

Nguyen Hong Thach's *Facing The Irony: A Vietnamese Diplomat's Evacuation Diary from the Ukraine War* is a multilayered account of his experience as Vietnam's Ambassador to the Ukraine when Russia's invaded. The diary covers the period from February 24, 2022 to May 30, 2022 during which the Vietnamese Embassy staff in Kyiv evacuated to Lviv in western Ukraine near Poland and then returned to Kyiv.

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**Carlyle A. Thayer**  
Emeritus Professor  
UNSW Canberra



**FACING THE IRONY**

Nguyen Hong Thach

A Vietnamese Diplomat's  
Evacuation Diary  
from the **Ukraine War**

The book cover features a painting of a man with glasses and a brown jacket standing in a city street. In the background, there are multi-story buildings and a yellow bus. A smaller, darker figure of a person is visible in the distance, looking away from the viewer.

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Diary  
from the Ukraine War



Nguyen Hong Thach





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**Facing The Irony**

First Edition: February 2026



*Dedicated to the **Ukrainian friends**  
who have suffered misfortune.*



# PREFACE

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By the time this diary reaches readers, the Russia–Ukraine war will have reached its fourth anniversary. It could have been published earlier, but at the three-year mark of the war I had just retired and was preoccupied with many personal matters. Plans for publication were postponed several times for various reasons. Now, however, I see no reason to delay any longer. Four years is a sufficiently long period to look back, to reflect, and to share my experiences with readers.

An American university agreed to consider publishing the book, but after six months of review they rejected it on the grounds that the author relied heavily on Russian sources. This is a diary—what sources could there be? The information that I and other diplomats had all came from online sources and certainly not from Russian ones, since Russian sources were blocked in Ukraine. Most likely, they simply did not support the author’s views on the war and chose a polite way to decline. A few American and Australian friends who helped me approach this university were also surprised by their reasoning. Thinking along these lines, I then turned to colleagues to reach out to Indian contacts. India takes a neutral position on the war, so publishing this diary should not be difficult there. I am very grateful to RedWord Publications for agreeing to publish this diary.

There is a Vietnamese proverb that says, “Fire tests gold, hardship tests strength.” War is an extraordinary circumstance in which everything is laid bare—especially those aspects that are difficult to see in times of peace. I was unfortunate to be posted as a diplomat to a country at war. Yet it was also a moment to test myself, to test others, and to test the system.

This diary records what happened during the first 96 days and nights of the conflict—from the moment the war began, to the evacuation of the Embassy, and finally to the return of the group of diplomats who remained in Ukraine from Lviv back to Kyiv.

The diary recounts in simple terms what my colleagues and I did during those days: organizing the evacuation of Vietnamese citizens, ensuring our own safety, and carrying out the duties of diplomats in wartime. As I reread these pages in preparation for publication, I realized that, relying mainly on information from the media along with exchanges with foreign colleagues and Ukrainian friends, I had very early on concluded that this war would last for years. Nearly four years have now passed, and the war still shows no clear sign of ending, though at certain moments peace seemed within reach.

My early assessments of the negotiations in Istanbul at the end of March 2022, and of Ukraine's shift in position following British Prime Minister Boris Johnson's visit to Kyiv in early April 2022, were later confirmed by publicly available information. Subsequent disclosures revealed that the two sides had indeed come very close to an agreement in Istanbul, but that Western countries encouraged Kyiv not to compromise with Russia and instead to continue the war in pursuit of ultimate victory.

Perhaps I have a certain advantage in analyzing the Russia–Ukraine war because I was born in wartime and later devoted many years to studying war and diplomacy in Vietnam. My doctoral dissertation, *Vietnam between the United States and China, 1950–1995*, covered the entire period of the anti-French and anti-American resistance wars, as well as the border wars in the Southwest and the North of Vietnam. This background helped me remain calmer when the conflict began

and better equipped to observe and assess events with caution.

From my perspective, the picture of this war is far more complex than simplified narratives suggest. Without NATO's eastward expansion, it is very likely that the war would not have occurred. If Ukraine had more clearly understood that it did not necessarily need NATO membership to ensure its security, the war might have been avoided. And if President Putin had not placed such excessive confidence in his military apparatus, the decision to launch the war might also have been prevented. These views may remain subject to debate, but they reflect my personal perspective as someone observing the war from within, with the experience of both a diplomat and a researcher.

During those days of war, the greatest hardships and sorrows did not come from the fighting itself, but from the pressures and complications of professional relationships. That is why I chose to title this diary "Facing the Irony". As Ambassador, I did my utmost to fulfill my responsibilities to my country, to the Vietnamese community in Ukraine, and to my colleagues. Yet throughout that period I constantly worked under administrative pressures that were not always explained to me, at times feeling as if the threat of disciplinary action was hanging over my head without ever being clarified.

A diary is, by nature, a personal record, and therefore it contains not only events but also the emotions of the writer. But I can affirm that everything written here is faithful to what truly happened—only the truth, and nothing but the truth. Inevitably, some pages may make certain individuals uncomfortable, but the purpose of this book is not to criticize anyone personally, but to draw lessons for the future. Without honest reflection, there can be no progress. As President Ho Chi Minh emphasized, criticism and self-criticism are meant to help

correct shortcomings, develop strengths, and enable collective progress and improvement. I hope this diary can make a modest contribution to that goal.

I respectfully invite readers to join the journey through the 96 days of wartime evacuation of the Embassy of Vietnam in Ukraine.

# FOREWORD

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Nguyen Hong Thach's *Facing The Irony: A Vietnamese Diplomat's Evacuation Diary from the Ukraine War* is a multilayered account of his experience as Vietnam's Ambassador to the Ukraine when Russia's invaded. The diary covers the period from February 24, 2022 to May 30, 2022 during which the Vietnamese Embassy staff in Kyiv evacuated to Lviv in western Ukraine near Poland and then returned to Kyiv.

Thach was eminently qualified to be ambassador at that time. He had previously studied in Ukraine before commencing his career as an analyst in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, then Director General of the Communist Party of Vietnam's External Relations Committee, and Ambassador to Iran. Thach was also my first Vietnamese PhD student. He wrote his doctoral dissertation on "Vietnam between the United States and China, 1950-1995" and was steeped in the literature on how major powers pursued their national interests.

*Facing The Irony* has a double meaning. The first is about being a diplomat caught up in war. The second meaning, the heart of Thach's diary is, as he writes in the Forward, that "the greatest hardships and sorrows did not come from the fighting itself, but from the pressure and complications of professional relationships." Specifically, Vietnam's Ministry of Foreign Affairs put Thach under "administrative pressures that were not always explained to me, at time feeling as if the threat of disciplinary action was hanging over my head without ever being clarified."

*Facing The Irony* is a diary that recounts Thach's experiences as Ambassador on a daily basis on seven levels.

The first level concerns his personal family affairs with his wife, Xuan, and caring for his elderly mother. They were evacuated back to Vietnam where Xuan became a useful conduit for news and information on matters of professional interest.

The second level concerns Thach's personal life when he was off work skiing, saunas, swimming, playing chess in the park, horse riding in Lviv and Kyiv, and having meals with close friends and colleagues.

The third level concerns Thach's interaction with staff at the embassy, some of whom were supportive and others who shirked their duties under the pressure of Russia's invasion. Thach didn't suffer fools easily and spoke his mind, as in the case of political officers and the Defence Attaché.

The fourth level concerns Thach interactions with the 7,000 strong Vietnamese community and their leaders who were scattered around Ukraine. Thach and his staff moved heaven and earth to assist their safe evacuation and provide necessary documentation so they could enter Poland and Moldavia. Here too some of the leaders of community associations were found wanting.

The fifth level concerns Thach's professional relationships with fellow ambassadors who formed the diplomatic corps in Kyiv, ambassadors from Vietnam serving abroad such as Nguyen Tat Thanh in Canberra, diplomatic colleagues Thach had befriended earlier in his career, officials of the Ukrainian government, and the media. This aspect of Thach's diary will interest academics, political analysts and other foreign affairs specialists.

The sixth level concerns Thach relations with his ministry in Hanoi and its chief officers, Minister of Foreign Affairs Bui

Thanh Son, Deputy Minister Nguyen Minh Vu, and official Spokesperson Le Thi Thu Hang.

The seventh level concerns Thach's personal assessments of the causes of the conflict in Ukraine, how developments unfolded on the battlefield, the motivations of the United States and European countries that supported Ukraine, and the likely terms and prospects for peace.

*Facing The Irony* is a compelling book. It is extremely well-written and thought-provoking. It weaves seven themes continually into a multilayered structure. As Thach notes in his Forward, "The purpose of this book is not to criticize anyone personally, but to draw lessons for the future." *Facing The Irony* offers the considered and professional assessments of Ambassador Thach on the framework for a peace settlement. This is as timely publication on the fourth anniversary of Putin's "Special Operations" and should be read by anyone concerned with ending this conflict.

**Carlyle A. Thayer**

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## **Thursday, February 24, 2022**

In the morning, my wife woke me up because of loud explosions in the distance. I turned on the TV and saw President Putin announcing that Russia had launched a “special military operation in Donbas” to de-Nazify and demilitarize Ukraine. What stood out to me most was his statement: “We cannot repeat the mistakes of the Great Patriotic War.” Clearly, the Russian president wanted to strike first before anyone could strike Russia. NATO couldn’t advance right up to Russia’s borders without being stopped. I had thought war wouldn’t break out because the price would be too high—but Putin was clearly willing to pay that price.

Bui Xuan from VTC contacted me via Facebook, asking for an interview. I agreed, of course. If I had accepted interviews before the war, why not after it started? While they were setting up the technical side, I was also getting ready to head to the Embassy. They were taking too long, so I had to remind them several times, as I still needed to get to the Embassy. I recall only saying to VTC that I hadn’t expected Putin to be this resolute; the war wasn’t limited to Donbas as announced, because I called down to Donetsk and found nothing unusual there. But hostilities had erupted in all major cities across Ukraine.

Xuan said the viewership was very high. I've always had a high regard for VTC because they are much more dynamic than VTV. Back when the U.S. and North Korea held their summit in Hanoi, they ran many live programs, and I was both a guest and a consultant helping them invite other guests. Those who are proactive deserve support.

I moved into the Embassy and required all the staff to stay there as well, for safety reasons—just for the time being. It's hard to predict how war will unfold. Mom set up downstairs in the basement; my wife and I slept on the floor in the office. The staff slept in the large reception room.

My phone was flooded with messages from everywhere—people checking in. Naturally, everyone was concerned—they really cared about us. Who would've thought a war would actually happen?!

The Air Defence – Air Force Command delegation was also unlucky. They were supposed to fly out today, but Ukraine had closed its airspace, so they had to turn back. I decided to send the delegation by land, providing them with our minibus and driver—there was no way we could find one for hire at a time like this. I only insisted that the Defence Attaché's Office assign an officer to accompany them—there was no way I would let driver Tan take the delegation by himself and then drive back alone. But Mr. Chien kept saying that Hoang, the cipher officer, couldn't go. If Hoang couldn't go, then why couldn't Chien himself? I thought this but didn't say it out loud, leaving them to sort it out among themselves. In the end, that's how it was settled—the delegation coordinated with the Defence Attaché's Office. Finally, I got a call confirming Hoang would go with the delegation.

Early in the afternoon, Tan came to pick up the delegation.

But five hours later, he returned, reporting that the delegation had received orders to return to Kyiv. After five hours, they had only managed to travel 50 kilometres! The roads were terribly congested. Everyone was trying to evacuate.

### **Friday, February 25, 2022**

Today was a sad day. H., from the Diplomatic Academy, messaged me a thread of public comments, and only then did I realize how harsh people were being toward me. One comment said something like, “That ambassador is incompetent, can’t assess anything properly, still out skiing on such-and-such day.” Honestly, if someone were truly useless and just out having fun while doing nothing meaningful, that accusation would be valid. But who could have imagined that Putin would go all-in like this, recklessly disregarding the cost?! I went skiing and posted about it to help people stay calm. But even that simple action was met with the worst kinds of sarcasm. I suppose there’s no escaping the world’s sharp tongues.

Looking back, maybe Hang (the Spokesperson) was right. I thought I was helping to reassure people, but back home, they didn’t see it that way. Still, Hang didn’t clearly say it was just social media talking—I wondered if someone was deliberately trying to smear me. Later, when Pham Hai (the DG of Europe Department, the CPV’s Foreign Affairs Committee where I worked before coming to Ukraine as Ambassador) relayed a message from the leadership, he added a disclaimer: “I’m just passing along the message, no personal intent.” But that little disclaimer made it seem like even he felt the boss’s stance wasn’t entirely objective. Maybe the criticism came from both sources.

Earlier, Deputy Minister Hieu had called and tactfully suggested I shouldn’t post on Facebook about the situation in Ukraine. I was so annoyed I drafted a cable back, basically

saying: “If folks back home can calm the people, then the ambassador wouldn’t need to.” But I figured there was no point in arguing, so I didn’t send it. Before the war, I genuinely didn’t believe such a reckless decision would ever be made, so I used Facebook as a channel to keep our community informed and help them focus on their businesses. Was that the right thing to do or not? Is silence always the best policy?

Ambassador Thanh from Canberra messaged me, asking about the evacuation of our people and Embassy staff. Of course, that was already our top priority. Honestly, a simple message checking in would’ve sufficed—but asking about the work felt more like a reminder, almost a prompt. Thanh even sent me the notice the Indian Embassy had posted on their website. The Vietnamese Embassy had also issued guidance, but instead of posting it on our website, we shared it through the Vietnamese community association. Who visits Embassy websites regularly, anyway? Why do I engage more on Facebook? Because information reaches the Vietnamese community faster and more broadly there.

Today, I sent a cable requesting permission from the Ministry to evacuate certain “non-essential” staff, along with their spouses and children, “as the war situation is unlikely to end soon.” The military delegation was included in this group, along with a few students who couldn’t fly back to Vietnam yesterday—33 people in total. The Malaysian Embassy also contacted us to coordinate and ask about our plans. But Director-General of Personnel Tran Ngoc An said, “Wait until there’s a safe corridor, then evacuate—it’ll be safer.” If that’s the official stance, then we wait. No point in debating—it’s hard to convince anyone otherwise. But who knows when such a safe corridor will appear? So, the military delegation also had to stay put.

## **Saturday, February 26, 2022**

Today marks the third day of fighting, and it seems Russia is taking heavy losses. Russian television is no longer talking much about the battles like it did yesterday, and instead airs programs that feel oddly meaningless during wartime. Ukrainian television, on the other hand, is clearly reporting more aggressively.

In the morning, I invited Comrade Chung, Head of the Air Defence–Air Force Command delegation, and Chien, the Defence Attaché, over for a meeting. Chung clearly wanted to return to Vietnam; he didn't hide his dissatisfaction with the leadership—saying things like, “Why did we leave the day before yesterday, only to be ordered back?” and “They're putting people in the line of bombs and bullets.” To be fair, I don't fully understand the reasoning behind the order to return—who gave it, who advised it—but calling it “putting people in the line of bombs and bullets” seems a bit excessive. After all, the Embassy staff are still right here, in harm's way. No one has left yet.

Sensing that if no one made a decision, the situation would drag on endlessly—causing hardship for both the delegation and the Defence Attaché's Office—I said, “As the Ambassador on the ground, I feel the delegation should take the train to Lviv and from there head to Poland.” Someone had to step up and take responsibility. Chung seemed relieved and immediately asked if the Embassy could help get the group to the train station. Of course, I agreed. I assigned Tan once again to take them. But apparently, at the last moment, they managed to arrange transportation to the station themselves, so they didn't call back. Needless to say, the delegation was thrilled. Once they reached Lviv, I asked Khanh (a Vietnamese Ukrainian living in Lviv) to help them board the train to Poland. The

delegation even asked me to reach out to the Vietnamese Embassy in Poland for assistance, saying, “You understand...” If the military can’t coordinate support among themselves at this point, well, what can you do? I simply informed Hung, our Ambassador in Poland, that a military delegation would be arriving and asked him to assist. How the Embassy and Military Attaché’s Office over there divide responsibilities is up to them.

Initially, I also considered sending the spouses and children along with this delegation to Poland. Since they’re family members, no Ministry approval would be necessary. But during the Embassy staff meeting, both Lan and Hai—being more “royalist than the king”—insisted that since we were sent here by the Ministry, we should wait for the Ministry’s directive before evacuating. I can create the opportunity, but if the staff themselves don’t feel the need, that’s their call. I also planned to have my mom join the delegation, but at the last moment, she didn’t want to go alone without anyone accompanying her, so we left it.

### **Sunday, February 27, 2022**

Early in the morning, I saw a message from Hang, the Spokesperson, asking me to take down my Facebook post about the first Vietnamese group escaping the conflict in Ukraine. Hang said these were officials, not civilians. That kind of rigid thinking—honestly. The delegation of officials only managed to evacuate after the Embassy made three separate decisions, and if I hadn’t personally taken responsibility, there’s no way that group of officials could have gotten out. Aren’t officials also citizens? And ordinary people haven’t been evacuated yet! I’ve been urging people non-stop. I didn’t even specify whether it was civilians or officials in that post. At the very least, it showed people that someone had made it out

safely, right? But if I was told to take it down, so be it.

Hang told me that yesterday, on the government plane returning from Singapore, everyone was asking how the evacuation of the Vietnamese community was going. Hang responded in a very “covering for the Embassy” way, saying there was a plan, but since the airspace was closed, flights couldn’t operate, and people were hesitant to evacuate because of roadblocks and other difficulties. And that’s exactly how things are. I don’t need anyone to “cover” for me—who could’ve predicted that Putin would actually attack?!

A Viber group was set up connecting the Ministry leadership, Ambassador, and Quang (Deputy Director of Consular Affairs), who asked me to report on the evacuation situation. I reported the following: (i) The military situation suggests that Russia won’t be able to end this quickly, as they may have intended. Negotiations are bound to drag on—even just choosing a negotiation location since yesterday hasn’t been resolved. (ii) Yesterday, at a community meeting, representatives expressed the desire to evacuate in three directions. Currently, within the diplomatic corps, there are also discussions about requesting a humanitarian ceasefire window to allow foreign nationals to leave by train. Turkey has 2,000 citizens in Kyiv; Vietnam has fewer than 1,000. So, if this opportunity arises, I propose we allow the Vietnamese community in Kyiv to head toward Lviv, and from there, arrange a flight from Poland—if one can’t be arranged directly from Lviv. (iii) The Vietnamese community in Odesa has asked for permission to evacuate by road to Moldova and has requested a rescue flight from there. The Vietnamese community in Moldova is ready to assist. (iv) The situation in Kharkiv is extremely tense, so we can’t immediately arrange a convoy from Kharkiv to Belgorod. But we’re considering

organizing something as soon as possible.

The situation is likely to drag on, so whenever there's an opportunity to get people out, we should take it. We'll handle things step by step—we can't expect to solve everything at once. Even getting this far should already be considered a success.

Assistant Minister Minh Vu raised the idea of reporting on the necessity to arrange an evacuation flight. I mentioned that media outlets were already reporting Bamboo Airways was ready to fly. I also spoke with Ha from Vietnam Airlines. Ha isn't in a leadership role, but even he said Vietnam Airlines would fly if needed.

By the end of the day, I drafted a report to send home regarding evacuation needs, in preparation for a meeting the following day.

I cabled home requesting that we be proactive in public communications about citizen protection efforts, following the principle of “say things as they are”—meaning, tell the truth as it happens, without embellishment. Before the war, and even up until yesterday, people didn't want to evacuate—so how could we have them evacuated earlier?! If we keep trying to paint a picture of proactiveness, we'll end up looking passive, and people will see right through it. Why not just say, “Previously, there was no evacuation plan, but now we're determined to evacuate”—what's wrong with that?! This habit of glossing over the truth, always chasing achievements—it's deeply ingrained. No one dares speak plainly. Let's see who could have evacuated people before February 26th!

This is the fundamental difference between me and the system back home, including Hang's Press Department. We're friends, but when it comes to principles and methods, it can't

be lenient. Hang said something like, “Let the higher-ups decide.” I know full well—when the higher-ups decide, they’ll never take my input. They’ll stick to the standard line laid out by the Press Department. If Hang listened to me and presented things differently, maybe there’d be a chance. No matter. Whatever decision is made, I’ll implement it.

At the end of our exchange, Hang also added, “All public statements will be approved after the Government meeting tomorrow morning.” Which basically means I’m not allowed to post on Facebook anymore. I’ve used Facebook for work, but if it’s banned, then I’ll comply.

At 9 p.m., a Vietnamese expat in Troieshchyna messaged me, saying that with the current approach, there wouldn’t be enough people willing to evacuate to fill a rescue flight. I immediately understood there were problems. I called Mr. Bang, Chairman of the Kyiv Vietnamese Association, and asked him to organize a leadership meeting with community leaders in Kyiv. Everyone brought up various reasons why an evacuation couldn’t be organized. I agreed that buses couldn’t be hired, but we could still help people get to the train station—then they could take the train to Lviv. If necessary, we could use cars to shuttle people to the station. I asked them to divide people into groups of 10–20, appointing a group leader to facilitate communication. Seeing how the military delegation had safely made it to Warsaw by train, I decided the community should do the same—gather in Lviv first, then take the train to Poland, or, if a plane is available, go directly to the airport. Just organizing this left my voice hoarse. The meeting lasted 45 minutes.

### **Monday, February 28, 2022**

The Vietnamese Association in Kyiv issued an

announcement to the community, based on the outcomes of yesterday's meeting, calling on people to evacuate and register to return to Vietnam. I asked them to compile a list of those wishing to return so I could report it to the Ministry. Many in the community suggested that once they reached Lviv, they should continue straight to Poland. I agreed but emphasized that the Embassy couldn't arrange pickups from multiple locations. So, anyone heading to Poland would need to arrange transportation to wherever the evacuation flight departs on their own; the Embassy simply couldn't manage pickups from everywhere.

Assistant Minister Minh Vu reported that the Malaysian Embassy group had already reached Poland. I left a comment right away. That was the very group that had originally planned to travel together with Vietnam embassy, but when Vietnam embassy group couldn't go, they proceeded on their own—and made it all the way to Poland (while we're still stuck here in Kyiv). He posted the news casually. Didn't even reply to my comment. I have no idea what he thinks.

Since we've decided to evacuate the community, we also need to evacuate part of the Embassy staff. We should've already sent the non-essential staff out the other day, but Hai and Lan—"more royalist than the king"—insisted, "We were assigned here by the Ministry, so let's wait for the Ministry's permission before evacuating."

This morning, I asked everyone to come in early so we could coordinate getting to the train station. I made it clear: deciding to evacuate part of the Embassy staff is entirely the Ambassador's flexible decision. The staff would go only as far as Lviv, and their families could continue on to Poland if they wished. I presented it as voluntary—whoever agreed could go; no pressure. No one voiced any objections after that. I even

said: “If you want to stay, stay.” It took several trips to get everyone to the station. Trains are much harder to board now.

Once everyone had gone, the place felt strangely empty. There’s always a sadness in seeing people off, especially during wartime separations. When the train arrived, only about half the group managed to get on. Fortunately, someone lifted my mom onto their shoulders to help her board the train. Even without witnessing it, I could imagine the chaos and hardship of fleeing like that. The rest of the group couldn’t squeeze onto the next train and had to return to the Embassy. By 5 p.m., the group headed out again. This time, luck was on their side—they arrived, and a train was available right away, so everyone boarded without having to fight for space.

Also today, there was news that some of our people traveling from Odesa to Moldova had been robbed. So I suggested halting that route and reconsidering the option of heading toward Lviv instead.

I also spoke with Viet Phuong from VietJet. Phuong said VietJet had agreed to operate an evacuation flight. I reported this in the evacuation coordination group—that VietJet was ready to fly. Vu even instructed that we should only announce it if VietJet would fly for free. If the government organizes the evacuation, it will appoint which airline flies. In short, when it’s the government’s “cake,” there will be people deciding how to divide it.

## **Tuesday, March 1, 2022**

This morning, as soon as I woke up, I saw that Deputy Minister Minh Vu had sent a list of 10 people into the group chat, requesting that I register them for evacuation. Still half-asleep, I initially thought it was Assistant Minh Vu, so I immediately replied, asking that such messages be sent

privately to avoid affecting everyone in the group. Turns out, it was Deputy Minister Vu himself—now the standing Deputy Minister—and naturally, my comment irritated him. He replied that this wasn't just a personal matter, but something that should be shared with the group for awareness.

Looks like he's starting to show a bit of that standing Deputy Minister "swagger," not quite as humble as before. But honestly, where are we going to find evacuation slots right now to register people?! There are still 7,000 Vietnamese in Ukraine who need evacuation—if every group of 10 people is sent into the group chat for discussion, what will become of this process?

I explained that our evacuation approach is for the Embassy to manage coordination through the community association, which in turn works with sub-groups, and those sub-groups reach out to individuals. There's no way the Embassy alone can manage down to each individual person.

This morning, I reported in the Ministry leadership group that it's unlikely we can evacuate people from Kharkiv eastward, so I've instructed the community there to evacuate by train to Lviv instead. So, Kharkiv's evacuation is now underway. At the same time, I discussed with Khoi (Ambassador to Russia) the idea of proposing a specific date and time for requesting Russia to open a humanitarian corridor for our people to cross from Kharkiv to Belgorod—12:00 to 15:00 on March 3. Having specifics makes it easier for them to respond; if you leave things vague, it's hard to get an answer.

Later in the day, Vu also informed us that the Ministry leadership approved my evacuation plan (via three routes) but had no intention of immediately arranging evacuation flights. Instead, they want to wait until people have been evacuated to neighbouring countries, then "based on an assessment of the

actual situation on the ground, organize registration for repatriation flights through the Embassy website and the community associations. If there are any difficulties, the Ambassador should inform headquarters for coordination.” Classic bureaucratic evacuation—people will have arrived in other countries, and only then will they start registering?! When will the flights be arranged at this rate?

Meanwhile, Vietnam Airlines had already eagerly jumped in with PR, announcing they would fly out of six locations. It’s hard enough to propose two points, and here they are talking about six! Statements like that only feed people false hope, and later they’ll be shocked when it doesn’t happen.

At this point, the first group has reached Moldova and made contact with Huy for help. Huy is a successful businessman in Moldova. We met recently when I came to Moldova to present my credentials, but he’s always been very dedicated to the community. I’m fortunate to have this “guardian angel” over there. Another group had no place to stay and ended up reaching out to Gujeb. Technically, that’s Transnistria, but at times like this, who cares about such distinctions—anywhere they can find shelter, they’ll take it. I called Gujeb and asked him to assist, also sharing contact numbers so the group could coordinate with Nina’s group.

Today was also the first time I returned to Facebook since the war began. First, because war brings so many tasks. Second, because the Spokesperson had already made it clear—everything is to come from the Spokesperson. Fine, policy matters will be left to the Spokesperson. But the personal duties of an ambassador, I can still post on my personal account. So I wrote briefly about how, over the past three days, I’ve been working alongside the community on evacuation efforts. I urged everyone: if you can still evacuate, do it now—and the

safest and most reliable way is by train. No need to worry about fuel shortages, and it's safer than private cars. Tonight is the first night after the failed negotiations. No idea if there will be heavier fighting.

I also held an online meeting with the community in Mariupol today. They said they couldn't leave. If they can't, the only option is to shelter in place as safely as possible—what else can be done? I told Thu that Mariupol is likely to become extremely dangerous soon. It could well be the Stalingrad of 2022. Russia wants to capture it, Ukraine wants to hold it—this will be brutal.

Documentation-wise, some people have valid papers, some don't, some have expired documents. All sorts of issues. Fortunately, the Consular Department provided an email contact and said they have someone on duty 24/7 to respond. So, I told everyone to send inquiries directly via email. The Embassy only has one consular officer, and he's been so rattled that there's no way he can handle all the responses alone.

Since the non-essential staff left, I've noticed Hau has been quite down. At first, I thought he just missed his wife and kids. But today, he came to my office and reported that his wife suffers from depression, and there's a family history of it. I was surprised—Linh seemed perfectly normal, no signs of depression. Then Hau told me, "Actually, it's me who has it." I was getting annoyed and asked, "So is it you or Linh who has depression?" Hau said, "Both of us!" He asked for permission to evacuate. I had no desire to keep Hau here. But the Embassy only has one consular officer, and during wartime, protecting citizens is the top priority, so I kept him, even though Cuong, a younger staff member without family here, would logically have been a better fit to stay. But it had to be Hau's job. Turns out, the reason he's been so absent-minded lately is because

he's terrified of the war. Keeping someone like that here during wartime is just making life harder for everyone. Early in the afternoon, Hai and Mong also came to my office, asking me to resolve the matter and let Hau evacuate. I decided to check with leadership in Hanoi first, saying frankly that I agreed to let Hau evacuate but would follow whatever leadership decided. In the end, Hanoi's decision was to keep Hau here.

### **Wednesday, March 2, 2022**

At 3 a.m., I woke up and started chatting with Viet Phuong. I told him if VietJet was hesitating over the \$200,000 cost for the evacuation flight, I would personally guarantee that the Embassy would find enough funds to cover that amount. And \$200,000 is worth several times more than an advertisement—people will remember it for life. After I said that, VietJet had no reason to refuse. By noon, VietJet officially informed us that they had sent letters to relevant authorities declaring they were ready to operate a free evacuation flight on March 6.

Right after VietJet's announcement, I called Quang from Vietnam Airlines and urged him to quickly announce their flight plans too.

At the same time, I posted on Facebook with the status "A thousand thanks to VietJet" and shared their official letter. Not long after, Hang, the Spokesperson, messaged asking me to take down the post, saying, "I just instructed airlines not to make public announcements (and here you are posting this)." As Assistant Minister's directive, I complied. But frankly, comparing this to the PR fluff from some airlines claiming to fly from six points is laughable. One side makes wild, irresponsible claims, and the other makes a serious, concrete commitment, willing to cover the costs to bring people home. Could Hang and those wanting me to take down the post really

not understand the difference? It's so obvious even children would get it. So why demand I remove such uplifting information? I posted it to encourage the community. People are anxious, unsure how they'll return to Vietnam after getting to Poland. This news was a ray of hope for thousands—and yet, they wanted it taken down! Probably because some feared it would expose the entire evacuation apparatus as ineffective—weeks without decisive action, only for a private company to step in and lead. I removed it immediately per orders, but honestly, the announcement had already fulfilled its purpose—putting pressure on the bureaucracy. If leadership won't act, someone else will. And the people have seen it.

This morning, Bang, Chairman of the Vietnamese Association in Kyiv, reported that nearly all members had evacuated. Odesa reported 4/5 already evacuated. Kharkiv had hundreds boarding trains to Lviv. That's solid progress. Of course, the numbers need verification, but even with some margin of error, this is already a success.

The Embassy has also started assisting people in crossing into Poland from Lviv. I reported that the number of evacuees in Poland and Romania was enough to fill a plane from each location. Assistant Minister Minh Vu replied that headquarters would consider and decide. Minh Vu kept urging for finalized passenger lists. But people are still fleeing dangerous areas—how can we have neatly prepared lists? I simply asked for understanding: once people are in safe locations, then we can finalize lists. Luckily, I asked Nina to help draft the lists. She's quick (though I've never met her, don't even know how she looks like) and managed to prepare them well—unlike Kyiv, where I haven't seen any proper list yet.

Now that there's some movement on a flight from Poland, many evacuees originally planning to head to Romania are

thinking of switching to Poland. But doing so will overload Poland. I saw people discussing this in the evacuation group, so I immediately posted a short status: those who have already left for or are planning to go to Romania should stick to the plan and not switch to Poland. We will do our best to arrange a flight from Romania too. How could the Spokesperson possibly be quicker to inform people than the Ambassador on the ground? Timely updates like this are exactly what helps stabilize the community.

Today, there was also an unusual request—Nguyen asked if the Embassy could help evacuate two Zimbabwean students. I told him, we're evacuating by train, not by private vehicles. But fine. However we're going, I'll guide them to go the same way. Since it's by train, first thing I told them was to ditch their massive suitcases—on trains, you can only carry the essentials. Eventually, we managed to get them to the station ahead of us. They even boarded before I did. In times of war, whoever can leave, leaves.

The Cuban Ambassador still hadn't received orders to leave Kyiv. A few days ago, he asked me if he and his wife could take shelter at our place. Their embassy is close to Ukrainian government buildings, so I guess they felt exposed. I agreed, even told my staff to prepare space for them. But in the end, they stayed put. Now they're short on money because Havana hasn't managed to send funds. I also agreed to lend them money. There's nothing to hesitate about with our Cuban friends—they've always been there for Vietnam in tough times. Worst case, I'll consider it a personal loan to help them out.

Later in the afternoon, Huong from Kyiv finally managed to send over four handwritten pages of names registering to return to Vietnam. Honestly, it's quite disappointing. The community in the capital couldn't even organize proper

registration. All the community leaders had evacuated, and no one was coordinating. Seems the “community” exists just for show, not for actual organization. I held a meeting with the Kyiv group, firmly instructing them to get organized and produce a properly typed list to send to the Vietnamese Embassy in Poland. It really shows how bureaucratic the requirement from headquarters was—to have evacuees register on a website with all kinds of fields and columns. Easy to sit in an air-conditioned office and make rules, but they don’t think about the actual evacuees.

I coordinated with the Ukrainian side and learned they couldn’t guarantee security for any corridor leading toward Russia. So I recommended we not let our people register to evacuate to Russia, to avoid giving them false hope. Instead, focus on evacuating westward within Ukraine.

Around noon, Quan Kieu Anh called asking how things were going. I told her the community evacuation was almost done, and now we should start preparing to evacuate Embassy staff too. Kieu Anh reminded me to plan for document destruction. Immediately, I had staff begin destroying sensitive materials. Mr. M from the cipher team, who’s experienced, had already been cleaning up for days, asking my permission to destroy certain items. His workload has eased a lot, but still, we ended up burning a big pile in the garden.

Since we talked about evacuation, Hau suddenly became much more lively. Clearly, he had been under heavy psychological strain.

I told Kieu Anh that if Hanoi decided, they should do it quickly—before curfew—so staff could catch the train. Barely 1-2 hours later, we received confirmation from headquarters allowing the Embassy staff to evacuate. Of course, Kieu Anh

wasn't the final decision-maker, but she was the one presenting the case, and she was doing so while at home sick with COVID. I think, in this war, Quan Kieu Anh is the one person working with a true wartime spirit. I'm grateful to her.

The train left Kyiv just one hour before news broke that missiles hit only 100 meters from the station. Had we been delayed even a bit longer, it could've been catastrophic.

Chien and Hoang couldn't leave because they were still waiting for orders from the Ministry of Defence. Chien sounded quite frustrated, "The military's slower than civilians." At lunch, we discussed evacuation plans. Our driver Tan volunteered, "I'll stay." Tan rightly pointed out that if no one stayed behind, looters would ransack the place. I teared up—having someone like that, so loyal to the team. I had everyone pour a full glass and toast to Tan: "I will never forget your loyalty." Sure, Tan's done a few things that annoyed me before, but with this gesture, he proved himself irreplaceable. Last summer, I was so frustrated I even considered letting him go, but after reflecting—someone who's served the Embassy this long deserves more consideration. I made the right call keeping him then.

Before leaving, I stopped by home to grab some belongings, but in the end, couldn't take anything. On the way, I noticed Ukrainian forces replacing local militia with regular army at key points. If Russia moves in, the cost will be steep.

At the station, unexpectedly, Hau turned out to be our "secret weapon" to help the group board early. While the rest of us were waiting, he went "scouting" and found a train bound for Lviv ready to depart. He somehow sweet-talked the carriage chief into letting us board. They asked for 4,000 hryvnia—I said give them 5,000. Honestly, if we hadn't gotten on, no one

else would have. Taking the carriage chief's spot, giving him a little bonus—it was only fair.

### **Thursday, March 3, 2022**

By morning, March 3rd, our evacuation group arrived in Lviv. They once again went to the Saigon Restaurant run by Chinh and Tam's family. After breakfast, the staff returned to the train station to continue assisting evacuees as usual. I stayed back at the restaurant to keep working. To my surprise, President Nguyen Xuan Phuc called, asking about the evacuation situation. Some time ago, one of his relatives in Kharkiv was among those rescued and flown back to Vietnam. When the war broke out, she called me too, but all I could do was guide her on how to evacuate—what more could I do? I reported to the President that the evacuation work had basically succeeded in pulling people out of active combat zones; now it was about helping them reach neighboring countries. He said at the upcoming meeting with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, he would call me and I have to report on it.

I also spoke with the Turkish Ambassador, who said that the Russians still hadn't responded to requests for humanitarian corridors. In fact, people in Kharkiv shared that if they encountered Russian patrols on the streets, they'd be detained, while Ukrainian patrols were showing people the way to the train station. That's the clear difference between invaders and the invaded. Seeing the reality, I recommended people not attempt crossing battle lines.

Deputy Minister Minh Vu requested I intervene to try to make it easier for Vietnamese people to board trains to Lviv. The mindset back home—and among Vietnamese in general—is always to find a way to get special privileges. But Vietnamese in Ukraine are treated the same as Ukrainians; how

could they be treated better than Ukrainians themselves? Ukrainians are focusing on their own citizens. It's enough that there's no discrimination; why expect special favours? That kind of thinking is honestly amusing.

What really needed to be done was to make decisions on organizing evacuation flights, but no one was pushing for that. Instead, they kept obsessing over how many people had registered. Odesa reported 400 names from Romania—more than enough to warrant organizing a flight—but still no decision. Tung, Deputy Director of Consular Affairs, even asserted via online meetings with representatives that many people wanted to continue to third countries rather than return to Vietnam, so the list should be reconsidered.

Back home, they seem to think Russia is reliable, constantly pushing to consider evacuating via Russia. But honestly, Ukrainians don't want Vietnamese crossing battle lines into Russia. When I asked the Ukrainian Ambassador, he gave vague answers, not really saying anything concrete. The phone number the Ukrainians gave us to inquire about humanitarian corridors never connected either. So, I decided to forget about the safe corridor idea altogether.

Meanwhile, speaking with the Turkish Ambassador, he hinted that they were arranging for Turkish citizens in Kherson to follow an OSCE convoy to Crimea. They even offered that we could possibly board the same flight back to Istanbul. I asked our Embassy in Moscow to coordinate as well, to see if the Russians might support evacuating Vietnamese from Kherson. At the same time, I contacted Mr. Kien from the Vietnamese Association in Kherson. He's older now and can't move quickly. To speed things up, I told him to photograph everyone's passports so we could handle the lists from here. Even sending photos took him a while, and he kept mixing

things up—if we left him to write out names and numbers himself, accuracy would be impossible.

In the morning, I spoke with the OSCE representative in Kherson. They're discussing with Russia about organizing a convoy from Kherson into Russia. Vietnamese vehicles could theoretically follow the convoy, but OSCE won't take responsibility for them and won't wait for them either. So even if Russia allowed it, it'd be hard for us to keep up. Their cars are fast and in good condition. Ours wouldn't be able to keep pace.

By late afternoon, an official document was finally issued: Deputy Prime Minister Pham Binh Minh approved the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' proposal to organize evacuation flights for Vietnamese citizens and their families from Ukraine, with the Ministry of Finance covering the costs as per the Prime Minister's directive in Cable 201 from February 26th. The Ministry of Transport will oversee the flights. It took six whole days to get this approval. In wartime, such slow decision-making risks lives.

Immediately, I proposed organizing two flights on March 6th from both Poland and Romania. Assistant Minister Minh Vu replied that March 6th wasn't feasible because flight permissions still needed to be requested. The earliest would be March 9th. This is the result of the whole system dragging its feet. Ideally, while waiting for one thing, the other preparations should have been made in parallel. It's already March 3rd—how can it take six more days to get flight permission? Frankly, Minh Vu has been focused all along on requesting endless reports and statistics. People are evacuating from war zones, but they're being asked to register as if they're booking a vacation. Just looking at the number of evacuees should be enough to anticipate the need for flights. But no—they insist on

having lists before making decisions. Bureaucracy at its finest. If Assistant Minister Minh Vu himself had to evacuate, I wonder what he'd think of all this?

