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Shock (im)mobility: African migrants and the Russian invasion of Ukraine

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Abstract

In the wake of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, many African students and other groups experienced shock mobility – panicked flight from the war zone – as well as shock immobility, as they were prevented from fleeing Ukraine due to racial discrimination.

Theme

Shock (Im)mobilities

Keywords

war, Ukraine, Africa, racial discrimination

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African migrants in Ukraine

On 24 February 2022, Russia began a military invasion of Ukraine² which some commentators have called the largest military operation in Europe since World War II.³ By April 1, an estimated, 7.1 million people had been displaced inside Ukraine,⁴ while another 3.2 million people had fled the country, according to the United Nations International Organisation for Migration (IOM).⁵ Prior to the Russian invasion, nearly a quarter of the 76,000 international students in Ukraine were African,⁶ while others were workers. Ukraine's appeal as a destination for foreign students can be traced back to the Soviet era, when there was major investment in higher education.⁷

Between the 1950s and the late 1980s, Soviet scholarship programs brought thousands of students from Africa and Asia to Ukraine and other Eastern bloc states to train as doctors and engineers.⁸ A deliberate attempt to attract students from newly independent African countries,⁹ these scholarship programmes were part of a charm offensive guided by a socialist ideology that was perceived as being less racist than that of its capitalist Cold War enemy, the United States.¹⁰ Through the programmes, and employing a propaganda of equal opportunity, the Soviet government hoped to develop alliances with Communist governments in Africa. Nevertheless, the schemes were predominantly open to students – especially men – from Uganda, Kenya, the Congo, and Nigeria. On completion of their studies, students were expected to return home, and were not extended opportunities to stay, work or seek Soviet citizenship.¹¹

Three decades after its fall, Ukraine – as well as several other countries within the former Soviet Union – have remained important destinations for African students. Students of all genders were drawn by the perceived quality of education, as well as tuition and living costs which were low in comparison with Western Europe and North America. Ukraine was also widely seen as a gateway to the European job market, with uncomplicated visa conditions, and the possibility of receiving

² Parker, Claire. 2022. What counts as an 'invasion,' or as 'lethal aid'? Here's what some terms from the Russia-Ukraine crisis really mean. *The Washington Post*. 23 February 2022. Available online at: <https://archive.today/2022.02.23-204700/https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/02/23/key-terms-russia-ukraine/>. Last accessed 29 March 2022.

³ Ibid.

⁴ United Nations International Organisation for Migration (IOM). 2022. 7.1 Million People Displaced by the War in Ukraine: IOM Survey. Available on at: <https://www.iom.int/news/71-million-people-displaced-war-ukraine-iom-survey>. Last accessed 26 April 2022.

⁵ Zelensky, Volodymyr. 2022. 6.5 million people displaced inside Ukraine due to Russian invasion. *Business Standard*. 19 March 2022. Available online at: [https://www.business-standard.com/article/international/6-5-million-people-displaced-inside-ukraine-due-to-russian-invasion-122031900024_1.html#:~:text=Photo%2FVadim%20Ghirda\)-,Amid%20escalating%20war%20between%20Russia%20and%20Ukraine%2C%20the%20UN%20migration,the%20International%20Organisation%20for%20Migration](https://www.business-standard.com/article/international/6-5-million-people-displaced-inside-ukraine-due-to-russian-invasion-122031900024_1.html#:~:text=Photo%2FVadim%20Ghirda)-,Amid%20escalating%20war%20between%20Russia%20and%20Ukraine%2C%20the%20UN%20migration,the%20International%20Organisation%20for%20Migration). Last accessed 29 March 2022.

⁶ Thorbecke, Catherine. 2022. 'We come for our own': How Black volunteers rallied online to help African students in Ukraine. *CNN Business*. 18 March 2022. Available online at: <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/03/18/tech/african-students-ukraine-social-media/index.html>. Last accessed 29 March 2022.

⁷ Ali, Soraya. 2022. Ukraine: Why so many African and Indian students were in the country. *BBC*. 4 March 2022. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-60603226>. Last accessed 29 March 2022.

⁸ Hundeyin, David. 2022. The false image of Africans in Ukraine. *Inkstick*. 17 March 2022. Available online at: <https://inkstickmedia.com/the-false-image-of-africans-in-ukraine/>. Last accessed 23 March 2022.

⁹ Ali. 2022.

