

How to end up with a gun pointed to your head – a brief formula made in Belarus

(Part 1: Until Arresting Us)

By Diogo F. Caiado

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Here I stand at the dunes of Guincho, Cascais. No wind and no sun. 30 degrees in October in the west coast of Europe. One has to be somewhere.

It was in 2005, that I and Joao went to explore a bit of mother Russia and the former Soviet Republics. Saint Petersburg is the Paris of the north. It's awesome to swim in the Neva and to drink a pint each time we visit a cathedral, a monument or just be thirsty. Russians are great and talented people, with a fast sense of humour and creative business skills. And they do can be proud of being the only nation in the old Europe that was never taken by an aggressor. Spain, on the other hand, was in Napoleon possession for a while and the French are still laughing about it.

We were staying at a place full of backpackers, but we were travellers. We were always among the Russians. Backpackers show some guts in leaving their countries by themselves but after a mere 2 days in the journey they can't handle the loneliness or the risk anymore so they look for their peers in agony: the other backpackers with whom to smoke a joint, have a conversation about the meaning of life, search for a brief love or romantic sex, or just spend some time together.

I had seen this so many times that I was more focused on the 80 year old lady that was running the guest house. She had gold teeth, was taller than me (let's assume I'm reasonably tall enough), and must have been a stunning woman in her early days. All the guests seemed to be afraid of her. I used to hug her and as a consequence she started singing and laughing showing me her golden smile. She was in charge of serving the breakfast and I recall she had the habit of throwing the food to the people's tables while producing strange angry sounds. At 9:00 sharply, no matter who was at the table, she removes all the dishes and glasses passing it to a big basket she holds with one hand. There were no other meals available. No one could bring food in. This was her world. During night and day she roams the house and rules.

In my particular case, it was slightly different. I used to get home by dawn when the cistern trucks are washing the avenues after all the shit that horses produced in the side walk during the day. Always a bit drunk I had to step by a convenience store to buy some caviar – in Russia buying caviar equals buying butter in London, and I mean London, Canada. Afterwards I had to paddle my way home where I knew I would find this great woman waiting for me to eat toast with caviar and drink tea with vodka drops. Then I go to sleep making lots of noise and successfully wake up a few French that went to bed at sunset. By 10 or 11 I used to get up and move to the living. And as she laughs at me, I give her a good morning hug and say some words in Russian since she speaks zero English – vezavvet iie vracha, call me a doctor. Then I sit and she brings me the best breakfast she can devise. Occasionally, I woke up at 8:45 for breakfast while the others are still finishing it. Then I enjoy an even better welcoming. She sticks to the rules expelling everyone from the surroundings leaving me there to use my time to finish my food, drink my coffee and sing her the kalinka mayan. I wish God provides her with everything she needs for her last years.

One day, we decided to take the Red Arrow, the night train that links Saint Peters to Moscow. It departed at 7 in the evening and by 7:15 we were moving from the cabin to the bar. In the beginning, there was only me and my beer, Joao and his beer sitting comfortably at the only existing table, which allowed a perfect match to our needs since it was a table for four. The spot was as decadent as any other bar in a train, but the Red Arrow had a mystic density. That was the kind of compartment where hours tend to go by really slowly but it would not be the case this time. An old tough fat blue eyed bar made was behind the bar and from her standing point she could only see the speed of the landscape changing through the window and a couple of small bottles of rum, gin and vodka parked in a shelf – nothing more.

That was when the game changed radically. These 2 dudes came and sat in our table without even asking. One, a very thin man of average height named Petr, was drinking a small beer. Yuri was the other one. He was two meters tall and look like a giant as he held the rum in his hand. They started chatting among themselves but after a moment. Yuri started crying. And as the tears were increasing, he first slapped his friend a couple of times and then punched him right in the table. Then they started talking to us as Petr started bleeding a little bit from the nose while telling us they were friends for life. We would find out later that they were bothers-in-law and that the discussion was a non help from Petr to persuade Yuri's wife not to get divorced.

Anyway – after 2 more beers, Portugal this, Portugal that and discovering that Yuri was a former Soviet Union boxing champ, he grabbed Petr, which looked very white and had spaghetti hair, punched him 3 or 4 times against the wall, and then lifted him on the air putting his neck outside of the train's window while strangling him for the time that a piece of ice takes to melt in a whisky glass. As we are used to similar shit we continued chatting. We didn't intervene or comment. We were calm and having a nice time. Soon after, Yuri came back to our table. He started explaining his point of view and calling Petr to join us. Petr was exhaust and paddled to reach the table. He ordered us to make a toast and we respected that. After some time, Petr's wife stepped into the cabin. That was when Yuri grabbed her, slapped her 3 or 4 times and punched her softly in her stomach. An officer came in but Yuri ordered him to

disappear. And ordered me to take care of his second bottle of rum as they went out to their cabin. The beer was great and I was telling Joao that I met a former Bond girl in the huge Peterhof palace outside Saint Petersburg.