That evening, after dinner, I called a meeting. Staff were frustrated with how labour-intensive everything had been. Plus, there was a new incident—someone in the community stole Tuong Van's backpack, which contained both money and her laptop. Van, unsure where else to keep her money, had brought it along. I could tell things were getting unsustainable; staff spending ten hours a day out at the cold station were exhausted and falling ill. Most importantly, the community had already safely exited combat zones—now, they just needed to queue calmly like the Ukrainians to board trains and buses. Why were we bending over backward to organize special vehicles, make lists, and even pay fares for them? And let's face it—many were taking advantage of the evacuation to move to Europe. I decided to stop providing organized buses or car services. If Ukrainians could stand in line and wait their turn, why couldn't we?

Since the non-essential staff, along with their spouses and children, had evacuated, I'd heard vaguely that Chai, the Trade Office officer, stayed behind at first because his family wasn't planning to evacuate. But once everyone else left, he got worried and decided to go too. He ended up resting in Vinnytsia, and even today hadn't shown up in Lviv, while the rest of the Embassy team had been working flat out assisting people. I contacted Chai and instructed him to immediately head to Moldova to support our community there—our Embassy has no personnel stationed there, and everything's been left to Huy's group. Chai asked not to go, saying it was too far. But he's near the Moldova border, and could easily cross directly. Still, as Ambassador, I have no authority to force

him. All I could do was say it plainly. If he wouldn't act, there wasn't much I could do. Earlier, he'd said he'd report to the Ministry of Industry and Trade—but clearly, he hadn't bothered. Some officials are just like that. Calling back home would only cause more headaches. No sense of responsibility, no discipline. During wartime, all they care about is their own family—the work is someone else's problem.

### **Friday, March 4, 2022**

This morning, I decided that not everyone would go to the station as usual; instead, we would split into 'shifts' to take turns. The first shift was assigned to Chai. He had just returned from Moldova and hadn't done anything since leaving Kyiv. I gave him the task, but he kept dragging his feet. I thought he was nearly at the station, but then I saw him turn back to grab the flag. Earlier, Quan KieuAnh had called, saying that some acquaintances were waiting at the station and needed guidance. I had already given them Chai's phone number, but now he hadn't even left for the station yet. How could anyone check on him? I was so frustrated that I just went to the station myself.

At the station, I saw it was crowded but orderly. The Vietnamese community, however, almost never queues like the Ukrainians—they're always looking for ways to go separately or find shortcuts. Vietnamese people really do have a kind of sly cleverness. I was about to help one family, where a woman was heavily pregnant, to "skip the line." It was a mess trying to sort things out. In the end, sure, you might manage to skip a bit, but eventually, you still have to get in line. And the moment people hear about lining up, they lose interest. So fine, they shifted to finding cars instead.

Quan KieuAnh still thought the Embassy should continue organizing transport like in the earlier days—even suggesting we could send extra staff if necessary. From a distance, that

view isn't wrong. But if you're here on the ground, seeing Ukrainian citizens calmly waiting their turn, it starts to feel a little off when we keep trying to carve out special treatment for our own people, like we're gaming the system.

Anyway, I decided to adjust things. Embassy staff would take turns going to the station to assist and guide people toward the car hire services (usually faster, but you have to pay). The community association would help arrange cars as quickly as possible but wouldn't collect money themselves—let people pay directly, only stepping in to support financially in special cases.

Back home, I wrote a short Facebook post: “Everyone is safe now, so just calmly queue like the Ukrainians—no more special requests.”

### **Saturday, March 5, 2022**

Ambassador Phong from Romania informed me that someone from the Vietnamese Embassy in Ukraine had requested to board the evacuation flight and sent over the passport photos of Chai's wife and children. His wife and kids went over there acting like it was a given they'd fly, without even mentioning it to me. And since they didn't tell me, I certainly hadn't said anything to Ambassador Phong either. If Phong had been easy-going, he probably would've just let them on. But since he asked me, I had to be honest—Chai never requested my permission.

Later, Chai texted me, saying, “Well, my wife and kids are there now—what can I do?” I told him we'd draft a cable requesting approval for them to fly out from Romania. A bit later, he changed his mind and said he'd bring his wife and kids back to Poland to fly with the others. But once he saw how expensive the tickets were—\$500 per person—he dropped the

idea. Honestly, I didn't want to make things harder for staff and their families, so I went ahead and sent a cable asking Hanoi for permission to allow Embassy staff to return to Vietnam from both Poland and Romania. So fickle. If they had just travelled with everyone from Kyiv in the first place, none of this drama would have happened.

Today, Kyiv finally finished a list of over 200 people. I asked them to move the new names onto a fresh list to avoid confusion. Somehow, Mr. Nui interpreted this in a strange way and even threatened me, saying this was the “latest list” and “if it's not processed quickly, people will start crying out for help back home.” What a mess. It's not like the Ambassador has an evacuation plane in his pocket he can pull out! Didn't I already raise the need to prepare evacuation flights back in February?! But fine—misunderstandings happen in wartime; I won't hold it against him. I didn't even bother responding to Nui's threat.

Some people suggested I report back that there's no evacuation happening via Russia or Belarus—“who's even there to evacuate?” Sitting back home, they sketch out six evacuation points without any basis. That's the kind of misinformation that really needs correcting. Even now, with enough people gathered, there's still no telling when a plane will be arranged.

At this point, the community has largely completed evacuation, except for those in Kherson, now occupied by Russia, and Mariupol, still under siege, where people haven't been able to leave. The media and Ministry of Foreign Affairs groups are flooded with photos of diplomats picking up refugees. Huy even told me how, amid all the chaos of helping evacuees, he was asked by our Embassy in Romania to find a photographer! That's PR for you—always needing a good picture. What should be done gets neglected, letting people

complain, while time is wasted on irrelevant things. Phong kept asking why I hadn't been appearing in photos like the other ambassadors. I told him I don't need PR—what matters to me is results. That's why I wrote a short Facebook post: *"Results are what matter."* I listed, bullet-point style, everything the Embassy had accomplished since committing to the evacuation effort: meetings with the Vietnamese community associations in all three major cities—Kyiv, Odesa, and Kharkiv. The toughest was Kyiv, where they kept making excuses not to organize evacuation efforts. Then there was persuading VietJet to fly for free. I concluded: *"The Vietnamese Embassy in Ukraine hasn't been posting photos about the evacuation because we believe results are what matter. I wasn't planning to write this status either, but sometimes things need to be made clear."*

Most of the comments were congratulatory, but a few pointed out a hard truth—things in Kharkiv had fallen apart. Initially, people there waited to cross into Russia, but when I realized that wasn't feasible, I ordered them to "head west." However, Kharkiv didn't have strong community organization like Odesa, so people mostly had to fend for themselves. Honestly, there wasn't much choice. Ukrainian citizens were in the same boat—each family had to look after itself. In wartime, who else can do it for them? As Ambassador, I could only issue requests; I couldn't physically organize everything myself. If the community on the ground couldn't handle it, there wasn't much more I could do.

### **Sunday, March 6, 2022**

Around noon, Vu called me, telling me to prepare a report for the President. A few minutes later, he called back, and I

reported to the President and the meeting on all the work the Embassy had done—concluding that, by now, we had evacuated nearly everyone who wished to leave. Only those in Mariupol, under Russian siege, and Kherson, occupied by Russia, remained unable to evacuate. Only after I finished did I realize I hadn't followed "protocol" at all—I even forgot to thank the President for his concern. But what mattered was updating him on the situation so the leadership at home could stay informed.

These past few days, there's been an uproar in the community regarding how priority spots were arranged for the first evacuation flight within the "Odesa Refugee Group." People were complaining loudly, like a chorus. I gave Viet access to that forum. Viet was the MOFA's deputy spokesperson. Somehow, Viet must have reported it to Hang, and she issued a directive asking everyone to "unify messaging to avoid social media being used to discredit us." Good heavens—the people's complaints are valid! What's disgraceful isn't the public's words; it's the behaviour of the system—lacking humanity. Instead of adjusting their actions, they focus on controlling the narrative to avoid criticism. Before I left for this post, Hang and I were quite close. But now, when it comes to work, we're polar opposites.

I also messaged Minh Vu, asking him to weigh in. Vu said he already had. Hai Anh even wrote to me, saying: "We in Odesa know clearly who deserves priority and who doesn't. Doing it this way only breeds resentment and indignation among the community." It was already late, but I still urged Minh Vu to act decisively to prevent this from tarnishing the Foreign Ministry's reputation. My suggestion was very simple: families without young children or the elderly should wait for the next flight. Uncle Ho wasn't wrong when he said, "We're

not afraid of scarcity, only of unfairness.” Fairness resolves tensions immediately.

Then Anh Bang from the Kyiv Vietnamese Association messaged me, saying people were complaining that Anh Khanh had been collecting money from evacuees, even though the buses were supposed to be free. Thankfully, I had instructed Embassy staff from the start not to get involved in any financial dealings—too easy to be misunderstood. And this is a perfect example. Khanh had been tirelessly helping people every day, but in the end, he got smeared like this. I immediately posted a short status on Facebook, thanking both Khanh in Lviv and Huy in Moldova as the key figures supporting the evacuation efforts—indirectly dispelling the false rumours about Khanh.

There was also another issue: the Vietnamese Embassy in Poland required evacuees to provide a phone number when registering. People were frustrated. Phuong commented on how rigid the mindset of the organizers was. Three phone numbers for the entire group should suffice. I agreed and passed the community’s feedback to the Embassy in Poland.

Today, I also had to formally correct Mr. Nui—I couldn’t let it slide like yesterday. Headquarters had decided that the Vietnamese Embassy in Poland would be the main point of contact for organizing evacuees onto flights, but Nui kept complaining as if the Vietnamese Embassy in Ukraine were shirking responsibility. Preparing the passenger list was the job of the Embassy in Poland, but out of concern for our people, we were pushing and helping—not because it was our duty. If he still had questions about why things were assigned this way, he should take it up with Hanoi.

### **Monday, March 7, 2022**

Yesterday, I wrote an article for *International Affairs*

magazine. After finishing, I noticed that the questions they had originally posed were slightly different. But I messaged Hanh, the deputy in chief of the newspaper, telling her that this piece was the most comprehensive write-up to date on the evacuation efforts. I also asked her to let me know if they planned to edit or cut it. Hanh suggested turning it into a regular article instead. I declined. An article reflects the writer's lens, while an interview reflects primarily the interviewee's perspective. And if it's filtered through their lens, I'd rather they not publish it at all. Hanh didn't respond, so I understood that the Editor-in-Chief had likely decided against running the interview.

I contacted the Vietnam News Agency and VOV to see if they'd consider using it in interview format. VOV replied that their current focus was on the evacuation flights. Honestly, this isn't about me personally—it's about offering a clear, accurate account of the evacuation efforts from the start until now. Whatever it is, if you present it clearly and straightforwardly, there's less room for misunderstanding—or at least, it's harder to be misunderstood.

Right around that time, Deputy Minister Vu Quang Minh messaged me saying that Ngoc from the BBC wanted to interview me about the evacuation and mentioned, "She's trustworthy." I agreed and gave the interview with Ngoc via Facebook Messenger. She truly is someone reliable. There were moments I felt slightly irritated because some of the questions felt very "Vietnamese"—like, "What's the next plan?" I even asked her in return, "Do you know what tomorrow will bring in this war?" None of us knows how the war will develop tomorrow, so all I can say to those still determined to stay behind is to be cautious—and if needed, evacuate immediately. There's no way to make concrete plans anymore! In the end, we wrapped up a rather long interview—over half an hour.

Chien, the Military Attaché, asked for permission to evacuate along with the Kazakh Embassy, promising to report back once he reached Lviv. Of course, I agreed. If I could evacuate, then the rest of the staff should be allowed to as well.

## **Tuesday, March 8, 2022**

Early this morning, Chien, the Military Attaché, called again, asking, “It must be crowded at the Embassy in Lviv already, right?” I replied, “Yes, it’s crowded,” and immediately he requested to move on to Uzhhorod. Clearly, the Kazakh Embassy was heading to Uzhhorod, so he wanted to tag along. He should’ve just said so outright and been done with it. In wartime, people make accommodations for each other—no one’s nit-picking. But people who are used to lying can’t help themselves; acting like it’s because the Embassy in Lviv is already too crowded. I asked, “So, you’re not going to meet as promised to report in full anymore?” He very frankly replied, “No.” Yesterday, when asking to leave Kyiv, he promised to report in full. Today, apparently, there’s no need for that anymore. Oh dear—a colonel with that kind of discipline, answering like a three-year-old child.

Afterward, I drafted a cable informing headquarters of what had happened, without making any commentary. They can draw their own conclusions. I thought about adding a line like, “Staff always act first, report later,” but decided against it—no need to stir things up.

Later in the morning, H asked to go to the Saigon Restaurant to help prepare documents for the evacuees. I don’t trust this guy. Every time there’s a chance to squeeze money out of people, he tries. So, I told him to stay put, handle the paperwork online, and send it to the evacuees electronically to save them from unnecessary trips. Not long after, I found out

he'd gone to the train station to meet people and collect photos for paperwork. Xuan has prepared documents for citizens countless times—never once needed photos. But H insists on making people go take photos, paste them, and get stamps. Sure, it might seem more “official,” but it's also a convenient way to meet people and ask for money.

Well, karma will handle that. Trying to squeeze people for money when they're already struggling—that's a loss of integrity. Mr. K has told me more than once about how H always finds ways to ask for money. I don't have the energy to micromanage these petty things. There are too many fronts to handle already—no need to open another one.

The Vietnamese Embassy in Poland requested to delay the evacuation flight by three hours to finish the passenger list. People had arrived since March 1st, and a whole week later, they still hadn't completed the list—what can I say? They're making things unnecessarily complicated. It could have been done simply. Eight days to prepare a list of 300 people. No words left. That job could be done in half a day at most.

Around noon, I joined an online meeting organized by the State Committee for Overseas Vietnamese with various embassies and Vietnamese associations around the world. Everyone took the opportunity to talk about how hard they've been working. Three whole hours of listening to those kinds of stories. When Ha gave his closing remarks, I didn't even bother to listen. I just posed one question: we managed to evacuate 6–7,000 people out of combat zones in three or four days—why has it taken a week without organizing even one flight?

The build-up of evacuees in Poland and Romania is the result of sending flights too late. Had we established an air bridge and sent a few planes immediately, it would've been

resolved. Meanwhile, only yesterday was one plane sent, and tomorrow another. I had proposed on March 6th to have two planes at two locations—Romania and Poland. If planes had arrived and priorities had been arranged properly, there wouldn't be any complaints from the people. But at home, everything's done bureaucratically. Waiting endlessly for lists to be compiled before submitting them, then meetings, allocation, etc. Everything is rigid, heartless. Each additional day people wait brings more suffering and hardship.

Either way, planes are going to be sent—why not do it immediately? The Prime Minister gave the order, but it took a whole week to execute, and the people just had to keep waiting!

In the afternoon, Ukraine's newly appointed ambassador called, suggesting a phone call between the two foreign ministers. That's fine. It's fortunate he took the initiative. If I had proposed it myself, Hanoi probably wouldn't listen—always prioritizing Moscow first.

The interview from yesterday was published right away. Overall, it was objective and stayed true to the content of our conversation. Ngoc asked if I could recommend others involved in the evacuation effort for further interviews. I referred her to Khanh and Huy.

### **Wednesday, March 9, 2022**

Hai Anh messaged me, saying that yesterday I hit the nail on the head regarding how slow the organization of evacuation flights has been. Exactly what's been itching me. I told Hai Anh, "You guys see I'm right, but did any of you speak up to support me? You leave the ambassador to say it alone. One person speaking is very different from three people speaking."

Hai Anh replied that he's not in Ukraine. Out of the nine

Vietnamese Association leaders—excluding Mr. Kien in Kherson—the other eight are in Kyiv, Odesa, and Kharkiv, all directly affected by the evacuation flights. So why didn't any of them say anything? Simple—none of those eight are planning to return to Vietnam, so none of them really feel strongly about whether the community has flights to return home or not. The Vietnamese Associations are like that—mostly formalities, not tightly knit or well-organized structures. Just the other day, one of the young people from Kharkiv commented on my page, saying it's every man for himself there, no real organization. And honestly, that's true.

Assistant Minister Minh Vu again asked me to write a report explaining why there are still people who haven't evacuated, what's been done for them, and what the next plan is, so that we can report it to the higher leadership. I've explained it countless times. People have homes, businesses; their whole lives are tied to this land. It's not so easy for them to just leave. I've repeated this over and over, but every time there's a report, they ask the same question. I wonder—if every time I answered, I turned around and asked a junior staffer to get the information for me, what would happen?!

Linh Dan from VOA asked if I'd agree to an interview—probably after seeing my BBC interview. Even though she wasn't introduced as a “trusted contact,” I still agreed. Once you're willing to answer one outlet, there's no reason not to answer another. Nothing to worry about. During the interview, once or twice, Linh Dan tried to veer beyond the agreed-upon content, but I quickly pointed out, “This is outside the scope of our discussion.” In the end, the interview still ran over half an hour. At the end, I just reminded her: “The ambassador gave this interview openly—I hope VOA presents it objectively.” I'm always wary of how things can be cut and twisted.

**Thursday, March 10, 2022**

This morning, I read an open letter from European ambassadors calling on Vietnam to urge Russia to withdraw its troops and end the war. Clearly, never before have European ambassadors exerted such pressure on Vietnam. It's obvious that we can't stay silent anymore. If they are speaking out like this while we remain silent, it gives the impression that we either disregard them or have no argument to defend our position. It's time to explain our stance. If we believe our position is right, then why not explain it to those who don't yet understand?

Thinking this through, I drafted a cable with a concise analysis: Russia is taking extreme actions to protect its interests; Ukraine is rigid in responding to Russia's demands; and Western countries, though appearing to support an end to the war, haven't taken convincing actions to persuade Ukraine to adopt a flexible approach—instead, they've added fuel to the fire. Therefore, I suggested we communicate three key points in some form: (i) Vietnam supports the call for Russia to withdraw troops and end the war to restore peace in Ukraine; (ii) at the same time, Vietnam calls on all relevant parties to take action to bring peace to Ukraine, because Russia will only withdraw and end the war if its security interests are addressed; and (iii) long live peace. Ukrainians often say “Glory to Ukraine”; we can say “Long live peace.”

After that, I discussed it with Minh, who is currently in charge of the European Department. Minh seemed to be following “higher-level” instructions, preoccupied with hypotheticals—if the Embassy were hit by stray bullets, how should we respond? If a Vietnamese citizen were injured or killed, what should we declare? Meanwhile, the major issue at hand is that we're becoming isolated, being viewed by other

countries as complicit with the aggressor—and no one seems to care! The Ministry of Foreign Affairs should really be renamed the Ministry of PR. Always focused on polishing appearances, while no one deals with real foreign affairs issues. And frankly, no one has the capacity to handle them. Even the Minister and leadership lack the stature, let alone the department-level officials.

Talking with Minh, he kept focusing on war scenarios. Scenarios are just that—scenarios. And who really has enough information to say which one is certain to happen? All of it is academic, analysis for analysis' sake, while the pressing issue—that people see us as friends of the butcher—goes unaddressed. No one thinks about what we should do to change that.

P surprised me when he said, “If it’s just these open letters, there’s no need for action.” Strange. Vietnam has never faced such a reaction from ambassadors in Hanoi, yet he thinks it’s nothing and doesn’t require a response. It’s like the other day when he said Ukraine hasn’t lobbied us to vote yes; their chargé d’affaires hasn’t gone to the Ministry in Hanoi, and the Foreign Ministry in Kyiv hasn’t sent a note. Technically, that’s not wrong. But more than 20 ambassadors signing their names like this is a completely different matter.

In the end, Minh agreed to consider it and said it would be handled tomorrow. I’ve done everything I can. There’s no point trying to hold up the sky with a stick.

Today, VOA published the interview from yesterday. Everything was true to what I said. Only the headline, written by VOA, had a bit of their slant: “Why Did Vietnam Evacuate Late?” I didn’t ask them to correct it. I only noted that it wasn’t entirely fair. Late compared to some countries, but earlier than

others—and, notably, we finished evacuating much sooner than many. But fine. The important thing is that it provided a full account of the Embassy’s efforts in evacuating our citizens.

### **Friday, March 11, 2022**

This morning, I spoke with Bac (President Nguyen Xuan Phuc’s relative) and became even more aware of the need to provide humanitarian aid to Ukraine. A few days ago, the Ukrainian Ambassador asked me if Vietnam was willing to offer humanitarian, financial, or even military aid to Ukraine. I couldn’t answer at the time and told him that the ministers should discuss directly. But today, it’s clear we can’t wait for ministers to meet anymore, so I drafted another cable suggesting that if we publicly explain Vietnam’s stance as I proposed yesterday, we’d get out of this dilemma and be free to provide humanitarian aid to Ukraine.

After writing the cable, I still felt uneasy, so I texted Deputy Minister Vu, saying I wanted to discuss. He agreed. In our conversation, Vu seemed to share my assessment. He was a bit more cautious, preferring to use China’s formula of mentioning “the interests of all relevant parties” rather than explicitly stating “Russia’s interests.” Frankly, I don’t see an issue with clearly mentioning Russia’s interests—it would be stronger and more straightforward, and it would smooth things over with Russia. Even if we didn’t explicitly name Russia, everyone would understand that’s who we mean. Vu mentioned that headquarters had already agreed to provide humanitarian aid to Ukraine.

Unfortunately, Vu still hadn’t read the open letter signed by 22 European ambassadors calling on Vietnam. I had to send it to him myself. No idea how the regional department reported things. Maybe Vu is overloaded and overlooked the gravity of

such a letter, so he didn't pay it much attention.

Still, I didn't believe China had only ever vaguely referred to "all relevant parties' interests," so I had staff double-check. Turns out, multiple times China has explicitly mentioned Russia's interests. I texted Vu again, sharing a compiled list. He graciously acknowledged and thanked me. I've done everything within my power to help Vietnam out of this predicament. What Hanoi decides from here, I can no longer influence. In peacetime, Vietnam's diplomatic weakness is hidden—but in wartime, it's glaringly obvious.

I checked again with the Cuban Ambassador about Cuba's official stance on the war. Cuba's position is crystal clear—they support ensuring Russia's security interests. The Cuban Ambassador also mentioned there are four Cuban citizens serving prison sentences in Nikolaev. She asked if the Vietnamese community in Odesa could help get them out of the conflict zone.

Seeing the need to coordinate some humanitarian support, I contacted Mr. Luyen to ask how much he had raised earlier to send to the Ukrainian Embassy in Hanoi. Turns out, it was only money from himself and a couple of friends. As Ukraine's Honorary Consul, he was too afraid to take the initiative and didn't dare call for broader support, afraid of going against policy. It's pathetic, really. He explained that the mechanism back home is restrictive—can't open a special account, etc. Blaming "the system" is just too easy. Surely there's some way to do it? I remember when a little boy in Yen Thanh (Nghe An) drowned after trying to rescue his friends, I suggested raising funds—and Mr. Le Anh immediately organized a simple fundraiser, raising hundreds of millions in no time. Don't tell me it's impossible! Honestly, for an Honorary Consul to be this passive is disappointing. Xuan was even ready to step up and

organize donations, but the Honorary Consul claimed the system wouldn't allow it. If I were Ukraine, I'd revoke his honorary consul title.

Even while traveling, Xuan still checked in, asking if there'd been any official gesture toward Ukraine yet, assuming Deputy Minister Vu's agreement meant things were settled. But back home, things don't move that quickly. It's already Friday evening—no fires, no deaths—so no one's rushing.

I happened to see a Facebook account today posting really solid updates on the war in Ukraine—far better than the Embassy's Political Section. No idea how many people are running that account, but their information is sharp and well-sourced. I forwarded it to the Political Section for reference—but whether anyone there will bother looking, who knows.

This afternoon, I grew restless because I felt cut off from reliable information (all sources tinged with propaganda). So, I messaged the Egyptian Ambassador and Ambassador H, who I knew were in Lviv, to arrange meetings. Luckily, both ambassadors were enthusiastic and agreed right away. I had Khanh drive me to see Ambassador H first, as he responded earlier. We arranged to meet the Egyptian Ambassador an hour later. But I had to reschedule twice with the Egyptian Ambassador because the conversation with Ambassador H ran long, and the roads weren't close. Plus, I forgot my phone at Ambassador H's office and had to double back. Thankfully, the Egyptian Ambassador was very understanding. When I finally arrived, the Palestinian Ambassador was also there, so it turned into a three-way discussion.

Talking to Ambassador H provided a lot of insight—most importantly, his view of the battlefield. According to him, in just one week (two at most), Ukraine's military forces would

be broken. Losing militarily means losing the war. I had previously thought Russia's slow advance and heavy losses meant they wouldn't win, especially seeing Ukraine's fiery "people's war" spirit. But maybe not. If Ukraine's main military forces collapse, a few pockets of guerrilla warfare won't change the outcome. Russia isn't aiming to fully occupy Ukraine—they won't spread out and govern the whole country, so they won't get bogged down. They'll likely hold strategic points to safeguard their interests, as they did in Moldova, and leave Ukrainians to govern themselves. Whoever ends up managing Ukraine will sign some sort of settlement with Russia. Ukraine will be fragmented and will take a long time to recover. Ambassador H also explained why the U.S. pushed Ukraine into this war: "American policymakers hate Russia, letting emotions drive their actions." In reality, China is America's true rival. By focusing on the secondary opponent instead of the primary one, the U.S. is playing into China's hands.

The Egyptian and Palestinian ambassadors didn't offer much new information, but the Egyptian Ambassador was observant. He noted that last year, Ukraine held joint military exercises with NATO four times to challenge Russia, that Macron visited Ukraine and then Russia, and afterward returned to France and did nothing—meaning Ukraine changed its stance and reneged on whatever promises it made to the French president.

After meeting the ambassadors, I returned to have drinks with Khanh. I felt better after gathering some intel, so I drank quite a bit. Even after drinking, I sat down to draft a cable to report back. But I decided not to send it right away—better to sleep on it and review in the morning with a clear head.

Today, I also received a cable from New York—a

whopping 20 pages. It covered everything from history to the present. But what stood out was a single point: Putin, being ex-KGB, always tends toward authoritarian control (with the implication that this extends to his foreign policy). One rule when drafting cables—keep them concise, clear, with unique or fresh information. Twenty pages reads more like a thesis.

Also today, Khanh invited me for a sauna session—it's hard to find a place for that nowadays. But Khanh's well-connected in Lviv's upper circles, so of course he'd find something. Deep in the forest. Met Iura there. He mentioned that next week would be difficult for Lviv. I asked about Ukraine's new law on seizing Russian assets. Iura explained it only applies to businesses, not personal property. Many people with Russian citizenship in Ukraine, like Thao, were worried and fled because of it.

### **Saturday, March 12, 2022**

Today, Phong messaged me asking whether Ukraine had just passed a law allowing Russians in Ukraine to be killed, and whether I'd seen swastikas in Ukraine. Clearly, the information war is as intense as the military one. I haven't seen any swastikas, and as for that law—yesterday I checked with Iura, and it's simply about seizing the assets of Russian businesses, not personal property. Yet somehow, online, this has morphed into claims that Ukraine is now allowed to kill Russians. No idea why back home there's even a document claiming that both sides have reached an agreement according to Russia's demands. It sounds like it was pulled from a report. How could anyone be so optimistic? Probably translated from some Russian source. Those were merely Russia's conditions, now spun as an actual agreement.

Woke up at 3–4 a.m. to finalize yesterday's cable, then

went back to bed at 5:30. Even though I've adjusted my assessment, I decided not to change my recommendation. Whether headquarters continues or drops my suggestion from yesterday is up to them. Honestly, if things change in two weeks, then maybe there's no need to make any gestures toward Ukraine. But who knows exactly when that will happen?

After finishing the cable, I went back to sleep. Woke up at 9 a.m. in a panic—my vision was blurry, and I couldn't read the Ha Tinh province's message on my phone. Thankfully, after a short nap, my eyes were fine. I only have one good eye left for reading, so if something happens, that's going to be serious trouble.

Ha Tinh sent a very clear message, requesting the Embassy help evacuate people from the province. I told Hau to draft a reply. He initially wanted to shift responsibility to the Embassies in Poland and Romania. Typical of those who don't want to take responsibility—just pass the job off and be done with it. This disease runs deep in Vietnamese bureaucrats. Back when I worked in the Party's External Relations Commission, every issue was endlessly debated—whose department should handle it. Same disease. I told Hau to draft a cable clearly stating that everyone who wanted to evacuate has already done so; if the province is specifically concerned about any particular case, provide us a phone number to check. The province's concern is understandable, but with 6,000–7,000 people—how much time would it take to check each one? Five minutes per person multiplied by 7,000 equals 35,000 minutes = 500 hours = 20 days!

This morning, I saw a message in the Russia-evacuation group about evacuating Kherson. I immediately called Kien to check. Turns out, only 14 out of 80 people (less than 18%) agreed to evacuate, even though conditions were the easiest:

pick-up right at their location, no hardships. Officials back home always ask how many people haven't evacuated and why. Well, there's your reality! But when I posted that fact in the Ministry Leadership group, I got just two "likes." Meanwhile, posting photos of welcoming 20 evacuees as if they were greeting an international delegation gets tons of praise and likes. Shows clearly—people care more about appearances than substance. It's become a habit.

Over lunch, I mentioned to the staff how good that Facebook page is—the one reporting and analysing the war. I asked the Political Section if anyone had checked it. Turns out, not a single person. Incredible. They don't even bother to self-study. Their boss shares useful info, and they don't even look at it.

Anh Thao brought his son to the Embassy to get the certificate proving they're Vietnamese, ready to leave for Poland tomorrow, then back to Vietnam. H couldn't squeeze any money out of them, so he worked with a sour face. You could see his irritation. How greedy can you be—still thinking of milking evacuees during wartime?

Early afternoon, I attended Lithuania's national day event. Took me a while to find Chinh's old coat. I only have a pair of jeans and a pullover. Wartime is like that. Only one Hungarian diplomat showed up in a full suit and tie; everyone else wore semi-formal clothes. Had a chat with the Croatian ambassador—she seemed to confirm Ukraine's weapons shortage. Ironically, that shortage might help end the war sooner. If it keeps dragging on, only civilians will suffer.

This afternoon, Xuan flew back from Warsaw to Vietnam. The wife of an ambassador in a war zone, who spent ten days supporting evacuees, and yet she was seated all the way back

at row 50 on the plane. Xuan didn't seem to mind. Son noticed his mother's seat and commented casually. Our family is used to not expecting anything. But still, life feels cold sometimes. Ambassador Hung knew Xuan was leaving but didn't say a word. Even a small gesture shows care, but we don't demand it.

Today, all the evacuees from Kyiv also flew back to Vietnam. That pretty much concludes the exhausting days.

Ambassador Thanh from Australia showed a lot of interest in proposing that Vietnam act as a mediator between Russia and Ukraine. He probably only sees that Vietnam is friends with both sides. But being friends with both sides isn't the most important condition to mediate. A mediator must be respected by both. I gently reminded him that Turkey's recent mediation between Russia and Ukraine is worlds apart from Vietnam's mediation between the U.S. and North Korea. The Turkish foreign minister sat directly at the negotiating table—a true three-party negotiation. Vietnam merely provided a venue for the U.S. and North Korea—that's all. Vietnam doesn't have the standing to mediate between Russia and Ukraine. Russia doesn't particularly value us, and Ukraine even less so—they're too angry. When even European ambassadors are signing open letters to Vietnam, imagine how disappointed Ukraine is. Their chargé d'affaires hasn't voiced it outright, but it's clear. What kind of mediator can we be? I gently hinted to Ambassador Thanh that countries acting as mediators all voted in favour of the UN resolution demanding troop withdrawal—no country that abstains—like Vietnam—can realistically act as a mediator.

Even now, we haven't been able to arrange a phone call between the two foreign ministers, yet we're talking about mediating. In Vietnam, everything needs layers of approval. In

other countries, presidents make decisions directly. With all our bureaucracy, how can we be flexible enough to mediate? It's pure delusion.

### **Sunday, March 13, 2022**

At 5 a.m., I woke up to a message from Spokesperson Le Thi Thu Hang saying there was a letter circulating online from Ms. Hong in Mariupol appealing for help. I checked and saw it was posted by Ho Sy Truc, who used to be a “close friend” of the Embassy but had since become “uncooperative.” When I first arrived in Kyiv, he was the one who took me to visit Troeshchina Market and introduced me to people. The conflict arose when he wanted to run paid Vietnamese classes outside, but I firmly prioritized organizing free classes at Ho Chi Minh School. Such a minor conflict shouldn't have led to opposition, but maybe he also clashed with Duan, who has helped me immensely in taking care of my mother. Without Duan, my mother-son tensions wouldn't have been resolved. From then on, Truc became uncooperative and now seizes every chance to jab at me. If he really wanted to help Ms. Hong in Mariupol, he should have sent the letter to me, informed me—not posted it online to stir things up. Clearly, such a letter at this moment is intended to incite criticism against the Embassy, the Foreign Ministry, and the Vietnamese Government. But regarding Mariupol, we've done everything possible.

Thinking that, I called him directly and told him bluntly that his way of handling things was provocative, not genuinely aimed at helping Ms. Hong. He had no argument to defend himself and agreed to take the post down. Nevertheless, by noon, I still told Hau to speak again with Bang, Chairman of the Vietnamese Association in Kyiv, to draw a lesson and prevent such things from recurring.

In the morning, Ambassador Gaman called me, saying he had received instructions from the Presidential Office to arrange a phone call between the Ukrainian President and the Vietnamese President. That's serious, so I immediately called Foreign Minister Thanh Son. The Minister said to arrange a call between the Foreign Ministers first, and to do so only after the one with Russia. When the Minister says so, there's nothing else to do but follow. But afterward, I called First Deputy Minister Minh Vu and gently pushed the idea that it might be better to arrange the call with Ukraine first; otherwise, doing it after Russia might make it hard to explain to Ukraine. Of course, Minh Vu still followed the Minister's instructions but tried to reassure me, saying that the call with Minister Lavrov is scheduled for Tuesday. It's really a case of "officials are slow, but the people are urgent." Ukraine wanted to talk today, yet it gets delayed two or three days, and people seem nonchalant about it. The Minister and Deputy Minister have spoken, so all I can do is carry it out.

I called Gaman to persuade him, explaining that typically, it's done from lower to higher levels; jumping straight to President level without even arranging Minister-level talks skips necessary steps. I also reminded him of his earlier mistake when I had suggested formalizing a Minister-level call but he didn't act, leaving Vietnam waiting.

Later, Minh from the European Department called, likely assigned by Vu, to ask about the call. I repeated the idea of arranging a Minister-level talk first. I stressed the need to press Russia more, so we wouldn't end up in an awkward position with Ukraine. Minh said the communication was now directly between the two Ministries of Foreign Affairs, not through the Embassy in Moscow anymore. Either way, I maintained that we must act proactively, not passively, with Russia. If they

realize we're talking to Ukraine only after talking to them, they might stall Ukraine, leaving us in a tough spot. But that's all I could say.

Later, the Ambassador circled back asking if a call could be arranged today—without specifying the level. I replied that the best option is to first organize it at Ministerial level. But just in case President Zelensky had something urgent, I asked if there was an urgent message. Gaman then clarified it was indeed about a Ministerial-level call. I told him to go ahead and send the official note to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Ukraine accepted the Ministerial-level call, so I reported back to Vu. He replied, "From now on, talk directly to Minh," meaning he didn't want to hear from me directly anymore. Fine—unless there's a crisis, I won't call. I informed Minh accordingly, telling him to wait for Ukraine's official note.

Meanwhile, I also cabled back home to put in writing the conclusion: "If Ukraine is eager, the Embassy recommends being flexible, possibly arranging the call before the one with Russia since we've already asked them for several days now." That's the maximum push I can give. But who knows if Ukraine is truly eager; their unprofessional approach makes you question it.

An hour later, Gaman sent me the note from their Hanoi Embassy to the Ministry. I forwarded it to Minh, who said he had received it too. So they are keen. By 4 p.m., Gaman asked again if there was any news from Hanoi. What could I say—I told him, "It's 9 p.m. in Hanoi now." Clearly, they're eager. But who knows if Hanoi will answer tomorrow; it seems they want to wait until after Tuesday! Frustrating.

In the morning, Chien messaged me saying Russia had started attacking Lviv. Looks like he's maneuvering to evacuate to a third country. Seeing that, before he could spread the news

in the Embassy's Viber group, I removed Chien and Hoang from the group. Chien messaged asking why I removed Military Attaché staff from the group. I replied, "You two removed yourselves from the group." He argued, saying he had always asked for permission. I told him to check the chat: "You said you'd report back after reaching Lviv, but then you left for Uzhhorod and said there was no need to report." Chien continued to argue, claiming I had told him no need to report. I sent him a screenshot of the chat where I asked, "No need to report?" and he replied, "Yes." He clearly chose to interpret things his way. I told him I blocked his Viber to avoid further hassle.

I informed the Embassy group that the Moldovan Ambassador would be coming to Lviv and that no other ambassadors currently in Lviv felt the need to evacuate. I said it to calm everyone down. But people still seemed anxious, posting in the group about sirens, roadblocks, etc.

Following headquarters' request to draft evacuation plans, I prepared a cable suggesting that if evacuation is necessary, we should move to Moldova since we are also accredited there—it would be a good opportunity to meet and push work forward. My thinking: "Either all go, or all stay." No need to waste the government's budget.

This morning, Russia attacked a training base on the outskirts of Lviv, making staff uneasy. So, I called a meeting. At the start, I clearly stated that 15 ambassadors here, exchanging on WhatsApp, all believed this attack didn't affect Lviv's security. In the worst case, the Embassy would relocate to Moldova since we're accredited there. Yet when it came time for staff to speak, they brought up needing safety to work, preparing in advance, needing an advance team, etc. Basically, pushing to move part of the mission to Moldova. They're not

working here despite constant reminders—how will they handle anything over there? And for what purpose? I made it clear—Lviv is safe; if the Ambassador can stay, why can't they? If anyone wants to leave, I'll send them back to Vietnam right away. I decided half the staff would return to Vietnam. After the meeting, I immediately cabled home requesting permission from headquarters to send half the mission home.

In the evening, Ms. Leokadia, Vice Chairwoman of the Ukraine-Vietnam Friendship Association, messaged me: “I'm shocked to learn that so many Vietnamese people support Putin's invasion of Ukraine. So many women and children have died, and yet the Vietnamese support this?” I replied, explaining that this is a misunderstanding. Many Vietnamese believe this isn't a war between Russia and Ukraine but between Russia and NATO—and if viewed as Russia vs. NATO, it becomes easier to understand why many Vietnamese support Russia. NATO has not respected its 1991 promise not to expand eastward; even European politicians admit this. Ms. Leokadia said all she knew was that Ukrainians were being killed by Russians. That's true. This war could have been avoided, but the West nurtured extreme nationalism in Ukraine and aimed it at Russia. I don't support Russia attacking Ukraine. Just one or two weeks before the war, there were signs Ukraine was starting to shift, beginning to make concessions—yet they chose to attack. Why not wait to see how far Ukraine would yield? Now, Russia risks losing everything.

In the end, she seemed to accept my explanation—less tense than at first. She even said she'd invite my wife and me to a dinner celebration once they win. I also informed her that Vietnam would soon provide humanitarian aid to Ukraine. Too late, really. I made the recommendation days ago.

