18/08/2022

EURAXESS for researchers at risk: an interview with Pavlo Bazilinskyy

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The EURAXESS network works daily to provide researchers across Europe and beyond with concrete support. The relevance of this mission amplifies when scientists are at risk or endangered by crisis.

In view of the ongoing conflict in Ukraine, we interviewed Pavlo Bazilinskyy, a Ukrainian national performing his research in the Netherlands, to ask direct insights about the war and its impact on the scientific community and share suggestions to widen the reach of the EURAXESS initiatives for researchers at risk.

Can you tell us more about yourself and your background as a researcher?

I am an assistant professor at TU Eindhoven, focusing on AI-driven interaction between automated vehicles and other road users. I obtained my PhD at TU Delft on the topic of auditory feedback for automated driving as a Marie Curie Fellow, where I also worked as a postdoc. For four years, I have also been working part-time as head of data research at SD-Insights. I am currently a treasurer of the Marie Curie Alumni Association (MCAA) and in the past I have been a director of the Research and Innovation unit of the Erasmus Mundus Association (EMA).

From a personal point of view, how has the current conflict impacted you and your family?

This war is very personal to me. My hometown is located just 50 km away from the border with Belarus. I happened to be in Chernihiv, North Ukraine, the day in which the invasion started, February 24. Luckily I have been able to bring my mother, who is a professor of Economics at Kyiv-Mohyla Academy, to Poland that same day, but my 76 years old grandmother could not leave. As of today, she is still in Ukraine in unsafe circumstances. She, a Russian native speaker like the rest of my family, was a rocket engineer working on the Soviet Concorde, Tupolev Tu-144; we are very close and I am extremely concerned for her safety. This story is unfortunately only one of many unfolding right now in Ukraine and beyond its borders.

Have you received any kind of support or assistance from the academic community, such as your current university? If yes, in which way?

My university has been supportive from the very first day. Different equipment was sent to Ukraine, the rector met with volunteers and representatives of the Ukrainian community of the Netherlands and to this day, the Ukrainian flag is still raised on campus. On the other hand, though, I believe that the academic environment in general could have taken a more active role in acknowledging this conflict and providing displaced students and researchers with scholarships and concrete assistance tailored on their specific needs. I am still very grateful for the support received and I wish that, if similar crisis will happen again in the future, universities could use a more direct approach.

EURAXESS Service Centers are specialized in offering tailored assistance on several topics related to relocation (taxation, pension, recognition of diplomas etc.). Do you have any experience of relocation challenges for researchers?

While I have been living in the Netherlands for seven years and only happened to be working remotely from Ukraine when the war started, I have experienced the difficulties of a sudden relocation through my mother. She is now a displaced researcher, living in my house in Delft. The main challenge she had to face was the lack of consistent information on topics such as registration or activation of a health insurance, highly needed to start anew in another country. It took many phone calls to different organisations and representatives to understand which steps to take, and in some cases, even this has not been enough. She was not just a tourist, but also not really a refugee in the legal

sense of it. The Netherlands, in our specific case, is a very liberal and structured country, but it came unprepared for missiles flying over heads of civilians just three borders to the East.

EURAXESS provides researchers with country-specific information about relocation and job, funding and hosting opportunities in Europe and beyond. The portal also hosts specific initiatives for researchers at risk (Science4Refugees, ERA4Ukraine). In your opinion, is there any essential aspect to be further addressed in order to offer concrete support to endangered researchers?

In my opinion, increasing the number of short-term projects offered to displaced refugees is of the utmost importance and the main tool to bring concrete support. Both my mother and I do not know a single such displaced researcher who wants to stay in Europe forever. My mother and all of her colleagues who were forced to flee Ukraine really wish to go back home to their families and friends. As a result, it is hard for such researchers to sign up for any long-term project, as they hope that the war will finish not in two years, but rather ‘tomorrow’.

What do you wish for your peers and yourself in the research community?

I wish for peace and support for cross-border science. I also hope that researchers and scientists keep their motivation and enthusiasm to fight disinformation through scientific facts, bringing power to the citizens to make informed decisions. The research community should be a beam of light during these dark times.

Can you share any advice for all members and staff of the EURAXESS network that is working daily to support researchers to widen their positive impact?

I think that the EURAXESS network has all the necessary tools to lead a deeper conversation with the research community, one that does not exclusively bases itself on “fast inputs” through social media and other communication outlets of sort. The scientific community should create a real dialogue with society by practicing open/citizen science; writing a paper should not be finalised to publication only, but to reduce the gap with the community and inform it, conveying the message in a clear, understandable way. I am convinced that a more honest, factual interaction between researchers and society could positively influence our lives, on a small and bigger scale.