



MoLab Inventory of Mobilities and Socioeconomic Changes, June 2023

Shock (Im)mobilities Special Section: African Migrants in the Ukraine War

Curated by Mengnjo Tardzenyuy Thomas

2. A State of limbo: African migrants in Ukraine after the Russian invasion

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Abstract

Following the Russian military in February 2022, African migrants in Ukraine found themselves in a state of limbo, with many forced to flee for safety. Many ended up in places they had never planned to visit, with some who had fled to Poland landing up in Hungary or back in Ukraine in camps.

Theme

Shock (Im)mobilities

Keywords

Limbo mobility, abandonment, racial discrimination, group formation, collective, destinations, African migrants

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On Friday 24 February 2023, the first anniversary of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine was commemorated in Ukraine and among Ukrainian communities. During the commemorations, President Volodymyr Zelensky called the invasion² “the hardest day of our modern history”.³ Some commentators have called it the largest military operation in Europe since World War II. The invasion marked a major escalation of a conflict which started with the “Ukrainian Revolution of Dignity” in 2014. In the period that followed, Russia annexed Crimea, and Russian-backed separatists seized part of south-east Ukraine, thereby starting the war in Donbas.⁴ The origins of that conflict date back to 2011, when Russia began a large military build-up along the border with Ukraine.⁵ During the build-up, Russia’s President Vladimir Putin questioned Ukraine’s right to statehood, accused Ukraine of being dominated by Neo-Nazis who were persecuting the Russian-speaking minority, blamed the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) for being a threat to Russia’s security through its eastward expansion, and demanded that Ukraine be barred from ever joining the alliance.⁶ On 21 February 2022, Russia recognised two self-proclaimed states in Donbas under the control of pro-Russian separatists, the Donetsk People’s Republic and the Luhansk People’s Republic. These states had not been recognised by other countries.⁷ The next day, the Federation Council of Russia authorised the use of military force, and consequently, Russian troops entered both territories. Finally, on 24 February 2022, President Putin announced a special military operation to “demilitarise and denazify” Ukraine.⁸ This was followed by missile and air strikes throughout Ukraine, including on the capital Kyiv, and was accompanied by a large ground invasion from several directions. In response, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy enacted martial law, and called for a general mobilisation against Russia.⁹

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.ph/2022.02.23/204700/https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/02/23/key-terms-russia-ukraine/>. Last accessed 29 March 2022.

³ Ryan, Missy and Erin Cunningham, Andrew Jeong, Ellen Francis, Adela Suliman, Claire Parker and David L. Stern. 2023. Russia-Ukraine war anniversary: No negotiations in sight, Zelensky says, as Biden rules out fighter jets for Ukraine. *The Washington Post*. 24 February 2023. Available online at: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/02/24/ukraine-one-year-anniversary-russia-invasion/>. Last accessed 17 February 2023.

⁴ Kirby, Jen. 2022. Putin's invasion of Ukraine, explained. *Vox*. 28 February 2022. Available online at: <https://www.vox.com/2022/2/23/22948534/russia-ukraine-war-putin-explosions-invasion-explained>. Last accessed 29 March 2022.

⁵ Abbruzzese, Jason. 2022. Putin says he is fighting a resurgence of Nazism. That's not true. *NBC*. 24 February 2022. Available online at: <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/politics-news/live-blog/russia-ukraine-conflict-live-updates-n1289655/ncrd1289673#blogHeader>. Last accessed 29 March 2022.

⁶ Wiegrefe, Klaus. 2022. NATO's Eastward Expansion: Is Vladimir Putin Right? *Spiegel International*. 15 February 2022. Available online at: <https://www.spiegel.de/international/world/nato-s-eastward-expansion-is-vladimir-putin-right-a-bf318d2c-7aeb-4b59-8d5f-1d8c94e1964d>. Last accessed 29 March 2022.

⁷ Hernandez, Joe. 2022. Why Luhansk and Donetsk are key to understanding the latest escalation in Ukraine. *NPR*. 23 February 2022. Available online at: <https://www.npr.org/2022/02/22/1082345068/why-luhansk-and-donetsk-are-key-to-understanding-the-latest-escalation-in-ukrain>. Last accessed 29 March 2022. Prior to their annexation by Russia later that year, Syria and North Korea also recognised these states.