**Monday, March 14, 2022**

This morning, I talked with Phuong Nga, the Chairwoman of the Vietnam Union of Friendship, my cohort at the MGIMO, about humanitarian support activities for Ukraine—after seeing people on social media harshly criticizing the Vietnam–Ukraine Friendship Association. Since the war broke out, they've remained silent. I understand the difficulties both the Association and the Union face. Everything depends on having clear directives, a green light, before they can act. But shouldn't they be more proactive in pushing for such a directive? I also told Nga about my conversation with Ms. Leokadia yesterday, which left me feeling quite embarrassed. Nga mentioned she had already submitted reports twice to higher-ups since the beginning of the war... She concluded, “Up to you,” whether to send another cable to push further for humanitarian efforts. At first, I intended to do it, but then thought better of it. I've already sent a cable and spoken directly with leadership about this. Sending another one might make them think I'm overly anxious. Let it be.

At noon, I chatted with Phong for over half an hour. We discussed everything—from the criticism on Facebook about how the Vietnam–Ukraine Friendship Association remains silent while Ukraine is at war, to whether Odesa will be attacked, to geopolitics involving the U.S., China, and Russia. I believe Odesa will be hit. Russia must try to cut off all of Ukraine's access to the sea. As for the U.S.–China–Russia strategic triangle, I still hold that the U.S. abandoned its main front to stir conflict on a secondary front. Phong thinks that if Russia loses, China will suffer too. But I believe if Russia loses, the U.S. misses an opportunity and ends up giving China a new ally against itself—which will make things harder for the U.S. either way.

In the morning, I spoke with Minh. He said there would be a meeting in the afternoon with various agencies about evacuating the Embassy staff. I asked how his department planned to present the case. Minh replied they would wait to hear opinions from the other agencies at the meeting. In the afternoon, Minh asked what I thought about evacuating to Uzhhorod. I immediately understood—“the other side” wanted to legitimize the Military Attaché’s stay in Uzhhorod. Amusing. Minh from the European Department asked me to write down the arguments for staying in Lviv instead of moving to Uzhhorod, so they could include them in the report. Turns out, the meeting was just to gather opinions, after which the department would write the report and leadership would decide. I jotted down a few bullet points for Minh: (i) There are 15 ambassadors here (the largest concentration), whereas in Uzhhorod there’s only one. Here, we can engage with other ambassadors. In Uzhhorod, who would we engage with? (ii) Things are stable here—where would we stay in Uzhhorod? Finally, I said bluntly: “Who will you listen to—the Ambassador or deserters?”

According to the schedule, I was supposed to meet the Indonesian Ambassador for dinner, but he messaged saying he couldn’t make it and suggested breakfast instead. I didn’t say anything. Fine, I’ll just arrange to meet for coffee tomorrow morning.

## **Tuesday, March 15, 2022**

In the morning, I met the Indonesian Ambassador for coffee. Poor guy. He arrived here but didn’t even have time to settle in before the war broke out. He had only just presented the copy of his credentials to the Deputy Foreign Minister. He recently moved up to Lviv—before that, he was in Chernivtsi helping evacuate Indonesian students.

Today brought some good news—the first group of 18 people has managed to leave Mariupol and head west. They’ve made it to Berdiansk and are resting there. I asked whether that area was under Russian control or if the group would continue to Crimea, since passing through the front lines is dangerous. But Tuyen said they planned to continue on to Zaporizhzhia and then Dnipro. It’s up to them; I’m sure they’ve carefully thought through their route.

### **Wednesday, March 16, 2022**

This morning, the group reached Berdiansk but couldn’t find fuel to continue. They had to search for quite a while before finally securing enough to head toward Zaporizhzhia. Through the Mutual Support group, I managed to find someone still in Dnipro—Ms. Phuoc—who could assist the group when they arrive there.

Minister Bui Thanh Son had a phone call with Minister Kuleba. At long last, that long-awaited event is complete. Hopefully, humanitarian aid will soon follow. As the Ambassador here—when aid is pouring in from everywhere and yet there’s still none from Vietnam—I can’t help but feel impatient.

I texted Ms. Leokadia, asking if she could use her channels to persuade the Editor-in-Chief of Odesa Online to take down his anti-Vietnam article. I told her the two ministers had just spoken and that Vietnam is preparing humanitarian aid for Ukraine—surely this isn’t how Ukraine wants to “thank” Vietnam? She promised to use her channels and speak to the Odesa Governor. She also asked if we needed anything in Lviv—some of her friends there could help—but I politely declined, saying the Embassy could handle everything on its own.

I also asked Leokadia to assist the Mariupol group when they reach Zaporizhzhia since there are no Vietnamese left there. By the time we managed to contact Ms. Antonina, the group had already reached a collective shelter set up in a shopping mall called Epicenter. At least they now had a place to rest. Our friend in Zaporizhzhia could have arranged train tickets straight to Lviv, but the group decided to continue to Dnipropetrovsk to pick up someone else. Wartime, yet people still keep moving together like a caravan. Honestly, they could've let that person travel alone to Lviv. That's just how Vietnamese people are—kids never seem to grow up. Even when they're adults, fully independent, they still are seen like children. In Dnipro, though, our contact couldn't assist with train tickets like in Zaporizhzhia.

#### **Thursday, March 17, 2022**

The second group from Mariupol, led by Thu, has also made it to Zaporizhzhia.

I'm really frustrated with Phuong. He posted a plea for help from a family in Mariupol on the Nguoi Viet Kyiv page. Posting it there—who exactly is supposed to help? That letter was addressed to the Embassy; why didn't he forward it to us directly instead of posting it online? When I asked, he claimed he had informed Lan and Hau, but in fact, he only did so after posting it—and even after I had already questioned him. He's such a poor liar. The timestamped screenshots clearly show he messaged Lan at 5:45 a.m., while I had already messaged him at 5 a.m. Posting such misleading information only makes people who lack information think the Embassy isn't making an effort. I told him bluntly that this wasn't helping—it was inciting public criticism, nothing more.

I messaged Bang, the Chairman of the Vietnamese

Association in Kyiv, so he could talk to Phuong peer-to-peer. Bang told me, “Phuong’s a party member—you might as well handle it through party channels.” In the end, I messaged Phuong in my capacity as party secretary, demanding he immediately remove the post about Ha’s family in Mariupol. If he doesn’t delete it, I’ll push for disciplinary action after the war.

### **Friday, March 18, 2022**

I met with the Kazakh Ambassador at his embassy. They have an Honorary Consulate here, so they probably share an office with the Honorary Consul. There’s a restaurant in the same location, so he hosted me at the café there. The Kazakh Ambassador was quite surprised that the Vietnamese Military Attaché had travelled together with the Kazakh Military Attaché to Lviv but did not stay here—instead, continuing on to Uzhhorod—while the Vietnamese Ambassador remains in Lviv. For them, having the Ambassador in one place and the Military Attaché in another during wartime seems strange. Strange to them, but not strange to us! The Military Attaché claimed he couldn’t find accommodation (though he never really tried!) and used that as an excuse to head to Uzhhorod, a city right on the border, so if necessary, he could quickly jump over to Slovakia. In today’s language: “What a foolish move—my hometown is full of people like that.” In the afternoon, I drafted a cable to Hanoi reporting this reality.

At the Kazakh Ambassador’s place, I also met political commentator Buzarov, who seems well-informed. Turns out he’s written for Vietnamnet before. So when he sent a photo to a Vietnamnet reporter, the reporter immediately recognized me: “Ambassador Thach, the one who’s done so much for the Vietnamese community.” It turns out that my efforts have been

recognized by the community, especially among journalists following the Ukraine conflict. Some people have advised me to clear out my Facebook friends list because some don't engage. But a few of them immediately responded, saying, "We don't interact, but we still follow you." Honestly, I treat my Facebook like a newspaper—what matters is that people read, not whether they like or comment.

Today marks the 8th anniversary of Crimea's annexation by Russia. There were rumours that Putin would give a speech at Luzhniki Stadium. In the end, I managed to bypass the firewall to watch Russian TV. But after a short while, it got blocked again. Watching it, I saw huge crowds supporting Putin—whether genuinely or mobilized for propaganda, the stadium was packed. I asked Ambassador Khoi if there was any intel on the speech, but Khoi said no speech had been seen yet.

Phuong today still tried to argue, saying that the family with relatives in Mariupol sent their thanks. Without me digging for information, how would they even know who to thank? He's clueless, yet still tries to argue. Instead of sending it directly to the Embassy, he threw it online, stirring things up.

### **Saturday, March 19, 2022**

This morning, the Mariupol group came to the Embassy to process paperwork for some members. Once that was done, I went to the train station to see them off to Poland. This was the first group I personally went to the station to bid farewell to—Mariupol truly deserves a different kind of attention and care compared to evacuees from other regions. By afternoon, the group had arrived safely. So, the first Mariupol group has reached safety. The second group is now en route to Lviv. A third group of five people has also left Mariupol. Due to limited seats, Ha Thuy's family of three couldn't go. But I'm concerned

that Zaporizhzhia may no longer be safe for them, so I texted Ms. Leokadia to ask about the situation there. She hasn't replied yet.

I met with political commentator Andrei Buzarov at a café. It was Gazda Café, which has a car on display covered entirely in rugs. Ever since my time in Iran, I've had a fondness for carpets, so that car—used as an advertisement for the café—really left an impression on me. Buzarov showed me a map—Russia now occupies nearly one-third of Ukraine. It seems they only need a short period of further offensives to take all of Donbas, and potentially two-fifths of Ukraine overall. Perhaps at that point they'll stop and negotiate. As always, the battlefield determines the outcome of war.

Meeting with Buzarov made me realize how complex Ukraine's internal politics are. There are already signs the government may be willing to compromise with Russia, and Poroshenko's faction is opposing it. A former Defence Minister under Poroshenko accused the current administration of “surrendering” to Russia. In response, Arestovich fired back, accusing that same former minister of dismantling Ukraine's entire Defence infrastructure during his term. I don't have anyone to keep track of this kind of news, and I can't read it myself. I'll try assigning this to Valia to see if she can gather any useful information.

## **Sunday, March 20, 2022**

Hoa from VTC messaged me on Facebook, saying she was preparing a program about the community's solidarity during this evacuation period and wanted me to help answer some questions. I immediately offered to introduce her to two people at two crucial locations: Mr. Khanh in Lviv and Huy in Moldova. These are the two main transit points for Vietnamese

people from Ukraine en route to third countries.

However, after a while, Hoa confided that it was very hard to find people willing to go on set—“everyone keeps passing the buck,” she said, adding, “You’re right there doing all the practical work, yet still getting scrutinized.” I understood immediately—it’s the folks at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs avoiding responsibility. They’re smart, not easily caught off guard, and afraid of slipping up and inviting trouble. So they avoid it altogether. I wonder where their sense of responsibility is during times like these. They’re quick to show up at airports or border crossings, giving flowers to evacuees for the cameras, but when it comes to speaking on TV to explain the Foreign Ministry’s efforts, they shy away. Seeing how hard it was for Hoa, I told her, “If you can’t find anyone, I’ll do it.” Building the Ministry’s image, promoting its citizen protection efforts—that’s exactly what PR should be about.

Meanwhile, ever since the evacuation started, the Ministry set up an entire Citizen Protection PR group on Viber, specifically to broadcast these efforts. Every day, they summarize how many people were received and put that in the news. Especially, the Ambassadors get their chance to shine, appearing in photos welcoming evacuees. On the first flight back, Deputy Minister Pham Quang Hieu even skipped a meeting he was chairing (organized by the State Committee on Overseas Vietnamese with Ambassadors and Vietnamese associations) just to be at the airport to greet the evacuees! They’re quick to show up for the cameras, but when asked to go on TV to speak about their work, they avoid it. Clearly, this generation of Foreign Ministry leadership and staff doesn’t understand what PR is truly about. It’s not just about appearing in photos—it’s about being able to speak, to tell the story of what you’re doing. No wonder people remark that diplomats’

Facebook pages are just filled with photo ops.

Ambassador AC invited me to lunch with Ambassador P. When I arrived, Ambassador U was also there. We had two to three hours of wide-ranging discussions, but what struck me most was that all three Ambassadors agreed Ukraine's leadership is still immature—not mature yet. They always think in black-and-white terms. In politics, nothing is purely black or white. Because the leadership is so inexperienced, they're easily led by the U.S. I asked how exactly the U.S. was leading them. They pointed out how Western Ambassadors always express collective opinions on various issues. Both Ambassadors U and AC have experience with “color revolutions” and see the U.S. deploying the same playbook in Ukraine as elsewhere.

In the LHS (Overseas Students) 80–81 group, since it's full of old classmates—people assumed to be seasoned and well-read—I've also wanted to share more information with them, though I can't plainly state my political stance. I saw Viet (not sure where he studied in our cohort) post something claiming that the shelling of the Barabashova market was by Russia, deliberately targeting a purely civilian area with no military significance. I simply responded that I had to prepare a report and had spoken with two people in Kharkiv who had personally went to the place after the incident. Both of them told me that it definitely wasn't missiles, just artillery, and they couldn't even rule out whether it was friendly fire.

### **Monday, March 21, 2022**

It couldn't get any worse. Deputy Minister Pham Quang Hieu signed a cable criticizing me for failing to perform certain tasks, citing, as an example, my interviews with foreign media outlets not friendly to Vietnam, such as the BBC and VOA. I am truly speechless. Those interviews took place nearly two

weeks ago and received very positive feedback. I responded to the cable by stating: (i) This is a practical application of Ho Chi Minh's philosophy—staying grounded in core principles while adapting flexibly to changing circumstances—focusing on Vietnam's interests as the constant while adjusting our actions as needed; (ii) Effective interviews on adversarial platforms can have more impact than those on our own; (iii) Criticism without specifying any concrete mistake only discourages initiative and fosters a passive, dependent mindset of “waiting for guidance.”

I didn't elaborate further—there's no point. But each of those three points could be expanded into an entire book. I did nothing wrong. I caused no negative impact. I even helped raise the profile of the State, the Ministry, and the Embassy. So why the criticism? This can only be interpreted as narrow-minded, self-serving behaviour from leadership trying to find fault with me. At worst, they could remove me from the diplomatic service. But would they dare face such disgrace? I have nothing to lose. I won't escalate this now, but in a few years, when everything comes to light, how will they explain themselves?

I used to be quite close to Hang (the spokesperson), and I didn't want her caught off guard by my response. So I messaged her, expressing my surprise at receiving the critical cable—drafted by her Department and signed by the Ministry's leadership. I said that during wartime, instead of encouraging one another, we're unjustly criticizing each other. Justified criticism might be postponed out of compassion during war—but this criticism was neither justified nor timely.

Hang replied that after previously advising me to retract the article, she had tried to dissuade the leadership from sending the cable, considering it a “favour” to me. She said there had only been a general reminder about communication

discipline, but since I continued giving interviews afterward, a further reminder was now necessary. That may sound reasonable, but Hang never once said what exactly I did wrong—only that “the seniors requested it,” and that former leaders, media agencies, and internal meetings had all discussed it. These explanations don’t convince me. Sure, people have opinions—but what, precisely, was my mistake? I told her I also hoped the leadership would hear my explanation. The conversation ended there. If someone can clearly point out where I went wrong, I’ll accept whatever disciplinary action they propose.

I shared the story with Xuan, who was very upset. Normally, in cases like this, she urges me to remain calm—but this time, she even suggested I respond more forcefully. In my reply, I had deliberately phrased it as “those reporting to you” to avoid directly calling out Hieu, who signed the cable. Otherwise, I might have said, “If you signed it, you must have evidence.” Xuan’s reaction is understandable. The second person aware of this was the embassy cipher officer. Just days earlier, he had praised my BBC interview—and now he was stunned to be the one forwarding me a cable of criticism.

After the interview with Hoa (from VTC), I confided that although I spoke of humanity during the recording, in truth, people have treated me terribly. There’s no humanity in this war. Hoa said she understood—she had visited several countries and read many community forums. I asked what that had to do with the way people treated me. She replied that most officials she encountered were cunning, demanding, and self-serving. When their expectations weren’t met, they became hostile. It’s surprising how perceptive she is. A journalist who doesn’t know much about in-house diplomatic dynamics, yet she senses it.

About that interview: Hoa had asked for help this morning, and I agreed. She was desperate and pleaded. Will they later accuse me of violating unified communication principles—that only the spokesperson is allowed to speak? I went to the square in front of the Opera House for the interview. It was fairly long. Hoa struggled at times, asking many questions about humanity and unity. I had to answer. But I do wonder what they'll cut in editing. I spoke honestly—it's not all rosy. There were moments we treated each other terribly. Some even stole money and laptops from diplomats trying to help them. Most community leaders cared only for themselves, not for the people. Only the Vietnamese Association in Odesa genuinely cared for and supported their community.

In the afternoon, I called and spoke with T from the Press Department, who is well-informed and close to Hang. T said that, generally speaking, many people had opinions about me—especially regarding the skiing trip. That story is ancient history. It happened before the war. And I've said many times: if you don't believe there will be a war, then you need to act in a way that reassures people so they can go about their lives and work in peace. Posting about skiing on Facebook served exactly that purpose—so what was wrong with it?

They say I was being complacent? Well, who could have predicted there would be a war? Even Ambassador C of a NATO member country said he couldn't trust American intelligence—it's always exaggerated. So what about a Vietnamese ambassador like me, who has no access to any intelligence at all?

I even cited the story of the Soviet Ambassador to Turkey during World War II, who insisted there was no risk of Turkey attacking the Soviet Union—to show that diplomats rely on their instinct and personal judgment when reporting. And my

impression, from both the Ukrainian leadership and the people, was that there would be no war. That was abundantly clear. If they were wrong, and I followed suit, then what more could I have done? Diplomats can only assess the mindset of the host country's leadership and people—nothing more.

After that, I brought up with a deputy head of the Press Department, regarding the cable sent to me, which had been drafted by the department. He said he didn't know the full story but found my responses to the BBC and VOA interviews completely normal. He added, "Please understand—we're just getting pressure from the top." That said it all. Only Hang showed no such understanding. She, along with the leadership, went after me—and even tried to justify their actions. She could've easily responded like the vice director did: "Please understand—it's wartime, and we're getting pressure from above too." If she had said that, who would have held that against her?

I completely disagree with Hang's approach to public communication. On February 27, three days after the war broke out, I called the Department (and even informed Hang in advance that I would do so) to recommend a public communication approach based on "just say what there is to say." But Hang didn't listen. Instead, she submitted a memo to the leadership. Naturally, the leadership would approve her media strategy—the usual formula: "The Ministry of Foreign Affairs always prioritizes citizen protection." But saying that just invites the question: if you cared that much, why didn't you prepare anything?

In the end, I had to shoulder the blame. No preparations? Blame the Ambassador. I don't deny responsibility. But if anyone at the Ministry thinks they could've done better, they're welcome to take the job. Sitting behind a desk talking about

war—that’s not preparation—it’s just talk.

If you believe there won’t be a war—and considering how deeply connected our community is to Ukraine, with homes, property, jobs, and a sense of belonging—then what kind of evacuation plans could you realistically make? How would you even know where the war would start, or where to evacuate people to? Wouldn’t it have been simpler to just say: “We were caught off guard, like the rest of the world, but now we’re doing our best”? But no—they’re too used to the culture of denial. If they had told the truth and done the job properly—like the Embassy actually did—no one would blame them. Back to Hang: given our completely opposing approaches, it was only logical that she would side with the leadership and “go after” me.

After finishing the VTC interview, Chien’s boss called me. He had just returned from a business trip to Cambodia, so he was only now getting back to me. I had called him a few days earlier, and now he was returning the call. I asked whether he had received the cable I sent on Friday. Knowing he probably hadn’t read it yet, I got straight to the point: What Chien did was desertion. Leaving Kyiv without permission was already unacceptable—and going to Uzhhorod was no different.

Today, the third group from Mariupol arrived in Lviv. This group includes Thu and Thai, whom I met during my visit to Mariupol. I had prepared a meal to host all 18 of them—adults and children—but they declined. I’m not sure if it was because the group was too large and they didn’t want to trouble us, or if they truly had enough food. Well, no point insisting. The food was already made. If they don’t eat it, our staff will just have to deal with it tomorrow.

Honestly, dealing with workers who are slow to

understand can be frustrating. I explain again and again, yet they keep asking the same questions without thinking things through. I made a notarized copy of a child's birth certificate and clearly signed it as "Ambassador," yet the child's father still asked me, "Don't I need to write your title, sir?" There's no cure for that. Doing citizen protection work—with love and care for the people—is genuine, but staying patient takes real effort.

Today is the first day of the week, and the group that returned to Vietnam had the weekend to rest. So I asked that, starting today, they begin submitting daily reports on any notable developments. Mong shared news from a Vietnamese outlet published five hours earlier, reporting that Russia and Ukraine had held online negotiations. Yet the Political Section hadn't even included this crucial point in their daily summary. I also tasked Valia with searching for more Ukrainian sources. She found an article by the founder of the Azov Battalion revealing internal conflicts within Ukraine. I told her she was on the right track with that approach.

I also had a heated debate today with Tam. She had read my post yesterday about video clips misusing a 2017 TV24 program in Lviv—a documentary on Ho Chi Minh—to smear Ukraine and undermine Vietnam-Ukraine relations. She was as loud as ever. I systematically refuted her arguments, pointing out that two isolated incidents over five years can't possibly indicate a "strategy." She claimed that in 2017, the Embassy didn't do anything. I asked her: if we did nothing, then how did the station remove the documentary from their website, and how did Odesa Daily remove their article about the Vietnam War within 24 hours? She insisted it wasn't removed. I had to show her that what she was referring to wasn't even a live link—just an old screenshot. At that point, she ran out of

arguments and privately messaged me, “I don’t know why I talked so much today.”

Honestly, I engaged in that exchange mostly for the benefit of the silent readers—those sitting on the fence. Once things quieted down, I let it go. I deleted the entire thread as if it had never happened. Exhausting, honestly.

The misuse of the documentary about President Ho Chi Minh clearly had an impact. Ambassador Thanh from Australia even messaged me about it. The real problem is that people don’t have the full picture. What I reported to the Press Department was never made public, so the online conversation has been one-sided. That’s why I had to post a few lines on Facebook—to clarify the situation and provide some context.

A lot happened today, but one story stood out as particularly revealing about the nature of this war. Khanh told me about a group of people from Kharkiv who had been staying at a local’s house in Lviv. When they left, they left behind a note saying, “It’s because of you guys that we had to evacuate.” It wasn’t that they were ungrateful—what they wrote reflected reality. The ultra-nationalists in western Ukraine pushed too hard to join NATO, and that path led to war. If they hadn’t been so extreme and dragged all of Ukraine down with them, there might not have been a war at all.

I shared that story in the LHS 80–81 online group to give people a clearer picture of real life. But then someone named Duc asked why the people from Kharkiv didn’t flee to Russia instead of heading west. Sure, life in the West seems more appealing—but was that worth dragging the whole country into war for? I didn’t want to argue any further. I tried to share this with friends who are educated and experienced so they’d be better informed, but their reactions showed a serious lack of

understanding. Some in that group are too emotional and loud, unable to calmly reflect on the issue. Others either don't care, don't understand, or understand but prefer to stay silent. In the end, it's just not the right forum for thoughtful discussion—it achieves nothing. Some people even used the moment to take jabs at me. I decided to hide the group to avoid further frustration; they'll lose interest in a few days anyway.

Tuyen reported that the Mai group also includes the Tung family of four. That means four more people have escaped the inferno of Mariupol. Today, Russia issued an ultimatum demanding surrender by 9 a.m., but the Azov forces still refused. The fighting there will surely be fierce. I asked Buzarov if there was any news. He replied: 50/50. If that's the case, Russia is in trouble. Time is of the essence now, and if it's still 50/50, then the end is nowhere in sight.

## **Tuesday, March 22, 2022**

Yesterday, I was getting impatient about Vietnam's humanitarian aid to Ukraine, so I texted Hai, Director of the Europe Department at the Party's External Relations Commission. Today, Hai replied that yesterday had been the deadline for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to respond to the Commission's proposal to let the Red Cross take the lead in humanitarian aid to Ukraine, but the Ministry still hadn't replied.

Yesterday, Viet, Deputy Director of the Press and Information Department, also told me he'd received a last-minute meeting invitation on this topic but couldn't attend, and he wasn't sure if anyone else did. It seems the Ministry's meeting yesterday was meant to prepare a response to the Commission. Maybe today there will finally be an answer, and then the Commission can draft a report to the Politburo

Standing Committee. After that, the Committee will decide. So, at best, we're looking at the end of this week. If we're lucky, maybe a full month after the war started, there will finally be a decision on humanitarian aid.

This should have been prepared in advance — so that the moment the foreign ministers finished their phone call, the aid could be rolled out. But instead, they waited until after the call to even begin the process. Too slow.

Madam Leokadia texted to say she hadn't been in contact due to lack of internet and asked how everyone was doing. She offered help if needed. I thanked her and told her people had reached safety. I also asked for Madam Antonina's contact so I could express my thanks. Madam Leokadia reminded me to let her know if there was any humanitarian aid, so she could help direct it. It's sad. A week ago, I really thought something would happen. But a week passed with nothing. I can only blame it on bureaucracy — what else is there to blame? And it *is* bureaucracy. Everything has to follow a rigid procedure, and there are endless “doors” to go through. Just like the saying goes: *“The people are in need, but the officials are not in a hurry; the people hurry, the people wade.”*

This morning, the Military Attaché called to ask how the Embassy was doing. I told him things were normal — half the Embassy staff had returned to Vietnam. He said, “Oh, maybe there's space now. I'll move back there.” As if half the staff leaving somehow freed up space for his office! I told him that the housing had already been given up, but if he wanted to return, others could help him find a place. It seems that after speaking with me, Chien's boss instructed him to move back to Lviv. I had already cabled about this last Friday — it looks like that only got processed yesterday. Thought he was clever, but ended up looking foolish. Here, he'd have people to support

him, food, drink — over there, he's alone and clearly looks like someone who deserted out of fear.

In the morning, Song Hoang (from *Dai Doan ket*) and later Doan Huong from *Tuoi Tre* both reached out asking to interview me. At first, I agreed out of courtesy to *Dai Doan Ket*, but later I realized there was no point in poking the bear. They'd just see me "going public" again and assume I was trying to stir things up. So, I told them I couldn't give interviews at the moment.

The young journalists kept trying to convince me — even saying they'd stick to questions about humanity and compassion... but I'm not afraid of the questions. It's just that no one cares about the questions or the answers — they only care that I appeared, and that will irritate certain people. If they cared about right and wrong, they wouldn't have issued that reprimand citing BBC and VOA.

In the end, I told the two young journalists: if their newspapers could send an official request to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry agreed, then I'd give the interviews. It's absurd — I'm an ambassador with full authority, yet I can't even speak publicly about my own work and contributions to diplomacy. The directive from early March clearly stated that all information for the press should come from the spokesperson. So when I spoke to BBC and VOA, it was deemed a violation. But what needed to be said was said — no point stirring things up further. If they don't protect the Ministry's reputation, why should I step in?

This morning, I even got a message from Hang, the spokesperson: "*I don't understand why you're still not following the leadership's directive; did you message back because you're too stressed?*" I chose not to respond. Any reply

would just turn into bickering. I'm not stressed at all. The cipher officer advised me not to respond. But when he forwarded my cable back home, he said it was written swiftly and well. How could someone writing like that be under stress?

Hang, with her rigid mindset, can't grasp what even ordinary people can. Others see good work; she sees stress.

I haven't done anything in response to yesterday's directive from the Ministry. I merely explained why I had given those interviews to BBC and VOA — I didn't say I'd keep giving them. So why accuse me of disobeying? I was explaining past actions, not taking new ones — though honestly, even doing so again would be the right thing.

In the afternoon, I went out to buy some clothes. Since the war began a month ago, I've only had one pair of jeans, one pullover, and one pair of boots. All my interviews and meetings — always the same outfit. Of course, I don't wear it at home, but anytime I go out, it's the same.

On the streets, it felt strange — traffic was heavy. Everything looked like there was no war. The USD exchange rate's buy-sell spread was just 70 kopecks. Previously, it was 10 hryvnias (almost 30%). The other day, I asked Mr. Huy if this meant things were calming down. He said it's because they're using a fixed exchange rate.

Today, Huy called to ask about the situation. He said the ruble was stabilizing — moving from 130 rubles per USD down to 100. That shows society has moved past the panic phase. If China and India continue to support Russia, its economy will adjust and not collapse. India, to this day, still firmly supports Russia. Clear policy — unlike Vietnam, caught between fear of Russia and fear of the West.

I read that Slovakia seems quite supportive of Ukraine, so

I reached out to Marek. Turns out the ambassador is in the capital and will go to Uzhgorod, not here. A bit of a shame. If he'd come here, I could've asked more. But over WhatsApp, you can't really say much.

Tuyen has been in Poland for three days now. The Vietnamese Embassy there still hasn't arranged for his return to Vietnam, so he's getting impatient and asked me to talk to the Embassy. But that's a tricky request. Earlier, in the group chat, I'd suggested that since Moscow handled evacuation flights, Poland should do the same. Now, if I step in directly, it'll look like interference. I told Tuyen to just go directly to the Embassy and explain his situation.

### **Wednesday, March 23, 2022**

Today marks the 28th anniversary of our marriage. Early this morning, around 1 or 2 AM, I received a congratulatory message from Jim — even though it was still March 22nd in the U.S. Jim has always been remarkably thoughtful and attentive. I spent some time choosing a photo I was happy with and made a status update to thank Xuan. In the hardest moments, she has always stood by me wholeheartedly, devoting herself to our family and children. I'm truly fortunate. The photo captured the moment well — an ambassador in the midst of war — and it prompted many kind comments and congratulations.

When I got up this morning, I saw that the Cuban Ambassador had sent me a link to an insightful article. What stood out wasn't just the American military analyst's argument that Russia is winning, but the emphasis on how this war was driven by efforts to use Ukraine to bring about regime change in Russia — and how that effort, according to the article, is failing. From the beginning, I believed the U.S. should have

allied with Russia to focus on China. Opposing a potential partner is simply counterproductive.

I shared the article in the LHS80-81 group, but it seems most people in the group aren't inclined to read carefully. They prefer surface-level engagement and rush to conclusions. Because of that, I've decided to stop sharing information there. It's frustrating to see such a narrow, stereotypical way of thinking. Back in the 1980s, many were more focused on trading, skipped classes, and cheated on exams. That era — with the decline of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe — was marked by hypocrisy. When we returned home, everyone pursued their own interests without a strong foundation. So really, there's no point expecting more now.

Today I felt exhausted after my conversation with Mr. Phong. He kept pressing questions: whether news like VinUni's support for Ukraine had been posted on the Embassy website, whether the Ukrainian people were aware, and whether their friendship association had contacted us. His perspective is very much rooted in Vietnamese thinking — where friendship associations operate like state agencies. But in other countries, they're just social organizations. They don't usually come to us for things like this.

I told him that what concerns me most is the government's humanitarian aid. About ten days ago, the Ukrainian Ambassador was eager to know when Vietnam would provide assistance, but since then, there's been no follow-up. Honestly, if I were in their shoes — already receiving support from the West — I might feel the same. Recently, they even declined humanitarian aid from China. That might be seen as improper, but it also shows they don't feel a pressing need.

I asked if he thought this delay in humanitarian aid was normal. He wisely said it's a sensitive matter and requires

caution. Everyone knows it's complicated — a war between two countries both considered Vietnam's friends. The warring sides are even avoiding civilian areas and helping each other evacuate citizens. So why the delay? I've decided not to send any more cables. If I do, they'll either assure me aid is coming or accuse me of overstepping. Still, the delay is unacceptable.

He mentioned that the Ukrainians were seeking to upgrade communication between the two countries to the presidential level. However, if such discussions just repeat vague slogans, our friends won't find them meaningful. Two weeks ago, I suggested clearly stating two things: first, a call to end the war and withdraw troops — aligning with Ukraine's demands; and second, a call for all parties to respect Russia's security interests — addressing Russia's core concern. If we said that, no one could criticize Vietnam. China has already taken a similar stance — there's nothing to fear. But in Hanoi, they still hesitate. I give up.

### **Thursday, March 24, 2022**

Yesterday, I sent former EU and Belgian Ambassador to Vietnam, Bruno Angelet, the link to the interview. This morning, Bruno replied, and I understood that he found that outlet quite one-sided. As for Fox — of course, it's biased. But even so, a portion of the West believes that the U.S. and its allies are using Ukraine as a pawn against Russia. Bruno said he's accompanying the Prime Minister to a meeting with Biden... I told him, "Please bring peace." Bruno, ever the diplomat, replied, "I think everything is in the hands of the Kremlin." I didn't argue. Because if one believes that pushing NATO right up to Russia's border is reasonable, then there's no point in debating. War becomes inevitable.

This morning, Huy messaged me that Russia had claimed

to evacuate a group of 26 people from Mariupol, including Vietnamese and Jordanians. I relayed the information to the Ministry–Ukraine Viber group and asked Moscow to help verify. But by evening, I still got the impression that Lam didn't understand what I meant. He kept talking about the group of three from Lam's family or about Nam's family — what do they have to do with this? Lam's family only left Mariupol this morning, and Nam's family left yesterday, but they weren't part of any convoy. What we need to check is whether this group of 26 actually exists and whether any Vietnamese were among them. The logic is simple, but people often see only the trees but not the forest. I said if we check with the Jordanian Embassy in Moscow and they also don't have info, then it means Russia is just putting on a show. Our staff are like this — like two goats trying to cross a narrow bridge. What can you expect?

Today, we sent off another group of over ten people from Mariupol heading to Europe. Among them were two young men who were stopped at the Hungarian border the other day because they had Ukrainian passports. One of their fathers keeps saying he's forever grateful to me. There's nothing to be grateful for — helping citizens is the job of the Embassy, and above all, the Ambassador. Of course, there are also plenty who take advantage to make money. In fact, that instinct runs deep in some diplomatic officers.

This morning, I met with Ambassador M. He admitted that Ukraine is not flexible. I asked him why. Ambassador M gave a very reasonable answer: “In any society, when just 15% of people are loud, the whole society follows those loud voices — because the flexible ones don't speak up.” In Ukraine, the western part of the country wants to align with Europe and has been the loudest — so the whole of Ukraine has followed that

hardline direction, lacking flexibility. That explains why a family in Kharkiv, when evacuating, left a note for the landlord in Lviv: “It’s because of people like you that we had to flee.” Ambassador M also shared a story — a Ukrainian who had stayed at a European family’s home left, taking the TV with him and leaving behind a note: “Glory to Ukraine.” It could have been a joke. But even if it is a joke, it tells a lot.

Since the war began, tonight is the first time I’ve felt a little joy. I was having dinner when I saw the U.S. President’s remarks posted in the Telegram group, scrolling up, I saw President Zelenskyy’s statement too. Both speeches suggest that the door to peace is starting to open. Biden said that any territorial concessions would be up to Ukraine — in other words, he’s giving Ukraine the green light to make concessions. Meanwhile, Zelenskyy said Ukraine couldn’t keep fighting year after year — that they want and deserve to live in peace. That kind of language shows both two men are ready for compromise and peace.

I cabled home immediately. Back home, hardly anyone is following statements this closely or picking up on these nuances. Tomorrow morning the news will come out, and only then will the report be made. Ministry leadership now doesn’t have the time to follow news directly or assess anything in real time. In any case, my cable will be noticed tomorrow. That’s the role of an on-the-ground ambassador: to understand and detect developments. But the problem is, they only want to hear what they already believe. They haven’t listened to my proposal on public communication — they’re even sharpening the knife to discipline me

Today, for the first time since the war began, I went swimming. I suppose it’s a small return to “normal life.” There’s no other war where the swimming pools stay open. Fighting

within a family is completely different from war between sworn enemies. They hit what needs hitting, but still try to let people live as normally as possible. A few days ago, I wrote a Facebook status: “A strange war” But not many people understood the message. Only one person got it and commented, “Hopefully we’ll come to understand each other soon” and end this war.

What’s truly unusual is that the so-called "invader" is helping civilians flee toward the opposing side. If they were fleeing toward the invader, that would be normal. The evacuees from Mariupol are the real witnesses to these stories. Outsiders listening to the propaganda from both sides have no idea. At one point, T messaged me, “This war is filthy.” He’s in Mariupol and saw with his own eyes how Azov troops embedded themselves among civilians to avoid being targeted. That’s why hospitals and theaters were attacked. If there weren’t soldiers hiding there, they wouldn’t have become targets. The keyboard warriors sitting comfortably at home don’t understand any of this.

Madam Leokadia messaged me, saying she heard people in Hanoi were raising funds for Ukraine, and she asked if I could speak with the chargé d’affaires to share some of it with her organization. Of course, I agreed immediately, and Zhyunkina transferred 10,000 USD to the Ukraine–Vietnam Friendship Association. That finally eased my feeling that Vietnam hadn’t done anything to help Ukraine — when in fact, during this war, they have helped us.

Today I found out that Tuyen had to buy his own ticket back to Vietnam. I told him I would cover whatever it cost. But he kept saying it was his decision, so using his own money was appropriate. I didn’t know what else to say. I just felt deeply sorry.



Mariupol trip with President Zelenskyy and FM Kuleba 10 days before the war



Dinner with Ukraine's Ambassador designate and his wife the night before the war



Helping African students to evacuate



Talking with the Vietnam TV on the break-out of the war



Selfie with a Ukrainian soldier guarding a bridge in Kyiv before leaving for Lviv



Ambassador with 4 last Vietnamese diplomats before leaving for Lviv



Feeling lonely and abandoned in Lviv



Dinner with Vietnamese group evacuated from Mariupol



8 of 14 Ambassadors staying in Lviv attended a coffee party by the Croatia Ambassador's initiative



Meeting with Slovak Ambassador at Uzgorod



Live as usual in Lviv



Live as usual in Lviv



Vietnamese friends visited Ukraine during evacuation time



A meeting organized by Ukrainian friends in Odessa celebrating the 132<sup>nd</sup> birthday of President Hochiminh



A meeting organized by Ukrainian friends in Odessa celebrating the 132<sup>nd</sup> birthday of President Hochiminh

**Friday, March 25, 2022**

In the afternoon, I met with political commentator Andrei Buzarov. Previously, the materials he shared were all in Russian and leaned in favour of Russia. Today, I met Andrei to hear his assessment of the two statements made yesterday by Zelenskyy and Biden. He believes that despite Zelenskyy's remarks, he may not genuinely intend to negotiate. Furthermore, Biden doesn't have a good relationship with Zelenskyy; Zelenskyy tends to listen more to the British. Naturally, the British are staunchly anti-Russian. Relations between the UK and Russia have always been more strained than those between the US and Russia. Andrei even suggested that British Prime Minister Johnson is planning a visit to Kyiv, and that Zelenskyy now faces two choices: welcoming Johnson, which signals a pro-war stance, or welcoming the former Israeli Prime Minister, which would suggest a pro-peace stance. It's an interesting perspective.

Talking with Andrei made me concerned for our compatriots in Odesa, as it's possible Russia may attack there to cut off Ukraine's access to the sea. That could turn the area into a fiery battleground. I messaged the Vietnamese Association there, advising those who can, to leave. But Mr. Manh replied that those who remain are mentally prepared.

I'm also anxious about Kherson, unsure if there's actual fighting as some reports suggest. It turns out the clashes are mainly at the airport; the city itself remains calm. That's reassuring. If Ukraine can counterattack at the airport, they still have some capability. This war is proving to be more complex than expected.

Today I read that Russia, in addition to demanding that Ukraine remain non-NATO and demilitarized, is also insisting on control over "certain vital positions," likely referring to

coastal areas along the Black Sea and Sea of Azov.

