



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

3. Shock immobility: Why some African migrants are staying in Ukraine

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Abstract

The war in Ukraine has not only led to the mobility of African migrants, but it has also occasioned their immobility. Some were rendered immobile by the destruction of infrastructure, others became immobile due to discrimination, yet others decided to stay on due to their commitment to Ukraine.

Theme

Shock (Im)mobilities

Keywords

Russian invasion, reaction mobility, reaction immobility, African migrants

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The Russian military invasion of Ukraine trapped many African migrants, preventing them from moving or fleeing from the war. This was due to a number of elements, which I discuss in this piece.

Some African migrants' love for Ukraine and Ukrainians motivated them to stay in the country, even in the wake of the Russian invasion. For this group of migrants, their long stay in Ukraine had led them to see themselves as Ukrainians. As such, the war became a means to affirm their solidarity with Ukrainians and to share in their pain. Victoria Osseme, a Nigerian national who has remained in Ukraine,² prides herself as being "the only black female in Kharkiv, Ukraine". Osseme has been living in Ukraine for the past nine years and after obtaining two degrees, she now sees herself as Ukrainian. In justifying her decision to remain, Osseme concluded that: "I could not leave them in such a hard time ... I had to support them and the best way to do that was to stay, to share in their pain."³

Some African migrants were forced to remain in Ukraine due to a lack of assistance from their home governments. At the outset, many African governments did not take Russia's invasion of Ukraine seriously, thinking it would soon be over. Russia and Ukraine had been antagonistic for several years, they reasoned. Without any form of assistance from his home government, Percy Ohene-Yeboah, a 24-year-old Ghanaian engineering student in the city of Kharkiv in eastern Ukraine, remained in Ukraine. He sought refuge in an underground train station and later in a church basement.⁴ Ohene-Yeboah remarked that "[i]n a situation like this, you're on your own. You've got to find the best way to find refuge for yourself ... [i]t's now that the reality is really hitting me ... I think for me it's a bit too late for evacuation and all those things."⁵

Some African governments did not initially assist in the evacuation of nationals. Later, they advised nationals to stay indoors rather than attempting to flee, where they may be harmed or killed in the street by a stray bullet or missile. Richard, a Nigerian in Kyiv, stayed in Ukraine in response to his embassy's policy, which advised all Nigerian nationals to "stay indoors". The policy cautioned nationals to "remain calm but be very vigilant and be responsible for their personal security and safety". In response, Richard agreed, saying that "I will stay indoors ... The roads are unsafe. My advice is to stay home. It's not good to make decisions when you are in a panic mode..."⁶

The destruction of infrastructure and suspension of transport rendered many African migrants immobile. Due to damaged roads and the presence of the Russian military, 22-year-old Nigerian medical student Fehintola Moses was trapped on his university campus in Sumy in eastern Ukraine:⁷ "What we need is someone who can remove the Russian soldiers from the streets, someone who can repair the bridges, someone who can make sure the railroads are safe. That's what we honestly need

² BBC News. 2023. Ukraine war: Nigeria student has 'no option but to return to study. *BBC*. Available online at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-64716801>. Last accessed on 28 February 2023.

³ Ibid.

⁴ 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.

⁵ 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.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

right now.”⁸ Similarly, some African migrants were unable to leave Kherson, a southern Ukrainian city under complete Russian control. One of those was Oche King Onu, a 29-year-old Nigerian nautical sciences student, who said he stayed in his room and in the university bomb shelter for several weeks.⁹ Sarah Ajifa Idachaba, a 19-year-old Nigerian medical student in the capital, similarly remarked that “[e]veryone is under pressure — there have been explosions in different cities, including my city, Kyiv ... [m]e and my sister are in panic because we don’t know what to expect. We are not safe and we are not sure about leaving here because the airport is shut down”.¹⁰ Similarly, Zimbabwean student Mellisa Charuvira was unable to leave Ukraine due to lack of transportation services, especially buses from Kyiv to other cities.¹¹