¹⁰ Helbig, Adriana. 2011. "On stage, everyone loves a Black": *Afro-Ukrainian Folk Fusion, Migration, and Racial Identity in Ukraine*. Trustees of Columbia University in the City of New York: 3. Available online at: https://shron1.chtyvo.org.ua/Adriana_N_Helbig/On_stage_everyone_loves_a_Black_Afro-Ukrainian_Folk_Fusion_Migration_and_Racial_Identity_in_Ukraine.pdf?PHPSESSID=dcv24vqdbdsm2trldts9bg7o21. Last accessed 23 March 2022.

¹¹ Ibid.

permanent residency.¹² In 2020, 20 percent of the total foreign student population in Russian was made up of Africans from Morocco (of whom there were about 8500), Nigeria (4000), and Egypt (3500).¹³ There were also students from the Democratic Republic of Congo (200), Côte d'Ivoire (500), and Kenya (200).¹⁴ Most were studying either medicine, engineering, or business.

Trapped: African migrants in Ukraine following the Russian invasion

Following the Russian military invasion on February 24, many people from racial minorities, especially those from Africa, found themselves trapped inside the country.¹⁵ Media reports, official statements, and social media messages that I collected between 28 February and 24 March report extensively on how blacks were stopped at the borders from leaving Ukraine, and some were turned away by neighbouring countries. Jean Jacque, a Congolese pharmacy student living in the city of Lviv, painted this picture: “We went to the border of Ukraine and Poland, but we African foreigners had problems crossing (...) The soldiers there, they tell you: ‘you are going to stay here, you are fleeing the war, stay here, you are going to fight with us, you are not going to leave, especially you black people’”.¹⁶ Yusuf Abdallah, a Tanzanian medical student shared the following experience: “We wanted to go to the train, but we were stopped outside and told not to go in. But other people, like the Ukrainians, could go in. So that's a big problem here (...)”.¹⁷ One African Twitter user who had reached Poland expressed her frustrations so: “We finally made it across and we're told accommodation at the hotel is only for Ukrainians. No sleep or food in 3 days, walked 20+ km (...)”.¹⁸ This was one of many such reports. Minority Rights Group spokesperson Anna Alboth noted that free transportation services for refugees often denied their services to non-Ukrainians. This unfair treatment had forced some refugees, notably Nigerian and Indian students, to return to Lviv in Ukraine.¹⁹ South African ambassador to Poland Clayson Monyela also remarked that African students had been “treated badly” at the border.²⁰

In response to these allegations, Nigerian President Muhammad Buhari issued a statement on his Twitter account:

There have been unfortunate reports of Ukrainian police & security personnel refusing to allow Nigerians to board buses and trains heading towards [the] Ukraine-Poland border

¹² Ali. 2022.

¹³ Hundeyin. 2022.

¹⁴ Tovey, Mark. 2022. African refugees fleeing Ukraine are facing 'shockingly racist' treatment with border guards blocking their attempts to cross the border into Poland, continent's leaders claim. *Daily Mail Online*. 2 March 2022. Available online at: <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-10562031/African-refugees-fleeing-Ukraine-facing-shocking-racism-Nigerians-told-no-blacks-bus.html>. Last accessed 29 March 2022.

¹⁵ Pronczuk, Monika and Ruth Maclean. 2022. Africans say Ukrainian authorities hindered them from fleeing. *New York Times*. 1 March 2022. Available online at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/01/world/europe/Ukraine-refugee-discrimination.html>. Last accessed 29 March 2022.

¹⁶ Horton, Ben Anthony. 2022. ‘Ukrainians go first’: How black and brown people are struggling to escape the Russian invasion. *Euronews*. 2 March 2022. Available online at: <https://www.euronews.com/2022/03/02/ukrainians-go-first-how-black-and-brown-people-are-struggling-to-escape-the-russian-invasi>. Last accessed 29 March 2022.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Bathke, Benjamin. 2022. Ukraine, eastern EU states accused of discriminating against non-Ukrainian refugees. *InfoMigrants*. 28 February 2022. Available online at: <https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/38831/ukraine-eastern-eu-states-accused-of-discriminating-against-nonukrainian-refugees>. Last accessed 29 March 2022.

¹⁹ Pikulicka-Wilczewska, Agnieszka. 2022. Non-Ukrainian refugees recount their long journey to Poland. *Al-Jazeera*. 2 March 2022. Available online at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/3/2/non-ukrainian-refugees-arrive-at-polands-przemysl-station>. Last accessed 29 March 2022.

²⁰ Ibid.