Andrei seems interested in comparing the Vietnam War with the current conflict in Ukraine. I emphasized that the Vietnamese were more flexible than the Ukrainians, especially under President Ho Chi Minh. Ho Chi Minh was even willing to accept Vietnam as a free state within the French Union, but that didn't materialize. When France encountered difficulties, the U.S. arrogantly stepped in, misunderstanding Vietnam — much like they now misunderstand Russia.

Today, another family from Mariupol arrived here before heading to Poland. Those who were able to leave have done so. Seventeen unfortunate individuals remain. I pray for their safety. Among those from Mariupol, only Mr. Tuyen plans to return to Vietnam. I've informed the Ministry Leadership and Ambassadors group, yet from Poland, they're still saying there's no directive. Poor Mr. Tuyen had to buy his own ticket. People from the most devastated, war-torn areas shouldn't have to pay their way home. They've suffered enough. Today, Tuyen confided that he was out of money and had to borrow to buy his ticket. He asked if I could transfer him some money to repay the loan. Tuyen is a proud man — admitting this shows how desperate his situation is. I reassured him not to worry and told him I'd send him money once he's in Hanoi.

The Trang family has safely arrived in Denmark and sent their thanks. I'm genuinely happy for them. The Lan family in Donetsk is also safe. Their child made it to Poland and wants to express gratitude. I told them, "Let's share a drink when we meet."

Today, President Nguyen Xuan Phuc called again to check on me and the Embassy staff. Perhaps he saw VTC's "Compassion During Evacuation" program, where I mentioned

how he called to check in on us during the early days. Even if the program reminded him to call, it's still commendable.

VTC produced a decent program and gave me a good amount of airtime. However, they hesitated to show both sides of the story. In my interview, I talked about incidents like Embassy staff having their backpacks stolen — losing laptops and money — and how the Vietnamese Association is more nominal than functional. Many of its leaders were the first to flee during evacuations, leaving the community to fend for themselves. So when someone commented on my Facebook page that the Kharkiv evacuation was essentially a chaotic retreat without organization, they weren't wrong. But that's just the nature of the Association — it's loosely structured, not a state agency with any real discipline.

Watching the VTC program, I learned that Mr. Le Thai Ky's family has a son of conscription age who had to stay behind. I only knew of him online due to his frequent posts on the Community page. I called to ask if he needed help with documents for his son to leave Ukraine, as the Embassy has done for others. These young men are of military age, and technically, assisting them in evading conscription is wrong. But I did it anyway, because I believe this war is utterly meaningless — even under the banner of “defending the homeland” against “Russian aggression.” It's all because of a vocal, rigid 15% minority dragging the whole country into conflict. I don't believe Russia would have attacked Ukraine if Ukraine hadn't positioned itself as a NATO outpost. Seventy percent of Russians support the war — not out of aggression, but because they feel threatened. The fact that they try to avoid harming civilians shows this is a fraternal conflict; they don't want innocent people to suffer. Of course, stray bullets are inevitable.

Today, I received a cable from New York about the UN vote on the humanitarian resolution regarding the Russia-Ukraine war. Vietnam abstained, which is acceptable — the resolution included many elements beyond humanitarian issues and took the opportunity to criticize Russia. However, Vietnam's failure to vote on the procedural motion for South Africa's draft was regrettable. Vietnam was outplayed by Cambodia in this instance. Although Cambodia voted in favour of the Western draft on the same issue — meaning they couldn't support South Africa's draft — they still voted in favour of the procedure to consider South Africa's proposal. By doing so, Cambodia scored diplomatically with South Africa, despite siding with the West.

Last Sunday, Ambassador AC hosted a lunch. This time, I arranged for the "Quad" ambassadors to have lunch together again tomorrow to exchange views. I invited Ambassador H, but he's not in Lviv.

### **Saturday, March 26, 2022**

This afternoon, I subtly told the Military Attaché to leave, saying, "I have to work on a report." What's the point of sitting around talking if you keep asking such dumb questions? When he first arrived, he kept making excuses about how hard it was to find a house, even jokingly saying, "Then you find me a house, Ambassador." I simply replied that if someone wants to do something, they can do it, but if they don't, there are countless reasons why it "can't" be done. "Just a month ago, when the situation was even more difficult than now, Hai — who doesn't even speak the language—still went out and helped find housing for Vietnamese who came here" (and yet you, who speak the language fluently, can't?). I lost interest in hearing these explanations and frankly don't care. He can go explain to

the people he needs to explain to. How can it be that in a city with 15 diplomatic missions, you can't find a place for two staff members of the Military Attaché office? Ridiculous.

Who on earth starts a conversation by asking, "Did you meet the other ambassadors today? Anything interesting from them?" Asking that way makes it sound like I'm reporting to *him* about what I gather. Hoang, a staff member at the Military Attaché office, knows how to ask properly: "Do you think in 10 days we might be able to return to Kyiv?" Now that's the kind of question that makes people want to respond. I told Hoang, "I was even surprised when one ambassador told me that even if a peace agreement is signed before May 9th, we might still find it hard to return, because within the city there could be armed robbers. We may not fear stray bullets since Russia is only targeting military facilities, but we diplomats would be easy targets for armed gangs." That reply gave him two answers: (i) There's a possibility of an agreement before May 9th, and (ii) even if there is an agreement, internal instability in Ukraine will make normal life difficult. That's how you ask questions if you want useful information. The Colonel clearly doesn't understand even these basics.

He asked me what I thought about the Russian claim that Ukraine might attack diplomatic missions and blame it on Russia. I turned the question back on him: "You're an officer, I'm not. If Ukraine were to attack diplomatic missions in Lviv, how would they do it? Airstrikes, missiles, artillery, or special forces?" He said maybe planting bombs! I asked, "Any other ways?" He couldn't think of anything else. So what, report back home that there's just such a claim without analysis? Just breaking down the possibilities shows how implausible it is. Planting bombs—who would believe that's a Russian act? Artillery fire? Hard to blame Russia. Air strikes? They don't

have that capacity. Missiles—where would they even launch from, and would they accurately hit a diplomatic mission? Just answering these questions makes it clear this is an information warfare tactic. But clearly, he's so scared of dying that this rumor is stuck in his head without any analysis. Talking to someone this clueless is such a waste of time.

In the afternoon, had lunch with the three Ambassadors. This time I moved the lunch up an hour earlier. Last week, 3 PM was too late. But moving it to 2 PM, the Ambassador from U still didn't pay attention and showed up an hour late. Last time, all the Ambassadors agreed that Ukraine's leadership is immature, not grown up enough. This time, the AC Ambassador said, "It's even more than that." Everyone agreed that Ukraine holds an ideal strategic position to be courted by both Russia and the West, yet instead of leveraging that, they're fighting and ruining their country. The AC Ambassador said this is a war to "save Zelenskyy." Afraid people wouldn't get the full meaning, he emphasized he wasn't joking. Before the war, Zelenskyy was facing all kinds of issues: economic downturn, corruption, etc. Now, everything is blamed on the war. History will judge fairly later. If, after all this, the number of civilian deaths is only in the hundreds, people will realize how strange this war was; and who really brought suffering to the people.

This morning, read a news headline with a key conclusion: "In summary, the crucial battle for Donbas—and not just Donbas—is reaching its final stage." That statement is clear. Since March 11, after meeting Ambassador H, I've been reporting that the Donbas issue is the heart of it all, and up until now, that's still accurate. NATO has its intel, and they understand where the core issue lies. If it can be wrapped up soon, better to end it. Without these half-baked politicians still

fantasizing about their strength.

Woke up to see Vietnamese media reporting about the Consular Department case, and they even put a parenthetical explanation but got it wrong: "Combo flights cost nothing, rescue flights cost money." Neither is free. In fact, combo flights cost more, while rescue flights cost less. In Ukraine, no one touched the combo flights, not even businessmen. How can they mess up such a basic fact?

Tuyen mentioned wanting to receive money directly in Poland to pay back the airfare debt. I asked Khanh to transfer money since he has a Privatbank account. After talking with Xuan, Xuan immediately sent Vietnamese money to reimburse Khanh. Well, at least we've helped someone who really needed it.

### **Sunday, March 27, 2022**

This morning, I woke up to see Minh, who is in charge of the European Department, sharing news in the evacuation group about Russia attacking Lviv — obviously implying that the Embassy might need to consider leaving. I commented that there was nothing particularly significant. Deputy Minister Minh Vu responded rather condescendingly, "I suggest Ambassador Thach calmly study the situation and report." The word "calmly" clearly implied the Ambassador was being hasty. It subtly suggested that the Ambassador had overreacted or lacked composure, rather than recognizing that his awareness of the situation was well-informed and timely. But if I report immediately and I'm right, is that being hasty — or simply having a firm grasp of the situation? If the Ambassador is well-informed, is there really any need to 'calmly study' the situation again? Should I also suggest that the Ministry leadership "calmly listen to the Ambassador"?! Of course, I

didn't do that.

Instead, I quickly surveyed the other Ambassadors currently in Lviv — 10 out of 14 responded they were staying. The remaining 4 didn't reply, either because they weren't in the WhatsApp group or were too busy, but I knew they'd stay too. Is that enough “calm research” or not? Maybe Vu is still holding a grudge from when I inadvertently criticized his request to help 10 people in Kharkiv via the group chat. Clearly, if it's a personal favour, it should be asked privately, not in a group chat! And the Deputy Minister doesn't even understand how evacuations work. Where would the Embassy find vehicles to suddenly add more people to the evacuation list? Not knowing something is understandable — but holding a grudge afterward is unfortunate.

Meanwhile, looking at a few other matters, it's clear the Deputy Minister hasn't fulfilled his responsibilities. Why hasn't he been able to persuade the higher-ups, when over a month into the war we still have no humanitarian aid for Ukraine? If war breaks out, who would help us? When I pushed, I was told aid would come after the two foreign ministers spoke. That call happened on March 15. Two weeks have passed. Saying “the higher-ups haven't decided yet” is too simplistic. Has the Ministry presented all the arguments? Clearly not. If you explain things thoroughly, even a turnip will listen. But the problem is always “reading the higher-ups' intentions” — not daring to speak frankly. I had already discussed and agreed on two basic points (calling on Russia to end the war, while urging all sides to respect Russia's security interests), so why has there been no progress? Just the same empty phrases: “respect international law, sovereignty, and territorial integrity.” Who needs empty words? People want specifics. We're in a war — are you supporting us, calling for

the war to end? We're cornered, and no one cares about our security concerns. Do you support us or not?

My proposal supports both Russia and Ukraine, and it holds the West accountable. Are we afraid the West will cancel contracts or projects? Honestly, they won't. They invest because it benefits them, not out of charity. So what are we afraid of? The Deputy Minister should be persuading the leadership — not simply repeating what they say. Is parroting their words really fulfilling one's duties?

I remember suggesting that if Russia stalled, Minister Bui Thanh Son could call the Ukrainian Foreign Minister first. But Vu said just to follow the Minister's direction: Russia first, Ukraine later. No diplomatic spine at all. Even something like that has to defer to the "big powers." In wartime, we need flexibility. Switching to Ukraine first because Russia is unresponsive doesn't mean Vietnam is turning its back on Russia. Always doing things "according to higher-ups' wishes" might help you climb — but don't start flattering upward while cracking down below. Since becoming Permanent Deputy Minister, Vu has shown the typical "big boss" attitude — meek when climbing, arrogant once in power.

Today, I had to focus on drafting a report analysing how the war is affecting global dynamics. I wanted to be thorough, so I've been reading up these past few days. Mong said that in other places, Ambassadors only need to sign off. True enough — many embassies operate that way. But here, who at the Embassy would write it? My is the best writer, but she can only write what I dictate. Starting from scratch — especially with analysis and evaluation — she wouldn't manage.

I was also frustrated with My today. I told her early on that the A-news item needed specific information and pointed her

where to look. Late at night she messaged saying she couldn't find it. Seven hours wasted. If she'd told me after one or two hours that she couldn't locate it, I would've helped immediately. But at midnight? Forget it. It was an interesting story I found yesterday and wanted ready for the Ministry's Monday bulletin.

Today, my son Chi Son and I had a long debate — rare for us. He criticized Russia for starting an invasion and killing civilians. I didn't defend Russia or Putin, but said we need to acknowledge that Russia and Putin were pushed into this war. He argued that being pushed doesn't justify the decision — they could've chosen diplomacy. I said I don't support it either — if I were in Putin's shoes, I'd try to negotiate — but that doesn't mean Russia is solely at fault. I've always said responsibility also lies with the U.S. and NATO, who ignored Russia's security concerns and baited both Russia and Ukraine into war. Before it broke out, I even reported home expressing hope that both sides would stay calm and avoid the trap. But unexpectedly, Putin still chose to strike — surely thinking he could win quickly. In the end, I had to say to my son, “Let's stop this war — for now” so I could finish my report.

Later that night, I saw news of Zelenskyy being interviewed by Russian journalists. They spoke casually, like brothers, in Russian. Honestly, it was a pity. They could've continued speaking Russian in informal contexts and avoided feeding suspicions of Russophobia. Thinking about that, I wrote a short Facebook post expressing regret. Immediately, Bao — the one who helped renovate the Embassy living room — commented: “Ambassador, aren't you being too emotional?” Bao rarely comments, so it meant something. I simply replied, “Have you seen Zelenskyy use Russian since he became President?” Bao didn't answer. Someone else

replied, saying it's normal for the President to use Ukrainian.

Clearly, I can't explain the whole story fully — and partial explanations only create misunderstanding. So I deleted the post. But the truth is, Ukrainians don't need to treat the Russian language like the enemy's tongue. It's the native language of a large part of the population. The Swiss Ambassador once told me, when I first arrived in Kyiv: "If the Swiss only spoke French, it would alienate the German speakers — and vice versa." So it's entirely possible to have Ukrainian as the official language while letting people speak whichever language they're comfortable with. Why restrict them?

When I presented my credentials, the protocol officer said that after speaking English in front of the press, "You can speak to the President in any language you'd like" once the cameras were off. I took this as goodwill — they knew I had studied in Kyiv forty years ago. A small detail, but it shows how intense the anti-Russian language sentiment is now. Even before that, if I had spoken Russian, it wouldn't have mattered — the President could always respond in English anyway

### **Monday, March 28, 2022**

Son "pineapple" from Kherson arrived but didn't dare greet me. He had badmouthed me after I handled the dispute with that An Thuyen guy in Odesa. Son pineapple was greedy and tried to run an illegal money exchange operation with a 7% fee, but ended up getting scammed himself. Then he tried to use Ukrainians to go after An Thuyen. But how could you frame someone for fraud over a money transfer and dress it up as a business investment issue? I wasn't defending An Thuyen (I don't even know who he is), but I couldn't let the community fall into chaos or use outsiders to attack our own. I called them in to lay out the facts. Son pineapple couldn't say anything at

the Embassy, but once home, he badmouthed me again, saying things like “this guy and that guy don’t know anything—he’ll only be here three years and then go home.” I didn’t bother responding. Today, I still signed the official note to help him cross the border. Life will teach him; I don’t need to. Mr. K suggested he could call up the guys at the border to hold him until the Embassy came to vouch—said he’d “pee himself”—but I said there was no need. Hai asked, “we’re still doing the paperwork for him, huh?” I said, go ahead.

My mother fell again in Ha Tinh. We thought she might need surgery. Luckily, it only required a cast. Duan called to thank the doctors, and Dung (Duan’s wife) from Germany called to ask when they could return to Kyiv. People want to settle back down and work—no one wants to evacuate to some third country. It’s tough.

Thong, Deputy Director of the Laos–Cambodia Department, messaged me to talk about the Ukraine–Russia war, saying that Russia was caught off guard by Ukraine’s resistance, the broad international front supporting Ukraine, Russia’s weak diplomatic performance (because the war lacks legitimacy), and their media failure. Not wrong. But the West had long intended to corner Russia, so they quickly formed a united front against it. I reminded Thong that America is also losing in this war. Instead of building alliances to focus on their main threat—China—they’ve distracted themselves with this side conflict. Now it’s even harder to contain China.

I had two long conversations today with Vu Quoc Huy. Huy’s an economist—very sharp, with a math background. His analysis of the economic war between the West and Russia was excellent. The West thought that by sanctioning Russia comprehensively, their economy would collapse, the ruble would tank, and the country might default. But Russia made a

very smart move: announcing it would only sell oil and gas in rubles—anyone buying would have to pay in rubles. The West claimed Russia was violating contracts because deals were signed in foreign currencies. Russia countered that the West had already broken all agreements with their sanctions, so why should Russia honour contracts? Just one announcement, and the ruble stopped crashing and began to recover. With China and India—the world’s two biggest markets—not sanctioning Russia, the West’s economic attack is unlikely to succeed. Russia will struggle, but it won’t crumble. Whoever advised Putin on this deserves credit. It’s not something in any textbook—though it probably will be soon!

I told Chi Son that Uncle Huy’s take on economic warfare was great. Son still believes Russia will face economic hardships. Of course, there’ll be difficulty, but collapse? Not happening. At least Russia’s avoided an economic panic—every crisis starts with panic.

Brother Khai messaged to check in, saying he heard Russia had hit Lviv and asked how things were. He said that as the Ambassador, I have to figure things out myself—back home, they won’t care (based on his Iraq experience). Ironically, this time they seem to care too much. I said all’s calm, but they don’t believe the Ambassador. They’d rather hear that it’s tense and dangerous. I’ve said from the start: this is a strange war, but back home, war is war—how could there be anything “strange” about it? This is a war between brothers, so they’re not targeting civilians. If they wanted to, ten missiles into Lviv would have everyone fleeing in terror. Why haven’t they? Isn’t that strange?

Haven’t heard from brother Phong in a while. Maybe after we talked about humanitarian aid, he gave up. He kept saying it was coming. Still haven’t seen it. Today I read that

Abramovich is shuttling between Zelenskyy and Putin, so I messaged Phong. Early on, he had asked if Abramovich was involved in negotiations. I didn't know then. This report mentioned, for the first time, the idea of leasing Crimea and Donbas long-term. Phong said it probably wasn't accurate. I replied that what matters is seeing concrete solutions emerging, not just vague talk anymore.

## **Tuesday, March 29, 2022**

Got up early to travel to Uzhhorod. The Slovak Ambassador, Marek Safin, was a schoolmate of mine—open-minded and well-informed, especially given that Slovakia borders Ukraine. Despite the distance, I decided to go to meet him. He's also quite fond of the Vietnamese Ambassador, so he brought out a bottle of liquor. I'm not much of a drinker, but if you want to hear stories, you have to drink. The two of us finished half a bottle. Marek even insisted that his staff bring me another bottle as a gift, knowing how hard liquor was to find in Lviv.

It was well worth the trip. Marek shared that Slovakia had successfully delivered military aid to Ukraine, though they kept it low-profile to avoid drawing Russian missile strikes. That's significant. As long as Ukraine has weapons, they can keep fighting. If Slovakia can deliver more, they will. Marek also admitted that NATO had pushed Ukraine into this war. So far, I haven't met a single ambassador who disagrees with that view. I recall meeting the U.S. Chargé d'Affaires during President Zelenskyy's press conference—she dodged my question about why the U.S., while supposedly pivoting toward Asia to counter China, had suddenly shifted its focus westward. She simply said, "I haven't had a bite to eat all morning," and walked off to get food. Since she avoided the question, I didn't

press further.

I asked Marek if he'd expected a war before it happened. He said no. I asked whether he'd faced any criticism at home for that. He shrugged, "I'm still sitting here," then added, "Who would've thought they'd act so illogically?!" I felt the same—Putin's decision only made sense if he thought he could win in three days. Even if he wins now, Russia is battered and broken. Before the war, Putin still had tools to pressure both Ukraine and NATO. I think if China were in that situation, it would have used the two self-proclaimed republics as Trojan horses to weaken Ukraine from within. Back then, Zelensky's approval ratings were already low. And realistically, Ukraine had no chance of joining NATO anyway.

From another perspective, if not for this war, NATO might still believe it could act with impunity. Putin declared from the start: "Peace is not something to be taken for granted." People need to understand that peace comes at a price. Had NATO been more sensible and acknowledged that cost, maybe Putin wouldn't have gone so far. It's truly a dilemma—nothing simple about it.

While waiting for Marek, I sat eating and saw a Ukrainian girl in a bikini posing for photos by the river—for over an hour. Life seemed so peaceful. No one would've guessed there was a war going on. I wrote a short caption and posted the photo on Facebook. Within minutes, my wife messaged me, telling me to take it down immediately. I deleted it without arguing. People always interpret things through their own stereotypes, ignoring the poster's intent. Surely they'd say, "How inappropriate for an ambassador to be so frivolous during wartime!" Better to take it down and avoid trouble.

Thinking about the ruble issue, I also posted a status

sharing my thoughts—hoping to encourage reflection. Some commented that Russia’s move to demand gas payments in rubles was clever. But again, my “policewoman” wife asked what I meant by that post. I didn’t argue. After all, someone might twist it into: “The Vietnamese Ambassador to Ukraine supports Russia.” A foolish interpretation—but better to delete it, just in case.

After seeing Marek, I went to visit Bao, about an hour and a half away. He said there was a mineral bath nearby, but it was already too late, so I saved it for the next day. We talked for four hours straight—about everything from his schoolboy crush that turned into marriage (though they later separated, they still care deeply for each other), to the Russia-Ukraine war. He seemed quite impressed by my fearlessness on the ski slopes—maybe that’s why he likes me!

Bao usually doesn’t say much, but the other day he even commented on my Facebook post about the Russian language. I deleted it right after his comment, realizing how easily things could be misinterpreted. Regarding the war, Bao thinks like a Ukrainian. He even wants to return to Kyiv to contribute. That’s fine. I mentioned I’ve helped around 100 people get certificates proving their Vietnamese citizenship so they could move to Poland. Personally, I don’t think risking one’s life is worth it for a war that could’ve been avoided. Regardless of who wins, the end result won’t be much different.

The landlady Bao rents from is an ethnic Hungarian Ukrainian. She already disliked Russians before the war, and likely hates them even more now. Ordinary people rarely understand who provoked whom—they just see the surface. That’s why policymakers need to account for these psychological aftereffects when making decisions.

Bao said that because the Ambassador was coming, the landlady spent the whole day cleaning. She even wiped down the swing outside, though no one would sit there in this cold. Bao, with his slightly arrogant attitude toward women, had her jumping at his every word.

After drinking both in the afternoon and evening, I was exhausted. But today, the Istanbul negotiations concluded—I couldn't skip writing a report. Took a quick nap, then forced myself up to write. For the first time, the talks addressed substantive issues. Ukraine agreed to some of Russia's security demands. Had Ukraine agreed to these earlier, there might have been no war. As for Crimea and Donbas, the reality on the ground was already established before the invasion. All of this only reinforces the sense that the war was senseless. But right after the talks, Ukraine launched missiles at Russian ammunition depots inside Russia. If Russia doesn't conclude negotiations quickly, dragging them out could backfire. Clearly, even within Ukraine, there are factions not ready to sign. Yesterday, I told Phong that what mattered was they'd started discussing concrete terms. Today, they truly did.

### **Wednesday, March 30, 2022**

Woke up this morning and went for a mineral bath. Honestly, if I lived nearby and could go regularly, it would probably do me some good. But maybe because I jumped into cold water, by the time I got back to Lviv, I had developed a fever. As soon as I arrived, I had to get my laptop fixed—the spacebar was stuck, and typing had become such a hassle.

Khanh picked me up at the market near his house. Hai had arranged for him to come over for dinner. But when it came time to cook, Hai didn't bother asking where Khanh was or what time he'd be arriving. He just cooked and immediately sat

down to eat. I found this kind of behaviour incredibly frustrating. If you invite someone, you should check on their whereabouts and timing so you can plan accordingly and everyone's on the same page. And if you're not going to ask, at least don't go ahead and start eating without them. I really don't understand what kind of diplomatic officer he is—he doesn't even follow the most basic rules of etiquette.

This is what happens when an entire ministry-level agency gets merged into the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and people get sent out to handle diplomatic work without any proper training. The other day was the same: he suggested we invite the military attaché for dinner because their office had just moved to Lviv. I'm not being petty, but when the military office relocates, they should be the ones hosting a small welcome dinner for the embassy staff—not the ambassador inviting the military attaché! It's completely backward. Even if they don't have kitchen facilities, there are plenty of ways to manage that. He always manages to irritate me with his illogical suggestions.

Later that night, I read the news that a humanitarian corridor had been opened from Mariupol, and more than 1,000 people had managed to evacuate. I immediately messaged some of the contacts I'd worked with there to see if anyone had heard from the remaining 17 people we were still waiting on. Still no word. Sister Phong is probably the most unfortunate. On March 22, there was a vehicle going toward the Russian side, but she didn't take it. Two days later, the building she was in got hit. Hopefully, she's still safe.

When I got home, I saw that Sister Lien had replied to my message yesterday about the nursing home project. She owns a ton of land with approved developments but doesn't have the capacity to implement all of them. Meanwhile, Truc Nha and the youth group are full of energy and capability—but they lack

land. It would be perfect if they could collaborate. But Sister Lien is quite tough. Back in 2000, if she had listened to me, she would've already had a thriving apartment complex right on Tran Duy Hung Street. I could have been a millionaire by now—maybe even left diplomacy behind and gone into business instead. Well, such is fate.

Today I also read some disappointing news—President Zelenskyy issued a decision to dismiss Ukraine's ambassadors to Georgia and Morocco because those two countries didn't join sanctions against Russia. But whether they joined sanctions or not depends on various factors, mostly their national interests in relation to Russia. Even if Zelenskyy himself became ambassador there, could he really change their position? On top of that, he even threatened to dismiss other ambassadors. I messaged Phong, saying it's probably a good thing Ukraine's ambassador to Vietnam hasn't arrived yet because of the war—otherwise, that ambassador might have been dismissed too, considering that Vietnam hasn't even provided humanitarian aid, let alone joined sanctions against Russia.

### **Thursday, March 31, 2022**

I messaged Minh, who's in charge of the European Department, asking about the decision on humanitarian aid for Ukraine. Turns out the Prime Minister assigned the Ministry of Finance to handle it, so now it'll take a few more days. Ideally, everything should've been prepared in advance so that once we got the "green light," we could implement immediately. But as usual, our system always works step by step. Only after the two Foreign Ministers finished their phone call did they begin drafting a submission proposing humanitarian aid. That submission then goes through several levels before approval is

granted. And once it reaches the implementation level, staff have to submit reports upwards—from department level to ministry level—detailing how they plan to proceed. Given that entire process, it's no wonder more than three weeks have passed and nothing has been done.

I read in the news that the agreement between Putin and the German Chancellor still involves payments in rubles. Even if payment is made in USD or euros, the amount is calculated based on the ruble's value and converted according to Russian banks' exchange rates. Russia's goal is to stabilize the ruble—and in that sense, they've achieved it. Of course, spending that money abroad may still be tricky. But the ruble's exchange rate has dropped back to 83 rubles per dollar. Quite a spectacular recovery.

Lam from the Embassy in Moscow called to remind me to keep an eye out for any information about Vietnamese citizens evacuating from Mariupol. Naturally, I've already been working on that since yesterday. Still, it's nice to know that some people care about the work. Others don't seem to care at all. Mr. Lan returned to Hanoi and left everything to me, as if it's no longer his concern. Honestly, even when I assigned him tasks, I had to constantly step in—it's exhausting. Our system is full of people like that—redundant, yet we still have to carry them. Nevertheless, I'll need to push this comrade to get back to work. I messaged him, asking him to reassess the community's situation—where people have gone and how to prepare for their return.

The whole day today was spent debating with my son. This time, we moved the discussion into a private chat instead of the family group chat. It started with economics—still centered around whether Russia's demand for gas payments in rubles is feasible and what its broader impact might be. But

eventually, we circled back to the war itself, which Son sees as utterly inhumane. He sent me a video clip showing shots fired at four foreign journalists. Shots were indeed fired, but I maintained my stance: “If shots are fired and no one is harmed, it’s clearly a warning shot.” In wartime, journalists shouldn’t be right on the front lines—how can anyone distinguish between real journalists and disguised combatants? The fact that they weren’t hit shows it was a warning.

My son then pointed to the devastation in Mariupol. No one’s denying that. But if Azov troops—as confirmed by the Vietnamese who managed to escape Mariupol—were sheltering in civilian areas, and “wherever they stayed, it would be attacked,” then it’s easy to understand why civilian buildings were hit. Son challenged me: “So you’re saying 100% Azov forces are hiding there?” Why not? They could easily use rooftops for observation or launching attacks. In war, losses like that are inevitable. Some evacuees even said, “Ukrainian troops destroyed the bottom floors, Russians destroyed the top.” I’m not defending Russia, but if they truly wanted to target civilians, they could have launched a few missiles into Lviv and people would be fleeing in panic. The reason all the embassies are still here is that no one believes Russia will attack civilians here. Mariupol is a different story—it’s a battlefield.

In the end, both father and son stood firm in our views. I wrapped up by writing to Son: “I’ve been sitting here thinking—if we keep debating, where’s it going to lead? I realize it likely won’t go anywhere, and time may not allow for much more. It’s getting harder and harder. In one of his speeches, Putin said something that I think really hits the core of the issue: ‘Europe shouldn’t think peace comes without a price; peace isn’t automatic.’ Putin is determined to show

NATO the cost of peace. That's the real goal of this war—not invasion. Sadly, neither NATO nor Ukraine understood that. So Russia felt compelled to act. I lived here 40 years ago, and looking at Ukraine now, I can't help but think—if only Ukraine had been smart enough to balance both Russia and the West, it would've been in an incredibly advantageous position by now.”

### **Friday, April 1, 2022**

This morning, Thong (from the Laos–Cambodia Department) sent me a speech by the President of the Cambodian Academy of Sciences, explaining why Cambodia supported the resolution calling on Russia to end the war (while Vietnam and China abstained). He said Cambodia needs international support in case Vietnam attacks Cambodia. He then went on at length, criticizing the Cambodian military for having too many generals but being ineffective, which led to Hun Sen publicly refuting the explanation and calling it incorrect. Regardless of whether it's right or wrong, the distrust is clearly reflected in the attitude. People keep talking about "special relations." But how special can they be when there's this level of suspicion? Both sides know there's nothing truly special, yet still feel the need to say it is. At least the Cambodian side says it less often; as for us, it's become a formula. If we stop saying the relationship is “special,” it's like admitting everything has failed. So, let them say it however they want—let people interpret it however they want.

Vietnam's policy toward Cambodia since 1991 has been one disappointment after another. If, from 1978 to 1991, there was at least a determined effort to build a new government that was good for the Cambodian people and beneficial to Vietnam—understandable, even if idealistic—then from 1991 onwards, it's been one failure after another.

Anh Khanh sent me a video clip of his interview with VOA. A full hour long—pretty impressive. He calmly recounted stories, even talking about how the embassy handled evacuations. What surprised me was when he said, “The US and Western Europe must also bear responsibility for this war,” implying that if Ukraine had been allowed to join NATO, there would be no war. He’s a Vietnamese living here and feels that way, and even misunderstands things like that—so it’s easy to see why the Ukrainian government insists on joining at all costs. Of course, governments should be different from ordinary people; they should have vision, should see that it’s not feasible, and realize that this very insistence on joining NATO is the root cause of the war.

Today I also prepared another report on the situation since the negotiations in Istanbul. Russia hasn’t gained any decisive advantage. In fact, the negotiations even show signs that Ukraine isn’t accepting its own proposals. On top of that, Russia is now being attacked on its own soil. Meanwhile, countries continue supplying Ukraine, fighting to the last Ukrainian. It’s like two rocks smashing into each other—this is going to drag on for a while.

Anh Phong, after a long silence, finally forwarded me a piece of news about President Putin dismissing four Russian academicians from the Scientific Council of the Security Council. All of them were dismissed because they misjudged Russia–NATO relations. He still keeps up with his reading as always. I guess forwarding me the article is also his way of “cooling off.”

### **Saturday, April 2, 2022**

Ambassador Thanh in Australia is clearly very interested in the upcoming term in Ukraine. Since the beginning of the

war, he has exchanged opinions many times about the conflict and our policy toward Ukraine. Today, he sent me an interview with one of the U.S. Secretary of State Blinken's advisors about the war in Ukraine. Ambassador Thanh had read it, but as someone not directly involved, he didn't notice the most glaring omission in the article—it lacked any information about how the U.S. responded to Russia's ultimatum. When I pointed out that he was confusing it with the current ultimatum Russia issued regarding Mariupol, he realized. These are two entirely different matters. I was referring to the ultimatum issued before the war, which concerned the U.S. directly.

If U.S. intelligence knew that Russia was preparing to invade Ukraine, they should have understood that Russia's security demands were serious. So why did they respond so dismissively, ignoring Russia's concerns? Was it foolishness, or was it a deliberate strategy to push Russia into launching the attack they had already prepared? Unfortunately, to this day, there's no information on how the U.S. considered or responded to that ultimatum.

Reading the article Thanh sent, it's clear the message from the U.S. is that they are also willing to escalate the war; it aligns with what I previously discussed with the Slovakian ambassador. With this direction, who knows when the war will end?

I also saw news showing the Chief of Staff of the Ukrainian President smiling brightly next to the Commander of the Ukrainian Armed Forces, with a caption stating they had just met with the president and discussed plans that would leave the enemy bewildered—and that everyone would soon see. That kind of message usually implies something significant is about to happen. Meanwhile, Ukraine's chief negotiator stated that Russia has verbally agreed to Ukraine's proposals, except

on the issue of Crimea. It sounds like Russia is also eager to reach an agreement now.

Thao from the Political Section forwarded me a letter from the Academy of International Relations, saying the other side had “corrected spelling mistakes.” Yesterday, I received a letter comparing the Vietnamese Embassy to Indonesia’s embassy, and I didn’t bother replying. Today, they sent it again. But our staff has this habit of simply forwarding letters without reading them, making no comments or suggestions—just acting like mail carriers. If that’s how it’s going to be, they might as well send things directly to the ambassador; there’s no need to go through staff.

Reading more carefully, I noticed that they had removed the comparison part. Since they had corrected it, I told Thao to call the research institutes back home and propose collaborating with them on research projects. In wartime, when people suddenly become this proactive, you can usually guess why. Or perhaps they’re under pressure—two ambassadors were recently recalled for failing to fulfil their duties.

I reminded the Political Section again: whenever they receive letters, they need to read, comment, and propose how to handle them—not just act as a forwarding station. Let’s see how long that reminder lasts.

### **Sunday, April 3, 2022**

In the "Ukraine–Russia Citizens" Viber group, Quang Anh reported that five people from Mariupol had crossed into Russia and were asking if there were any Vietnamese people who could help them. Apparently, someone had passed the information to Quang Anh. I tried contacting the number via Viber but couldn’t get through. So, I asked Lam at the Moscow embassy to follow up—I didn’t dare bother Ambassador Khoi.

I called Lam, and he said, “I’ll have the staff get in touch.” Ambassadors from smaller countries make the calls themselves; meanwhile, section heads in larger embassies delegate to staff and wait for updates. Quite amusing. Bureaucracy at its finest.

Anyway, it’s good news. Five more people have escaped the furnace, and they confirmed that the remaining twelve are safe. That’s a relief. At this point, all Vietnamese in Ukraine, including those in Mariupol, are accounted for and safe.

Tonight, the “quartet” of ambassadors gathered again for dinner. Because it’s Ramadan, it has to be dinner instead of lunch. As usual, the conversation began with how this war could have been entirely avoided, and how this beautiful country shouldn’t have had to endure such a brutal conflict. But that topic had been exhausted, so today, more time was spent on the topic of Islam. All three ambassadors are from Muslim countries. I’ve also served a term in Iran, so I could join the conversation with some background...

One ambassador had served in the Soviet army for a year and knew firsthand the reality of the Afghanistan war. He said that during the entire Soviet–Afghan war, the Soviet Union lost 15,000 soldiers, but in this conflict, Russia must have already lost at least 5,000. Truly horrifying. Ukrainians are right when they say Shoigu is corrupt—his failures contributed to Ukraine avoiding defeat. Putin clearly received heavily distorted reports about the military. Who knows what Shoigu’s fate will be after the war?

All the ambassadors agreed that the fighting will intensify in the near future, and no one knows when it will end. However, they’ve all somewhat begun planning to return to Kyiv. Even if the fighting continues, it likely won’t affect Kyiv unless it is

bombed. But given the logic of this war so far, Kyiv will probably not be bombed—because the losses would outweigh any potential gain. No one would accept bombing Kyiv just to try to resolve the battlefield in the East and South.

The news these past few days has been highly contradictory. Yesterday, it seemed Ukraine was walking back its proposals by demanding a referendum—something unacceptable. But today, I read that President Zelenskyy said they were close to reaching agreements on non-nuclear status, neutrality, and no alliances, with international guarantees—without mentioning referendums or territorial issues. Could those be deferred until later? I was reading the summary in Russian, so I asked My to find the full video clip for verification. I also had to assign this to the Political Section staff—handling everything alone is impossible. Since the start of the war, I’ve been writing all the reports myself, without assistance, not even help sourcing materials.

I read news that Zelenskyy publicly “called out” former German Chancellor Merkel and former French President Sarkozy (naming them outright), saying they should go to Bucha to see the consequences of their appeasement of Russia 14 years ago. Ukrainian leaders love to “call out” other countries’ leaders. Yet, to many people, it’s Zelenskyy himself who should reflect on what his rigidity has cost—how many innocent lives lost and the destruction of his country. Right before the war, Germany’s Chancellor and France’s President had proposed exactly the points Zelenskyy is now agreeing to, but he rejected them at the time. Putin reportedly asked Macron, “Do I trust your information, or do I trust Zelenskyy’s?”—because Zelenskyy had agreed with Macron but reversed his stance before Macron even landed in Moscow to meet Putin. Ambassador of AC is very impressed by this

story and has brought it up three or four times with me.

Since Deputy Minister Minh Vu sent a message in the group, requesting embassies continue supporting citizens and suggest if any further assistance is needed, I proposed that the policy of reimbursing commercial airline tickets for citizens should be uniformly communicated. Recently, in Poland, some officials refused to process cases because they hadn't received instructions to support commercial tickets—while Moscow has been implementing this for over ten days already. Generally, though, reminders are in vain. People just operate according to habit. They don't realize that incomplete communication prevents embassies, like ours in Poland, from properly implementing directives.

### **Monday, April 4, 2022**

This morning, Nga Pham, an ex-BBC correspondent, asked me to do an interview for Australia's SBS, a government-run station, about the evacuation efforts. I told her I'd already spoken enough to the media—"any more would be redundant." I hadn't planned to give any more interviews after the reprimand from Vice Minister Hieu, especially not to foreign outlets. But Nga kept pleading: "Just two questions, just five minutes, it's a government station, etc."

Since I studied in Australia, I've always had a soft spot for anything related to the country. Sensing my hesitation, she pressed on: "I'll call now, okay?"—the classic "don't let him escape" move.

She lit up when I mentioned that the embassies were preparing to return to Kyiv and blurted out, "Don't go back right away, okay?" Of course, that's not something to say in an interview. Nga said she had enough material already. I reluctantly agreed, telling her to add a line that I initially wasn't

going to give the interview for personal reasons but decided to do it because I was a former student in Australia.

Just as the interview was wrapping up, the cryptography office brought in a cable: “another media issue.” I immediately understood—another warning. Skimming through the half-page message, I saw enough citations from various regulations, ending with a clear threat: if I continued not adhering to “media discipline,” disciplinary actions would be taken under clause a, article b, section c—whatever that is. I got the message: one more misstep and I’m done.

