Newly Arrived Georgian Immigrants – The Road from Georgia to Mexico, Part 2

Respondent
Anonymous Person 5
Givi

Interviewer
Nini Sikharulidze

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Introduction

Anonymous Person 5 Givi talks about his immigration story in 2022 to the United States of America. Deported multiple times from different countries, Givi managed to come to the United States more than 8 months after the beginning of his journey. To enter the USA, he passed through the countries of Central America and crossed the Pacific Ocean. He spent 4 months in the Texas Detention Center. Givi tells us about his experiences moving from Mexico to the U.S.

Background

Nini Sikharulidze: Hello, Mr. Givi. How does the story of your immigration begin?
Givi: I left Georgia in November 2021. I first arrived in Kutaisi and flew from Kutaisi to Warsaw. I was in Warsaw for 5 months and worked there. After the start of Russia's war in Ukraine, the situation in Poland worsened, and that's why I decided to come to the U.S.

Nini Sikharulidze: When did you come to the U.S.?
Givi: My journey to the U.S. began in May 2022. I flew from Warsaw to Madrid and from Madrid I went to Mexico. I was not allowed in Mexico. I was detained for 24 hours at the immigration services. There was neither water nor food. No one told me anything. Then, I was informed that I had to take a return flight to Madrid. I was asked a lot of questions in Madrid. They were interested as to why I wasn't allowed in Mexico, but I didn't know myself because no one gave me a specific reason.

Initial Attempts to Enter Mexico

Nini Sikharulidze: Did you attempt to enter Mexico again?
Givi: Then I tried to come to the U.S. again through Colombia. I had to stay in Spain for 1 month before planning a new flight and sorting out the situation. I bought a ticket Madrid-Bogotá-Cancún, but it happened that I was not allowed to board the plane at all. Even now, no one has given a specific reason. They didn't refund me, either. I involved the police, but the police couldn't help me either. Of course, I lost all this money.

Nini Sikharulidze: What did you decide to do after?
Givi: Then, I bought the ticket again. I arrived in Bogotá from Madrid. I had a flight to Cancún in two days. The Mexican immigration did not let me in again. I was again detained at the immigration department of the airport for 28 hours. I was given neither water nor food. I begged them to give me water in exchange for my money, but no one bothered. Again, a return flight was available from Cancún to Bogotá, and I was brought back to Bogotá. After that, I was detained by Colombian immigration. They wondered why I was not allowed in Mexico. I honestly answered that I really didn't know the specific reason. The Colombian Immigration then informed me that they were going to deport me first to Madrid and then to Tbilisi. They tore out the visa from my passport.

Nini Sikharulidze: What do you mean they tore out your visa?
Givi: In full honesty, I don't know if my visa was torn by Mexico or Colombia, because I personally did not witness this process. Later, I accidentally discovered that I no longer had a visa in my passport.

Nini Sikharulidze: Did the Colombian immigration give you any answer or explanation?

Givi: We tried to negotiate with the Colombian embassy. I was told that going to Cancún was out of the question. I was helped by the fact that I knew the language and was able to communicate with them to some level. After much discussion, I got them to agree, and they issued me a one-week temporary visa to stay in Colombia. It was at the end of this week that I found out about my visa being torn out. I didn't have a visa. I had no documents. I found myself in a difficult situation. I had to stay in Colombia for a month and a half while I was trying to figure out the visa situation. I couldn't do anything. Then I found out about a new route through Nicaragua. This road is called "jungle road." I booked a ticket from Bogotá to Nicaragua. Citizens of Georgia do not need a visa to Nicaragua. I flew to Nicaragua. From there, my adventure begins.

"Jungle Road"

Nini Sikharulidze: Tell us about this journey.
Givi: We took a taxi from the airport to the Honduran border through Nicaragua. From there, we quietly moved to Honduras. Then we rode our motorbikes through Honduras to get to the Guatemalan border. Similarly, in Guatemala, we moved through the forest at night on foot, by bus, and on motorcycles. We slept at random spots whenever we could.

Nini Sikharulidze: How long was the trip from Nicaragua to Guatemala?
Givi: This journey took about two weeks. We reached the border of Guatemala and Mexico, where a small river flowed. We found a small woody debris, like a river raft, with which we swam to Mexico. We reached the Pacific coast through Mexico. Then, we set off on a boat, but we almost sank. The boat had two motors, with the help of which we were sailing by the coast for 14 hours. It was raining non-stop, I remember it well. Then, we reached a swampy place somewhere. Here too, mud, water, we went through a lot of trouble. Now, I am telling you all this very "lightly." On this journey, a lot happened. I can't remember everything. I don't even want to remember, to be honest.

