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Memories of the first days of russia's full-scale armed aggression against Ukraine

The feeling of war had been in the air for several days, especially on the night of 24 February 2022. The first explosions occurred around 4 a.m. However, I woke up not from them, but from the inability to sleep and a premonition of something bad.

I should note that I lived in the town of Vyshhorod, famous for its thousand-year history. But this location itself added even more anxiety because Vyshhorod is a few kilometers from Kyiv. In addition, the Kyiv hydroelectric power station is located nearby.

So, when the first explosions started, my friend and colleague Bohdan, with whom I shared an apartment at that time, and I decided to get ready as quickly as possible and head towards Kyiv to get to the main transport hubs and decide what to do next. We decided to try to get there by public transport, so we got on the first and at the same time the last minibus that connected Vyshhorod with Kyiv.

Unfortunately, getting to the capital by public transport was almost impossible. A long traffic jam stretched between Vyshhorod and Kyiv. A roadblock caused it. The fact that I had Busia, my cat, with me, whom I could not leave behind, added to the complexity of our route.

It was interesting to watch the people on the bus. Some of the passengers were not fully aware of the situation. Some did not react at all and continued to go to work as if nothing had happened. Moreover, one of the passengers even remarked to the minibus driver why he was late. Such a question was quite absurd and illogical, considering the seriousness of the situation. But this fact clearly confirmed that not everyone fully understood what Ukraine was facing.

Realizing we were standing still, Bohdan and I decided to walk to Kyiv with all our belongings and my pet. Surprisingly, a car stopped on the way, and the driver kindly agreed to give us a lift to the Heroiv Dnipra metro station. The first point of our route was completed. With a sigh of relief, we continued to our mutual friend Denys, who lived in the western part of the city, not far from the Zhytomyrska metro station.

As it turned out later, it was in this direction that the russian army planned to break through the defenses and invade the Ukrainian capital. It was also here that we met our friends Maria and Yana. For the next few days, we were all together.



A queue of people in front of the Varus supermarket at 129 Beresteyska Avenue. Kyiv, 24 February 2022.
Photo: Ruslan Kutsyk.

The atmosphere in the capital was tense. The feeling of war was felt at every step. Explosions rang out systematically, sirens wailed continuously one after the other. Many people were in panic and fear. Long queues formed near ATMs and grocery stores.

Crowds of people gathered at bus stops, eager to leave the city as quickly as possible. Some people carried large suitcases while others only had small backpacks. It is noteworthy that many people had pets with them, which showed care and responsibility for animals.



A large traffic jam on Beresteysky Avenue on the way out of Kyiv. Kyiv, 24 February 2022. Photo: Chris McGrath/Getty Images. <https://www.dw.com/uk/a-kudy-meni-tikaty-va-u-sebe-vdoma-yak-va-perezhyva-pochatok-viiny/a-60905057>
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The situation was worst on the main roads in the capital, especially on the road leading to Zhytomyr. The traffic jam stretched for tens of kilometres. Cars were moving at an extremely slow speed, and sometimes it seemed that they had not moved a single millimetre in an hour. This stalemate made it extremely difficult for Ukrainian troops to move. For example, not far from the Zhytomyrska metro station, unable to drive along the road blocked by cars, Ukrainian soldiers in tanks were forced to use pedestrian sidewalks to reach the fiercest battlefield near Kyiv at that time, Gostomel.

What is interesting, then requests for information increased significantly. It felt like the phone was stuck to the hands and could not be removed. In order not to miss anything and to be aware of the latest events, the news feed was viewed every second at extremely high speed.

The battle for Gostomel, where events were changing every second, was of particular interest and attention. The general anxiety and constant sounds of explosions certainly interrupted any desire to sleep. I managed to get only a few hours of sleep at night, and even then I woke up frequently.

The general atmosphere in Kyiv was depressing and at the same time ‘exciting’, which was of course due to the surge of emotions and adrenaline. At 22:00, a curfew was imposed in Kyiv, which lasted all night until 7:00 in the morning. The city seems to have died out. I have never seen Kyiv like this before, where life was always actively raging. At that time, the question sounded in my head more than once: are the Ukrainian people going through the times again, like a hundred years ago in 1917 – 1921?!

There were many historical analogies. It seemed that this was not happening as if in a dream or in a parallel universe. It was difficult to realise the reality and scale of the events around us. But even under these conditions, there was hope that it was all temporary, that in 2-3 days everything would calm down and Russia would stop the offensive.