I thought to myself—Zelensky received an ultimatum from Russia and refused, but me, receiving an ultimatum from Hanoi? I’d be a fool not to comply. I’m not afraid, but why bring trouble upon myself? Be a hero for whom? I immediately called Nga and told her to stop the interview. She probably didn’t understand why—it wasn’t sensitive at all. I just said briefly, “I’ve received an ultimatum from Hanoi.” No need for elaborate excuses—simple, I’m not allowed.

Nga still tried to persuade me: “What’s so sensitive about it?” or “I’ll turn it into an article, without your voice,” or “The Vietnamese community in Australia is very interested.” Sure, they’re interested. But satisfying public curiosity and supporting Vietnam’s diplomatic needs—even just reporting what we’re doing—already promotes our efforts. But those in charge don’t see it that way. They consider it a violation of discipline. That’s what I thought—but all I said to Nga was, “Let’s drop it.” She still hoped: “If they change their mind, let me know.” Change their mind? Impossible.

The previous cable was already worded like that—they didn’t even explain what I had done wrong. Hang simply said she couldn’t understand why I kept disobeying the Ministry

leadership. How is providing clarification considered disobedience? If I were truly wrong, why didn't the cable signed by Hieu give specific examples?

Well, avoiding the elephant in the room doesn't hurt anyone. Nga mentioned that Natalya in Vietnam had been loudly criticizing everything — “Speaking badly of Vietnam while in Hanoi.” That's how our people are — meek with outsiders, harsh with insiders. Frankly, if it were another ambassador, it might not be an issue. But because someone powerful is particularly “interested” in me, even Hieu is just following orders.

Back when Hieu was a regular staff member, Xuan recommended him to Vu Dung as a secretary. At that time, I was quite close to Vu Dung, so my words carried weight. But Hieu probably doesn't know those stories. Among colleagues working closely together, is it so hard to say, “Hey, maybe you shouldn't do this or that”? But once someone is promoted, they become bossy and forget the past.

I consulted Quoc Dung to see what advice he had. Dung suggested I cable back to HQ asking for instructions on how to handle media requests. But Xuan was sharper—she said HQ would reply asking me to send the interview questions and answers for pre-approval. And once HQ reviews it, you already know the answer: unusable. It's a burden. Better to stop. That's how effective our system is—it stifles people. Doing nothing might actually be better.

I have to admit, Xuan was sharp. Dung and I didn't think of it. I informed Dung so he'd be in the loop. He told me to keep him updated so he could prepare accordingly. I told the cryptography office to send the Friday cable to Washington.

Today, I read about the meeting between China's Foreign

Minister and Ukraine's Foreign Minister. Wang Yi's message read like a lecture to Ukraine: "I hope Ukraine is wise enough to make choices in the interest of its own people." He emphasized "the importance of learning lessons from the crisis and finding ways to ensure Europe's long-term security." Couldn't be more patronizing. Meanwhile, Ukraine's version of the report highlighted that China stands in solidarity with Ukraine over the massacre of civilians, and that both sides agreed on ending the war to meet global peace, food security, and trade needs. Two completely different narratives.

I read the Chinese version first, so I didn't even bother to cable HQ—knowing how HQ operates doesn't encourage initiative. No point in cabling—they won't listen. Waste of time. Better to read for personal understanding. Two cables a week are enough.

Today, I just received Moscow's cable analysing the March 29th Russia–Ukraine negotiations. Meanwhile, I had already sent mine the night of March 29th. There's a whole team in Moscow, but it probably has to go from staff to division head to who knows who before reaching the ambassador—no wonder it takes so long. Here, I read, analyze, and write by myself—done in a few hours. Yet, when it comes to merit reviews, the big embassies are always at the top of the list.

## **Tuesday, April 5, 2022**

Woke up this morning to see a message from Hang, the Spokesperson, in the "Ukraine – Ministry Leadership – Ambassador" Viber group, sharing an article from VOA about VinUni offering three-month scholarships to people with Ukrainian citizenship to study in Vietnam. I don't quite understand Hang's logic. That news is from March 23—what's the point of sharing it now? What does it have to do with

Vietnam's diplomacy or citizen protection? Or is it just because she loves Vin so much that she had to share it in this group, even though the group's clear purpose is to update key developments related to evacuating Vietnamese citizens from Ukraine?

Ten days ago, when the Vietnamese Ambassador gave an interview on VOA, not only was it not shared, it was even used as grounds for a reprimand—without ever identifying what exactly was wrong with the interview. I messaged T, who is a close friend of Hang, to ask what the logic behind this was. T wittily replied, “Haha, I have no idea, brother.”

In the afternoon, I met with Ambassador H to exchange views. He has quite a distinctive perspective. According to him, Russia will have to keep fighting to achieve its objectives. Stopping now would mean achieving nothing. But the question is: do they have enough resources to continue? If they do, Putin wouldn't hesitate. Having committed already, how can he stop? That's not Putin's nature. If he's in the game and has the capacity, he'll keep going. The issue is whether Russia has enough strength to reorganize and push on to round two.

Is the West supplying Ukraine enough to keep them fighting? Zelenskyy doesn't seem eager to stop either—saying one thing today and another tomorrow suggests he's still undecided. Ambassador H believes the effort to hold on to Mariupol is just stubbornness and will only lead to the city's complete destruction. He even speculates that Zelenskyy may secretly want Azov to be wiped out. After all, in any country, how can an armed force operate openly without being part of the official military? Of course, this contradicts Zelenskyy's public statements, but it's not entirely illogical.

Regarding Bucha, he also doubts its authenticity. A few

days ago, Ermak posted a photo with the Commander-in-Chief of Ukraine's Armed Forces, captioned with a tease that something would surprise everyone. Since then, the only "surprise" has been the Bucha incident. Could it have been staged to damage Russia's reputation? Ambassador H said that, at the very least, they achieved their goal—given the international reaction. Let's see if any real investigation happens.

I sent the photos to Thang, and he commented that the size of the corpses compared to the buildings seemed disproportionate. According to him, it looked staged.

At the moment, all the ambassadors in Lviv are preparing to return to Kyiv, which reflects a completely different assessment from Ambassador H's. We'll see. Better to wait than return and have to evacuate a second time.

Film director Ghorban from Tehran reached out, asking me to inform Ambassador Huy—who just took up the post in Iran—to meet him next Thursday. Even after being succeeded by others, he still contacts me to promote relations between the two countries. If we can pull off the "Hanoi Love Story" movie, it would be fantastic. That project is my brainchild from my time in Iran.

Tonight, I had planned to go to bed early to welcome the Kherson group tomorrow morning. But after lying down, I kept thinking and ended up messaging Hieu. I wrote something along the lines of: after the 10th Party Congress, Vu Dung told me that after that "great upheaval," nothing scared me anymore. But who would've thought that 16 years later, his former secretary—someone both Xuan and I voted to bring in—would be threatening me with disciplinary action. He's probably just following orders, so I told him: even

unintentionally, don't repay kindness with resentment. I'm not begging for anything; I just want him to reflect.

Sixteen or seventeen years ago, when we were preparing for the 10th Party Congress, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was going through intense internal struggles. Minister Nguyen Dy Nien wanted to promote his son-in-law as successor, sidelining all the deputy ministers—starting with Vu Dung, who had external support and was projected to replace Nguyen Dy Nien. He used the issue of visa irregularities at the Vietnamese Embassy in Japan to try to discipline Vu Dung.

Many in the Ministry didn't support the Minister's "family rule" approach, so they supported Vu Dung. I was leading the charge in that struggle—not because I sought personal gain from him, but because I saw the injustice. I simply believed it was the right thing to do. It's a long story. Later, Nguyen Hoang Long, son of Manh Dung, greeted me in Washington and called me "Gia Cat Thach" (a strategic adviser), probably because of my role and advice during that period before the 10th Congress.

The result of the 10th Congress was that none of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' candidates made it into the Central Committee—except for Binh Minh, who became an alternate member, then Deputy Minister, then Minister, then Deputy Prime Minister, and finally a Politburo member. Binh Minh and Hoai Trung were a tight pair. Hoai Trung would fill the positions left by Binh Minh—except the last one: Minister of Foreign Affairs.

To sum up, Binh Minh and Hoai Trung's rise was the result of the "revolution" before the 10th Congress. Our families also share another connection: after Hoai Trung's father was expelled from the Party, my father, at the time, served as Party Secretary at the Ministry's Chancellery and helped reinstate Le

Ba Cap. Without that, it would've been over.

Despite all these shared pasts, for some reason, I've always been given "special attention" by Le Hoai Trung.

### **Wednesday, April 6, 2022**

Woke up in the morning intending to go to the train station, only to find out the train was still four hours away from Lviv. Went back to sleep. By the time I woke up, the group informed me they would come to the Embassy to process paperwork. Seventeen people in total, including both adults and children. A group like that traveling through war zones is quite something. Once again, we had to prepare documents for a few young men of conscription age so they could cross the border safely.

The Vietnamese community in Kherson had, from the start of the war until now, experienced relatively less bombing and shelling—since there wasn't much fighting in Kherson. The Russians "negotiated" and took control, while Ukrainian authorities still continued to operate. But now, it seems Ukraine is trying to reclaim Kherson, making the situation more tense and prompting people to evacuate. Fourteen people crossed over to Russia a few days ago; today, seventeen more left, plus four from Son's family previously. Altogether, this is still less than half of the Vietnamese population in Kherson.

Listening to everyone's stories, I finally understood why only fourteen people went last time — it was due to disorganized coordination. I don't know how Mr. Kien understood the plan, but he wasn't able to arrange things well. Ideally, people should have stayed home and waited for the Russian troops to pick them up, but instead, some went out to the bus station. Meanwhile, the Russians were looking for them based on their home addresses. As a result, many who wanted

to leave couldn't. It's unfortunate. When the person representing the community isn't quick-witted, the people lose opportunities. But at the same time, it's also because the people chose the wrong leader. Whether it's a small group, an organization, or a country—if you choose the wrong leadership, things fall apart. Then again, as the saying goes, the people reflect their leaders. Truly, it's the chicken-and-egg dilemma.

In the afternoon, the Croatian Ambassador invited all the ambassadors currently in Lviv out for coffee and cake. She is the only female ambassador here. Nine ambassadors showed up. Turns out six or seven ambassadors have already returned to Kyiv. Everyone seems to be planning to go back to Kyiv after mid-April. But I've decided to take it slow. Who knows if Russia will strike Kyiv again? And if they do, it won't be a small-scale attack. Better to wait and see how things unfold by the end of April. Returning only to have to evacuate a second time wouldn't look good at all.

The restaurant was right in the city center, so I walked there. After talking with the ambassadors, I took a stroll for a while. It was a sunny day, the sky clear and blue. The city center always feels so peaceful, with groups playing music, sketching, people sitting around enjoying the day, chatting with friends.

After walking for a bit, I wandered over to the chess area. I'd seen it many times before but never stayed long—always in a rush. But now, there's nowhere to hurry off to—might as well savor the moment. I watched for a while, then sat down to try a game. Turns out they played with small wagers—50 hryvnias, about \$1.70. These guys clearly knew their stuff. I've played plenty online, but as soon as I sat down, I lost. My opponent asked if I wanted to play another round, but I declined. Gambling like that in public doesn't look good.

After the game, some of the chess players asked me where I was from and what I thought about the war. In short, the majority of them believed that Russia is the aggressor, the U.S. is helping Ukraine, and Ukraine will win. I simply said this was a war that could have been avoided, and that Russia wasn't fighting Ukraine but rather fighting the U.S. The guy I played chess with didn't accept that at all, but one or two others listened without arguing so forcefully. As the saying goes, the people reflect their government. When the people think this way, naturally the government acts accordingly.

Dr. Ha, Director of Huu nghi Hospital in Hanoi, texted me to check in and inform me about my mother's condition. Apparently, she needs surgery for something. I'm truly grateful to him. Knowing I'm far away, he took the initiative to visit her and then texted me the details.

In the evening, Deputy Minister Hieu texted me back in response to my message from yesterday, saying, in essence, that the decision was the collective opinion of the Party Committee, not a personal matter. I thanked him for replying. I'm all too familiar with how Party meetings operate. If someone speaks up strongly with an opinion, others who aren't directly involved won't bother to jump in. I remember back when they raised the issue of ending my probation at the department level—meaning I would be promoted to deputy director—Standing Deputy Minister Le Cong Phung simply made one remark: “Thach seems to have some issues with horizontal coordination.” And just like that, no one else said anything; it was shelved. Because of that vague comment, my promotion was delayed by six months.

That “horizontal coordination” comment referred to a time when I was at the Department of China–Northeast Asia, reading materials to prepare for my doctoral dissertation. One

or two colleagues who weren't happy about it tried to make things difficult for me. Suddenly, it became an issue of me having "coordination problems." Simple—if you're not part of their circle, one offhand comment is enough to stall you.

I don't know what rule I supposedly violated this time. "Discipline in public communication" is such a vague concept. If the Ambassador uses Facebook to push work forward, then if something is wrong, point it out clearly so I can learn from it. But as Hang said to me, "Matters like writing reports shouldn't be posted on Facebook." Really? I didn't post any report content. I merely noted that I had submitted a report prior to going skiing. What's wrong with that? If I hadn't written anything, people would just assume I was only skiing! As for the interviews with BBC and VOA, nobody has specified what was said incorrectly either.

My life has been filled with all sorts of "disciplinary actions." The very first one came right after I joined the diplomatic service, when I published an article about the 45th anniversary of the Yalta Conference in 1990. The piece I originally wrote was heavily edited by Editor-in-Chief, turning it into something completely different. Regretting that my intellectual effort had been altered, I went ahead and submitted my original version to the People's Army Newspaper. But at that time, Khai wanted to bring me down, accusing me of violating rules by publishing in another paper without permission. Khai even compared my "offense" to that of Uncle Phan Doan Nam, who had written an article in the Communist Review. After publishing that article, Uncle Phan Doan Nam lost his position as Assistant to the Minister and was demoted to the Academy. People used to refer to him as "Little Thach" because he was an assistant to Mr. Nguyen Co Thach. No one quite understood how his article offended Mr. Thach so much,

but the punishment was severe. Khai was an opportunist. The second time he went to the U.S., he assumed Vietnam was about to collapse like Eastern Europe, so he got involved in fabricating evidence related to POW/MIA cases, which is why he could never return to Vietnam.

The second time I was “disciplined” was after I returned from my postdoc in the U.S. Tran Duc Mau didn’t want me back at the Department of Foreign Policy Planning. The Personnel Department couldn’t figure out a solid reason to push me out of that department, so they said, “Thach is a student of Carl Thayer, so it's not appropriate for him to work in Foreign Policy Planning.” Funny—as if by working there, I would leak information to Carl. That was in 2002. Not long after, Vietnamese media were constantly interviewing Carl Thayer.

The third disciplinary action came when the Minister likely caught wind of my support for Vu Dung, and so removed me from the post of Deputy Editor-in-Chief of *International Affairs* and instead reassigned me as Deputy Head of the Historical Research Division. At that time, Pham Cao Phong was the secretary to Mr. Nien. Phong said he didn’t understand why Mr. Nien, on the way to the airport, repeatedly asked, “Has Thach been transferred yet?” Another round of disciplinary action through reassignment, though no formal charge.

While working at the Party External Relations Commission, there were plenty of these “non-formal” disciplinary actions. I was Head of the General Research Department but was rarely allowed to participate in actual diplomatic activities. No one outright said anything; they just didn't like me. What could I do?

The fourth instance could be when I was suddenly recalled from Iran along with three other ambassadors. When I was in

the third year of my term, the Personnel Director told me, “We haven’t found anyone else with both expertise and language skills like you, so there’s no replacement yet.” But out of the blue, they assigned a deputy director-level official from the Border Committee—a lower rank than a department deputy director—who lacked both foreign language skills and expertise to replace me. That, too, was clearly a case of “being tired of seeing me as ambassador,” so they hastily assigned someone else. The work itself was not important. To this day, the newly appointed ambassador still reaches out to me for advice—likely not to the predecessor.

Now this is the fifth time—if not counting the time after I returned from Iran, when many regional department head positions were vacant at the Party External Relations Commission, yet Chief Hoang Binh Quan insisted on assigning me as Editor-in-Chief of *External Relations Magazine*. Clearly another form of “disciplinary action.”

### **Thursday, April 7, 2022**

This morning, I texted Xuan to share Deputy Minister Hieu’s reply. Xuan said, “At least he responded politely.” That’s true—in many cases, people don’t even bother to reply. Xuan also told me yesterday that T had come over and remarked, “These days, there’s no shortage of incompetent leaders.” T is a witty guy, but that particular quip really sums up the current state of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs—and probably not just the Ministry, but the whole system. It’s the result of a long-term decline across society. Where are we headed if the competency of those in charge keeps deteriorating?

Xuan keeps reminding me: “Don’t let it get to you; it’ll just wear you out.” I often use the phrase *san si* (anger and

attachment), but I had to look it up again to fully understand it. *San si* means not to get angry (*san*) and not to become emotionally entangled (*si*) with the things you witness. I try my best to recognize bad behaviour directed at me without reacting emotionally.

Today, I drafted a report covering the situation from April 1st to now, to send back home. Since being unjustifiably threatened with disciplinary action, I haven't felt much motivation to work. Even when I do, it's not like anyone values it. Still, I try to send one or two reports a week just so they have no excuse to criticize me. Frankly, there's no clear sense of purpose anymore. Might as well sit back and relax.

I also chatted a bit with Xuan Dung in Saudi Arabia about various things. At least I can see Dung still wants to do something meaningful during his term. Over there, they've just started showcasing Vietnamese goods, and some people bought them on the spot—as if it were that simple. It feels almost too easy and optimistic. From my experience, just displaying goods rarely leads to real outcomes, especially when there isn't enough sample stock. For actual transactions to happen, the market needs to be tested, and the hardest part is getting buyers to accept the product. Either Dung is overly optimistic, or maybe the market there really is that receptive. Who knows?

### **Friday, April 8, 2022**

Nothing special happened today. Khanh returned from Poland and stopped by to give me a bottle of Polish vodka. He shared that during his travels, he saw many vehicles transporting weapons from Poland into Ukraine. It's not just something you hear on the news—you can actually witness it on the roads. This suggests the war is far from over. Ukraine lacks only weapons; they remain determined to keep fighting

in defence of their country and to reclaim sovereignty. Unfortunately, both sides will continue to suffer heavy losses. Meanwhile, those supplying the weapons are simply offloading what they no longer use. Without war, these weapons would just expire anyway.

Today, a “Bucha 2” event occurred: a missile strike hit the Kramatorsk railway station where Ukrainians were evacuating due to the approaching battles. At first, Ukrainian media quickly reported that Russia had fired two Iskander missiles at the station. But when debris was recovered, it turned out to be the remains of a Tochka missile—something Russia claims is used only by Ukraine. Ukraine, on the other hand, accuses Russia of possessing and using such missiles too. Most chillingly, the missile had “For the Children” written on its body. Was it a Russian attack meant to shift blame to Ukraine, or did Ukraine accidentally strike its own people? If Russia did it and tried to deflect responsibility, what more can be said? Has the war pushed people to cross all moral boundaries? It became another topic for me and Son to debate. Naturally, Son believes Russia was behind the strike. As for me, without solid evidence, I can’t draw conclusions.

I also chatted with T in Paris to ask whether Deputy Minister Hieu had mentioned anything about me lately. Apparently, Hieu told others that he had personally called me several times, but that I continued to “violate rules.” At the same time, he admitted that I’m a highly responsible person who has been holding the line at the embassy. Well, at least that’s some recognition of my dedication. But really—what does *speech discipline* even mean? If an ambassador isn’t allowed to speak publicly about the embassy’s work—especially in a crisis like this—under the pretext of maintaining discipline, then what’s the point of having an ambassador at all?

Now, if I've said anything wrong in those interviews—whether with BBC, VOA, VTC, or VTV4—please, point it out. Those are supposedly the “continued violations.” I'd welcome being told exactly what I got wrong. But no one ever does.

I told T I've lost all motivation to work. How can I carry on when I'm being evaluated like this? T advised me to let time reveal the truth. That's fair—time will tell. But by then, people like me will have been dragged through so much. In the middle of a war, instead of supporting one another, they're threatening disciplinary action without even clarifying the offense.

Interestingly, today the crypto officer handed me a cable from New York and mentioned that I've sent 77 cables back home this year, while New York has sent 79. The crypto officer has the clearest view of an ambassador's work. Having served through seven postings, he can compare ambassadors better than anyone. From our conversations, I know how he evaluates my dedication.

Mr. K also sent me more updates about the investigation into the Consular Department case. I forwarded him a *Vietnamnet* article on the case—which even misused the terms “rescue flights” and “combo flights.” But it seemed like he didn't really read it. I asked him if he wasn't interested in whether the investigation was being conducted fairly. He responded indifferently: “Whatever, soon they'll haul in a big batch, including some big fish.” I've also heard rumours that Vice Minister To Dung is being banned from leaving the country. But why would anyone feel pleased when fellow colleagues are in trouble—especially when there may be serious flaws in the investigation? I told him, “Even if we're not involved, we shouldn't condone it if the investigation is flawed.”

## Saturday, April 9, 2022

This afternoon, I went horseback riding. It turned out to be quite close by and very convenient. It's been a long time since I last rode, so I wasn't as skilled as before—but still, it was a lot of fun. Victor, the owner of the horse farm, told me to drop by anytime if I want to practice. With probably only a few days left in Lviv, I'll try to get better at it while I still can.

Today, the British Prime Minister visited Kyiv. Zelenskyy welcomed him with great enthusiasm. Walking together around Kyiv's city center was the warmest public display of solidarity between the UK and Ukraine so far. But I see it from a completely different angle. The UK has always had a tradition of being anti-Soviet, and now anti-Russian; naturally, it's Zelenskyy's ideal ally. It's no surprise he told the world to "learn from Boris Johnson." But to me, this visit signals that the war is going to drag on. When the leader of the pro-war camp comes all the way here to show support like this, it's a clear sign that the conflict won't end anytime soon.

In the evening, we had dinner with all the staff currently in Lviv, including the military and trade attachés. We had to queue for a while since our group was large. On the occasion of the Hung Kings' Commemoration Day, Chai probably wanted to use this gathering to "mend" the relationship between the Military Attaché's office and the Embassy. A few days ago, he mentioned that the military attachés would come over this Saturday. I asked, "Who invited them over?" In short, he means well, but he's not very tactful. I have no hard feelings toward Chien—I just dislike his slyness. I only ask for straightforward honesty. The dinner itself was pleasant enough. He asked when the Embassy plans to return to Kyiv. I replied, "Two weeks from now, we'll reassess the situation." I had to emphasize *reassess* rather than *return in two weeks*, otherwise

it could be misinterpreted later.

Yesterday, I instructed My, the Head of the Political Section, that even during weekends in wartime, they still need to compile the daily news digest. I haven't seen any reply, nor the digest, today. Honestly, even if they don't do it, I still read the news and handle it myself. But I can't do everything. At the very least, the responsibility needs to be clear to them.

### **Sunday, April 10, 2022**

Today was a day off, and with not much news coming from the battlefield, I spent some time watching a few video clips about Ukraine. Professor John Mearsheimer and Vladimir Pozner had already identified the “Ukraine problem” seven or eight years ago and predicted that “Ukraine will be shattered” if it continued down the path toward joining NATO. And indeed, it has been shattered. Pozner was right—the West created the Putin we see today. Before 2007, Russia wasn't a problem for Europe. But due to NATO's eastward expansion, it was only in 2007 that Putin began losing trust in the West. In 2008, there was even the idea of admitting Ukraine into NATO, which was fortunately blocked by Germany and France. From there, mistrust between Russia and the West deepened.

It's clear—over a piece of land that isn't of vital interest, the U.S. invested significant resources, sacrificing the opportunity to build an alliance with Russia in order to focus on its true strategic rival: China. It turns out my thinking aligns with theirs. Analysts laid all this out clearly, yet the entire Western establishment chose to ignore it, while the Ukrainian leadership continued chasing an illusory dream. We'll see how the West helps Ukraine rebuild after all this.

I went swimming with Khanh. Victor joined us—his father was a former Soviet colonel, and his brother is a colonel in

Khabarovsk. Now Victor is here, naturally under the watchful eyes of Ukrainian security. A country torn apart over what began as relatively trivial matters. In the end, everyone becomes a victim.

Today was the Hung Kings' Commemoration Day, so the mood at dinner was a bit livelier than usual. While we were drinking, Hai mentioned that when he attended Trung's appointment ceremony as Consul General in Vancouver, the Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister commented that many department directors deliberately avoid becoming ambassadors just so they can be appointed consuls general. Hai didn't understand it at the time. I suppose now he does. Back then, our group joked, "Strive to become a consul general." Jokes are one thing, but for a Politburo member to publicly make this kind of remark doesn't seem appropriate at all.

Vietnamese diplomacy now faces a strange distortion: people aspire to become consuls general. The consul general is simply "mister," while the ambassador is addressed as "excellency." Yet people aim for the former. Such a warped diplomatic system—and the person leading it sees this abnormality as normal and even says it out loud. There's nothing more to say. When things are this distorted, consequences are inevitable. Ordinary department-level officials are qualified to serve as consuls general. Strong department heads should be appointed ambassadors. But now, many capable department heads are being sent as consuls general based on completely unrelated criteria.

## **Monday, April 11, 2022**

Reading the news, I saw that the Austrian Prime Minister's visit to Russia was very tense—so much so that a journalist from *Komsomolskaya Pravda* even described it as "delivering

an ultimatum” to Russia. It really was intense. After reading more from both Western and Russian sources, it became clear that the Austrian Prime Minister’s message to President Putin essentially amounted to an ultimatum: “If you don’t stop the war, the sanctions will increase tenfold, a hundredfold.” The wind has clearly shifted. It’s no longer Russia issuing ultimatums, but Europe issuing ultimatums to Russia.

I considered reporting on this because not many people read across sources as thoroughly as I do. And even when they do, they often miss the nuance. But then I thought, what’s the point of rushing? Reporting early won’t change anything. Nobody really evaluates it. Back home, even something as straightforward as humanitarian aid has taken nearly a month without resolution—so battlefield analysis certainly isn’t a priority. Especially now, when they’re brandishing disciplinary knives at me.

Kien from Kherson reported that a group of eight people would be evacuating through Lviv and asked for help with paperwork. Of course—no problem. The embassy has never refused anyone. I contacted Mrs. Phuoc in Dnipro, who has helped many evacuees from Mariupol pass through. Life there still feels normal—she’s still selling at the market. But I worry the fighting might spread there soon, so I advised her and her husband to consider relocating temporarily. That’s how it is—war is right next door, yet people don’t want to evacuate. Meanwhile, office clerks sitting at their desks are only worried about getting blamed if anything goes wrong. They never try to put themselves in the shoes of those affected. That’s exactly the root of my disagreements with folks back home.

Getting anxious again, I texted Minh about the humanitarian aid. Turns out everything is ready—just “waiting for higher-ups to give the green light”!

I also messaged My to remind the Political Section to prepare the weekend summary, but got no reply—and nothing was done. My said, “I thought I already replied.” Because the summary wasn’t prepared over the weekend, we missed reporting on three significant visits by European leaders to Ukraine. If I had relied solely on them, how could I produce any reports? They don’t have to draft the reports, and even the simple task of compiling news summaries wasn’t completed. That’s the system we work in. What can you do?!

## **Tuesday, April 12, 2022**

Got up early and immediately prepared a report. In short, Russia is growing weaker. Now, preparations are underway for what may be the decisive battle in the next one to two weeks. If they manage to capture Donbas, they’ll likely annex it into Russia if no agreement is reached with Ukraine. But if they fail, the war could drag on for years.

At noon, I attended a chamber music concert organized by the French Ambassador and the Honorary Consul General of France. It looks like at least two more ambassadors (from Moldova and Uzbekistan) will soon return to Kyiv. I also heard that the Belgian Ambassador is preparing to return. Meanwhile, the Cuban Ambassador might head back home directly from Romania. Natasha asked me about parking their minibus at the Vietnamese Embassy. I spoke with Dang Tran Phong—he agreed, so it was straightforward to handle. But he always seems tense, saying, “Tomorrow I’ll have my secretary call the Cuban Ambassador’s secretary.” If they want to speak directly, why not just call? Involving the secretaries unnecessarily weakens the direct communication between ambassadors, especially when the request has already been extended. It shows a lack of sensitivity.

This was my third horseback riding session. Opera, the horse, is rather temperamental. If I hadn't kept a firm hand, I probably would've fallen. This hobby can be risky if one isn't careful. After the session, I sat in Victor's room for a chat. He's a straightforward person, so I also spoke candidly: "This war could have been avoided," "Russia isn't at war with Ukraine, it's with the U.S. and NATO," and "If Zelenskyy had accepted neutrality and not joining NATO, there wouldn't have been a war." Of course, one can argue—who is Russia to dictate what other countries can or can't do? Fair enough, ideally, that's how it should be. But when has the world ever been fair? Smaller countries should avoid provoking great powers to prevent bloodshed. Vietnam is no different—if we provoke China, we'll pay the price. But if we are skilful, firm, and avoid provocation, things remain stable. Vietnam and Ukraine are very similar in this respect.

Eventually, Victor mentioned that back when he was a member of the provincial council, he also advocated for being friends with both Russia and Europe. That's exactly the right approach. Had Ukraine followed that path, this unnecessary war might have been avoided.

We ended up talking until almost 6 p.m. I was getting anxious as time dragged on. It turned out he was waiting for his wife to invite me to dinner, though he had told me it was just tea. When we arrived, I only had a bowl of soup—I wasn't feeling very hungry. His wife is also very warm and hospitable.

Today, I also received an inquiry from the International Organizations Department (MOFA) about how to transfer humanitarian aid to the Ukrainian Red Cross.

### **Wednesday, April 13, 2022**

In times of war, with so much misinformation, you have

to verify everything you read. This morning, Xuan sent me news saying that Ukraine's Marine Brigade had managed to link up with the Azov Brigade. Vietnamese newspapers reported it, but strangely, there was no mention on telegram. The Telegram channel of *Politica Strany* is usually concise and thorough. It wasn't until the evening that I saw the two commanders of the units sitting next to each other on TV, confirming the "link-up."

Meanwhile, Russian sources reported that 1,026 marines had surrendered. The figure was so specific—down to the last digit—that it made Khai believe it, saying, "Such an exact number must be true." Well, if you're going to fake something, you might as well make it look real. By evening, when the commanders from Azov and the 32nd Brigade appeared together and stated they would not honor "some individuals who surrendered to the enemy," it confirmed that a surrender had occurred, but the exact number remains uncertain.

That's the nature of war—so much conflicting information. People pick and choose the news that aligns with their own side. Today, there was even a viral claim that a 12-kilometer-long Russian tank convoy was destroyed. But no Telegram channels reported on it. It's highly likely to be fake news. Russia already fell for something similar at the start of the war—hard to believe they'd repeat the same mistake. Yet Vietnamese in Ukraine are sharing it like wildfire.

One thing is certain: Russia is advancing much more slowly than anticipated. Mariupol remains unresolved, and after more than 10 days, they've only taken Iziium in Donbas. I already reported this yesterday. Their chances of achieving their objectives don't look promising. The next two weeks will likely see intense fighting as they try to salvage something. If they can't, the war will likely drag on indefinitely.

I'll probably return to Kyiv by late April or early May. Already, eight embassies have returned. Today, the Moldovan Ambassador left. On Saturday, the Uzbek Ambassador will arrive. That'll make ten embassies present in Kyiv by the weekend.

Today, Phong (Romania) called to say he'd been able to contact the Cuban Embassy. That was thoughtful of him. At least they've made contact. They're still considering whether to send their minibus to the Vietnamese Embassy. Our poor Cuban friends—they really do have it tough.

President Zelenskyy has finally decided not to receive the German President. The German President had planned to visit Ukraine alongside the Presidents of Poland and the Baltic states, but since Zelenskyy didn't extend an invitation, he's not going. Honestly, Ukrainians are remarkably skilled at making enemies. Yes, the German President, when he was Foreign Minister, pursued "pro-Russian" policies—but that was official German policy at the time. Now he's willing to visit in good faith—why refuse him? Who else will want to stand by Ukraine after that? And inviting the German Chancellor instead? Really? If the Chancellor accepts, it will only make Germany look divided and disorganized. This is why I've always felt Zelenskyy isn't the leader Ukraine truly needs. Yes, he stayed to fight—perhaps others wouldn't have. But that doesn't mean every decision he makes is in Ukraine's best interest.

Today was my fourth horseback riding session. I'm getting more confident. Tan also sent me my riding gear from Kyiv. Rarely do I get such a convenient opportunity to practice, so I'll make the most of it. But Xuan was right—falling off a horse, or even while skiing, "would not be good." She used those exact words—it'd delight quite a few people. But giving up just because of that would be weak. So I'll keep practicing—

just more carefully.

Kien from Kherson called to say the group planning to evacuate still couldn't leave because the driver's wife had a stroke. Poor souls. War, and now illness on top of it. Thankfully, it doesn't seem too serious—they're planning to leave in about a week.

Huy called today asking if I could introduce someone who might help him get a Ukrainian passport. Turns out Moldova's system is quite strict. For someone as successful as Huy to be unable to obtain Moldovan citizenship and now consider switching to Ukrainian citizenship says a lot. He also does a lot of business in Ukraine. Hopefully, things work out. Ukraine is about to join the EU, so a Ukrainian passport is becoming "increasingly valuable."

### **Thursday, April 14, 2022**

Today brought earth-shattering news. For the first time, a Deputy Foreign Minister has been taken into temporary custody—still in connection with the evacuation flights. It's initially understood that TD took bribes and has been arrested. For TD, this is the end of everything. He had already received the decision appointing him as Ambassador to Japan—an "easy landing." But before he could even assume the post, calamity struck.

First of all, if I were in TD's position, I would have advised the Government not to organize these so-called "rescue flights," but instead to allow citizens to return to Vietnam on commercial flights—with appropriate restrictions based on the country's capacity to receive and quarantine returnees. That way, the burden of organizing chartered flights wouldn't have been so heavy, and the process could have been fair and transparent. But of course, because it would be transparent, I

would never have had the chance to be in TD's position in the first place. So, is it his fault or the system's fault? Probably both.

Kien from Kherson called to inform me that the Kherson evacuation group will arrive in Lviv tomorrow.

### **Friday, April 15, 2022**

Today, Russia officially admitted that the *Moskva* ship had sunk, although they didn't say it was hit by Ukraine. Either way, Russia's performance has been terrible. If Ukraine really sank it, as they claimed, then they are incredibly skilled—and Russia completely fell into their trap. According to their account, the Russian radar had a 180-degree blind spot; they created a diversion to draw the radar's attention in that direction and then launched Neptune missiles from the blind side. And if the ship instead caught fire on its own and exploded its ammunition depot, then that's also a disaster for Russia. No matter how you look at it, Russia was far too sloppy. Losing a flagship cruiser like that is unforgivable.

The Cuban Ambassador sent me a clip of Kadyrov's troops delivering humanitarian aid to civilians in Mariupol. Personally, I'm not fond of these staged displays—it's pure propaganda. But the fact that the Cuban Ambassador shared it shows she still seems to have a great deal of sympathy for Russia. As for me, I believe both Russia and Ukraine foolishly pushed themselves into this fratricidal war. Only the U.S. and the West stand to benefit.

The Palestinian Ambassador asked me to help find housing. It seems the Vietnamese Ambassador has some credibility. I've asked Khanh to see what he can find.

Now people are beginning to talk, at least theoretically,

about the possibility of Russia using tactical nuclear weapons. This is something I worried about a month ago and even discussed with Anh Phong. Now, it seems everyone is thinking about it.

I'm also concerned that Russia will retaliate for the sinking of their ship. So I think deciding not to rush back to Kyiv was the right call. The Uzbek and Palestinian embassies had planned to return tomorrow, but due to the recent developments, they've postponed. I'll wait until the end of the month to see how things unfold. Russia will need to do something between now and then to restore its reputation. If they haven't achieved anything by then, they probably won't do much at all—just continue dragging things out in Donbas.

The ambassadors did a roll call. As of now, Armenia, Croatia, Uzbekistan, Palestine, Egypt, Georgia, Hungary, and Vietnam are still here. Possibly China, Indonesia, and Kazakhstan too, though they haven't replied in the group chat. The Moldovan Ambassador returned to Kyiv today.

This morning, the Kherson group arrived much later than expected. Our embassy staff completed their paperwork and then accompanied them to Poland. Everyone arrived safely. Two of the three evacuees texted to let us know they were safe and to thank us. I think the embassy staff did a good job. There's no harm in letting them go along—it puts everyone at ease. When people feel supported, they work better.

Today was my sixth horseback riding session. Even though it was drizzling, I still trained. If you're enjoying yourself, what's a little rain? Khanh said I look different now when I ride. Tomorrow, Victor said he'll train me to trot—that's what I've been waiting for. At first, when I got on the horse, my body felt a bit sore. I thought I might have to stop, but after a

short while, I felt fine again. Whatever you do, you need determination.

## **Saturday, April 16, 2022**

Last week, I told My that even on weekends, the news summary still needs to be done. Come Monday, she told me, “I thought I already replied.” And now it’s Saturday again—and still nothing. There’s nothing left to say. The Political Section has four people, and yet they can’t even complete the news summary. And this is wartime. They’re just sitting in Hanoi, with nothing else to do but read the news and put together summaries.

Today, I had my first lesson on trotting. It’s a bit tricky, but I’m starting to get the rhythm. After riding, I went back to Victor’s house for lunch. His property spans thousands of square meters—like living in a forest. Beautiful. In winter, the outdoor swimming pool is always kept at 34 degrees Celsius!

Today, Victor finally agreed with me about Mariupol. If there’s no more ammunition and no food left, is it humane to force people to keep fighting? Would the Commander-in-Chief act the same way if his own family were among those trapped? Or is it easier to make such decisions while sitting safely in a bunker with everything provided? Especially when the Commander-in-Chief refuses to send troops to break the siege. And now, even considering stripping the titles of soldiers who fought for 40 days under relentless fire—that’s deeply unfair. When they had ammunition, they fought. When they ran out, they surrendered to survive. What’s so wrong about that? In whose name are you forcing people to die?

Now they demand that Russia withdraw from all occupied territories before even discussing neutrality and NATO. At this rate, the fighting will drag on indefinitely.

Today is Easter. Since the Vietnam War, there's been a tradition of protesting against war on Easter Day. And yet the Ukrainian Ambassador in Germany opposed the idea of anti-war demonstrations, declaring that protesting against war has nothing to do with Easter or peace. They want everyone focused solely on being anti-Russia—not simply anti-war. Ukraine's apparatus is far too rigid. Yes, they are suffering from war and have received worldwide sympathy, but they're being overly rigid. Now the President is even criticizing countries that are helping, saying, "Any country still buying oil from Russia is profiting from Ukrainian blood." So basically, he wants the world to sacrifice its own interests for Ukraine? Yet this entire war could have been avoided—and now, after rushing headlong into it, they blame the world for not sacrificing enough? It's as if the entire world is expected to revolve around Ukraine.

Tonight is the full moon. The moon is stunning. I tried to capture it with my iPhone, but it didn't do it justice. For the first time, I got to view the moon through a telescope—60 hryvnias for a look. Quite an experience.

### **Sunday, April 17, 2022**

President Zelenskyy drew a red line, declaring that if Ukrainian soldiers in Mariupol are eliminated, there will be no further negotiations with Russia. The troops have no weapons left, no food, yet they are still being forced to fight—and if they're wiped out, negotiations will end? What kind of logic is that? It really sounds like something said just for the sake of sounding strong. On the surface, it appears resolute—projecting determination, honoring the sacrifices of soldiers in Mariupol, and taking a hard stance against Russia. But how feasible is it?

Of course, Russia won't accept that condition. So does that

mean the soldiers in Mariupol will likely die, and then the negotiations will halt altogether? That's what it sounds like. But in reality, it's essentially sacrificing the lives of those soldiers still holding out in that factory—putting oneself in a position with no way out. Or is the true intention to fight to the very end and never negotiate at all?