Nini Sikharulidze: Which U.S. state did you enter through this method?
Givi: Then we reached the American border, the state of Texas. There, I moved to the neutral zone and waited for the U.S. immigration police so that I could surrender and request political asylum.

Detention Facility

Nini Sikharulidze: What happened after the U.S. immigration police took you in?
Givi: When the immigration police showed up, they took me to the so-called detention. They put me in a room where they took my passports, clothes, everything I had with me. We were in a room with about 300 people, where we were kept for 5–6 days. Then, I was transferred to an immigration prison. I was detained there for 4 months.

Nini Sikharulidze: Did you know how long they were planning to keep you in the detention facility before letting you out?
Givi: I was in an uncertain situation for 1 month. No one told me anything. I usually talked to them in English, but they didn't give me any information. Then I was interviewed about what I wanted from the U.S. They probably had doubts since I was sent back so many times from so many countries. The officer who interviewed me gave an unsatisfactory verdict, which meant deportation. I appealed the deportation, I hired a lawyer and the trial was held in prison. The judge didn't even give me a chance to say a word. He also ruled on my deportation. After so many defeats, I was psychologically devastated, to be honest. I didn't know what they would do. A week, two weeks, four weeks, two months, three months, four months pass in this uncertainty… Let me make a comparison: for example, you committed a crime and were sentenced to 2 years. At least, you can still cross the days out of the calendar and count the days. I haven't committed anything, and they didn't even tell me after what time they would release me. You sit and you don't know anything. You see how some are allowed in with political asylum, others are deported. Imagine you are sitting and you don't know anything.

Nini Sikharulidze: What happened at the end?
Givi: Finally, the only time I got lucky was when the immigration services made one mistake. Specifically, a lot of people's personal information was accidentally leaked online. I was one of those whose information was leaked. A very big fuss broke out. They brought me a document where it was written that the personal information collected about me was made public by accident and downloaded by other Internet users. They were apologizing. For three weeks, everyone whose information was leaked in my detention room had their deportation canceled. My negative answer was changed to a positive one, and I was released. I was in shock. I really didn't believe it. Even at the airport, I did not believe that they would not deport me. When I was left alone, I came to my senses a little. I bought a ticket to New York and came here.

Nini Sikharulidze: I want to ask you about immigration prison before we move on to the next topic. What were the conditions there for immigrants?
Givi: There, too, the situation was unbearable. We wore short-sleeved shirts. Inside, it is unbearably cold. The officers themselves wore coats and warm cloaks. You are freezing. There is no food, you are always hungry. Tap water tastes like rust. I'm not even talking about food; there is no time to be picky, if you are hungry you will eat anything. You are rarely allowed outside to breathe the air. This isn’t for a day or two, also. This has been going on for months. The social situation is also terrible. No one cares about you. The breakfast is at 5 in the morning. They wake you up, and if you don't eat, you will starve. The next meal is at 10 AM. The last meal is at 5 PM. That's the end of it all. Until 5 in the morning, no one will bother, even if you're starving to death. The lights go out at 10 PM. After 1 hour, they come in again, wake us up to count us and inspect the wards. This is also a part of psychological terror. You're wearing short sleeves in the

freezing cold, they keep telling you to go to sleep just to wake you up in an hour, and no one lets you out, you are given very little water, and no one gives answers.

Nini Sikharulidze: Did you meet any Georgians throughout this time?
Givi: I met several Georgians in the immigration prison. They were released soon after, in three weeks. I was left behind, along with some Latin Americans. By the way, during these four months, I did not waste time in the immigration prison. I started learning Spanish. I also taught English to Latin Americans. In short, something good came out of this terrible situation. There was no other way. Towards the end of the immigration prison, I was in such a position that I had to get used to it. I challenged this horrible situation into a comfort zone because many Latin Americans, many Colombians, were trapped for a long time just like me. I also got used to the rusty water. As they say, people get used to even the rope. For a little, they will try to get out of it before they stop the fight. That's right. Human possibilities, from my point of view, have no limit. I really did not imagine that I could do so much. My relatives know my story. They don't believe it either.

Nini Sikharulidze: Are you proud of yourself?
Givi: Psychologically, I am proud of myself. I didn't think I could take so much and go through so much. Let's start with Polish emigration, I have been emigrating for two years and eight months. Out of these years, I took 8 months to enter the U.S. For 8 months, I was on the road for 4 months. I spent a month in Spain. Then I stayed in Colombia for two months. They deported me again. Then I was on the road to Nicaragua for three weeks. Add to that the immigration prison, where I spent 4 months. In short, these 8 months were literally suffering and torture.