Realising that the situation was getting worse, we decided to get to the railway station as quickly as possible the next day and then go to our parents in western Ukraine by train. Denys's family also decided to temporarily evacuate to the Ternopil region. Some of them were to come to me, and some to Bohdan. I should note that due to the lack of space in the car, Denys's younger brother Oleksiy joined our walking group.

All large suitcases were left behind to make it easier to get around on foot. We took only backpacks filled with valuable documents and personal belongings. As the route was going to be very long and difficult, I decided to leave my cat Busya with Denys's uncle and aunt, who were not planning to leave Kyiv.

So, on the morning of 25 February, we decided to hit the road. Surprisingly, we managed to get to the railway station very quickly. Even though some of the stations on the red line of the metro were out of service, public transport continued to run almost as usual, except with slight delays. When we got to the Central Railway Station, another alert was issued in Kyiv with the threat of bombing key infrastructure facilities.

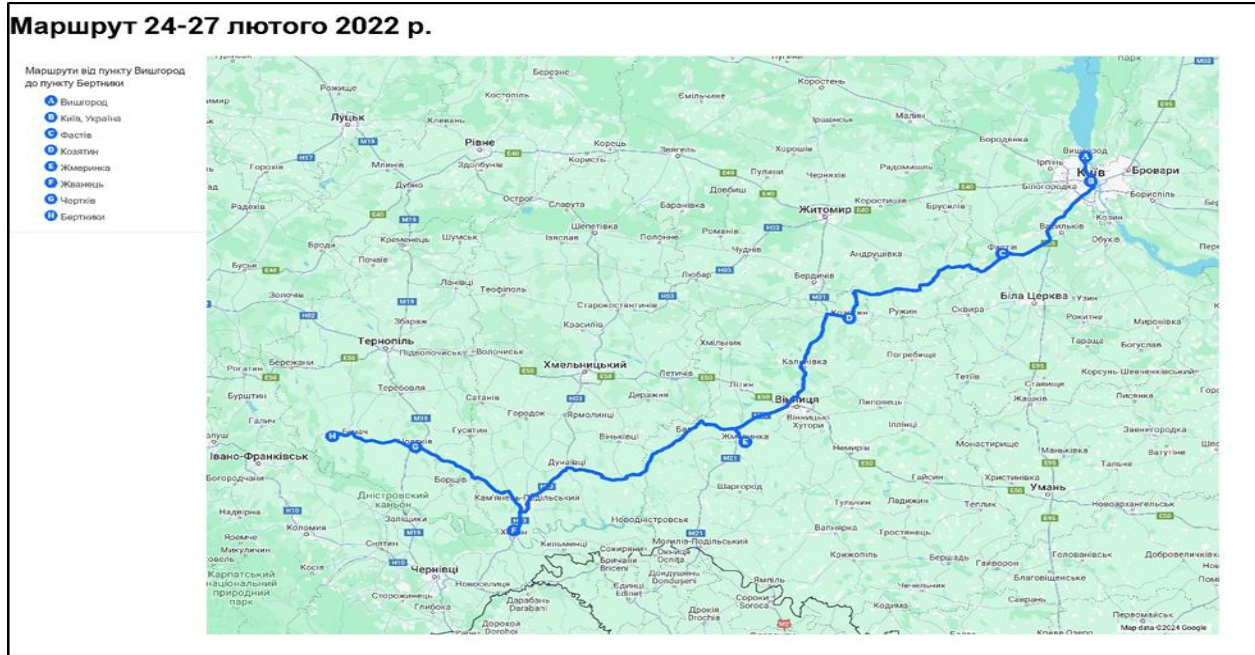


Central railway station. Kyiv, February 25, 2022. Photos: BBC
<https://www.bbc.com/ukrainian/live/news-60462319/page/34> (Revised: 10.07.2024)



For safety reasons, we went down to the Vokzalna metro station. But the alarm did not stop, and time was running out. So, at my own risk and fear, I decided to go upstairs to find out the situation with the trains.

As a result, we managed to get tickets for the last train to Fastiv, which was completely crowded. Afterwards, with transfers, we got to Zhmerynka, and then to the village of Zhvanets, located in the south of Khmelnytskyi, near Kamianets-Podilskyi.



Map of our route February 24-27, 2022. Photo: Ruslan Kutysk.

Here we temporarily stayed with our friend Maria. Two days without sleep and worries had taken their toll, and my body was exhausted and in need of rest.

The next day, 27 February, Oleksiy and I finally reached my home village in Monasteryshchyna. On the same day, Denys also arrived with his family.

We lived through the first days of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine with the belief that it would all end very soon, that the enemy would be forced to withdraw and stop attacking.

However, these hopes were in vain. The hostilities only escalated.