Russia reportedly used strategic bombers to drop bombs on the Azovstal factory. The bombs are said to have guidance systems for increased accuracy?

### **Monday, April 18, 2022**

In wartime, many things are unclear. Truth and falsehood are mixed together. But today, I discovered a fact that Ukraine simply cannot explain away. Three times, Russia issued ultimatums for surrender in Mariupol, and Ukraine rejected them all. Now, after intense fighting, Ukraine suddenly announces that there are over 1,000 women and children inside the Azovstal plant. If that information is accurate, why weren't these civilians allowed to leave through the humanitarian corridors Russia opened on all three occasions? And if the information is false, then there's nothing more to say. Either way, Ukraine cannot properly justify its actions.

Meanwhile, yesterday the President made a bold statement: if the last soldiers at Azovstal are eliminated, Ukraine will stop negotiating with Russia. Either it was a statement made for show, or Ukraine genuinely doesn't want to negotiate. In any case, it doesn't reflect well on the President.

I don't support war, nor do I support Russia—but the actions of Azov in Mariupol and the President's statement are unacceptable. Of course, in my position, I can't express this publicly. I can only report back.

The West, hiding under a blanket while waging a proxy war with Russia, is quick to accuse Russia of violating every imaginable law. But taking shelter in the Azovstal plant, turning it into a shield, effectively destroys the facility. Using women and children and not allowing them to leave—on the ground, that’s terrorism and a war crime. And yet no one says a word.

I “pushed” Bay to post something on Facebook, but he lacks the backbone. He can’t distinguish between President Ho Chi Minh’s famous saying, “It is better to sacrifice everything,” which was meant to express resolve—not as a concrete action plan. Ho Chi Minh was deeply humane, unlike many of today’s leaders. Because Bay’s thinking isn’t clear, his post didn’t gain much attention.

I also sent my comments to Phong, who admitted I was right.

After horse riding today, I shared this perspective with Victor. He had nothing to refute. It’s exactly because my views are clear—even if they’re not what people want to hear—that Victor respects me so much. If he didn’t value or respect me, why would he let me ride horses for free six days a week at his ranch?

Today’s conversation also turned into an interesting challenge. Victor asked, “If you were Zelenskyy, what would you say if I, as Putin, demanded that you sign off on Crimea for peace?” I immediately replied: “Right now, the two countries are too far apart to understand each other. But without meeting, without understanding, we can’t solve anything. I’d tell Putin: ‘Would you sign over the Kuril Islands to Japan, or Kaliningrad to Germany? If not, then don’t ask me to hand over Crimea to Russia. However, we can talk about Crimea later. Right now, let’s talk about ending the war.’” He accepted my point.

Zelenskyy, elevated as a hero, won't stop for peace. He'll keep fighting.

The West keeps sending weapons. Ukrainians and Russians keep dying. Only the West benefits.

Today, Russia struck military infrastructure in Lviv again. The smoke rose not far from where I live. I asked Hai to go with me to see exactly where. It turns out it wasn't the main train station, but the locomotive depot—a likely location for transferring Western-supplied weapons. That's why I still feel at ease staying here. If it had been the station, I'd reconsider. Russia is still targeting military objectives. Civilians in Lviv remain calm, because like me, they believe Russia isn't aiming at civilian targets. Avoid those areas, and you're basically safe.

Minh from the European Department messaged the group about the news later in the day. I had already reported the incident 7–8 hours earlier.

Today, I followed instructions and informed the staff about Vice Minister Tô Dung being detained. It was just procedure. Everyone already knew. Nothing new—except that this time, the instruction came from the highest level at the Ministry for a formal announcement. Tô Dung has already been in detention for about a month and a half. Let's see where this leads.

## **Tuesday, April 19, 2022**

I went with Vichia to visit his health resort in Svodnitsa, about 70 km from Lviv. It must have been very remote in the past. But since people discovered that the mineral water here has healing properties, the area has gradually developed. The trade union resort that Vichia bought was probably the largest establishment in the area before 1991. Now, many private businesses operate places even bigger than his. Especially one

company doing business with China—it invested hundreds of millions of dollars. Truly, anyone who does business with China gets rich easily. They’re the world’s factory. Selling to them and going global means “earning enough.”

Vichia said he just wanted to show me around so I’d know the place—nothing more. And that’s exactly how it was. Traveling broadens the mind.

We continued discussing the Russia–Ukraine war. Vichia surprised me with this remark: “A strong soldier is one who can turn the enemy into a comrade.” That’s brilliant. A strong soldier isn’t someone who can eliminate many enemies, but someone who can turn enemies into comrades. If politicians thought that way, how could there ever be wars?

### **Wednesday, April 20, 2022**

Today, I’m really happy—I finally managed to trot the horse! I had dreamed of the day I could ride at a trot, and today, I did it. Success always brings joy. This sport is better than many others in the sense that, up to now, I haven’t fallen off. I know that falling off a horse at my age could be serious, so I’ve done my best to avoid it. There have been many moments when I avoided trouble simply because I was determined not to back down from Opera. Twice, she nearly threw me, but I managed to hold the reins tightly. Each incident was a lesson. Sometimes she just wants to test whether the rider can truly control her—she likes to challenge. Another time, it was because I didn’t know how to rein her in properly; I held my hands too high, which hurt her mouth and made her more agitated.

Minh Rolton sent me a link to a video clip made by Ambassador Gaman to counter Russian propaganda. He even remembered the plans I’d intended to carry out in Ukraine after the art exhibition—quite impressive. Maybe Natalia reminded

him—who knows. Either way, they seem to have good intel. Wartime seems to make diplomats much more dynamic.

In the evening, as scheduled, I completed the interview for Valentin. I have no idea how they'll edit it. I shared it with Xuan to check—Xuan found no “political” mistakes. It was a tough interview because I had to write for Ukrainians about a war they are currently living through, yet I don't entirely support their stance. Cheering them on would have been too easy. The challenge was to refrain from cheering, yet still write something they could accept. I welcomed that challenge.

I included several key points in the interview: (i) Ukraine is not the objective of the war, but rather the battlefield of the war; (ii) In war, there are no winners—only losers. (iii) Don't blame others or demand who should act first; ask whether you've done everything possible to stop the war; (iv) The strongest warrior is the one who can turn his enemy into a comrade; (v) In negotiations, make your own decisions. Even the closest allies will think in their own way, in their own interests. A five-point interview like that is more than enough. People may dislike me, but it's hard to argue with me. I discussed the article with Khanh, and he said it was excellent.

However, Khanh again told me something like, “Some people say Thach is too confident and was wrong in assessing that Putin wouldn't start a war.” I was slightly annoyed. But then I figured—there's no point in being upset. Khanh is like a loudspeaker; he repeats whatever people say without deeply pondering whether it's right or wrong. Getting irritated with people who are “carefree” like him would just wear me out. After a moment, I told him, “If anyone says that to you, just tell them—even Putin made the wrong decision—so it's normal for the Vietnamese ambassador to make an incorrect assessment.” That's exactly how it is. Logically, no one would launch a war

at such a high price like Putin did. No one. So, assessing the situation based on normal logic—and believing there would be no war—wasn't surprising at all.

### **Thursday, April 21, 2022**

Received a diplomatic cable from the Press Department. In the end, they stuck to the same hollow formula: “The Embassy has contacted the relevant authorities of Ukraine to request support in protecting the assets of Vietnamese citizens in Ukraine.” In short, all the clarifications made by the ambassador on the ground seem to count for nothing. I asked Minh whether they still kept the same formula as what was sent from home. Minh replied in a very “diplomatic” manner, saying that Headquarters had carefully considered many options before the spokesperson made a statement, and that the final response was approved by the Ministry's leadership. Truly the perfect response by Press Department standards—very neat, leaving no room to spot flaws. But the problem is, if anyone were to ask one or two follow-up questions, it would immediately unravel.

If someone asked, “Which relevant authorities did the Embassy contact? Can we know so we can contact them too?”—it would all fall apart. They're used to giving neatly packaged statements and never being questioned to the core, so it's become a habit... of lying, even about things that don't need lying. The spokesperson's statements have become so cliché that no one listens anymore. It's just speaking for the sake of hearing oneself.

Today, Putin decided to halt the assault on the Azovstal steel plant in Mariupol. Even Ukrainian radio admitted this was the right decision. If Russia were determined to attack, it would undoubtedly suffer heavy losses. Surrounding them and cutting

off escape is enough. It also avoids giving Ukraine a pretext to declare it won't negotiate. Russia has no need to negotiate if its objectives aren't yet met. But giving the other side an excuse to burn bridges serves no purpose. All in all, it's a correct decision. Yet the Ukrainian side spins it as if Putin has lost the battle in Mariupol. Typical propaganda. Just yesterday, they were terrified of being wiped out, threatening, "If our soldiers are all killed, we'll stop negotiations." Today, they're thumping their chests, saying the other side lost! As long as they're still thinking like this, the war and suffering will continue.

In the afternoon, I contacted Canh Binh to check his plan to go to Poland. Turns out he's leaving tonight. Luckily, we still had the afternoon to process his visa into Ukraine. Because of the war, Ukraine limits visitors to just three categories: diplomatic staff, technical personnel for diplomatic missions, and humanitarian aid workers. Oleksandr was very flexible—he said they could issue Binh the third type if I submitted a diplomatic note. Of course, a note saying he's coming for humanitarian aid wouldn't be very appropriate, so I wrote that he's coming to conduct research to facilitate humanitarian aid. That's broad enough to be beyond reproach. Binh had his visa completed in just two hours. A record!

Over dinner, the team asked when we'd be going back to Kyiv. I said we'd wait until Canh Binh arrives and let him return with us. That would be around May 3rd. That's enough. Russia might still fire missiles at Kyiv, but they'll likely target specific sites. It might actually be riskier staying here in Lviv than going back.

Today, for the first time in ten days, Vichia didn't ride horses with me. So the session went by quickly. I finished riding and went straight back, without all the usual chit-chat. Oksana said I rode better than yesterday. I'm trying hard so that

by the time I return to Kyiv, I'll be confident enough to ride even unfamiliar horses.

Nga Pham, who used to work for BBC, posted a status today supporting Vietnamese diplomats amidst the backlash in the community over the evacuation flights scandal. She said there are diplomats she proudly refers to as “our Ambassador.” Nga is right—Vietnamese diplomacy is far ahead of other sectors in terms of vision and culture.

I also told Nga that I responded to the Ukrainian magazine interview, even though I had previously told her I wouldn't give interviews. Nga, being experienced, noted that the magazine probably doesn't have a huge readership. But that's fine. What matters is that I get my voice across about this war. How much people read it—that's up to them. I also spoke with Quoc Dung about Nga's post. He said her evaluation was fair.

Today, Ha in Donetsk texted in the group chat about the fighting in Donetsk. Lan is also in the group but didn't react at all. I privately reached out to Ha and got a lot of information—not just about Donetsk but also Mariupol. That's how Vietnamese officials are: you give them a task, they do it. No task assigned, they sleep. There's no sense that this is inherently their responsibility. To set things straight, I've now required Lan to report weekly about the community. The Political Section, in addition to doing news briefs and daily reports, must also identify and report anything relevant to the embassy. Usually, it's Phong or Huy who inform me. Never see the team proactively report anything.

### **Friday, April 22, 2022**

Today, Nguyet messaged me asking, “Do you think Ukraine will trade land for peace? The country is being devastated.” I replied, “They're trading peace for land.”

Exactly that. Nguyet was referencing the familiar formula from the Middle East: land for peace. It sounds logical—something anyone would think is worth pursuing. But if Ukraine’s leadership truly valued peace, they would have avoided this war in the first place. Now they’re even threatening that if the soldiers in Mariupol are wiped out, they’ll walk away from negotiations. Peace means nothing to them. What matters is the image of being heroic.

Xuan attended the wedding of Lan’s child. Everyone was talking about the children’s schooling situation. Because of the war, the kids don’t have grades for the first semester, so they can’t graduate. I agreed—no problem. The Embassy will issue a letter requesting that the relevant authorities allow special consideration so the children can graduate. It costs nothing. Next year, if they can’t keep up, it’ll become clear soon enough. And even if they can’t move up a grade, come September, I can issue them a certificate stating they’ve completed that level—what’s the harm in that? There’s no reason to let the children suffer setbacks because of the war.

Phong asked me about the Nazi issue in Ukraine. In reality, Ukraine does have far-right forces—but not Nazis. And far-right elements exist in every country. Russia’s framing of “de-Nazification” is pure propaganda—there’s no actual Nazism to “de-Nazify.” The other day, I saw Gordon’s interview on Russian TV, which was quite amusing. Gordon argued that Ukraine is democratic—before an election, no one knows who will win, unlike in Russia, where the results are known even before voting starts. But the Russian journalist wasn’t to be outdone and replied, “That’s why Ukraine’s candidate list is pages long, and people don’t even know who these candidates are.”

Ukraine’s democracy is, frankly, over the top—people run

for office more to make a splash and score points for other ventures. However, the argument that Russia attacked Ukraine out of fear of having a democratic neighbour doesn't fully hold water. Ukraine may appear more democratic, but corruption is no different from any other post-Soviet state. Zelenskyy himself isn't truly democratic either—he does whatever he can to crush political opponents.

Medvedchuk was charged with collaborating with the separatist authorities in Donetsk and Luhansk. But by that logic, couldn't one also argue tomorrow that the current gas pipelines running through Ukraine constitute business with the Russian invaders? Russia still collects transit fees for gas through this pipeline—meaning, technically, Ukraine is still financing Russia's invasion! Such reasoning to imprison the opposition is hardly convincing. But Europe, for its own interests, stays silent, doesn't it?

### **Saturday, April 23, 2022**

I've seen once or twice on social media people comparing Ukraine's decision to accept war with Vietnam's determination to resist the U.S. and save the country. I didn't engage. But today, someone went even further, arguing that while the two decisions might look similar on the surface, their nature is different—that both show resolve, but Ukraine is choosing the progressive path, while Vietnam followed the backward one. At that point, I had to chime in. No one else commented, so the author probably assumed they were right.

In fact, Vietnam spent four years, from 1954 to 1959, trying peaceful means through elections. Everyone knew Diem would lose if elections were held. It was the U.S. and Diem who refused to unify the country peacefully, making war a necessity to reunify the nation. Phrases like “cutting along the

Truong Son mountains” or “burning the Truong Son range” were just figurative expressions of determination.

Meanwhile, right before the war, both the French President and German Chancellor had already proposed neutrality—no NATO, no military bases—but President Zelenskyy rejected it. Had he agreed back then, as Ukraine is now willing to do, there would have been no war. These two situations are entirely different and cannot be compared. President Ho Chi Minh always sought peaceful solutions; he wasn’t naïve like today’s Ukrainian politicians. Ho’s efforts failed because the U.S. and the southern government knew they would lose a general election. Some of Vietnam’s “theorists” haven’t studied history thoroughly and are too caught up in current events, leading them to make careless comparisons.

I had to ease off my trotting practice today—my back was quite sore. No need to overdo it.

In the afternoon, Chien and Hoang came over and stayed for dinner. Yesterday, I told them that Chien had been a bit thoughtless—he could’ve simply brought something over, and we’d all sit together happily. Today, he brought over some grapes—probably someone tipped him off. If he’d thought of it himself, he would’ve done it long ago. Fair enough, no need to make things tense. If I hadn’t welcomed them in, it would’ve been as good as sending them away. Sitting and chatting, I learned that Chien had spent four years stationed in Truong Sa, then returned to work at Lung Lo Corporation. I tried to have a proper conversation with him, but quickly realized he didn’t quite grasp the issues. He told me Ukraine had retreated from three positions, including Severodonetsk—a key location. That caught me off guard, since I’ve been following closely and hadn’t seen anything about it. I asked Chien to look it up—he searched forever and finally pulled up an article with a name

vaguely resembling what he'd mentioned!

Then came the moment when he claimed Putin was more trustworthy than Zelenskyy. I couldn't listen any longer—it sounded like a farmer reading from tabloids. Of course, Zelenskyy has his flaws, but on what basis does one conclude that Putin is more trustworthy?

Later, when Hai asked whether Vietnam needed an aircraft carrier to protect Truong Sa, I gave up completely. No point in continuing the discussion. When I rejoined them for tea, Chai chimed in, saying Zelenskyy wanted to negotiate with Russia, but “the people wouldn't allow it.” Another “farmer” talking geopolitics! Who are “the people”? Surely, a significant portion of the population doesn't want war and would support peace efforts. Others might oppose. But Zelenskyy isn't refusing negotiations because of “the people”; he wants to rely on the West to fight Russia. That's the truth—not some democratic mandate.

I ended the political chatter by pointing out that today, Zelenskyy declared if there's a referendum in the South, there will be no further negotiations. And the likelihood of a referendum is high. So, the likelihood of no negotiations is high—meaning the war could end without any formal agreement. Once those territories are annexed into Russia, attacking them means attacking Russia, and things won't be so simple. At that point, Ukraine may just have to swallow the bitter pill. If they had agreed to terms earlier, perhaps they could've avoided the war and kept their land. Let's see how this plays out.

I sent my interview article to Phong and Quoc Dung to see if they had any feedback. Dung said there was nothing problematic. Phong simply replied with a thumbs-up emoji—

probably means it's okay.

## **Sunday, April 24, 2022**

Today is the Orthodox Easter holiday. Vichia invited me over to his house again, which shows how close we've become. Even though he always jokes around like we can't part without bickering, meeting six days a week for horseback riding seems not to be enough—we even met on Saturday to make it seven days a week. His father-in-law, his aunt, and his wife's younger sister with her kids were also there. His father-in-law is a Merited Artist painter. He said he's someone who lives on emotions, so he couldn't hide his feelings when talking about the war with Russia. I tried to tell him that one day all of this will pass, and Ukrainians and Russians won't always see each other as enemies. He said it's unforgivable. Honestly, during times like this, how can anyone even begin to think of forgiveness?

During the years of the war against the U.S., we also never thought we could forgive the Americans. Or in 1979, no one imagined forgiveness for China was possible. But life can't stay stuck in the past forever. Now, Vietnamese people are friends with both the U.S. and China, though of course there are still lingering issues here and there. That's life. Hopefully, one day, Ukrainians and Russians will return to normal relations.

We talked about all kinds of things, and eventually the conversation shifted to painting. Vichia suggested that his father-in-law paint a portrait of me. He took out his phone to snap a photo and said it looked great. It seemed like he saw enough “substance” in me for a portrait. Then he asked about the Ambassador's wife too, so I gave him a photo I liked—a picture of my wife and me taken in Soc Son before I left for Ukraine, during our farewell gathering with our senior political

class. Honestly, I'm not particularly fond of his signature blue tones—they feel a bit dark, a bit somber. But having a Merited Artist paint for me—who could ask for more?

After everyone left, Vichia and I went to the sauna, then swimming, then back to the sauna. The outdoor pool was warm, but the rain made things a bit chilly. I stayed in the water a little too long and started feeling cold, so I headed back inside. Luckily, I didn't catch anything serious. I didn't get home until nearly 11 PM. It was raining, so the way back was a bit of a hassle. But it was a truly delightful gathering.

Before going out, I sent a cable back home, outlining four reasons to propose returning to Kyiv at the start of May: (i) The military situation shows that Russia is unable to launch large-scale attacks and cannot retake Kyiv, though they may strike from afar. However, even if they do, the Embassy won't be in any more danger in Kyiv than it is in Lviv; (ii) Twenty countries have already returned to Kyiv. By then, more will likely return. Vietnam shouldn't be among the first, but it shouldn't be the last either; (iii) Post-war security is relatively stable; (iv) Vietnamese residents are gradually returning, and the Embassy needs to return to process their consular documents.

I don't know if Hau somehow caught wind of the Embassy's plan to return to Kyiv and is now angling to come back too, but he texted me saying that throughout his time in Hanoi, he had consistently answered calls from the community about consular matters. I simply told him that the fact he left when he should have stayed made things very difficult for the Embassy. Cuong, who lacks the necessary expertise, had to set aside his own work, and we even had to bring in outside help. Even if Hau had stayed in Kyiv, he wouldn't have been the one answering calls—not to mention now that he's in Hanoi. And if it's the Embassy's official line, it's not like people can reach

him via Viber anyway.

But I didn't bother arguing. Honestly, if he had any self-respect—knowing that he was allowed to return home, spared the burden during the toughest times—he shouldn't even ask to come back now. I already told him, “You should just settle into your work back home.” If he does return, it would be incredibly unfair. He abandoned his post and now wants to come back when the war is over? Why should others have had to struggle through his duties during the hard times—without even receiving proper compensation?

### **Monday, April 25, 2022**

Today is still part of the holiday period. In the morning, I went with Mr. Mong to Shevchenko Park, where there's a museum of old Ukrainian houses. There are about 20 houses, some as old as 150 years, relocated and reconstructed here. It's truly impressive. They placed them within a large park, making it look like an ancient village. There's also an old church on site. When we arrived, a service was ongoing. They were singing hymns beautifully. The scene felt so peaceful. But right at that moment, the air raid siren went off. It felt so out of place in such a serene setting. But that's life in wartime—those sirens constantly remind us that we're living in war, not peace. Moments like these make one realize how foolish the decision was to drag the country into war.

Upon returning home and checking the news, I found out that Russia had struck an area near Krasne station, more than 40 kilometers from Lviv. I didn't think it was that far, but in the afternoon, I double-checked with Mr. Khanh, and it was indeed correct. This time, there was no reported damage. If civilian areas had been hit, it would have made the news immediately.

While we were having lunch, Cuong half-jokingly, half-

seriously suggested that the Embassy request to return to Vietnam for one or two weeks. Honestly, it was neither a real joke nor a serious suggestion. Just days ago, they insisted on returning to Kyiv, and now they're suggesting going back to Vietnam. If the Ministry back home received such a proposal, they'd think the ambassador had lost his mind—just requested to return to Kyiv, and now proposing to return to Vietnam? They say whatever comes to mind, without considering whether it's appropriate. Normally, hearing such thoughtless comments would irritate me greatly. But today, perhaps my self-control was better, so I simply remarked, "You've just requested to return to Kyiv, and now you're suggesting going back to Vietnam—how would the Ministry interpret that?" One should try putting oneself in the position of the listener, consider how they might react, then decide whether or not to say something.

To reassure them, I pointed out that there's nothing new about strikes on railway stations. For a month and a half now, we've known that Russia targets military infrastructure and transportation hubs in Ukraine. Since there's nothing new, why propose something new?

I mentally calculated the civilian casualty numbers—not too high. Clearly, Russia isn't intentionally targeting civilian facilities. In fact, the civilian death rate probably matches Vietnam's traffic accident fatality rate. So what's there to worry about? If fate has it so, well, it's fate—you can't control it. And if absolute safety is the goal, then the safest option would be to propose going back to Vietnam altogether.

This whole discussion makes me dwell more on how indifferent the authorities back home seem—two months into the war, and there's still no decision about policies for those who stay behind on duty. Such unfairness—who would want to

work under these conditions? It makes things harder on the remaining staff. Why should I insist they stay without also advocating for their support? The work clearly requires someone to stay and shoulder the responsibility. But if there's no policy for those who stay, could the unfairness get any worse? Yet if no one brings it up, everyone will probably just laugh it off and say, "Well, that's how the system works." Blame it on the system; no one is at fault. I suppose tomorrow I'll have to draft a cable reminding them about this issue.

The other day I reminded Lan, so now he's at least beginning to move—reaching out to Kien in Kherson to check on the situation.

## **Tuesday, April 26, 2022**

Today, the situation in Moldova has become tense again. It's unclear whether war will break out. I've never written a report feeling as uncertain as I do this time. The tension is real, but who's behind it remains unclear. It could be Russia, Ukraine, or Moldova—each has its own possible reasons to be involved, and none can be ruled out. But, to be honest, the reasons not to escalate seem to outweigh the reasons to escalate. That's what makes this situation so tricky.

The most likely party behind it seems to be Russia. But Russia is already struggling on the Eastern Ukraine front and hasn't managed to resolve that—so why would it open up another "Pandora's box" here? The disadvantages outweigh the benefits. People say Putin is capable of anything, but that was before February 24. Now, after more than two months, the reality has become clear—if he continues down this path, it would be self-destructive, wouldn't it?

It's murky, but I still have to report it back. Let's see how things unfold.

## **Wednesday, April 27, 2022**

In the morning, I went to meet the Georgian Ambassador. Since Georgia has “a third of its territory occupied by Russia” (which actually refers to the areas of the two breakaway republics), their perspective on the Russia–Ukraine war is quite different. According to Ambassador Giorgi, the war between Russia and Ukraine was unavoidable—“the more you concede to Russia’s demands, the further Russia will advance.” I told him that Russia is vast; surely, it doesn’t need more land. Ambassador Giorgi countered, “A third of Georgia’s territory is nothing compared to Russia’s size, and the 450,000 people here are just like a single district of Moscow’s population. So why did Russia still occupy it?”

I didn’t want to argue, and I’m not an expert on Georgian–Russian relations, so I stayed silent. But I couldn’t help wondering—if there had been a more flexible policy toward the Russian population living in Georgia, just like with Russians in Eastern Ukraine, could both countries have avoided their respective wars?

After all, they were once all part of one Soviet family. When the breakup came, it was inevitable that Russians would be scattered across the former Soviet republics. If Moldova, Georgia, or Ukraine had opted for a federal model, like that of the U.S., what harm would it have done? Why the insistence on a unitary state?

## **Thursday, April 28, 2022**

I talked to Minh, who’s in charge of the Europe Department, just to ask why the decision to return to Kyiv has been postponed until after May 9. Just as I predicted, everyone is worried that “nobody knows what might happen” between now and then. I’ve already said this before—Russia might very

well strike Kyiv to make a statement. But is Lviv any safer? Staying in Lviv doesn't mean greater safety! I've already reported that the last missile strike landed just three kilometers from where the embassy staff are staying. Meanwhile, if we return to Kyiv, any strikes would likely be farther away.

What's even more frustrating is that, despite my report, the folks back home completely misunderstood the situation and decided "there's no need for consular staff yet." My God! People here are constantly asking about birth certificates, passports, notarizations, and so on. Sitting comfortably in Hanoi and saying there's no need—yet it's the people here who need the services. That kind of bureaucratic thinking is beyond words. They say they'll decide after a meeting on May 9. Fine. Our people have already been left hanging for two months—what's another half-month, even though it serves no real purpose. But it's not just the staff who are suffering—it's also the people who need our services. A decision that seems "humane" and "considerate" on the surface is, in reality, bureaucratic, emotional, and lacking understanding.

Today, I also received a petition regarding the schooling of the embassy staff's children, signed by Tuan on behalf of the parents. At the end of the school year, the kids won't be able to move to the next grade because they have no first-semester scores. Ukrainian schools had to evacuate, so they couldn't issue grades. A few days ago, *Giao Thong* newspaper even reported on this issue, which means it's not just embassy children—many Vietnamese children returning from Ukraine are affected.

I've guided the parents on how to draft the petition so I can submit an official cable requesting action from the Ministry of Education. I know all too well how bureaucratic the system is, so this won't be easy to resolve—but we still have to try.

Fortunately, Huong from the Government Office is very enthusiastic. Even though she was on her way home, she turned back to prepare a report. Hopefully, with pressure from the Government Office, the Ministry of Education will process it. I argued that during wartime, we shouldn't rigidly apply peacetime regulations—let the children graduate exceptionally, and if next year they can't keep up, they can retake the grade. No problem. I also pointed out that children who've gone to other countries aren't facing this difficulty, so I “earnestly urged” them to solve this issue and “not let returning to their homeland be the hardest place for them.” I'm framing it in the most sympathetic way possible—if that's not enough, then there's nothing more I can do.

In the afternoon, while horseback riding, I got a call from Hung in Odesa about a young man being detained in Chisinau. Because of the war, he couldn't enter Ukraine. I couldn't reach the Moldovan Ambassador in Kyiv, so I contacted Moldova's former ambassador—now the First Deputy Foreign Minister (luckily, he still uses his old WhatsApp). Ruslan asked for the young man's passport number, but Son had already boarded the plane and couldn't get off. So I told him to fly to Turkey and return from there. I wrote a short post in the Odessa refugee group so others could learn from this.

After riding, I had tea with Vichia. Nothing special in our conversation. Toward the end, I asked him, “Do you think Ukraine could become a federal state, where Eastern, Western, and Southern Ukraine function like states within one country, like in the U.S.?” He said, if no one is pointing a gun at us to force it, then sure—it's entirely possible. I asked, then why, in the eight years from 2014 to 2022, when there was no pressure, didn't they do it? He answered: because the presidents were too busy making money. That's it. Being president is supposed to

mean serving the country, but if you're busy getting rich, you should run a business instead. If they had built a federation where both Russians and Ukrainians felt respected, there wouldn't have been separatist movements. A political system that produces those kinds of presidents—even if the war ends, the country will struggle to move forward. That's why, after a year here, after traveling to many places, I feel that 30 years after independence, not much has been achieved. Everything still feels stuck in the post–World War II era. In the 30 years since independence, people have mostly just been finding ways to divide up the assets.

Anh Phong texted me about how the Indonesian President invited President Zelenskyy to attend the G20 later this year. I said, that's the result of Western pressure. If 17 out of 20 members push, of course the host will adjust—and anyone hosting would do the same. That's the trend now. Not pressuring Ukraine's inclusion would be the unusual thing.

In the evening, both Anh Phong and Anh Khai forwarded me commentary from a former Vietnamese trade representative in Russia, writing about how Vietnam–Russia trade is facing difficulties due to sanctions. The article isn't wrong, but it should have stayed internal. I told my senior: why did the Russians publish it? Clearly, they're using us to express their internal concerns—a subtle form of pressure, perhaps.

### **Friday, April 29, 2022**

In the evening, I went out for dinner with several ambassadors—from Turkey, Georgia, and Croatia—along with two Turkish businessmen. The Turkish ambassador mentioned that Russia had accused Ukraine of failing to ensure the safety of humanitarian corridors in Mariupol, while Ukraine blamed Russia. In short, each side blames the other. I commented that

if the corridors are intended for civilians, then the UN could assist—so who’s actually preventing civilians from leaving? Clearly, it’s Ukraine. The ambassadors admitted that if civilians leave, Ukraine’s soldiers would be doomed. So it’s clear who’s using whom as human shields.

Some believed Ukraine might be willing to cede the Donbas region, but I don’t think so. Ukraine is fired up right now—there’s no way they’re going to concede territory. Neither side wants to compromise, so the only remaining scenario is one side imposing unilateral terms and threatening nuclear retaliation if challenged. In that case, Zelenskyy might have domestic political reasons to stop the war. Otherwise, if the fighting continues, Russia might actually lose. Right now, it feels like Russia is being beaten by a crowd.

They also discussed how Ukraine needs \$7 billion per month—where is that money going to come from? I believe that once the West decides it wants to weaken Russia through this war, it will have no problem financially supporting Ukraine. A year-long war costing under \$100 billion is a bargain for the goal of weakening a major power. That’s my logic, though my colleagues seemed skeptical. On the other hand, I’m not convinced by their theory that Ukraine would give up Donbas.

Tomorrow, the Turkish ambassador is leading a 50-person delegation back to Kyiv! Meanwhile, back home, they’re overly worried about the safety of the Vietnamese embassy, insisting we stay in Lviv “until after May 9.” Yet there’s still no official directive. Meetings began Wednesday, and by Friday evening, nothing had been decided. The Turkish ambassador said they’ll move their entire embassy staff back to Kyiv because Turkish businesses have resumed operations. “Tell them not to return, but they’ll return anyway,” he said.

Meanwhile, today we received instructions from the Consular Department telling us to advise citizens not to return. Sitting in Hanoi, they think issuing advisories is enough. But people are still coming back—they have homes, property, and documents that need handling. So who's going to deal with all that?

Today I continued addressing the issue of citizens facing problems crossing into Ukraine via Moldova. I sent a diplomatic note to Moldova and clarified with Ukraine which documents would allow entry. Obviously, I can't handle everything myself. I assigned Cuong, Valia, and My to take care of it. Usually, when I handle things directly, they move quickly. But with official diplomatic notes like this, who knows how long it will take? Still, I can't keep doing everything hands-on forever.

Today, Russia accused the U.S. of establishing a secret command unit of 50 personnel to support Ukrainian forces, claiming that Lviv has become Ukraine's "second policy-making center." That's clearly a warning that missiles might target Lviv. The policy center in Kyiv is known—you know where to avoid. But if the new center is in Lviv, where exactly is it? Hopefully not in a residential area. Best to stay hunkered down in regular neighborhoods—missiles probably won't strike there. There used to be up to 15 ambassadors here. Now only three remain. Soon, the Georgian ambassador will leave too, leaving just myself and the Croatian ambassador. There won't be anyone left to exchange information with.

Back when we were still in Kyiv, our request to evacuate was denied. I even had to authorize half the staff to evacuate without official approval, all while facing countless obstacles. Now, when we're requesting permission to return to Kyiv, they're stalling—because of vague, emotional concerns about "not knowing what might happen before May 9." Other

embassies have already moved back to Kyiv from Lviv—so why are we still stuck here? There’s no practical reason, no real experience behind these decisions—everything is based on emotion, yet they insist on issuing orders. Honestly, it might be better to just evacuate far from Lviv for a few days and wait to see how things unfold.

Today, I managed to trot several laps around the horse racing track. A success! I’ve dreamed of doing that. It’s not perfect yet, but definitely a big step forward.

### **Saturday, April 30, 2022**

Today marks 47 years since the country's reunification. On the occasion of “Victory Day,” the three “offices” agreed to hold a joint gathering. Fine by me—just sitting together for some friendly time. But it turned out to be not so cheerful. During the conversation, Chien brought up Lavrov’s article from today. I hadn’t seen it in the news sources I usually follow, so I asked what it was about. Chien said it stated that the war is now being framed as a conflict between Russia and NATO. I nearly burst out laughing. Two months into the war, and he claims the “novelty” of the article is this revelation? I probably slipped up when I blurted out, “You really are like a first grader.” Chien shot back, saying I must be in preschool. Realizing I had overstepped, I backed off immediately: “Yes, I’m in preschool,” and let the conversation end there.

A military attaché who only now realizes this is a Russia–NATO war... there’s nothing more to discuss. I pointed out that right from Putin’s February 24 declaration, he clearly stated that Russia would not repeat the mistakes of the Great Patriotic War—hinting that Russia wouldn’t wait to be attacked. Obviously not by Ukraine, but by NATO. This war has been Russia vs. NATO on Ukrainian soil from the very beginning.

The West may not openly acknowledge it, but that's their narrative. If even Vietnam doesn't understand this, then... we're a lost cause. At that point, there was really nothing more to add. Better to steer clear next time, instead of exhausting myself talking to people like that. I left the table and went to play chess instead—a much better use of time.

Since yesterday, I've been thinking about the possibility that Russia will “go all-in,” especially after reading British intelligence reports suggesting Putin might declare total war on May 9 and announce full mobilization. Putin is absolutely capable of doing this. If the war stops now, Russia can only annex the currently occupied territories—possibly without Ukraine's consent—and threaten tactical nuclear use if challenged. Ukraine would have to swallow that bitter pill. But Russia still wouldn't have achieved its full objectives. If Putin wants to go further, he has to launch a full-scale offensive, and soon. If that happens, I'll request to return to Vietnam. Total war won't spare residential areas like before—it'll aim to crush the opponent's will completely. With this in mind, I told the staff: if anyone feels the need to return to Kyiv to retrieve essential items in case of emergency evacuation, I'll allow them to do so and return to Lviv immediately.

After horseback riding (I rode quite confidently today), I went out for a drink with Vichia. He said there's no way out of this war anymore. Indeed, both sides have gone too far. Honestly, a non-NATO, neutral Ukraine without foreign military bases, organized as a federal state where Russian minorities don't feel oppressed, would be the ideal solution. I believe Russia would accept it. The Soviet Union itself was a federation—so after its dissolution, adopting a federal model would have been the most logical path for the former republics. It could've prevented tensions, separatism, and ultimately, war.

Too bad no one pursued it. Vichia agreed and added that Poroshenko had been too busy enriching himself to resolve Ukraine's internal divisions. With leadership like that, it's no surprise the country is in trouble.

This morning, I exchanged messages with Huong from the Government Office. She commented that Zelenskyy is the one who dragged Ukraine into this devastation—"such a small country, yet accepting so many Western weapons." And she's right. Those weapons will only prolong and deepen the destruction.

I told Vichia, "I can clearly see a third way, but I feel powerless." The French President and German Chancellor might have had the ability to make it happen. But a mediator must know how to make the case—to show that a solution benefits all sides—and they have to be willing to push for it. The U.S. and UK are too far removed from the consequences, so they keep fueling the conflict. Continental European countries understand better and want to avoid escalation. Poland and the Baltic states, meanwhile, believe that helping Ukraine win is their best chance to avoid war themselves.

Reading the news, I saw that European ambassadors had once again issued a joint article condemning Russia's violations of international law in Ukraine, citing OSCE reports. It's clearly intended as pressure on Vietnam. I posted the article in the group chat for ambassadors of the 2020–2023 term. Not a single person gave it a "like," let alone commented. Any trivial post usually gets floods of congratulations, but this—complete silence. Just marking it as "seen" seemed like a big effort. I remember last time, when EU ambassadors made a similar statement after Vietnam's UN vote, even Deputy Minister Minh Vu didn't know about it. Nothing left to say.

**Sunday, May 1, 2022**

Xuan texted me that Vietnam is providing humanitarian aid to Ukraine. A little while later, Ambassador Gaman messaged to ask if I knew any specifics about it. Luckily, Xuan had informed me, so I was able to respond, “Most likely through international organizations,” though honestly, I had no real idea about the details. Ideally, before announcing something like this, they should have informed the Embassy so we could coordinate with our counterparts. There was no prior notice at all. If Xuan hadn’t mentioned it, I would’ve been caught off guard in front of the Ukrainian Ambassador. And I really don’t understand why they chose to make this announcement while the Japanese Prime Minister is visiting?

I still remember back when I was Ambassador in Iran, the Iranian Ambassador in Hanoi once told me, “I know you texted our Director-General about xyz.” My goodness. Not only did they know the content, but they even knew exactly how I communicated with Tehran’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs. That’s what professional diplomacy looks like. When will Vietnamese diplomacy ever reach that level of professionalism? There are so many slogans and lofty goals flying around, but in the end, it’s still patchwork diplomacy.

Vichia invited me over for a BBQ at his house. Volodia, who lives in Dnipro, came to stay with Vichia and is an absolute pro at grilling. Vichia’s in-laws came over as well. Of course, the conversation inevitably circled back to the war when I toasted to peace. Everyone knows I don’t fully support the way Ukraine is conducting this war, but that didn’t spoil the evening. The debates were lively but respectful. Since I’m a foreigner, they treat me with courtesy—but among themselves, there’s no such restraint. Even at the market, speaking Russian can get you publicly cursed out, let alone elsewhere.

### **Monday, May 2, 2022**

Today, Canh Binh came to visit. Lam, Binh's friend in Poland, brought him over. According to the plan, Binh was supposed to stay in Lviv for one day, and then I would take him back to Kyiv together with the Embassy staff. But since Headquarters has not yet approved our return to Kyiv, that plan had to be canceled. Without me going back, neither Binh nor Lam dares to head to Kyiv—even though Tan could have picked them up on my behalf.

### **Tuesday, May 3, 2022**

Khanh took me to visit the cemetery in Lviv. Truly, Lviv's cemetery is like a history book of the city. This land once belonged to Poland, but after the war, it was absorbed into the Soviet Union and specifically became part of Ukraine. The historical conflicts between the Polish and Ukrainian people are reflected throughout the cemetery. In the end, relations between the two countries improved after the Maidan events, and the section dedicated to the Polish soldiers who died in Ukraine has since been restored.