(...) We understand the pain [and] fear that is confronting all people who find themselves in this terrifying place (...) We also appreciate that those in official positions in security and border management will in most cases be experiencing impossible expectations in a situation they never expected (...) But, for that reason, it is paramount that everyone is treated with dignity and without favour. All who flee a conflict situation have the same right to safe passage under UN Convention and the colour of their passport or their skin should make no difference.

The African Union (AU) also added its voice to the apparent attempts to stop black people leaving Ukraine: “(A)ll people have the right to cross international borders during conflict, and as such, should enjoy the same rights to cross to safety from the conflict in Ukraine, notwithstanding their nationality or racial identity.”²¹

African migrants were also turned away from neighbouring countries partly because of their visa status. Unlike Ukrainians, many non-Europeans fleeing the war needed visas to get into neighbouring countries.²² As Michael, a Nigerian migrant, noted: “They won’t let Africans in. Blacks without European passports cannot cross the border (...).”²³ Moreover, African migrants from Ukraine who fled to neighbouring countries were received differently by their host.

Speaking to the United Nations General Assembly on February 28, Polish ambassador Krzysztof Szczerski asserted that allegations of racial or religious based discrimination were “a complete lie and a terrible insult to us”. While noting 300,000 people from 125 countries including those from Nigeria, Morocco, and Algeria had already arrived in Poland, he lamented that “(t)he nationals of all countries who suffered from Russian aggression or whose life is at risk can seek shelter in my country.”²⁴ Unlike the discriminatory experiences reported by some African migrants seeking refuge in Poland, it is worth mentioning that some others who had fled to countries like Moldova, Hungary and Romania said they had been well catered for. According to Tara Daraa, a Moroccan dentistry student, he and other Africans were provided with food and other necessities by Romanians: “They gave us everything.”²⁵ This does not in any way mean that all African students seeking refuge in Poland were discriminated against nor does it mean that all refugees in other countries bordering Ukraine were well treated. Sarah Ajifa Idachaba, a 19-year-old Nigerian medical student, and her older sister were, despite long queues, allowed to cross the Ukrainian border and arrived safely in Poland.²⁶

²¹ Mohamed, Hamza. 2022. AU ‘disturbed’ by reports Africans stopped from escaping Ukraine. *Al Jazeera*. 01 March 2022. Available online at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/3/1/au-disturbed-by-reports-africans-stopped-from-escaping-ukraine>. Last accessed 29 March 2022.

²² Africa News. 2022. Ukraine War: Africans stuck at European borders as they seek refuge. 01 March 2022. Available online at: <https://www.africanews.com/2022/03/01/ukraine-war-africans-stuck-at-european-borders-as-they-seek-refuge/#:~:text=Embassies%20around%20the%20world%20were,to%20make%20space%20for%20Ukrainians>. Last accessed 23 March 2022.

²³ Omokri, Reno. 2022. Opinion: Russia-Ukraine Exposes African hypocrisy. *The African Crime & Conflict Journal*. 02. March 2022. Available online at: <https://theafricancriminologyjournal.wordpress.com/2022/03/02/opinion-russia-ukraine-conflict-exposes-black-africans-hypocrisy/>. Last accessed 29 March 2022.

²⁴ Africa News. 2022. Ukraine War: Africans stuck at European borders as they seek refuge. 01 March 2022. Available online at: <https://www.africanews.com/2022/03/01/ukraine-war-africans-stuck-at-european-borders-as-they-seek-refuge/#:~:text=Embassies%20around%20the%20world%20were,to%20make%20space%20for%20Ukrainians>. Last accessed 29 March 2022.

²⁵ Pronczuk, Monika and Ruth Maclean. 2022. Africans say Ukrainian authorities hindered them from fleeing. *The New York Times*. 1 March 2022. Available online at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/01/world/europe/ukraine-refugee-discrimination.html>. Last accessed 29 March 2022.

²⁶ DW. 2022. Africa: African students scramble to flee fighting in Ukraine. Available online at: <https://www.dw.com/en/african-students-scramble-to-flee-fighting-in-ukraine/a-60947768>. Last accessed 29 March 2022.