We felt the need to continue our chat standing for a while to stretch the legs and check the windows. That was when a handicapped girl entered the bar, singing and dancing all over the compartment. She was far below any level of mental stability. And she proved it by approaching our table – not in a subtle way – and stealing the rum bottle moving steadily to another wagon.

__If you don't recover that bottle you're a dead man!—by the way I've put this in italics because it was an inner thought.

Moreover, Yuri was a rich business regional tycoon who never shared what one might consider his true hobbies.

Previously he had shown us a wallet full of dollars and roubles and tried to give us some money. __For the friendship!—he added. We rejected.

Anyway, I got a grip and went right away after the crazy handicapped girl to get that bottle back. As fast as I was moving from one car to the next, the girl was moving even faster so I had to run and spend a lot of energy to ultimately get face to face with her. I thought that smiling and dancing with her could be a win-win solution to defocus her attention from the bottle and solving the problem with no violence. But as we started dancing she was looking at me in a silly way celebrating the trophy tightly stuck to her left hand right above my head. She was laughing and talking loud – un kilombito. I waited from the right moment and boom! I took it from her. I ran to the bar again as fast as I could. Almost at the same time, Yuri and Petr came back and discovered an apparent normal scenario: me and Joao drinking, his bottle of rum untouched on the window base and 2 couples occupying our table.

__Diego, but this is our table! How can you allow this?—Yuri asked very curious.

Yuri took care of the case pushing the four of them against the wall and with a single hand expelling them out of the bar. We wouldn't see them no more. In the meantime police showed up again but he ordered them to get out of the compartment. All they really did was to leave, carefully closing—and ordering the woman in the bar to lock—the bar compartment door behind them expecting to avoid extra damage. There was more fight that night.

Moscow is the city to be. Sometimes you live just a day but it seems a week has passed you by. People have been opening to the west at a fast pace while ancients say respect for older no longer exists and that youngsters are crazy and have an American look. Society is changing fear for money. And all that money is a driver for fun.

Day 1 began late. When we arrived to Kremlin it was almost 11:30 and there was a long queue to see Lenin's grave. Citizens from all over Russia were there to revisit their heroes from the past. People standing in the queue were waiting since early morning. We had to find an arbitrage opportunity. We easily noticed that guides were approaching foreigners to take them to see Lenin since they had a free pass by paying some roubles to the militaries. There was at the least 10 guides walking by the surrounding area. But demand was scarce. Eventually a Japanese duet and a Nordic old man were the only ones to be fooled – I recalled that in the trade the Japanese inflated the prices paying a lot for such services. The first guide that came to talk to us had a furious look and offered a way into the grave for 1000 roubles each, explaining he had to pay to others, namely the guards. Clients were afraid of him so he had additional problems. We showed no interest and kept observing. Time was passing so I said to Joao:

__This is pure games theory my friend. At 12:25 we will get a price of roubles 0+ , I mean, almost nothing! In fact we will end up giving them some money just not to be rude.

__Yeah—Joao answered—let's try not to get this people pissed of.

Then around noon another guide with a south Russian appearance came to talk to us:

__1200 roubles for the two of you and you're in! Come on! This place is almost at closing time!

We said no. The guides started talking among each other. They clearly realized we had totally understood the game dynamics. We had been fooled before at the Hermitage by buying tickets in the front of the museum to official guides realizing later one, that Hermitage was for free in August, and second, that even European serious companies sell their touristic packages computing this cost as real. But now the case was different. And for the guides it was a teaser to deviate from cartel prices since as the time passes competition for the last possible customers increase. We all were aware. Who would get our money then?

By 12:20 we were in. 300 roubles for the two. We first stepped by an official locker to leave Joao's professional camera. It was the only way. In the Hermitage for instance it was impossible to take pictures, but Joao took more than 1000 per day selling them to Asians afterwards.

The visit occurred normally. The furious guide was moving fast but we paid no much attention to what he was saying, though he had sharp comments to some of the graves. In Lenin's grave we stayed longer than we should. When we finally got out action began. He said:

__Now pay me 1000 roubles!

__We have agreed 300 hundred my friend.

__That never happens! The price is 1000! Pay!—And he shouted—Pay!

We smiled at him:

__No, we don't pay.

__I'll call the police—he warned.

__Whatever you want. Call!

I then took 3 hundred roubles bills already prepared in my pocket and put it in his hands. For a brief moment I think he was convinced it was 1000. When he finally counted the money he got even more furious, so he destroyed the money in front of my eyes and violently threw it against my face. He left walking very fast and disappeared among the crowd. He left in the locker's direction!