### **Wednesday, May 4, 2022**

I wrote a short post welcoming Binh. Since there wasn't a photo of the two of us together, I used a picture of each of us holding a small glass of beer. But painter Marchuk—who had enthusiastically participated in the Ukraine–Vietnam painting exhibition and even painted a portrait of me—commented: “At times like this, you shouldn't appear too joyful.” I sent him a private message saying I would change the photo. He replied that we're still friends, but that Vietnam supports Russia. Perhaps with that mindset, seeing my photo made him even

more uncomfortable.

I explained that there's actually a misunderstanding about Vietnam's policy—Vietnam opposes the war. In fact, Vietnam provided half a million dollars in humanitarian aid to Ukraine. He apologized, saying he had probably misunderstood.

In the eyes of many Ukrainians, Vietnam is seen as supporting Russia. It's such a pity. Meanwhile, I had specifically requested that our position be clearly stated as opposing the war and calling for an end to it—but back home, that wasn't accepted. They keep speaking in vague terms about international law—too distant, too abstract.

Today, the Deputy Chairman of the Defence Committee of the Russian Duma declared that Russia will never enact a general mobilization. That's a signal there may not be a full mobilization. And without it, they won't be able to wage an all-out war.

### **Thursday, May 5, 2022**

In the evening, I attended a BBQ party at Petro's house. This was probably the most intense conversation I've had since the war began. In the first toast, Petro said he wished for the strength of "our armed forces." That's fine. Following custom, I had to say something in return, so I thanked Petro for being the first person I called upon arriving in Ukraine, for arranging my first trip to Lviv, and for helping with my second trip in early February 2022—never imagining the third trip would come so soon and last already two months. I toasted for peace to come to Ukraine.

But it seemed people were still not satisfied. The friend sitting next to me immediately asked to speak. After a while, he declared that he used to study and teach Russian literature, but

now he wished for peace without fascism, without Russian fascists, or the Russian people. It was intense—an absolutely anti-Russian statement from someone who had once studied and taught Russian literature.

I didn't want to let things escalate, but I couldn't stay silent either. The friends wanted "black and white to be clear": do you support Ukraine or not, do you oppose Russia or not? I simply told them: in life, there isn't only black and white—there are many colors: blue, red, purple, yellow. And if you can't accept the existence of other colors, you can't accept the reality of life.

Interestingly, the Polish friend at the BBQ—whom I expected to be a strong supporter of Ukraine, given how Polish politicians have acted—surprised me by making a toast to Vietnam. I jokingly said that, in that case, there were six Vietnamese people present: four in our group, the host Petro, and that Polish friend himself.

### **Friday, May 6, 2022**

Today, I went with Mr. Khanh, Binh, and Lam to the mineral bath area in Uzhhorod. My younger brother has been here for a whole week seeking refuge, so we had to find somewhere to go—staying in Lviv all the time wouldn't do. In the morning, I couldn't remember where I had parked the car the night before. That just shows I drank quite a bit last night. In the evening, Mr. Khanh told me Petro thanked everyone for coming yesterday and said it was a pleasant evening. It's good that despite the intense debates, we still maintain the relationship.

On the way, we stopped to visit Tustan, an old fortress built to block Mongol invasions. It's small and simple, but it stood heroically nonetheless.

While on the road, Chien called to ask for permission to return to Kyiv to look after the embassy headquarters, which hasn't had anyone present for two months. If he waited for official permission via a cable to the Ministry, who knows how long that would take—especially since the Ministry had already said, "After May 9, we'll consider." As for verbal permission—who would I even ask? To make things simple, I gave him my personal opinion right then and there: agreed. That would make it easier for Chien to proceed. As it turned out, he had already left Lviv before asking me. He was back in Kyiv by evening.

We were driving rather slowly, so toward the last stretch, I decided to take the wheel myself. Needed to speed up—the others were driving too cautiously. When we arrived, I realized we could still swim freely. They don't close until 10 PM! This was my second visit to this mineral bath. The first time was with Bao in mid-March. Now it's crowded. There's no sense of war at all. It feels like we're living in peacetime.

Hung from Odesa called to say that people are being charged exorbitant service fees to get visas to Moldova. My stance is simple—whatever we can do to help our people, we should do. I told Hung to coordinate with My on drafting a diplomatic note to the Moldovan Embassy requesting assistance with transit visas. After that, we can just use the same formula with Moldova moving forward. For things like this, if we were in Kyiv, I could simply meet the Moldovan Ambassador over a drink and sort it out easily. But the folks back home don't understand these practical needs. Their mechanical decision to keep us in Lviv until after May 9 is exactly what makes the embassy's work so difficult. Countless challenges—how can one possibly explain them all?

**Saturday, May 7, 2022**

This morning, Quoc Hung texted me, saying he wanted to interview me for a feature article about “a day in the life of the Ambassador.” It’s actually a good idea. Hung is also an experienced writer, so I imagine it would be a quality piece—different from the usual interviews I’ve done. But I declined. Hung thought I was just being hesitant like some others in the system and tried to persuade me. I told him, “Life is complicated. I can’t accept the request now, but one day I’ll explain in my memoir.”

It’s nothing, really. People are just waiting for me to speak up again so they can discipline me. And honestly, why should I have to ask permission to do an interview like that?! I shouldn’t have to. Nowhere else would a full ambassador be treated this way. An interview like that would only help promote the image of our diplomats, but instead, it would likely be misunderstood. The “pending disciplinary action” hanging over me doesn’t even specify what I did wrong. Apparently, just giving an interview is wrong!

I don’t even feel like writing reports anymore. The current situation clearly shows signs that Russia will likely occupy the eastern and southern parts of Ukraine—either to annex them and avoid getting bogged down, or to continue a prolonged, grinding war. Reporting on it wouldn’t change anything. I’ll wait until after May 9 to see what Putin declares, and then report everything at once. Our system is something else. Turns out, not working is somehow better than working.

Last night, Zhynkina texted me asking when she would receive the official note regarding Vietnam’s humanitarian aid to Ukraine. Huong, who is in charge of Ukraine relations, said the Vietnamese Embassy in Ukraine would issue the note. How

could that be? It's been a week already. Minh told me the other day that he had already sent the official note to the Ukrainian Embassy in Hanoi, and I even told Ambassador Gaman that Hanoi had informed them. Gaman said they'd check after the holidays. But it's been a week, and Zhyntina is still asking about it. I don't even know where the fault lies anymore. We'll figure it out later.

But clearly, it's not about the amount of aid—it's about the manner of giving. We donated half a million dollars, yet announced it during the Japanese Prime Minister's visit to Vietnam—completely unrelated. And even now, they still haven't received the official communication.

After breakfast at the hotel with a few of the guys, we headed to Uzhgorod. We planned to stop by a fortress Mukacheve but now it's no longer a tourist site—it has become a military base, so entry is prohibited.

On weekends, Uzhgorod feels like a tourist city. Locals and visitors alike are bustling about, sightseeing and strolling through the old town. Just then, the air raid sirens went off, but it didn't seem to affect anyone's mood. Everyone carried on as if nothing had happened. You wouldn't think there's a war going on here. But people have grown used to the idea that attacks won't target civilians—only military sites. That's why they can remain so calm.

On the way back from Uzhgorod, we stumbled upon another hot springs bath at Beregov. It's almost twice as expensive, but better. Lam kept saying, "When peace comes, we should bring a whole group over." A beautiful and promising country like this—why go to war, only to leave everything in ruins? There are so many business opportunities; you'd be sure to make a fortune.

Reading the news last night, I saw that Ukrainian and Russian forces exchanged artillery fire again—how depressing! What’s the point of brothers fighting like this? Who gains? Both sides lose. Only those standing outside, supplying weapons, are benefiting.

Today, Ukraine apparently attempted a counterattack to retake Snake Island in Odesa, but it wasn’t successful. Ukrainian media reported hitting Russian missile systems on Snake Island. But Russian sources said Ukraine used bombers, helicopters, and landing ships to attack, yet the plan failed. Once again, so many sons and grandsons of Soviet citizens died by each other’s shells and bombs. It’s hard to fathom that Soviet-made weapons are now being used to kill the descendants of Soviet citizens.

While having dinner, Canh Binh brought up the old story of the Vietnam Students’ Association (VNSA) days. Twenty-five years ago, I was in Australia and actively participated in VNSA. Endless debates among Vietnamese students from around the world. That’s how the two of us knew each other back then, and later we met in real life. VNSA was a forum of “intellectuals” from Vietnam, but eventually, I got disillusioned when people there also revealed their selfishness.

There was once a Vietnam conference where someone asked, scientifically, why Vietnamese drivers often head straight toward oncoming traffic and only swerve at the last second. David Koh said it was because Vietnamese people are contentious. I said no, it’s a sign of an underdeveloped society where people don’t respect rules; they act on impulse. I shared this story on VNSA to gauge reactions. Everyone agreed, “Yes, Vietnamese people are contentious.” Yet none of them considered themselves contentious, but still accepted that the Vietnamese community was. Mathematically, that doesn’t add

up. If none of the individuals are A, the collective can't be A.

The only explanation is that each member is selfish, caring only about themselves, without defending their community. They're fine if someone says their community is bad, as long as it's not them personally. When I realized this selfishness in the so-called intellectual Vietnamese community, I lost interest in VNSA and gradually stopped participating.

Today, I also finished drafting the official note to help Anny get a visa to return to Ukraine for medical treatment. But I'll wait to send it tomorrow. It's still the weekend; they won't process it anyway. The official notes for the community to apply for visas to Moldova and to transit through Moldova back into Ukraine are also done. Hopefully, these efforts will help people return to Ukraine more easily.

### **Sunday, May 8, 2022**

At 4 AM, Minh texted me, saying the Department of International Organizations had sent a clear cable stating that the Embassy should draft and present the diplomatic note to the Ukrainian side. I got up and carefully reviewed the cable. It clearly indicated that the Embassy's role was only to "help forward the note," while the Department of Europe at home was supposed to "draft and present the official note to the Ukrainian Embassy in Hanoi." By Friday, Zhyunkina still hadn't received any information, which meant the note still hadn't been presented. Now they're saying, "Both ends should present it." How clever. Essentially, they're trying to shift responsibility to the Embassy so the Ministry doesn't have to handle it—leaving the Embassy to take the blame for the delayed notification. I've been waiting on this since the two Ministers spoke on the phone back on March 13.

Of course, the Embassy would be honoured to handle this

immediately if officially instructed. But as a matter of principle, tasks like this should be handled by the Ministry—it's more dignified that way. It's not just about the gift; it's about how the gift is given.

What would be even better, and more proper, is that before making any public announcements, the Ministry could have informed the Embassy. This would allow the Embassy to proactively brief the Ukrainian side if asked. Fortunately, Xuan read the news at home and tipped me off, so I was able to reply promptly to Ambassador Gaman when he inquired. Without that, I would have been caught off guard again. Perhaps the Government Office decided on this without notifying the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. If even the Ministry was left out of the loop, it's no surprise the Embassy abroad wasn't informed.

After breakfast, we hit the road back to Lviv. Along the way, we stopped at the village of Svatoslav for some sightseeing. It's a ski resort area in winter. Interestingly, it had previously been hit by missiles, so when Lam started taking photos, some taxi drivers stopped him and called the police. The police quickly realized it was just a group of tourists. However, what the police said was startling: they mentioned that half of the people who had evacuated there were “pro-Russian,” even if they didn't openly admit it.

A country where half the evacuees lean pro-Russian underscores how deeply divided this war is. It's heartbreaking. I told Mr. Khanh how painful it was to see the descendants of Soviet soldiers using Soviet-made weapons to kill each other. Mr. Khanh argued that they aren't truly descendants of Soviet soldiers because this western region doesn't share a Soviet lineage. He had a point, but it's not entirely accurate—there are people from other regions involved in the fighting against Russia. Perhaps it's like Ambassador M once said: all it takes

is 15% of society to be vocal, and the rest will follow. That 15% from western Ukraine—loud anti-Russian voices supported by the West—have dragged all of Ukrainian society into this unnecessary conflict with their neighbour. Say what you will, but I don't believe Russia actually wants to invade and annex Ukraine. Even the Pope suggested that NATO provoked Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

I had initially planned to go to Poland with Binh, visit Krakow, and return the following day. I also intended to let the cipher officer join this time, since during our previous trip to Poland, the cipher officer couldn't come along. I texted Deputy Minister Ngoc, who oversees this, to let him know, but Ngoc replied that I needed to submit an official cable. Once an official cable is submitted, a formal response is required as well. That process would take too long and wouldn't be timely. Our fellow ambassadors across Europe freely travel to neighboring countries without issue, but when I simply send a text, I'm told to submit an official cable. Forget it then.

### **Monday, 9 May 2022**

Today is Victory Day, the day people had been speculating for an entire month that Putin would announce some major decision. In the end, there was no major decision at all. That only shows how absurd the Ministry's decision not to allow the Embassy to return to Kyiv "because the situation is still complicated" really was. Everything was based on intuition—that something important *might* happen—without any logical analysis. At times I myself worried that Putin might declare full-scale war, and if that happened, we would return home. But after analyzing it again, I realized that scenario was unlikely. Moreover, even if he declared full-scale war, it would require extensive preparations and could not be implemented

immediately.

They are accustomed to exaggerating the situation, and the more severe they make it sound, the more “profound” the person making the assessment appears. Now it is clear that the alarmist assessment about 9 May has completely collapsed. This is hardly surprising—mid-level officials are too weak to assess the situation, and the Ministry simply relies on what those mid-level officials submit. They are used to playing it safe. It costs them nothing.

I reported that Putin’s failure to announce anything on this important day shows his dilemma and indecision. He cannot stop the war, but he also cannot expand it and “go all the way.” I assessed that the only remaining option for Putin to save face would be to declare the annexation of the occupied territories into Russia and threaten to use nuclear weapons to end the war. That approach would also give Ukraine an internal justification if it wanted to end the war. But would Putin dare to use them? If not, the situation will drag on, with no end in sight.

I just saw Canh Binh off. The two of us had agreed to meet in May. The war made it seem impossible to carry out the plan, but in the end we still managed for Binh to come—and to stay with me for quite a long time, seven days. The reason was simple: Binh could only stay in the Schengen area for 13 days, and his flight was on 11 May. Leaving early in the morning would have violated the rules, so he had to take refuge in Ukraine. But I arranged for him to travel and visit various places. We brothers always joke that the war is exhausting—yet we were “partying non-stop.”

In the afternoon I went horseback riding. The new horse was hard to control, and I almost fell off. I had to hold the reins very firmly. On the way back, Vichia said, “You’ve got strong nerves.” If I hadn’t, I would have hit the ground. I am used to

many challenges, so I always have to stay steady—not anxious, not losing my composure. In life I’ve been “tested” many times already—if I didn’t have strong nerves, I would have “fallen off the horse” long ago.

Today there was another case of a Vietnamese person traveling from Vietnam to Moldova who couldn’t enter Moldova and called me for help. Everything is reported directly to the Ambassador. No staff—everything falls on the Ambassador. I contacted the Moldovan Embassy in Kyiv, sent notes verbales, reminders—everything—but still no result. What else can I do? We have posted online many times that people must register and send a diplomatic note in advance, etc., but no one reads or asks. They just go anyway. With such public awareness, yet still believing our country can surpass xyz—that is overly optimistic.

I planned to go to Poland with Binh to visit Kraków and return the next day. I also intended to bring Mong, the cipher officer, since last time he couldn’t join the trip to Poland. I messaged Deputy Minister Ngoc, who told me to send an official cable. Once you send a cable, you have to wait for a reply—so it would not be in time. Other European ambassadors travel to neighboring countries for sightseeing without any issue, but when I text, they tell me to send a cable—so I just dropped it.

## **Tuesday, May 10, 2022**

I woke up near dawn and saw in the ambassadors' group chat that the Turkish Ambassador had invited everyone to a garden buffet party. This is practically the first diplomatic activity since the war began. Not showing up would be quite awkward. I got up and immediately drafted a cable requesting permission to return tomorrow to attend the event. People back

home probably don't see the necessity, but here on the ground, being present at such a gathering is very important.

First, it allows me to exchange various matters with colleagues. Second, it shows that Vietnam is visibly present in Kyiv again. We stayed inside Ukraine during the war, so if we still don't return even at this calmer stage, it would be very hard to explain.

Late into the evening, there was still no reply. But I had already told the staff: even without official approval, we will return. No one can stop us under these circumstances. That's just how they operate back home—nothing is urgent or dangerous, yet they still have to convene meetings, reach a conclusion, then issue instructions. If we wait for those instructions to return, it will surely be too late. Generals on the battlefield must decide for themselves.

Today was my last horse riding session before returning. Egor is still hard to ride, but once I got on, it felt great. I've now completed my refresher course and feel confident enough to try riding new horses.

After the ride, Vichia—knowing I was leaving—invited me over for tea and a farewell with Irina. Irina made the smoked fish dish I love. I had planned to eat just that, but then she made soup as well. Once a host has prepared something, I have to eat it. Even when I declined the last dish, Irina still brought it out. I had to take a bit for her sake.

Funny how even during an evacuation, I managed to find a kindred friend. Vichia and I often tease each other, but we understand one another well. Khanh keeps joking that the ambassador has "cast a spell" on Vichia, since he's usually quite the "godfather" type—more used to giving orders than receiving them. Our views on the war differ greatly, but who says you have to share the same views to appreciate someone?

In the evening, a few of us had a farewell dinner in Lviv

and invited Khanh along. He lost the bet—since I’m returning to Kyiv as an ambassador, not just as a tourist—so he brought a bottle of vodka to pay up.

He had thought Russia might divide and partition Ukraine, leaving the western part to make Lviv its capital. I think even in the best-case scenario, Russia is unlikely to dominate so decisively. Right now, it looks more likely that Russia will lose. At best, they might hold onto the southern and eastern regions they’ve already taken. Surely they won’t let Ukraine take back everything—that would be too humiliating. But even that’s not off the table.

Germany was stronger back then and still lost. So if Russia is now being dogpiled by its opponents, it’s understandable that Russia could lose too.

It’s funny how, at the start of the war, some online commentators mocked me—but that was so unreasonable. Even Putin himself miscalculated. So my earlier assessment—that logically, there would be no attack—was completely reasonable. Putin didn’t act logically because of his delusions, and who can predict that?

Another case cropped up today: a Vietnamese citizen from Romania was unable to enter Moldova. Again, they travelled without consulting anyone—without checking with friends, community pages, or the embassy’s information. Just assuming that because the child has a Ukrainian passport, the Vietnamese mother would automatically be allowed in too. Such simplistic thinking.

### **Wednesday, May 11, 2022**

At 6:50 AM, the five of us set off from Lviv back to Kyiv, even though there was no official order from the Ministry. That’s just how things work back home—they can hold endless meetings. On the way, I saw Chai post a photo showing that he

had already returned to Kyiv. This will surely lead to the assumption that the entire Embassy has returned, even though no official order was given. I told Chai to take down the post. He said he intended to ask for my permission, but I didn't reply.

As we neared Kyiv, the cipher staff and the Director General of the Cipher Committee kept calling our Embassy's cipher officer, asking where "the embassy" was. Clearly, word had gotten out that we'd left Lviv. I told them to just say they were still in Lviv—whatever the consequences, I'll take responsibility. When we were almost at the Embassy, I received a message from First Deputy Minister Minh Vu: "The Minister and Ministry leadership have decided that you and the Embassy should remain in Lviv." The worst-case scenario had happened. So, after today's work, I'll have to return to Lviv.

Yesterday, when Cuong asked me, "You must have reported verbally to the Ministry leadership, right?" I joked, "If they don't allow us back, they must be from another planet." But they really didn't allow us back. I misjudged this—just like I misjudged that Putin wouldn't invade Ukraine. Both decisions defy logic.

As for the decision to keep the Embassy in Lviv, either the Ministry has intelligence that Russia is about to launch a strong offensive and Kyiv is unsafe, or they simply don't want the Embassy to act first and report later. If it's the first reason, then the intelligence is completely wrong—and they're putting far too much faith in Russia's "mystical" military power. After two months of war like this, to still believe in Russia's overwhelming strength shows a lack of observation and analysis—and instead, reliance on emotion or superstition. If the reason is about avoiding a "fait accompli," then that's just being petty. I reported my intention two days in advance. They should've decided during their last meeting what to do: if Putin

declared all-out war on May 9, what's our plan? And if he didn't, what then? Clearly, there was no contingency plan. So now, without meetings and conclusions, everyone just sits tight. Work can wait. Reputation can wait.

I requested to return today because I didn't want Vietnam to be absent from the diplomatic corps' gathering in Kyiv. But back home, they don't see the point. On top of that, there's the matter of consular paperwork—helping our citizens return to Kyiv and handling tasks we simply couldn't resolve in Lviv. But no one back home cares. I've reported all of this—it's not as if I haven't. In short, they don't care about Vietnam's reputation here, or how the Embassy is perceived by the Vietnamese community. All other embassies have returned—why haven't we?

Yesterday, I posted on Facebook: “Goodbye to the horse ranch, waiting for orders to return to Kyiv.” Hai Anh commented, “Everyone else has returned already.” That's the voice of the people, isn't it? I couldn't exactly reply and say I'd been allowed to return. I worded the post deliberately—“waiting for orders” and “not yet allowed”—not because we're still afraid of war. If we were afraid, we wouldn't have stayed in Lviv to help people evacuate; we'd have already fled to a third country or back to Vietnam.

The staff probably felt disheartened knowing we'll have to return to Lviv, but what can we do? I understand—they want stability, not to keep living unsettled lives. I was flexible enough to let the military attaché leave early, and they returned safely. But if the Ministry hasn't approved, the Ambassador has to comply.

Along the way, I noticed roads being repaired and checkpoints removed. Clearly, peace is returning. Yet Hanoi

keeps listening to vague intel and clinging to conspiracy theories about nuclear war or something?

I attended the buffet at the Turkish Embassy. Everyone was greeting each other warmly. It was the first diplomatic event in Kyiv. At least Vietnam was able to “make a mark.” Many sincerely congratulated us. Such genuine goodwill isn’t easy to come by. It’s all about making an impression. Once people have a good impression, it sticks—and that’s hard to erase. Vietnam doesn’t have money or power, so we have to build our standing from simple, visible actions like this. It wasn’t by accident that I rushed back today. Wouldn’t it have been nicer to stay back riding horses? But I returned for work. Unfortunately, back home, they don’t understand that. They’re just making things harder for everyone. Tomorrow, I’ll have to go back to Lviv—for what?

The Turkish Ambassador’s residence was packed. This was the first “post-evacuation” event. The Deputy Head of the President’s Office was there. Just a month ago, he and I had a heated phone call—he wanted to take Putin to the international court. I made sure to shake his hand today, so he knows I’m here in Kyiv. I saw he was talking to the Georgian Ambassador, so I didn’t join in. Showing up isn’t enough—it’s about networking. And who would I network with in Lviv now?

People asked if I was the last to leave Lviv. I said no—the Chinese Ambassador is still there. But he doesn’t interact with anyone; no one even notices him.

The representative of the Crimean Tatar community told me that no one is willing to meet halfway: what they demand, we can’t accept; what we demand, they won’t accept. In short, it’s all about territory—but hearing it firsthand is different from reading theories. So yes, this war will drag on. This afternoon,

I read that U.S. intelligence assesses there won't be clear winners or losers in this war. Exactly what I've been saying all along.

I also spoke with the Moldovan Ambassador today about Vietnamese citizens in Ukraine having trouble returning via Moldova. He advised, "You should come over and talk directly." That's true—direct talks are what's needed. Back at the Embassy, I arranged for a trip tomorrow. Friday's coming soon. Might as well make use of the time—leave two staff here so they don't have to keep moving. If, when we return from Moldova, the Ministry still doesn't allow us back to Kyiv, then they'll go back to Lviv. But if permission is granted, they won't have to go back and forth unnecessarily.

Speaking of moving back and forth—today, when the staff got to shower in their own homes, their faces lit up. Simple joys like that—Hanoi wouldn't understand. If staying in Lviv were truly about safety or work, we'd accept it. But there's no real work there—so why make the staff endure hardship?

At the reception, I only drank white wine—didn't eat anything. It's easier to network with a glass in hand than with a plate of food. It reminded me how, back in Vietnam, officials often gather at receptions just to eat and drink. But receptions are for working, not dining. Xuan texted me, "Don't get too carried away during wartime." I guess she still sees me chatting a lot at these events. Of course, I had to get back early to be with the staff. Today was our first gathering after two months of evacuation.

Over dinner, I heard stories I hadn't known during the evacuation. Mr. Tan has worked at the Embassy since its establishment and has always been helpful. I've always appreciated that he volunteered to stay behind and watch over

the Embassy when no one knew how the war would unfold. Today, I learned that his wife and kids weren't treated the same as other Vietnamese evacuees in Poland. It's heartbreaking. I had no idea. If I'd known, I would've spoken up right away. Well, it's over now. But it shows how many people suffer quietly, in their own ways. Tan volunteered to stay—his family should've been prioritized. But instead of being supported, they were sidelined as “foreigners, not Vietnamese.”

### **Thursday, May 12, 2022**

In the morning, Hai and Cuong arrived late again, so our departure from Kyiv was delayed. We only reached Chisinau at 5 p.m. On the way, I arranged meetings with Moldovan counterparts for tomorrow. I also considered setting up a meeting with the Moldova Artists' Association to see if they might paint more pieces about Vietnam, in case I organize an exhibition in June. The main task, however, remains discussing how to facilitate our people's return to Ukraine. Hopefully, there will be results.

I posted a photo taken in a field of blooming canola flowers, noting that I'm on my way to Moldova to resolve community-related issues. People seem to be waiting for that. Some friends shared the post, and others even sent friend requests. Clearly, the community's needs are real—though perhaps those in Hanoi don't quite understand.

The crypto officer informed me that the European Department continues to cable instructions to stay in Lviv. But if we stay in Lviv, how can we address the community's needs? We're working with the Moldovan side now, but when it comes to the Ukrainian side—are we expected to work from Lviv? Who would even be willing to work with us from there? Are we supposed to travel 500 kilometers back and forth to Kyiv

every time we need to handle official business?

Not returning to Kyiv results in a loss of credibility—not only with our community, but also with Ukrainian counterparts and the diplomatic corps. I don't understand who benefits from this decision. Maybe only those in Hanoi, ensuring their own safety and avoiding any incident. But don't they realize that when Vietnam loses credibility with the community, Ukraine, and other countries, it's Vietnam itself that suffers? Or do they think Vietnam's reputation has nothing to do with them? If that's the case, then I give up.

Xuan sent me an article from *Tien Phong* about the risk of nuclear war! Is that the kind of nonsense they're using to justify not allowing the Embassy to return? So, who should we trust—the Embassy's assessment and the international community, or a tabloid newspaper? When U.S. diplomats returned to Kyiv, Podoliak, assistant to the Ukrainian President's Chief of Staff, even said that “the nuclear bomb threat has been eliminated.” And yet Hanoi is still afraid of nuclear war?

I had dinner with Cuong and Hai. Both tried to explain Hanoi's reasoning for not letting us return, although it's clear to them too that returning is the right thing to do. Understandably so—they're still dependent on Hanoi, so of course they'll defend and justify its stance. Hai said maybe it's because I focus more on specific work—helping the community—while back home, they prioritize safety. Of course, I care about safety—especially my own! But what I care about, and what Hanoi should also care about, is Vietnam's prestige in the eyes of the community, the Ukrainians, and the international community. Why do they think differently from me? Because Hanoi isn't thinking about collective prestige. They're more concerned about their own personal safety and reputations in case something goes wrong.

When people were evacuating, everyone was busy promoting their image, taking PR photos to post online. But now? No one's doing PR anymore. The community needs help returning to Ukraine—so who's helping them?

While I was out for a walk, Ambassador Khoi called from Moscow, saying there are signs of our people taking advantage of the war to go to Europe. As if that's new. That's as old as the hills. Ukraine has long been used as a transit station. It even got to the point where Ukraine refused to issue visas for Vietnamese citizens because of it. Since the end of February, I've already said in our internal group that we should not be helping people exploit the war to emigrate to Europe. Our job is to help people get out of conflict zones—not help them use the war as a springboard to settle in Europe.

Deputy Minister Minh Vu even criticized me for being too blunt with our compatriots. Apparently, we're supposed to use nice, flowery words no matter what they do. But now, where is the support for people who want to return? Their wish—to go back to where they lived—is far more legitimate than heading to Europe and becoming someone else's burden. The Deputy Minister is well aware of this. One of the four main reasons the Embassy proposed returning to Kyiv was to support consular services for the community. Or maybe back home they think consular work is just about collecting fees? Since the war began, the Embassy has processed plenty of paperwork for our people—all free of charge.

As I strolled through Chisinau, I noticed how peaceful life is. It could just as easily have been a war zone. I came across a statue with the word “Leninist” on it—a monument to the Leninist Komsomol Youth League. It still stands in the center of the city. That kind of statue was torn down in Kyiv long ago, leaving only a stone pedestal behind. That's the difference.

Moldova, by being more tactful, has kept the peace. Ukraine, by taking a more extreme approach, has brought war upon itself. A blatant example. I just include that detail—those who read carefully will understand. Those who skim won't get it.

Our people also have plenty of “keyboard warriors” who do nothing but nit-pick. While many acknowledged that my trip to Moldova was to help resolve issues for the community, some still took jabs, accusing me of showing off with photos in canola fields. Normally, I ignore that kind of pettiness, but sometimes you have to set the record straight. If our people hadn't been sent back to Vietnam, I wouldn't have needed to go. Moldova is still part of the broader conflict zone—yet the Ambassador still had to go to assist the community. And what—if I go, I'm not allowed to take photos? If I don't post, people say I'm hiding something or taking a leisure trip during wartime. Classic keyboard warrior behaviour.

### **Friday, May 13, 2022**

Today is Friday the 13th, but it wasn't too unlucky. I went to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, had meetings, and managed to reach an agreement on the procedure for our people returning to Ukraine. Previously, many of our people used services to obtain tourist visas, since those could be acquired online. The service providers pocketed the fees, while the Embassy was left dealing with the aftermath when our people couldn't enter Moldova.

Now, after working things out with the Moldovan side, we've clarified that people must apply for transit visas—not tourist or business visas—to enter Moldova. Their border guards can easily tell the difference and recognize when it's not legitimate. If people knowingly apply incorrectly, they have every right to deny entry. Let Vietnamese continue to provide

services for one another, but they must do it properly.

Another issue is that many people don't actually have residence cards yet—they're still in the process of applying. That needs to be handled on the Ukrainian side. But when I'm still stuck sitting in Lviv, how can I deal with them? It's clear how the decision to not allow the Embassy to return to Kyiv has made life harder for many.

While Ukraine is still at war, June also marks the 30th anniversary of diplomatic relations with Moldova. I thought of organizing an exhibition in Moldova, using the paintings by Ukrainian artists about Vietnam. The Moldovan side seemed supportive, though not as enthusiastic as the Ukrainians. I knew the exhibition would be free, but they still wanted to charge me. I had to say, "I thought it was free," and only then did they stop asking for fees. Still, I politely offered to give them a gift. I also suggested they participate by painting some pieces like the Ukrainian artists. We'll see how that turns out.

Yesterday, I posted a simple photo of a canola field with a short caption, and somehow it stirred up unnecessary drama. One person nit-picked my use of the word "hoi huong" ("repatriation"). Technically, "hoi huong" means returning to one's homeland—Vietnam. But to these people, this place already feels like home—perhaps even more so than Vietnam—because after the war, they might not return to Vietnam, but to this second homeland. So depending on how you interpret it, the term isn't wrong. No need to get pedantic.

Another person took the opportunity to slander the Embassy, claiming we initially charged high fees and then had a change of heart—"our conscience kicked in"—so we adjusted the fees. Even during wartime, we arranged for four of her passports to be transferred and charged exactly as regulated,

and she still managed to spread rumours. She complained that had the passports been mailed directly to her, she would've been grateful, but because someone else delivered them, she wasn't. Did she even pay for postage to make that demand?

Serving the public—there will always be people like this.

Yet another “warrior” chimed in, questioning why we were encouraging people to return when things weren't completely stable. He even brought up my so-called “past sin” of not recommending evacuation before the war. I don't bother replying to people like that. Sitting comfortably, acting like a keyboard warrior. When people face obstacles returning home, we help them—who's “encouraging” them to return? And as for not advising evacuation before the war, I've explained that too many times already. No need to repeat myself.

In the evening, I had dinner at Huy's house. It was a pleasant evening. Little Eric is learning Vietnamese online with kids in the U.S. Only now do I see how an idea I had 15 years ago has become so common.

Back then, I realized children abroad didn't have Vietnamese language classes, so I thought of setting up an online Vietnamese learning platform. I even hired someone to build the program, but programming skills in Vietnam at the time were still too limited, so it didn't work out. Now, with Zoom and all these online tools, learning is everywhere. Turns out, some of my ideas were ahead of their time—but they never materialized. Simply because they were just... for fun. Not something I staked everything on.

### **Saturday, May 14, 2022**

After breakfast, the three of us left the hotel and headed to Tiraspol. I wanted to show goodwill by visiting the "breakaway region" myself rather than asking them to come to the capital to meet me, but in the end, we couldn't get in. Turns out, they're

even more cautious than the central government. The central government doesn't control entries and exits much, but here, they have strict controls. Even an ambassador wasn't allowed in!

They even argued that if the ambassador uses the ambassadorial car, it's considered official work—but if it's a personal trip, I'd need to present an ordinary passport. It's their breakaway territory, their laws. They can do whatever they want. But the situation revealed a few things. For one, our businessman friend Petia clearly isn't part of the special forces. If he were, this issue would've been resolved in no time.

Still, I managed to chat with him while we waited. That was really the goal of the trip—to hear his assessment of the situation in Pridnestrovie. It seems the Russians have propped it up, but it doesn't serve much purpose. With only 1,500 soldiers stationed there, that's hardly enough to do anything. He also confirmed the rumor that 20 Russian generals had been captured and are currently under investigation.

According to plan, we were supposed to visit another Vietnamese expat before heading back to Ukraine, but Ms. Hien changed the plan and couldn't receive us, so we drove straight back. On the way, I discussed with Cuong the idea of moving the paintings to Moldova for an exhibition. He casually remarked, "But we have to make sure it's safe." I asked, "What exactly do you think is unsafe?" but he didn't answer. In short—just lazy. Wants to sit in one place, avoid extra work, and uses so-called "safety" as an excuse.

Also on the way, I managed to chat with Chernyavskyy, the Chairman of the Ukrainian Artists Association, about the exhibition in Moldova. He agreed right away. Thank goodness. Foreigners say yes immediately, while our own people make things difficult. And it's the subordinates making things

difficult for their boss! It's not like I ever made them work without compensation. They just prefer to sit idle.

Back home, I finally approved yesterday's press release. It's required by protocol, but I know no one really reads these kinds of official updates. My Facebook post yesterday about the trip—that people actually read and shared widely. Who pays attention to formal announcements anymore?

It was past 8 p.m. by the time we got home. Hai has been here two months already, yet he still drives against traffic rules all the time. There's a roundabout just before my house, but he never takes it. Typical of our people—never bothering to look at road signs.

While we were having dinner—almost finished—the guys started talking about how things here are lacking this or that, and I casually reminded them: if we had quietly returned, we'd already be settled in Kyiv. But instead, someone had gone and made noise about it, letting HQ know and trace us down. In the end, everyone had to go back to Lviv. Before I could finish, Hai suddenly raised his glass to make a toast. Maybe he didn't mean to cut me off, but honestly—it was tactless. Well, what can you do? I just sighed and let it go.

### **Sunday, May 15, 2022**

This morning, I texted Quoc Dung, asking him to gently mention to the Minister about the Embassy moving back to Kyiv, since the Minister is accompanying the Prime Minister on a visit to the U.S. Quoc Dung replied, “As soon as I mentioned your name, the Minister got irritated and brought up your Facebook posts again.”

What's wrong with my Facebook? It shows the dedication of Vietnamese diplomats to their work and to the community.

If anything, it should be commended, not criticized! There's only that single photo of me skiing before the war—which I've already explained countless times. I did that to reassure the community. Who would've thought Putin would go that crazy? Is that really so serious as to warrant being blacklisted?

I've said many times that our philosophies on media couldn't be more different—mine is about transparency; theirs is about appearances. I don't embellish media coverage—I simply state things as they are. Do good work, and naturally, your reputation will follow. Back home, it's all about appearances. Everyone gathered for photo ops when welcoming evacuees. But now, when the community is trying to return to Ukraine and facing real difficulties, where is everyone? Not a single person is around to help.

I still remember Huy's story from Moldova. Even with so much to do, they still asked the community to find photographers to hype things up. Nothing could be more tone-deaf. While people were scrambling to evacuate, diplomats were focused on getting the best pictures.

Minister Bui Thanh Son has a few things worth discussing. Whether he's "gentle" or not—I don't care. Ministers aren't measured by gentleness, but by vision and competence. When Thanh Son returned to the Department of Foreign Policy, he was a Deputy Director but clearly groomed to become Director. At the time, he led a research project on "Vietnam's strategic partnerships," comprised entirely of deputy-level staff from various departments.

I was on the review council and was dismayed by the project. It was a collection of essays on Vietnam's relations with countries already labelled strategic partners—Russia, China, India, Laos, Cambodia, etc.—but it completely failed to

establish any criteria for what defines a strategic partnership for Vietnam. I refused to approve it and said it needed to be redone. The council chair, Director Tho of the Diplomatic Academy, said, “Thach is right, but if we don’t approve it, we’ll have to set up another council, which will be complicated. Let’s just mark it as passed and assume it’s been revised per Thach’s suggestions.” After that, what else could I say? Everyone gave it 4s and 5s, and in the end, the project was rated “excellent.”

For comparison, I once led a project where the contributions were so poor that I had to rewrite the entire summary report myself to ensure scientific rigor. Later, the project was criticized because “the summary didn’t match the main content.” Of course it didn’t—the original content lacked any scientific value. But anyone who wanted to question the summary on scientific grounds could come talk to me. That’s how much the Minister’s research capabilities stood out—even when he was at his supposed peak.

Today, I drafted five cables. From the beginning of the year until now, that makes 101 cables—all self-written. Who else works like this? Why is no one paying attention to that, but instead fixating on Facebook posts?

Among the five cables, the most important was the one arguing why the Embassy should be allowed to return to Kyiv. It’s something that should be clear as day, yet I still had to write to persuade. The Ministry insists on waiting until things “normalize” and the two sides reach an agreement before returning. Waiting for that agreement? Might as well wait until the Congo New Year! I can’t understand what logic makes them believe a deal is imminent. Right now, the two sides are barely even negotiating—their positions are still worlds apart. That argument alone is already indefensible.

Of course, in the cable, I only stated that the war is in a stalemate, neither side is winning, and there's no sign of compromise. I emphasized four disadvantages of not allowing the Embassy to return to Kyiv—for Ukraine, for the Vietnamese community, for the diplomatic corps in Kyiv, and for the Embassy staff. Ukraine can't understand why other embassies have returned while Vietnam hasn't, despite so many pressing matters to discuss. Surely no one expects serious conversations to happen with someone still sitting in Lviv?

The diplomatic corps will question Vietnam's assessment of the situation. The Vietnamese community will wonder why their own embassy remains in Lviv instead of returning to assist them—especially now that others have resumed normal operations. Our staff have endured two months of hardship; now that it's possible to return, why still delay?

Before sending the cable, I consulted with Deputy Minister Minh Vu, who's currently in Laos. I considered just having a quick call instead of sending an official message, to avoid the formality, since our reasoning differs. But Vu said, "Just send the cable," so I did.