⁸ Grunau, Andrea and Matthias von Hein, Eugen Theise, Joscha Weber. 2022. Fact check: Do Vladimir Putin's justifications for going to war against Ukraine add up?. *DW*. 25 February 2022. Available online at: <https://www.dw.com/en/fact-check-do-vladimir-putins-justifications-for-going-to-war-against-ukraine-add-up/a-60917168>. Last accessed 29 March 2022.

⁹ Ukrainian president signs decree on general mobilisation of population - Interfax. *Reuters*. 24 February 2022. Available online at: <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/ukrainian-president-signs-decree-general-mobilisation-population-interfax-2022-02-24/>. Last accessed 29 March 2022.

As a result of the invasion,¹⁰ a significant number of civilians in Ukraine, including African migrants, found themselves in a state of what Biao Xiang calls ‘limbo mobility’. ‘Limbo mobility’ refers to movements without an intended destination or a planned route.¹¹ A large percentage of the population were caught unprepared for the invasion, and did not know where to run. And as they fled, some were turned away at Ukrainian borders. On 3 November 2022, United Nation’s High Commissioner for Refugees Filippo Grandi said that 14 million people had been displaced from their homes by the invasion.¹² It is estimated that Africans accounted for nearly a quarter of the 76,000 international students in Ukraine. There are no official statistics on the number of African workers in Ukraine.¹³

In the wake of the invasion, limbo mobility among African migrants manifested itself in different ways, as accounts by three students about their journey illustrate. The 25-year-old Nigerian student Alexander Somto Orah recounted that when the crisis began, he and his friends rushed to seek refuge in the Nigerian embassy in Kyiv. But the embassy was locked and its staff had been evacuated.¹⁴ At that point, they decided to flee to Poland, which had announced it was accepting refugees from Ukraine. But at the train station, they found out that Blacks were being summarily turned away, and at times, were even being violently forced off trains. Due to overcrowding at the station, Orah and his friends decided to jump onto a moving train, latching onto its locked doors. Fortunately a conductor noticed and opened the doors, allowing them to board safely. They finally arrived at the relatively safe Ukrainian city of Lviv. At Lviv, they observed a distinct divide among the people who were fleeing Ukraine. The Ukrainian police were asking for papers and conscripting Ukrainian men as they tried to leave the country. With rumours on social media that Poland was accepting everybody, Orah and his friends decided to go on. But there were no trains, buses or taxis, and many people had abandoned their cars by the roadside after running out of petrol. So Orah and his friends walked from Lviv to the Polish border, about 75 kilometres away.

¹⁰ Tardzenyuy Thomas, Mengnjo. 2022. Shock (im)mobility: African migrants and the Russian invasion of Ukraine. MoLab Inventory of Mobilities and Socioeconomic Changes. Department ‘Anthropology of Economic Experimentation’. Halle/Saale: Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology. Available online at: <https://www.eth.mpg.de/molab-inventory/shock-immobilities/shock-immobility-African-migrants-and-the-Russian-invasion-of-Ukraine>. Last accessed 30 November 2022.

¹¹ 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. Available online at: <https://www.eth.mpg.de/molab-inventory/shock-immobilities/shock-mobility>. Last accessed 20 November 2022.

¹² Euronews. 2022. Russia’s war in Ukraine has displaced more than 14 million Ukrainians, says Filippo Grandi. Available online at: <https://www.euronews.com/2022/11/03/russias-war-in-ukraine-has-displaced-more-than-14-million-ukrainians-says-filippo-grandi>. Last accessed 30 November 2022.

¹³ Tardzenyuy Thomas, Mengnjo. 2022. Shock (im)mobility: African migrants and the Russian invasion of Ukraine. MoLab Inventory of Mobilities and Socioeconomic Changes. Department ‘Anthropology of Economic Experimentation’. Halle/Saale: Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology. Available online at: <https://www.eth.mpg.de/molab-inventory/shock-immobilities/shock-immobility-African-migrants-and-the-Russian-invasion-of-Ukraine>. Last accessed 30 November 2022.