The diverse ways African migrants flee the war

A number of African migrants have fled or been evacuated from Ukraine by various means. Some had to trek for long distances before boarding a bus. Kouadio Simeon, an Ivory Coast student studying in the northeastern city of Kharkiv said that he and some friends had to travel more than 1000 kilometres west to the city of Lviv, about 75 kilometres from the border to Poland, before managing to get a bus to Poland.²⁷ Others were assisted by their national governments. Ghana was the first African country to fly home students – evacuating 17 of its 500 students on March 1.²⁸ Kenya evacuated 26 nationals from inside Ukraine around the same time.²⁹ The Nigerian government stationed buses at border points to evacuate its citizens and coordinate their flights back home,³⁰ an initiative which had seen the evacuation of 415 Nigerians, mostly students, by March 4.³¹ Similarly, South Africa evacuated 25 students stranded in Poland, Romania and Hungary.³²

The war and fleeing: Migrant perceptions in Ukraine and public perceptions in Africa

Although the perception of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in Africa and amongst Africans was divided, it ought to be underlined here that most Africans have decried the apparent ill-treatment of African migrants – both collectively and individually – seeking refuge. The AU condemned discrimination against African migrants by noting that, during conflict, everyone has the right to cross international borders and to reach safety. Similar condemnations were issued by the Nigerian government.³³

Cases of racial discrimination against African migrants have been reported in major media outlets and social media. Twitter, in particular, has been used by migrants to report on and denounce incidents of racial discrimination. On one of the main Twitter accounts, “Africans in Ukraine @BringOurPPLHome”, migrants shared and uploaded videos and images portraying how they had been pushed back while trying to cross the Ukrainian border, chased by police, removed from trains, and had limited access to food, water, and shelter.

²⁷ DW. 2022.

²⁸ Mensah, Kent. 2022. Ghana Welcomes First Citizens Evacuated From Ukraine. *VOA News*. 1 March 2022. Available online at: <https://www.voanews.com/a/ghana-welcomes-first-citizens-evacuated-from-ukraine/6464744.html>. Last accessed 24 March 2022.

²⁹ Muia, Joseph. 2022. 26 Kenyans In Ukraine Evacuated As Russian Invasion Intensifies. *Citizen Digital*. 9 March 2022. Available online at: <https://www.citizen.digital/news/26-kenyans-in-ukraine-evacuated-as-russia-continue-with-its-invasion-ministry-of-foreign-affairs-says-n294180>. Last accessed 1 April 2022.

³⁰ Peters, Adele. 2022. The war in Ukraine is highlighting racial differences in how Europe treats refugees. *Fast Company*. 2 March 2022. Available online at: <https://www.fastcompany.com/90726644/the-war-in-ukraine-is-highlighting-racial-differences-in-how-europe-treats-refugees>. Last accessed 24 March 2022.

³¹ France 24. 2022. More than 400 Nigerians who fled Ukraine return home. 4 March 2022. <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20220304-more-than-400-nigerians-who-fled-ukraine-return-home>. Last accessed 24 March 2022.

³² African News. 2022. South African students arrive home after leaving Ukraine. 10 March 2022. Available online at: <https://www.africanews.com/2022/03/10/south-african-students-arrive-home-after-leaving-ukraine/>. Last accessed 24 March 2022.

³³ Al Jazeera. 2022. AU ‘disturbed’ by reports Africans stopped from escaping Ukraine. 1 March 2022. Available online at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/3/1/au-disturbed-by-reports-africans-stopped-from-escaping-ukraine>. Last accessed 1 March 2022.

Shock (im)mobility

In the weeks following the Russian invasion, African migrants in Ukraine have experienced a typical example of what Xiang refers to as “shock (im)mobilities”, namely “dramatic incidents of mobilities and immobility caused by acute disruptions and uncertainties.”³⁴ The African migrants experienced both shock mobility – panicked flight from the war zone, as well as shock immobility – the inability to move as result of racial discrimination and other obstacles. More specifically, their experiences illustrate a subtype of shock (im)mobility which Xiang identifies as “limbo mobility”: “People in shock mobilities are ill-prepared in terms of where they want to reach and how, and they are turned away by communities along the way.”³⁵ While migrants during the COVID-19 pandemic were turned away due to the public fear of the virus, African migrants in Ukraine were pushed into limbo mobility because of racial discrimination. Shock (im)mobilities render hidden tensions visible. And they in turn, have lasting impacts on relations across populations. While the migrants’ experience may not directly play into geopolitical games, such memories shape popular perceptions about the global relations which will, in the long run, affect geopolitics.

³⁴ Xiang, Biao. 2021. Shock (Im)mobilities. Available online at: <https://www.eth.mpg.de/molab-inventory/shock-immobilities>. Last accessed 30 March 2022.

³⁵ Xiang, Biao. 2021. Shock mobility: convulsions in human migration are having large impacts. *MoLab Inventory of Mobilities and Socioeconomic Changes*. Department ‘Anthropology of Economic Experimentation’. Halle/Saale: Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology. <https://www.eth.mpg.de/molab-inventory/shock-immobilities/shock-mobility>. Last accessed 30 March 2022.