__He’s after the camera!—Joao noticed.

So we started running and crossing all the Red Square, eventually pushing people and messing with Lenin, Putin and Karl Marx doubles that were being taken photos with families from all over Russia.

For lunch we took a bus to zone 3. At the eating spot, we met a young waiter and asked her about her hobbies. The only thing she does in her spare time is graffiti:

__In the beginning I used to graffiti walls and buses. Then I started to feel no adrenaline…

__So, have you stopped then?

__No, on the contrary! I started to grafit the underground. I dress really feminine and I know I have a beautiful face, so I grafit and when the police arrives, they cross me by, as I’m on my way up to the street on the rolling stairs, they stop all the boys and never suspect of me. I have even contacts with Western Europe and America. And I’m building a cool graffiti network.

__So you ever got caught?

__No, you see, I almost always working alone. Other times I go with my friends and dress really sexy… so after the graffiti we go out. Do you guys graffit?

__Yeah!—I told her—I did it on some communist murals in my own town years ago…

__I knew you had the gift… Tonight you will graffit our underground!

In the afternoon, while seeing one of the Kremlin’s palaces we met an old friend: the furious guide. He showed up from behind a group of Italians just in front of us, as we were getting closer to enjoy a free ride of explanations. He began shouting:

__See, good people from Italy, those 2 are monkeys! Portuguese monkeys!

We laughed and moved to jump out.

__You are monkeys! Mafia from Portugal! You are gypsies! Fucking gypsies!

He never knew we are the kind of kids that actually could pay for such disorder!

By the late afternoon after some beers in the expensive non egalitarian Moscow, a walk in a plaza showed us a dancing event with traditional music. BBC was shooting. Old Russian ladies were waiting for their pairs … and dancing started. The orchestra was with a strong mood. A fat old lady with a velvet dress and a pink feather was dancing alone since no one picked her. So I walked in the plaza, asked her to dance being the only foreigner and young lad in the event. She spoke Russian to me the whole time and I only understood that I was a total ignorant about that dance so I had to lead her with my own African and South American style. In the end, people applauded and Russians were saying:

__Man, you have the guts!

When a BBC reporter asked me why I decided to join the dancing I just answered:

__Since I don’t have the heart nor the mind, God blessed me with the guts.

When evening came we got in touch with our new people in town and went to an R&B club in a huge cave with difficult access. But the outcome would turn out to be way above expectations. There were only Russians inside but the rest could be NYC based: the drinks, the music, the drugs and the speed of light. People were young and dressing like summer time since warm jackets were left at the entrance. Really great was the fact that all people were dancing choreographies and each hour there were a dancing competition one-to-one.

By dawn we decided to cross a street by the underground passage to check the wakening up of the city. It was surprising to see that the underground entrances were being cleaned by old ladies with watering cans. The first thing I said was in Russian:

__Let’s call a doctor and then an ambulance! What do you think?

After a while I was washing the underground while the old ladies were happy, laughing and singing Russian songs.

One day we decided to take a train to Vilnius. We had been informed that the train had almost no foreigners and it was mostly Russian emigrants in Lithuania. We were told as well that there were 2 alternatives to go: one was a 9 hour direct train to Vilnius and the other a 13 hour train with a stopover inside the Belarus border. In the train station at the ticket office we bought two tickets on a direct to Vilnius. As we can read no Cyrillic we asked the most normal person in the nearby whether it was or not the right ticket. We were damn lucky because he could express himself quite well in English and assure us our tickets were not the Belarus line. After a bunch of beers in the train’s bar we went to sleep. Joao was in the upper bed and snored like a pig. I woke up when it was just an hour to destination. I was hearing no buzz in the corridors. But I was calm. When 9 hours passed I became more apprehensive and tried to wake up Joao:

__Man, wake up, there can be a problem. We should have arrived by now!

__Don’t wake me up, you animal!—he said—Let me sleep! Maybe the train was slow moving during the trip by some reason. Who knows!

He continued snoring. By the 12th hour the train stopped. Movement was discrete. It was raining like hell and it was a dark night. The militaries were walking fast waking up people beating with the sticks in the metal doors producing an awful sound. We could hear loudly:

__Passport! Passport!

We showed them the passports.

___Belarus! Where's the visa for Belarus?

We were then asked 500€; or the professional camera to continue on the train. We had no fresh money and the camera for Joao was out of question. That was when the militaries entered the cabin, grabbed all our stuff, walked to one of the train's door and threw the luggage to the soaked ground, pointing to a water hole. Joao was pale. And then we were arrested.