¹⁴ Adeshokan Oluwatosin. 2022. A Mixed Bag for Black Ukraine Refugees: Africans face kindness and discrimination as they flee the war. *New Lines Magazine*. Available online at: <https://newlinesmag.com/reportage/a-mixed-bag-for-black-ukraine-refugees/>. Last accessed 22 November 2022.

Vukile Dlamini, a South African student in Vinnytsia, remarked that the invasion left many African migrants, including herself, feeling desperate and abandoned.¹⁵ While recounting how she and other South African students had fled and finally ended up at the Romanian border, she lamented that: “We would have loved to go back home, we can’t, the airports are closed, we are evacuating from city to city and trying to leave the country on foot or by car. As foreigners in this country, we do not know what will happen next but God will never leave us, not now.”¹⁶

A British-Nigerian medical student Melissa also shared the numerous attempts she had made to leave Ukraine.¹⁷ A student in Dnipro, Melissa said that when the crisis began on February 24, her feelings ranged from fear to anger, disappointment and shock. Her Nigerian-based family’s attempts to get her out of the Ukraine had ended in vain when flights were suspended. Meanwhile, the attempts she had made to contact the Nigerian embassy about her evacuation had fallen on deaf ears. Melissa summarised her experience as follows:

I travelled with a group of friends – we were seven in number (two Nigerians, two Moroccans, one Zambian, two UK residents but one with a German passport, the other with a British passport). We had booked a bus from Dnipro to Poland on Saturday, February 26 2022, at 07:20 in the morning. On getting to the bus station, we found out the bus was cancelled. We went to the train station, [but] there were no scheduled trains. Then a friend reached out to us that a couple of students had organised a bus to take them towards the Polish border and asked if we wanted to join. We did, and began our journey at half past four that evening. On the way there, the bus was divided at some point, as some students were thinking we should re-route to the Romanian borders while others wanted to continue. We were all scared Africans wouldn’t be let in. The majority of the students in the bus were Africans [and from] North and East Africa. We eventually decided to continue with our original journey but changed which border to go through. We chose [to travel from] Medyka to Krakovets [on the Poland-Ukraine border]. The driver took us as close as he could to the border.¹⁸

The choice of destination was determined by security. Social media reports about discriminatory practices against Blacks and African migrants along the Romanian border, in particular, pushed some migrants to head towards Poland. Kouadio Simeon, an Ivory Coast student studying in the

¹⁵ Shoaib Alia. 2022. Thousands of African students who went to Ukraine to train to become doctors and engineers scramble to escape the Russian offensive. *Business Insider*. Available online at: <https://www.businessinsider.com/ukraine-thousands-of-african-students-trapped-by-russias-attack-2022-2>. Last accessed 12 November 2022.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Munu Adama Juldeh. 2022. A British-Nigerian medical student shares her ordeal of navigating dangerous routes in a bid to leave the country devastated by war. *TRT World*. Available online at: <https://www.trtworld.com/perspectives/trapped-in-ukraine-african-governments-failed-us-yet-again-55268>. Last accessed 20 November 2022.

¹⁸ Ibid.

north-eastern city of Kharkiv, had to trek with his friends for more than 1000 kilometres to Lviv, about 75 kilometres from the border with Poland, before getting on a bus to Poland.¹⁹

Limbo migration has a strong collective dimension. Displaced by the invasion, most African migrants wanted to flee. While some formed groups to flee, others joined groups during the trip. This was the experience of Princilla Ayealey Adjar, a 23-year-old Ghanaian medical student who had spent almost five years in Chernivtsi. In what she considers a challenging journey, Princilla remarked that: “There were so many people, Ukrainians, Ghanaians, Nigerians, Zimbabweans, Ethiopians, Egyptians, Indians; everybody was trying to find their way out of the country.”²⁰ In her journey, which ended with her arrival in her home country of Ghana on 1 March 2022, she recounted how they boarded a train, later got off it, and had to trek for more than an hour and a half before finally reaching the Romanian border.²¹