Vu asked, "What about the other embassies?" Why does every decision depend on what others do? Each country acts based on its own needs and interests. I wrote bluntly: Malaysia and Indonesia don't have large resident communities like Vietnam does. They don't need to reopen embassies to serve their citizens. Some of them don't even have ambassadors posted here yet—so what's the rush for them?

No need for grand theories. Just this idea of "waiting for an agreement" already shows a complete misunderstanding of the situation. On the surface, it sounds reasonable—for safety—but when applied to reality, it reveals how naive it is.

The real reason? Fear of responsibility. If something happens after allowing us to return to Kyiv, who will be held accountable?

I stated clearly in the cable: the risk of conventional attack is negligible, and the chance of a nuclear strike—when over 40 diplomatic missions have returned to Kyiv—is virtually zero. If Russia were to use nuclear weapons like that, who would they live with afterward?

Taking advantage of the Ukrainian ambassador's question about why Ukrainian citizens can't get tourist visas to Vietnam, I sent another cable to the Immigration Department proposing visa-on-arrival for Ukrainians. It shows the Embassy isn't profiting from this, but purely acting in Vietnam's interest. Other countries are welcoming Ukrainians during wartime. We, on the other hand, not only fail to offer refuge—we shut the door even on those who can afford to evacuate and relax in Vietnam. Vietnam wouldn't lose anything—on the contrary, it would collect service fees. If even this isn't allowed, it shows how rigid the system is. Any talk about collective benefit becomes meaningless. What matters is: what's in it for us?

After dinner, I felt like everyone around me was acting out of self-interest. I went out for a walk. Life outside felt light and peaceful. There were several groups performing music beautifully. I stopped to watch people playing Chinese chess. Life felt truly calm. Why do Vietnamese lives always seem so full of hustle and struggle?

Back in Lviv, I decided not to tell Vichia or go horseback riding anymore. Otherwise, I'd have to explain why I still hadn't returned to Kyiv. Too complicated. Best to leave it. Instead, I went swimming with Khanh. Managed 600 meters and felt quite relaxed.

**Monday, May 16, 2022**

The other day, I saw Ha (from Donetsk) lamenting in the group chat: “Homeland is like a sweet starfruit, yet it feels more and more distant.” I understood immediately that something was going on. Today, I asked about the situation. Ha said they had submitted a request two months ago but still hadn’t received any response. I spoke with Lam, who handles consular affairs in Moscow—he also said there’s been no reply from back home.

It’s true: once a “campaign” ends, nobody cares anymore. That’s how things always are back home—when there’s a movement, everyone rushes to act. Once it’s over, everything reverts to how it was.

Looks like I’ll have to draft another cable. The reality now is that Donetsk is very tense. The war has been going on for nearly three months without any casualties among our people. There are only nine people asking to return; if we don’t handle this and something happens, it will “affect the efforts of the entire apparatus over the past period.” Simply making polite requests won’t get anyone’s attention. You have to hit where it hurts—their “reputation,” “achievements,” for example—then maybe they’ll take notice.

Finally, Zelenskyy announced that the soldiers in Azovstal must preserve their lives—meaning, he’s agreed to let them surrender. Of course, since this is wartime, they avoid using the word “surrender” and instead call it an evacuation pending a prisoner exchange. This is exactly what I thought should have been done over a month ago.

To be fair, they did play a role in tying down a contingent of Russian forces in Mariupol, preventing them from being redeployed elsewhere. That’s no small feat. They still had

supply lines, but around May 4th, those routes were discovered, and they suspected there had been a betrayal. To some, it's betrayal; to others, patriotism.

## **Tuesday, May 17, 2022**

Last night, Lviv was hit again. That makes two consecutive days of attacks. This time, it's considered the largest missile strike on Lviv so far. But no one in the embassy relocation group even bothered to check in. Simply because, if they asked now, it would unintentionally admit that I was right—Lviv is even tenser than Kyiv.

I just sent a message in the group chat: “Lviv has been hit two days in a row, but still only targeting military zones.” Minh, who's in charge of the Europe Department, privately messaged me saying I needed to send in arguments for the Embassy's return to Kyiv. I was surprised—I sent the cable on Sunday so the department would have it by Monday. Now it's already Tuesday and they're saying they haven't received it. No idea whether they've been too busy to read it or whether the cable division mishandled it.

While asking Hai , the deputy in charge of Ukraine, about the condolence cable for President Kravchuk's passing, Hai also said he hadn't received it. So clearly it's not a matter of being too busy to read—the issue lies in how the cables are being processed.

Today, both Ukraine and Russia admitted that negotiations are no longer happening. Yet back home, they're still saying, “Wait until the situation stabilizes and the two sides reach an agreement, then move back to Kyiv.” Honestly, what planet are they on?! It'll be New year in Congo before there's any agreement. So how long are we supposed to sit here and wait?

**Wednesday, May 18, 2022**

Woke up to see a message from Madam Leokadia: “Mr. Ambassador, are you still in Lviv?” If I answered that I was still in Lviv, they’d look down on me. Should I say, “I haven’t been allowed to return yet,” and let them think poorly of Vietnam? So, I replied that I had already returned but was currently on a business trip to Moldova.

I screenshotted her message and posted it in the group chat: “If I told her I haven’t been able to return yet, what would she think of Vietnam? So I said I’ve returned and am now on a business trip to Moldova.” That message seemed to have some effect. Minh Vu directed the Europe Department to study the cable, consult relevant units, and advise soon. Truly, it seems that only when foreigners speak do they finally understand. I sent a cable requesting to return—no result. I made every argument possible—still no result. But once a foreigner mentions it, they get all flustered.

Instead of sending a cable allowing the return to Kyiv, the Europe Department is now asking for a report on a contingency plan in case of another evacuation. Probably the only place in the world right now still issuing instructions to prepare for evacuation at this point! It’s unimaginable how childish and mechanical this thinking is. A contingency plan means hitting the road—what more is there to plan? And for Russia to attack Kyiv again, they’d need plenty of time to gather forces. There would be time to prepare. And where would they even get those troops? They can’t even manage the Eastern front. No forces to spare for Odesa. Sitting in Hanoi, they imagine Russia will strike Kyiv again, so they demand an evacuation plan.

If you’re a leader with all this information and still can’t make a decision, then don’t be a leader. They just force

subordinates to write reports. And these subordinates haven't even wiped their noses clean yet, asking ridiculous questions! Oh, my country.

Tomorrow, I have to speak online for the Ho Chi Minh birthday celebration in Odesa. I messaged Minh Vu to ask permission to return to use the Embassy's backdrop properly—and if necessary, I'd head back to Lviv. I figured saying that much, surely they wouldn't insist I stay in Lviv. Told Hai to make sure we had enough gas. Hai got the gas and returned. As we were about to head back, Vu messaged, saying I had to send a cable—not just a message. Incredible. Something this urgent, and they want a cable no one knows when they'll read or act on! It's not classified, so why not just message?

Since the message didn't work, I called directly and explained it was urgent. Vu said, “You don't need to prove to them that you're in Kyiv.” Vu doesn't understand—trying to prove I haven't even returned to Kyiv gains us absolutely nothing. But no point arguing. If after all this, they still don't get it, then forget it. Just follow orders. Only problem is, in the eyes of my team, the Ambassador seems to always get rejected by leadership back home. Fine. No prestige. I accept. I lose.

Today, there was a minor issue with Mr. Khanh, the Honorary Consul in Odesa. Yesterday I asked him to contact Andrei Gorchakov to check on the Ho Chi Minh birthday event and help arrange more attendees. Instead of working with Andrei, Mr. Khanh contacted the city authorities, who of course said not to collaborate with Andrei because he “supports Russia, the country killing Ukrainians.” His reasoning wasn't wrong—when you live somewhere, you have to follow local rules and work with the authorities. But that's only seeing one side, not the full picture.

As Vietnam's Honorary Consul, Mr. Khanh's job is to safeguard Vietnam's interests first and handle things tactfully. Don't create tension with Odesa authorities, but present your arguments and persuade them. Andrei may be labeled pro-Russian, but his work has nothing to do with Russia—it's purely about building Vietnam-Ukraine relations. So why should the city oppose? Also, Odesa was where an article criticizing Vietnam appeared back in February 2022. Tomorrow's event could help dispel that negative image—why not support it? At least present your case and see how the city responds.

I reminded Mr. Khanh that I don't care how Odesa officials view Andrei; I care about what Andrei has done for Vietnam. Clearly, without him, how could the Vietnam Embassy have received 200 paintings from Ukrainian artists for a grand exhibition? And now we're even moving them to Moldova for another exhibition.

But Mr. Khanh is strong-willed—once he disagrees, that's it. I can't force it. I just told Hung (Mo) to contact Andrei directly to verify tomorrow's program so we don't end up being tricked. Hung didn't understand that his job was to verify, not to ask if they needed help. Of course Andrei said no help was needed. That's their level of professionalism. Thankfully, I called back and asked Hung to go check tomorrow morning. Trust but verify—that's the principle.

Finally, I messaged the Vietnamese community group in Odesa to ask them to send a few representatives to attend tomorrow's event. We can't have an event like this without any Vietnamese present, especially when Andrei mentioned there might be representatives from Turkmenistan and Palestine. That would be embarrassing.

At lunch, knowing my team had overheard my exchange with Mr. Khanh, I shared the story so they could learn from it. Cuong, ever the sly one, said, “We don’t need to go around putting out small fires,” implying that adjusting the negative perception some Vietnamese have of Ukraine isn’t worth the effort. Very slick. I responded immediately: the goal isn’t to put out small fires. If they’re organizing Ho Chi Minh’s birthday celebration, we should support it. Any side benefit of adjusting perceptions is welcome, but that’s not the main purpose.

Comments like his are quite crafty—he clearly doesn’t support the event. He’s been tasked with participating to write the news summary. Bottom line: whenever there’s real work, he tries to shirk. Everyone’s long said he’s lazy. Now it’s even clearer. He even discouraged the Moldova exhibition plan, dragging Hai into it. And now he’s subtly undermining the Vietnam promotion event for May 19th too.

It’s amusing how sharp these new-generation Vietnamese diplomats are. No sense of duty—just money-minded. Slyness won’t get you far. Honesty matters. If he wants to avoid work, I’ll let him avoid it entirely. Starting tomorrow, he’ll sit and do news summaries. No more assignments. He speaks Russian—perfect for reading news. The other day I asked My why she hadn’t roped Cuong into the news work. She said since he’s in charge of consular affairs, he wasn’t assigned to news. Classic shirking. Only a handful of consular cases each week, and he uses that to dodge political work?

Fine. No more extra tasks—so he has no excuses.

## **Thursday, May 19, 2022**

This morning, I still didn’t see any response from the Odesa Honorary Consulate office group regarding my request yesterday to send someone to attend today’s event at the Odesa

Library. In short, it's clear now that no one will show up. I called Hung to check how his inspection went. Hung said the organizers scheduled things around noon or so. Basically, just show up and attend; even if something unexpected happens, there'll be no time to adjust.

I finished preparing my speech. I focused on two of Uncle Ho's points: "Nothing is more precious than independence and freedom," and "Unity, unity, great unity." They are at war, so I needed to affirm our support for independence, freedom, and territorial integrity. But with the second point, I added that to achieve unity, one must respect differences. Only when differences are respected will disagreements not be exaggerated—and only then can war be avoided while preserving independence, freedom, and territorial integrity. That was the message. But do they really respect differences? They even labelled the event organizer—who is fostering relations between the two countries—as "pro-Russian" and boycotted him.

In the end, the event turned out to be quite grand. Nearly two hours long, not including the buffet. Yet only one Vietnamese person attended. It's truly sad. I messaged the Odesa Honorary Consulate office group. At first, I didn't intend to comment. But then I thought I needed to "call things by their name." I wrote that this was stupidity and short-sightedness. Honestly, that's exactly what it was. Celebrating "your own father's birthday", yet being swayed by others to boycott the event just because they claimed the organizer wasn't good—what else to call it but stupid and short-sighted?

Xuan strongly disagreed with me, thinking I was too harsh. (Xuan has been in that group since I invited her to give feedback on consular matters concerning Odesa citizens.) She still believes harsh words don't solve anything. Of course, it

doesn't change them. But if I don't speak out, they'll keep thinking they're right—especially when Mr. Khanh even tried to question me, asking if I knew who Gorchakov was. I said, whoever he is in the eyes of others, I don't care. I only care that he helps me and helps Vietnam.

I immediately drafted a thank-you letter to send to the Ukrainian friends who organized today's event. I couldn't do much else—at least show appreciation. Ideally, I could've asked Hung to print it, frame it properly, and deliver it. But then again, it wouldn't bear a live signature. So I left it at that.

Huy sent me an article reviewing Kissinger's predictions on Ukraine. I must admit—Kissinger's analysis from six years ago was spot on. He wrote that the Russians view Ukraine as an inseparable part of their history and culture, and they cannot accept losing Ukraine to the West. Ukraine should serve as a bridge between Europe and Russia. Had they done that, they could've had both peace and prosperity. But extremism led the country, and now it's all devastated.

Today, I noticed My didn't send the news summary. Probably assigned to Cuong, and he didn't do it. For the past month, we haven't missed a single day, even on Saturdays and Sundays. I messaged My to ask who was responsible for the news summary today.

## **Friday, May 20, 2022**

Woke up to see My's reply confirming that Cuong was assigned to do the daily news summary. I asked Cuong, and he said he'd been busy following the commemoration of President Ho Chi Minh's birthday and writing the news report, so he couldn't get around to the summary. That's the typical "if you're holding the baby, you don't wash the dishes" kind of excuse. I couldn't accept that explanation, so I just reminded

him that these two tasks weren't much—and if he knew he couldn't handle both, he should've asked someone else to help. For the first time, he admitted, "I'm not good." Probably just said it to stop me from commenting further. I didn't continue either—no need to prove anything to him. Just wanted him to realize how hollow his bragging is.

Finally, today marks the official end of the fighting in Mariupol. Around 2,500 prisoners of war over the past few days. President Zelenskyy has indirectly acknowledged it, stating that the last remaining people (non-military) will be evacuated—not to Ukrainian-controlled areas—in the coming days. He even emphasized it wouldn't be "days" anymore. That means hours! In reality, it's already over.

Today also marks the third anniversary of Zelenskyy's inauguration. One detail I noticed was his admission that many pilots had sacrificed themselves trying to fly in to rescue Azovstal. Unable to rescue, unwilling to surrender, yet still allowing flights to attempt a rescue—leading to even more unnecessary deaths. Of course, Zelenskyy again blamed the West for not providing enough weapons to militarily save Azovstal. Ukrainians sure have a habit of blaming others.

Also today, *The New York Times* published an article saying Ukrainian leaders need to face reality and consider giving up territory to Putin. The U.S. and Europe do have limits when it comes to supporting Ukraine. That's it, then—a clear signal that aid won't last forever. Ukrainian leadership naively plunged into this war thinking they'd have unconditional support and would win. They should've been clear-headed, negotiated with Russia, and positioned Ukraine as a bridge between Europe and Russia—securing peace and prosperity for their country. It's a pity they didn't.

In diplomacy, you need to have genuine affection for the country you're working in to succeed. That's absolutely true. I've always cherished Ukraine and its people, but I cannot support the extremist policies that dragged the country into an unnecessary war.

I noticed Gaman texted yesterday, saying there's no way to transport the paintings to Vietnam. I already had a feeling he wouldn't be resourceful enough to figure this out. Well, since I've helped, might as well help all the way. I texted Quang (Deputy General Director of Vietnam Airlines). Quang agreed to help and asked me to send a formal letter to the airline. I informed Gaman, and he was thrilled. But I still left the issue of transporting the paintings to the designated airport open-ended. I'll probably have to sort that out for him too. But at least I've made the process clear—better than him thinking it's all settled and the paintings will just be received right in Hanoi.

Hung in Odesa also reported that Vietnamese people applying for transit visas in Romania were rejected because applicants must apply in person. Obviously, those in Vietnam can't apply in person. But really, it all boils down to people's lack of awareness. They're required to submit by post, yet they insist on applying in person. Not used to handling things through the mail—whereas for foreigners, that's standard. Guess I'll have to check with the Moldovan side to see if there's any flexibility. Seems unlikely though.

I'm honestly too tired to even ask Hanoi how the decision to return to Kyiv is progressing. But it seems the team is really eager. Mong keeps bringing it up now and then, wondering when there'll be an answer. I had to text Minh to check. Turns out, today they're submitting it for approval and have consulted with relevant agencies—"basically agreed." That means by the weekend, we might get the order to return to Kyiv.

So, we've spent the extra time from early May (I raised the issue around May 3–4) doing nothing productive—only damaging Vietnam's image in the eyes of Ukraine, the diplomatic community, the Vietnamese community, and even among the Embassy staff. We've had to endure an extra three weeks unnecessarily. Meanwhile, Lviv has gotten more intense. Since Sunday, there've been alerts every day—and multiple times each day.

### **Saturday, May 21, 2022**

Mr. Manh, Chairman of the Vietnamese Association in Odesa, is still upset about my comment calling their behaviour ignorant and short-sighted, so he suggested organizing a meeting for everyone to express their opinions and draw lessons. Honestly, I've had enough of these so-called criticism sessions. People who don't understand will jump in and attack. It's exhausting. I wrote down my viewpoint and sent it to the Association, concluding that whether we agree or disagree, we still have to look ahead, cooperate, and work toward common goals. In short: set the past aside and focus on the future.

Xuan texted me asking if I'd been allowed to return to Kyiv yet. Seeing it in the family group chat, I replied with a side comment: "Not yet, the leadership is still off for the weekend." Last weekend, when there were suspicions that the Embassy might return to Kyiv, they sent a directive over the weekend to stay in Lviv. This weekend, when the Department has likely submitted the proposal to allow us to return, there's no directive at all. So, with so much work waiting in Kyiv, are they keeping us here just to sit around? Or simply to make life difficult for us?

The Palestinian Ambassador called again, inviting me to join him at a concert tonight. Turns out it's hosted by the

Ukrainian Ministry of Culture. I had to lie once again, saying I was on a work trip to Moldova! The Palestinian Ambassador was allowed to return home for nearly a month—just came back to Kyiv yesterday. Meanwhile, the Vietnamese Ambassador is not only barred from visiting home, but even a request to return to the capital to live and work decently still hasn't been approved. Truly ironic. I don't understand what kind of policy this is for someone who stayed behind to keep working. Only one word comes to mind: heartless. I've already called it stupid. And as for this idea of "waiting for an agreement"—negotiations have already ended. What kind of agreement are they still hoping for? Maybe they're waiting for Congo's New Year.

### **Sunday, May 22, 2022**

This morning, I saw Hai returning from somewhere and assumed he'd gone grocery shopping. Turns out, he had gone to fill up on gas. Everyone here wants to go back to Kyiv. Only those back home don't seem to understand that. Let's see when they'll finally issue the order to let us return.

Even before I got out of bed, I saw that Leokadia had sent me an attachment. It was a Facebook post by a Ukrainian. Extremely long. The first half accused Russian soldiers of raping children as young as two or three years old. The second half criticized the U.S., claiming that the \$40 billion in aid wasn't even for weapons. Honestly, I don't know how confident people are when they post things like that. Still criticizing \$40 billion in aid? I keep getting "brainwashed" now and then with posts like this. Of course, I can't respond negatively — these are friends. But they don't realize that doing this only loses sympathy, not gains it.

I feel for Ukraine — a country being devastated, its people

suffering tremendous loss — but exaggerating the enemy’s actions isn’t a smart move. And criticizing the one giving you \$40 billion in aid... who else do you think is going to support you after that?

I sighed to Huy about being “brainwashed.” Huy joked that Thach in Iran had it better than Thach in Ukraine. It’s true — who would’ve thought a peaceful European country could now feel worse than Iran, which was under U.S. and Western sanctions when I worked there. But Iran avoided war, while here they plunged headlong into one.

When the U.S. killed General Soleimani, Iranians raised the red flag calling for holy war atop mosques. It looked like war was inevitable. But before Iran launched a barrage of missiles into Baghdad for revenge, they quietly notified the U.S. through the Iraqi government. The U.S. had time to withdraw and evacuate its troops, so no one was harmed. Both sides saved face, and war was averted. That’s the mark of good leadership — avoiding unnecessary war to survive. Here, avoiding war would’ve been easy, but they didn’t. And now the country is in ruins.

It’s already past May 20. I had told Vichia earlier that his visa result would come around then. Truly, no country is like Vietnam — an ambassador can’t even issue a visa for his guest to visit as a tourist! Yet we keep boasting that Vietnam is a top destination. Suddenly, we just shut the door to Ukrainian tourists. I sent a cable to the Immigration Department asking to resolve this, but who knows if it even reached the right desk.

I told Xuan we have to follow up tomorrow. Xuan said, “They’ve already promised, it should be fine.” But here I am, an ambassador, having to go through the backdoor just to get my guest a visa to Vietnam — as if I’m bribing someone.

Simply because I can't let my friend find out that not even the ambassador can get a visa approved.

Kien in Kherson called to ask whether Vietnamese people traveling through Crimea to the Baltic states can still be considered evacuees. Even matters like that end up with the ambassador. I'm basically doing the work of both consular officers and community officers. That's why the folks back home don't bother assigning consular staff here. And as for the community officers — the moment they set foot back in Vietnam, they fall asleep.

Went to Khanh's place to watch the football match. The Thai team played well but weren't lucky. Our team didn't play as well, but lucked out, scored one goal, and became SEA Games champions. The whole country seems to be erupting...

### **Monday, May 23, 2022**

Today, Thaveporn posted on Facebook: "Winning 2–0 or 3–0 is impressive, but 1–0 is just luck — what's there to be so excited about?" She's right. It was just luck, yet people act as if it were some great achievement. I joked with Thaveporn that she's been researching Vietnam but clearly hasn't fully understood the Vietnamese people. It seems we have so little to be proud of, so we cling to the smallest things and turn them into grand sources of pride.

The cable we've been waiting for didn't arrive — instead, a different one came, instructing the Embassy to halt preparations for the art exhibition in Moldova. I texted Minh, telling him I'd comply with the order, "but it's quite amusing." Minh called back, trying to explain it was the opinion of "relevant agencies." Xuan had already mentioned that Cuong reported back home that organizing the exhibition in Moldova was "not favourable." So this is the opinion of "the agencies,"

no doubt! Meanwhile, even in Ukraine, they're still able to organize cultural events, like the 132nd birthday celebration for President Ho Chi Minh recently held in Odesa.

On the way back from Odesa, Cuong had blurted out that organizing the exhibition wouldn't be safe. So, in short, headquarters listens to the slacker. Minh even mentioned that the Minister added the phrase "strictly comply." It's not like I'm doing this exhibition for personal gain! I simply want to do my job well — so why such heavy-handed restrictions? It's beyond comprehension. And funny how they can issue this kind of directive so quickly, without even consulting me. Meanwhile, there's still no directive about letting the Embassy return to Kyiv.

This afternoon, Khanh had to sort out renting the house for another half-month. So on top of all the downsides I've already reported, today adds another: more unnecessary expenses for the state budget. Over drinks, Khanh mentioned that his birthday is this coming Saturday, and I thought to myself, I might as well stay in Lviv even if they allow us to return to Kyiv. There's no rush to go back and resume work when everyone's treating their duties so lightly. Why bother exerting yourself just to get more frustrated? If they told us to stay here until the end of the year — fine, whatever.

I wasn't planning to message Dung (Vietnam's ambassador to Washington) this afternoon. After the delegation returned from the U.S., I figured that if Dung hadn't mentioned anything, then nothing positive had come out of the trip. But in the end, I sent him a short message: "I can't understand the mindset back home. Maybe they've heard bad things about me, but work is work. Why block me from holding an exhibition in Moldova?"

Dung replied, “The Ministry now — like a bird shot once, scared of bent branches. You can’t say anything, they won’t allow it. Just have to accept it.” I admit, my friend always has a way of softening things. I understand he doesn’t want me to dwell on it, but I can’t agree with this. Precisely because of the issues with the Consular Department and the rescue flights under scrutiny, there’s all the more reason to encourage those of us who actually want to work! We’re the ones trying to restore the Ministry’s reputation — why block us? It’s not about being a scared bird; it’s about vision and responsibility. No vision, no competence, and they listen to gossip. At the very least, if they had any competence, they’d filter out the self-serving rumours. But blocking work for no reason — how does one even begin to understand that?

I thought of sending a cable today to “reflect” on the regional department’s instruction, since only a department-level officer signed the cable. But Xuan was right — they won’t listen. It’s the department level explaining things to me. There’s no chance to talk to the top leadership. No point in addressing the wrong people about the wrong matter. Using the department level to “reflect upward” won’t change anything. Fine. Accept it. Time to relax and enjoy myself.

Nothing to do, so I went to the chess club at the central square. Managed to get a win and a draw today — not just losses like last time. Didn’t even have to pay, since I’m considered part of the club “just for fun.” When things frustrate you like this, dwelling on them only shortens your life. Best to take it lightly, for your health. This war — what’s exhausting isn’t the fighting or the danger of bombs and bullets. What’s draining is the poor treatment from the Ministry’s leadership. Always treating the ambassador like an enemy, never caring about right or wrong, making decisions entirely based on

emotion. Can they even say what I've done wrong?

This morning, Ambassador Gaman contacted me from Hanoi, saying that Hanoi is planning to discuss erecting a Shevchenko statue there. I messaged Hai, who handles Ukraine relations, to remind them that if Hanoi wants to proceed, they should coordinate with the Embassy based on reciprocity and in view of the broader relationship.

Actually, I was the one who originally proposed the idea of a Shevchenko statue in Hanoi during talks with Kyiv's Mayor Klitschko. But that was just to smooth over the plans for the Ho Chi Minh Corner in Kyiv. Now, with the current political mood, the Ho Chi Minh Corner seems unlikely. Ukraine's attitude toward Vietnam isn't favourable. So Hanoi shouldn't proactively push this either.

Ambassador Gaman also asked about some sister-city relationships I'd been promoting. Seems like Gaman is quite active — good to see. If there weren't a war, he and I would probably make a good diplomatic pair. Bilateral relations only thrive when both ambassadors are active; if one side "sleeps," it's hard to get anywhere.

Today, Khoi called to inform me that headquarters has finally approved flight tickets for the eight Vietnamese people in Donetsk to return home. Looks like my cable warning that their delay could "affect the overall achievements" had some effect. Two months without progress — but the moment their "achievements" are mentioned, things move immediately. Funny. Or maybe it's just coincidence. But logically, without that warning, it would've stayed stuck. A few hours later, Lan reported that eight families had been approved to return. Clearly out of touch — I said eight people, not eight families! Do they even keep track of what's going on?

Hung from Odesa reported that people applying for transit visas at the Moldovan Embassy in Romania are still facing difficulties because Moldova doesn't have a system in place and doesn't know how to return the visas. Hung asked if I could "talk to Ambassador Phong in Romania." How could I possibly "order" Ambassador Phong around? If I sent a cable back home requesting support from the Romanian Embassy, that approval would take forever. So if I want to help the people, I'll just have to handle it myself.

I texted Sergiu, the contact I'd met during the recent Moldova trip, to ask for help resolving the issue. It's late already, but I sent the message so it can be followed up on tomorrow. At least that trip helped establish direct contacts so I can work things out quickly now.

## **Tuesday, May 24, 2022**

Today, I sent a letter to the Moldovan Artists' Association informing them that the exhibition would be postponed "due to technical reasons." They replied, expressing regret. Postponing something like this accomplishes nothing, and now they might see me as unreliable. I called Sergiu to discuss the difficulties regarding transit visas and to check if there's been any progress. Sergiu said he would talk to the Moldovan Embassy in Romania to help resolve the issue and would get back to me.

The press today published multiple statements from Medvedchuk. According to him, former President Poroshenko had clandestine dealings with Russia for personal profit. It's amusing. There's a war going on, yet they're dragging each other to court—how can there be unity? I still remember before the war, when Poroshenko had to appear in court. After leaving the courtroom, he surprised me by declaring, "Our common enemy is Putin; we must unite against this common enemy."

Clearly, he had internal political troubles but used the image of an external enemy to deflect attention. Now, it's all coming out. He had skeletons in the closet, so he played the unity card to save himself.

What surprises me even more is that even Poroshenko himself recognized that doing business with Russia was profitable and that he personally benefited significantly from it. Yet, instead of adopting a balanced policy—maintaining ties with both the West and Russia—he chose to fully align with the West after the Revolution of Dignity, and Zelenskyy simply followed that path.

This past Sunday, the Polish President visited Ukraine and delivered a speech in Parliament. Right now, Poland is Ukraine's number one ally. President Zelenskyy even promised that Poland would be his first destination to visit “after victory.” Both sides are offering special privileges to each other's citizens. What worries me most is their effort to allow Polish citizens to join Ukraine's military—essentially participating in the war unofficially. This could escalate the conflict into a broader international war. Outsmarting Russia won't be easy.

### **Wednesday, May 25, 2022**

I woke up this morning to news of President Zelenskyy's speech at Davos, where he asked whether people wake up each day thinking about what they've done for Ukraine. Honestly, it's a bit too self-assured. Does the whole world have to live for Ukraine? I couldn't help but think: what have *you* done for Ukraine, Mr. President? Or rather, have you brought war to Ukraine? Had you been more flexible, this country might have avoided war — might have avoided countless losses in lives and resources.

The revelation about Poroshenko's backdoor dealings

with Russia through Medvedchuk came out now precisely because Poroshenko's faction broke its promises and started criticizing the President's faction for failing to rescue the Azov troops at Azovstal. So, my earlier suspicion — that external affairs were being used to handle internal politics — turns out to be correct. They had an agreement, but when one side didn't uphold it, the other side exposed them.

Today, the media also reported on Kissinger's speech yesterday at Davos. Remarkable — 99 years old and still invited to speak at such a high-level forum. Kissinger advised returning to the pre-war status quo and sitting down to negotiate. But returning to the status quo ante seems unlikely now. Russia has lost too much to simply go back to the starting point. It will need to gain something. Ukraine will definitely lose out.

During dinner, Hai mentioned that Tan's wife and children are preparing to return to Kyiv via Lviv, and Tan had asked the Embassy for assistance. I thought to myself — another person wanting to return to Kyiv. I took the opportunity, over some drinks, to share a few reflections with the team about the Kyiv situation and the recent Moldova exhibition.

Last time, knowing that everyone wanted to return to Kyiv, I tried to be flexible, assuming the Ministry would approve soon. But because their decision-making process requires endless meetings, nothing could move quickly. I instructed the team to absolutely keep quiet, but Cuong still reported back, which led to intense inquiries from the Ministry and everyone being forced to return to Lviv — a big hassle. The art exhibition in Moldova was similar. Cuong reported it as unsafe, and the Ministry hurriedly issued an order to halt it, with the Minister even adding, "strictly comply." The leadership probably thinks I'm undisciplined, hence the need to

keep emphasizing strict compliance. Do they know I was just trying to ease unnecessary hardship for the team? I gain nothing personally! I only returned to Kyiv on May 11 to attend the Turkish Ambassador's reception, so I could reconnect with the diplomatic corps. When people see that the Vietnamese Ambassador is "on the same boat," it's easier to work with them. Deputy Minister Vu said, "You don't need to prove to your counterparts that you're in Kyiv." Well then — should I prove that I haven't returned to Kyiv instead? For what purpose?

I told everyone that this time, I'll be flexible again — Cuong and Tuan can escort Tan's wife and children back to Kyiv, while the Ambassador and two others will stay behind, awaiting orders. At least two staff members can be "liberated" earlier. Everyone seemed quite excited. This time, Cuong likely won't be foolish enough to report back again.

Hai suggested that if the Ministry won't allow the exhibition, the Ambassador could instead host a reception celebrating 30 years of diplomatic relations between the two countries. I replied that organizing an exhibition would earn us more respect — anyone can throw a party. Interestingly, Hai himself acknowledged tonight that the road isn't dangerous at all — whereas just days ago, both he and Cuong were arguing against the exhibition. That's how it is. Their perspective is limited. Sometimes laziness leads them to justify avoidance, but once they understand the situation, it's too late. Had Hai realized this sooner, he might not have sided with Cuong, and Cuong might not have reported unfavourably about me regarding this matter.

Ultimately, all of this stems from the fact that the Ministry's leadership lacks goodwill toward me, so they're ready to believe any unfavourable information about me —

regardless of whether it's logical.

Watching video clips of the fighting in Donbas tonight was heartbreaking. Beautiful fields like paintings, full of blooming rapeseed flowers, but marred by plumes of smoke from artillery fire. I posted one on Facebook with the caption: "Images from the battlefield — what more can be said."

### **Thursday, May 26, 2022**

I woke up this morning and checked how people responded to my post last night. Most of them didn't quite grasp the point. Criticizing Putin is easy enough. But in a country as beautiful as this, if it doesn't know how to skilfully preserve itself — is that solely Putin's fault?

In the end, I felt it was necessary to send a cable back to the European Department regarding coordination. If I say nothing, they'll assume they're right. The Embassy strictly followed the Ministry leadership's directive to halt the exhibition and has already informed our Moldovan partners, but citing security and safety concerns is unconvincing. Leaders of various countries are still visiting Ukraine, Ukrainians are importing thousands of luxury cars across the border, ambassadors from other countries are still traveling these same routes because there are no flights — and since the start of the war, there hasn't been any specific information about danger on this route. Meanwhile, strengthening relations and addressing practical issues with Moldova is urgent. In particular, the matter of transit visas for people returning to Ukraine remains unresolved.

I suggested that next time, if they see anything questionable, they should discuss it with us before issuing decisions. Let's see how Headquarters responds.

I called Comrade X to inform him that the exhibition plan had been halted — since I know it was his suggestion that led to this. I sent him photos of the exhibition space our Moldovan partners had prepared, just to show how his decision ruined the entire plan. Comrade X said he always supports the Embassy’s activities and asked if he should say something to reverse the decision at Headquarters. Reverse it for what? Once they’ve made a decision, nobody changes it. Besides, I’ve already informed the Moldovan side about the postponement. It’s just disheartening.

I also called the Deputy Director of the Immigration Department to sort out the visas for Vichia and Irina. At first, he said just to apply through the electronic portal — only to realize later that Ukraine isn’t on the list of permitted entries. Imagine: guests of the Ambassador having to apply like any other tourist. I don’t understand how Vietnam expects to develop tourism like this. I sent a cable back on May 15 proposing they allow Ukrainians to enter. Now, ten days later, it seems the Deputy Director wasn’t even aware of it. How are we supposed to coordinate policies this way?

### **Friday, May 27, 2022**

Early in the morning, before I even got up, the cryptographic officer came in and handed me the order from Headquarters permitting us to return to Kyiv. After breakfast, I informed everyone. I told them, as I’d mentioned before, I would stay until Monday before returning — naturally, Hai and Mong would stay with me. The others could decide for themselves. Cuong immediately asked to leave together with Tuan. That shows how eager everyone was to get back to Kyiv. And isn’t it ironic, considering who it was that caused everyone to endure an extra 15 days here?

We had already returned to Kyiv on May 11. Had he stayed silent, I'm sure we would have received the order within a few days. But instead, he reported back, leading Headquarters to think the Ambassador was acting undisciplined, hence the delayed order. I acted flexibly to get the job done, to make things easier for everyone — as should be done. What did I gain personally from returning on May 11? Nothing. And returning on that date wouldn't have negatively impacted bilateral relations — in fact, it would likely have been beneficial. The fact that Ambassador Gaman, his wife, and the Vice Chairwoman of the Friendship Association were all asking where the Ambassador was — isn't that evidence that returning on May 11 would only have improved relations?

On May 15, after returning from Moldova, I reported four disadvantages of not allowing Embassy staff to return — the consequences with Ukraine, with the diplomatic corps in Kyiv, with the Vietnamese community, and with the Embassy staff themselves — thinking this would prompt an early decision. But the regional department only submitted the recommendation last Friday, and it took leadership a full week to decide! What happened during these past 15 days? Nothing at all, except Russia advancing slightly on the battlefield. Kyiv's situation remained unchanged. All this delay achieved was wasted time, wasted state funds, and further damage to our credibility with Ukraine, the diplomatic corps, and the Vietnamese community. That's the kind of "fun" leadership we have at the Ministry now.

In the afternoon, Sergiu Russu from Moldova texted saying that people can write a letter to the Moldovan Embassy authorizing a representative to apply for the transit visa on behalf of a group. I messaged Hung in Odesa to follow up. Hopefully, this will finally remove the obstacles for those

applying for transit visas through Moldova.

In the morning, I also tasked Cuong with arranging a meeting with Ukraine's Immigration Department to address how those still waiting for residency cards can return to Ukraine. This will be our priority task when we get back to Kyiv.

In the evening, the three of us had dinner together. It felt much quieter. But this time, the quietness wasn't like the sadness we felt when saying goodbye during the evacuation at the end of February. This time, it felt cheerful — because we were preparing to return to Kyiv.

Yesterday, Mong brought up the idea of having his wife come here with Xuan. I agreed. But again, it has to be done flexibly — there's no way to request official permission. Headquarters hasn't even decided whether to allow evacuated staff to return, let alone spouses.

This morning, Xuan also mentioned needing help arranging a visa for Mrs. La. I'll have to find a flexible way — maybe speak to the wife of the Ukrainian Ambassador so she can reach out to the Polish Embassy. Submitting an official note would be too awkward. But in the end, there was no other way — I still had to prepare a formal note from Lviv to send to the Polish Embassy in Hanoi for Mong's wife.

## **Saturday, May 28, 2022**

Today is the last weekend in Lviv before returning to Kyiv. I took a stroll through the old streets and the central square, where I've spent the past three months. The weather was beautiful. The city itself is lovely and peaceful. Even during wartime, it still feels like a tourist hub. Without the war, it would be even more stunning.

I sat down to play chess with the elderly men in the central square. Next week, once I'm back in Kyiv, I won't have the chance to play chess like this anymore. Maybe Kyiv has similar places, but it won't be as convenient as here. Just a few steps, and you're already at the European chess club.

The Ukrainian Ambassador in Germany is embroiled in yet another scandal after posting a photo on Twitter — a bullet cartridge resting on a snail, captioned “German arms support to Ukraine moves at a snail’s pace.” There’s probably no other ambassador like Ambassador Melnyk who “scolds” the host country so freely, almost like he’s singing a tune. I don’t understand — if this were any other country, they probably would have declared him *persona non grata* long ago. If I were to say something that didn’t sit well with Ukrainian friends, they’d surely send me packing. Yet they can openly criticize the host country and its leaders without holding back.

### **Sunday, May 29, 2022**

Yesterday was Khanh’s birthday, but he reserved the day to spend with his wife. So today, he held a birthday gathering and invited me and Mong to join. Hai stayed home. I decided to remain in Lviv and not return to Kyiv immediately because I had promised to stay and celebrate Khanh’s birthday. After three months of hardship during the war, the brotherhood we shared made it important to mark this day together. Rushing back to Kyiv wouldn’t have accomplished anything.

It was a joyful evening. Khanh’s daughter, seeing her father happily singing in Vietnamese with us, probably felt happy too. Both mother and daughter sat at the dining table chatting while the three of us sang karaoke.

## **Monday, May 30, 2022**

This morning, after breakfast, the three of us set off back to Kyiv. And with that, 96 days of the war's early period and our time in evacuation away from Kyiv came to an end. Returning to Kyiv felt like returning home.

The moment we crossed into the city, familiar streets greeted us like old friends. The buildings, though worn by war, stood with quiet resilience, unchanged in their grace. Even the air seemed different — softer somehow, scented with memory. Kyiv wasn't just a place on the map; it was a heartbeat I'd been away from for too long. As we passed the corners where laughter once echoed and light spilled from café windows, I felt a quiet joy stir inside me. Hello, my beautiful Kyiv — I'm home again.

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