



Caught In-Between: Tokyo Terminal

By Viktoriya Kim and Aleksandra Babovic

Could you ever imagine that the story of Viktor Navorski from Steven Spielberg's "[Terminal](#)" might happen to hundreds, even thousands of people? Well, the coronavirus made this movie's plot a reality for many. The pandemic showed harshly how interconnected and interdependent our lives have become, while simultaneously making us anxious about losing our freedoms when faced with anarchy reminiscent of a Hobbesian world as many governments single-mindedly pursued purely national and economic interests during this times of crisis.

As COVID-19 marched on, forcing country after country into lockdown, the Japanese government was taking measures like [canceling classes](#) and introducing [isolation protocols](#). Despite this, there were still scenes of parks packed with people having picnics enjoying cherry blossoms and alcohol, which was particularly confusing amidst the [government's calls for social distancing and to stay home](#). This confusion was brought about by the government's vague communication and slow response to the situation, with a [state of emergency](#), only declared at the beginning of April.

Being a citizen of Kazakhstan, living and working in Japan, my daily life became filled with constant scrolling through daily news and posts in the Russian-speaking Facebook communities in Japan. These communities unite the culturally and ethnically diverse people of post-Soviet countries by the fact that we live in Japan and speak Russian. My feed was swamped with discussions about the coronavirus and [tests](#) for it. This inflammatory topic often ended in unconstructive and anxiety-inducing bickering among community members. The situation was getting even grimmer as I went to local supermarkets. Shortages of [sanitary products](#) and [half-empty food shelves](#) felt like I had been transported back in time to the 1980's Soviet Union.

Early April, one post appeared in my news feed, an outlier story that captivated my attention. A man, traveling with his children, wife, and her parents were asking for help in one of the groups. The family was returning home when their flight was canceled, and since they were living in the airport waiting for another flight. As the man could not use his card to withdraw money, he was running out of cash and was searching for help in the Facebook Russian community. The heartbreaking part of his message was that the children were hungry and asking for food, and there was no way he could feed them. And this was not a lone case, there were actually hundreds of people [stuck in international airports](#) all over the world.

It turned out that in just one of [Tokyo's international airports](#), 43 people were living there, not having anywhere to go, and frightened to miss any possible flight

should they leave without assistance from state or airport personnel. The absence of a complete lockdown and lack of movement restrictions inside Japan had misled many [short-term travelers](#) to assume that there was still relative freedom of movement. Thus, when the state of emergency was declared and people rushed to leave, many countries had already closed their borders.

But, as Spielberg's "Terminal" characters teach us about the human warmth and compassion which stands in stark contrast to state bureaucratic machinery, this Tokyo terminal story also transitions into a more humane sequence. Faced with hardships while waiting for state assistance — in a manner of Becket's play "[Waiting for Godot](#)" — the men opted to ask for help from the Russian-speaking communities on Facebook. The response was fast. Local Russian citizens and activists, just ordinary people, took turns to visit the men and bring them food. The Russian Orthodox Church monastery accommodated some of the men. And eventually, the airport management found out and helped by reaching out to the Japanese media, while community members contacted the Russian media. Then finally, the Russian Embassy in Tokyo and all parties involved managed to provide the necessary support and many of the people were happily able to return home.

Yes, the story had a happy ending, but it left me pondering the larger picture of these events. How did the banking and transportation system collapse? Why were states assisting their citizens or foreigners in need, not their top priority? And, who is

responsible for this situation? The answer to many of these questions is again, convoluted due to the elusive interconnectedness of the world derived from the (imagined) freedom of movement. In this sense, the coronavirus uncovered not only fragilities in the medical care system but also multiple layers of restrictions and limitations within the banking and transportation systems that we take for granted and expect to deliver.

In an era of digital banking, it turned out that not all banking systems were working in coordination with each other, and people stuck in Tokyo could not withdraw money from their Russian bank accounts. Many of them indeed applied for the financial aid provided by the Russian government, but not all could receive it on time. Then those who did receive it found a pittance remaining after the bank commissions and exchange fees. When it came to the evacuation, [Russia's](#) regional budgetary struggles and a daily quota of 500 people through its international airports during the quarantine, made the return of these people home a complicated endeavor. It seems we have grown complacent through associating interconnectedness with instantaneity and freedom of movement while ignoring the underlying issues of state responsibility to its citizens and the lack of infrastructure when it comes to human security emergencies.

This story is an important reminder that despite the general portrayal of governments and international organizations as dominant actors, transnational communities become “canaries in the coal mine” in calling attention to problems and

are often the first responders in providing relief to people in need. Moral of the story?

People and communities matter. They are a source of support and empowerment across borders and exercise leadership through human empathy, not through financial rationalization and administrative procedures.