The Russian military’s indiscriminate bombardment of Ukraine forced African migrants to flee for safety: “in limbo”, they had to constantly change decisions about destinations. A case in point here is that of Olufunmilila Bamidele, a 33-year-old Nigeria postgraduate student at the Dnipro Medical institute. Bamidele recounted how she and other fleeing African migrants ended up in Hungary.²² When Russian missiles damaged the train station, and as Ukrainian soldiers were ordered to prevent entry into and exit from Dnipro from 3 March 2022, she said she had no other choice than to leave immediately, especially as she was under a lot of pressure from family members. Together with five other Nigerian medical students in Dnipro, as well as 44 others, she boarded a 50-seater bus bound for the Romanian border. But that had not been their initial destination. When they arrived at the western Ukrainian city of Chernivtsi, which was closer to Romania, they decided to stay there until they could figure out which country or destination to try to reach. By the third day in Chernivtsi, they had decided to travel to Uzhhorod, a city near Ukraine’s border with Hungary. From there, the students bought tickets for the next train to Budapest.

The discriminatory attitudes of some Ukrainian officials at train stations and at the borders also compelled some African migrants to move from one place to another in search of safety. On social media, there were a number of reports on how African migrants had been prevented from boarding trains at some stations, and thereby from leaving Ukraine. Rabiātu Bah, a 23-year-old fourth-year medical student from Sierra Leone who fled to Germany, recounted her ordeal leaving Ternopil: “We were running from one train attendant to another, and they kept refusing to let us on ... The first one tried to convince us there was something wrong with our tickets, the second one said there

¹⁹ 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 20 November 2022.

²⁰ Mugabi Isaac. 2022. Africa Rushes to Evacuate Nationals From Ukraine. *All Africa*. Available online at: <https://allafrica.com/stories/202203040032.html>. Last accessed 21 November 2022.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ovuorie Tobore. 2022. Ukraine: African students face Russian missiles and racism. *DW*. Available online at: <https://www.dw.com/en/ukraine-war-african-students-face-russian-missiles-and-racism/a-61356066>. Last accessed 20 November 2022.

were too many of us (it was a group of 10), and finally the third one let us on.”²³ Discriminatory practices against African migrants at the countries bordering Ukraine, such as Poland, as well as limited mobility resulting from excessive border controls, especially at Ukrainian borders, forced some African migrants to travel to other, unplanned destinations that they deemed safer.

Desperation to follow their peers and friends were among the forces which led some African migrants to flee to previously unplanned destinations. Muhsanah Olamide, a Nigerian student studying computer engineering in Kharkiv, said that when Kharkiv was attacked, she immediately packed her laptop, documents and an overnight bag. Her long journey to safety had begun. She left her apartment at 7pm to catch the train to Dnipro, but ended up sitting in an idle train until 5 the next morning. While in Dnipro, which was supposed to be relatively safe, she saw most of the people she knew at the train station, and at that moment, she decided to join them. After hours of waiting, they were able to get on an old train to Lviv. On their arrival in Lviv, they had initially planned to head to Poland, but due to varying reports about discrimination against Blacks and Africans at the Polish border, and that the route to Poland meant walking for hours in a forest, they decided to head toward Hungary. As she recounted, “[w]e decided [on] Hungary. The major [deciding factor] was the walk through the forest that some people reported.”²⁴

The surprise Russian military invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 placed African migrants in a state of confusion and desperation. These migrants had no plan of where to flee to. Some were turned away along Ukraine’s borders. Many found themselves fleeing to unknown destinations. Their focus was on fleeing to secure neighbouring cities and countries at all costs. Some who had planned to flee to countries like Poland ended up in camps in Ukraine, while others who had initially planned to flee to Poland ended up in Hungary.

²³ Sesay Isha. 2022. African students in Ukraine have suffered. Their stories matter. *The Washington Post*. Available online at: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/2022/03/25/isha-sesay-african-students-ukraine/>. Last accessed 20 November 2022.

²⁴ Adeshokan Oluwatosin. 2022. A Mixed Bag for Black Ukraine Refugees: Africans face kindness and discrimination as they flee the war. *New Lines Magazine*. Available online at: <https://newlinesmag.com/reportage/a-mixed-bag-for-black-ukraine-refugees/>. Last accessed 4 March 2023.