Nini Sikharulidze: Did you have an acquaintance with you on this journey?
Givi: I left Poland alone and went through all this absolutely alone. I had no one on the way. In Nicaragua, Honduras, and Guatemala, the situation is such that they don’t even value a person as much as a dog. They are capable of crushing you like an ant and no one would even care. You can't say anything anywhere. There is nothing you can do if someone knocks you down. It was a very big risk, I just had no way of backing out. I chose this path. I had a reason to escape from Poland. The situation in Poland was unbearable.

Nini Sikharulidze: You must have been really traumatized after all this.
Givi: When I got to New York, I was in a state of shock. Even after two weeks of getting to NY, I would be woken up by nightmares. The fear that an immigration officer was standing over me would wake me up late at night. I was in a state of shock for a month when I got to NY. I was in a state of euphoria. I still couldn't believe it.

Settling in the U.S.

Nini Sikharulidze: How do you deal with these memories now?
Givi: It's been 5 months now that I have been in NY. I forgot many things. I left a lot in the past. I'm trying to get stronger step by step and not reduce my efforts to progress. In terms of documents, I got a driver's license, employment authorization. In short, I follow the usual flow of my life.

Nini Sikharulidze: What empowered you back then, and what motivates you now?
Givi: During this 8-month journey to enter the U.S., I strengthened myself. In general, I am a very stubborn and steadfast person. My biggest motivation was and is my son. I would do more for my son's better future.

Nini Sikharulidze: How did you mentally prepare for this experience?
Givi: Before I took this step, I was mentally preparing myself. I knew it would be a difficult ordeal. I'm going somewhere, on the other side of the earth, with no one to rely on, and I'm completely on my own. This psychological preparation prior to leaving Poland helped me a lot. When I arrived in New York, I worked on myself for 1 month. I took control of myself. Even here, where I am now, it is not easy to live and work. The only thing that helps me a lot is that I am very motivated and determined. Knowledge of English is also a big plus.

Nini Sikharulidze: It was also other things you needed to take care of that helped you shift attention with time, right?
Givi: I have walked all over New York looking for a job. It helped distract me. I had to stop thinking about the past and focus on the future. If I stop now, what's the point of all that I went through? I didn't stop. I didn't get stuck in the past.

Nini Sikharulidze: What have you been able to do since you've arrived to New York?
Givi: These four or five months, I did everything I could. I got a driver's license, sent the documents to the asylum, I had a court hearing which I also attended alone. In short, I'm still moving forward. I will also say that I made some mistakes. I think I left a little earlier than I should have. I was in the wrong place at the wrong time. Luck also turned its back on me. This is life. Sometimes you get lucky, sometimes you don't. In the end, I'm lucky to be here now, to be able to cover the financial costs of tickets and accommodation along the way. I don't know what I would do in case of deportation. Thank God that didn't happen.

Advice to Newer Generations of Immigrants

Nini Sikharulidze: What would your advice be to those who plan to embark on this very challenging journey in the future?

Givi: Whoever decides to go through this, it is necessary to prepare psychologically. It will not work out otherwise. This road isn't strewn with violets and roses. No one will meet you with rose-colored glasses in the U.S., either. Again, you have to pave your own way. If there is someone to rely on in the U.S., that's a big plus. However, many responsibilities fall on you. You have to achieve your plans by yourself. If you have even a little doubt in your abilities, it is better to stay where you are at.

Nini Sikharulidze: How do you appraise your decision today?
Givi: I somewhat already knew what I had to go through. I was preparing psychologically. However, when I faced reality, it turned out to be even more difficult. The rain, the heat, the animals in the jungle, the boats, the fear of skidding off a motorcycle in the mountains… You could even smile at someone and if interpreted in the wrong way, you could get stabbed. There are many dangerous places in Central America. After, they would just throw your body for animals to tear up.

Nini Sikharulidze: Many probably can't go through this psychological terror.
Givi: In the immigration prison, there are people in a separate one-cell room who had suicidal thoughts and could not withstand this psychological pressure. These risks exist. Caution is required. In Georgia, it is said that you must wear a hat of where you're at *(In other words, whatever environment and society you are in, you have to live by the customs endorsed by its natives)*.

Nini Sikharulidze: Is there anything you would like to add prior to wrapping up this interview?
Givi: If you take this step, you should be very psychologically prepared. That would be my advice. I am happy that I was psychologically ready, one way or another. Therefore, I wish everyone success. Hopefully others will have better luck than I did. If they decide to take this path, psychological preparation is the main thing. The rest will be revealed during the journey itself.