



A career at the Bar beckons for the Times/2TG mooting winner

Arriving in the UK as a Chechen refugee, Maya Chilaeva worked hard to reach university. After a job in investment banking she is now training for the Bar

When Maya Chilaeva arrived in Britain after having escaped the civil war in Chechnya at the age of 12, she spoke little English. Last month the aspiring barrister was in the winning pair in the 2TG mooting competition, run in conjunction with *The Times*. Chilaeva and her team-mate, Tey Guan Khoo, who attended a state school in Singapore before gaining degrees from King's College London and Cambridge University, beat Matt Bignell, a law graduate from the University of Bristol who has just started his pupillage at Devereux Chambers, and Kim Pullinger, who is working as a paralegal after completing the law conversion and Bar training courses at the University of Law in Bloomsbury, London.

The moot took place virtually and was set in the world of Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials*. The problem concerned a discrimination and equal pay dispute between a disgruntled television presenter, Lyra Belaqua, and the Magisterium Broadcasting Corporation, which had sacked her for a tweet she sent denying climate change, and had paid a male presenter, Roger Parslow, three times more than Belaqua to present her show.

Chilaeva, now 29, has just started a pupillage at Quadrant Chambers in London, but 17 years ago she and two younger brothers came to live in Bude, Cornwall, with guardians

they had only met once, in Ingushetia, in the North Caucasus of Russia. Not knowing when she would see her friends and family again, Chilaeva dealt with the uncertainty “by taking each day as it came”.

She recalls: “I went from being at the top of my class in Chechnya to not being able to understand or communicate with the teacher or my peers.”

But the experience, she says, made her work harder than she had done before and gave her a work ethic that has stayed with her.

Her parents arrived the next year and sought political asylum. The moment they were granted indefinite leave to remain in the UK, Chilaeva says, was “a major turning point and transformed my life for the better”.

The family moved to London, where Chilaeva went to school before gaining a fully funded place at Christ’s Hospital school in Horsham, West Sussex, for A-levels. “These were probably two of the happiest years of my school life. I had excellent teachers and I loved my subjects, particularly history and English,” she says.

After a degree in history and international relations at the London School of Economics, Chilaeva worked as an equity research analyst at Bank of America Merrill Lynch, an investment bank, for three years before changing careers and training for the Bar.

Having enjoyed finding her voice and expressing her views through debating at school, she was driven by the idea of being an advocate to speak on behalf of others. But she also thought she would enjoy the analytical and problem-solving elements of being a barrister, as well as the independence.

Mooting, she says, has shown that she can “persuade and do so in my own voice”, which has increased her confidence, as well as improving her legal research skills.

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