Racial discrimination along Ukrainian borders has been highlighted as one of the key factors affecting African migrants’ immobility.¹² Many videos of African migrants being prevented from leaving Ukraine have been shared online. With authorities operating a ‘Ukrainians first’ policy, Ukrainian men, women and children were allowed to board trains and buses to the borders first.¹³ Rachel Onyegbule, a Nigerian first-year medical student, told how she and others were left stranded in the border town of Shehyni, some 600 kilometres from Ukraine’s capital, Kyiv. In their attempt to flee, Rachel said her group were prevented from boarding buses which were reserved for Ukrainian men and women. They were advised to walk.¹⁴ Ruqqaya, a Nigerian medical student in Kharkiv in eastern Ukraine, said that armed guards at the Ukrainian-Polish borders stopped her to allow Ukrainians to cross first.¹⁵ Jean Jacque, a Congolese pharmacy student in Lviv, remarked that: “We went to the border of Ukraine and Poland, but we African foreigners had problems crossing ... [t]he 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 his experience: “We wanted to go to the train, but we were stopped outside and told not

⁸ BBC. 2022. Nigerian student speaks of life on Ukraine frontline. Available online at: <https://www.myjoyonline.com/nigerian-student-speaks-of-life-on-ukraine-frontline/>. Last accessed on 23 November 2022.

⁹ Isha Sesay. 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.

¹⁰ BBC. 2022. Nigerian student speaks of life on Ukraine frontline. Available online at: <https://www.myjoyonline.com/nigerian-student-speaks-of-life-on-ukraine-frontline/>. Last accessed on 23 November 2022.

¹¹ Ovuorie Tobore, Mahachi Josephone and Lawal Shola. 2022. Thousands of African students are stuck in Ukraine. *DW*. Available online at: <https://www.dw.com/en/thousands-of-african-students-are-stuck-in-ukraine/a-60902104>. Last accessed on 20 November 2022.

¹² 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. Doi: 10.48509/MoLab.4142. Last accessed on 30 November 2022.

¹³ Dovi Vivianne. 2022. The treatment Africans are facing in Ukraine is despicable, but why are we surprised? *Euronews*. Available online at: <https://www.euronews.com/2022/04/01/the-treatment-africans-are-facing-in-ukraine-is-despicable-but-why-are-we-surprised>. Last accessed 20 November 2022.

¹⁴ Busari, Stephanie, Princewill Nimi, Nasinde Shama, and Tawfeeq Mohammed. 2022. Foreign students fleeing Ukraine say they face segregation, racism at border. *CNN*. Available online at: <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/02/28/europe/students-allege-racism-ukraine-cmd-intl/index.html>. Last accessed 21 November 2022.

¹⁵ Hegarty Stephanie. 2022. Ukraine conflict: Nigeria condemns treatment of Africans. *BBC*. Available online at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-60555650>. Last accessed 19 November 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 on 30 November 2022.

to go in. But other people, like the Ukrainians, could go in.”¹⁷ Moustapha Bagui Sylla, a Guinean university student who was living in Ukraine’s second largest city, Kharkiv, said “[t]hey stopped us at the border and told us that Blacks were not allowed. But we could see White people going through.”¹⁸ Ghanaian medical student Gifty Naana Mensah said he spent two days at the Polish-Ukrainian border with no food and little water: “To be honest, there was a lot of racism ... [b]ecause the Ukrainians always came first, even though we Africans would be there for days and sometimes three days with no food. Everyone was just exhausted. Any time Ukrainians came, they told us to go back. They were shouting at us, ‘go back.’ It was really crazy.”¹⁹

It is evident that the Russian military invasion has not only led to the mobility of African migrants in Ukraine, but also occasioned their immobility. While some migrants fled to (and often through) neighbouring countries like Poland, Hungary and Romania, either of their own accord or with the assistance of their home governments, other migrants were rendered immobile. It is therefore important to stress that some Africans chose to stay in Ukraine despite the practical challenges and risks to their personal safety: some have chosen to do so out of love for the Ukraine and their commitment to the people there.

¹⁷ 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-invasion>. Last accessed on 30 November 2022.

¹⁸ Chebil Mehdi. 2022. ‘Pushed back because we’re Black’: Africans stranded at Ukraine-Poland border. *France24*. Available online at: <https://www.france24.com/en/europe/20220228-pushed-back-because-we-re-black-africans-stranded-at-ukraine-poland-border>. Last accessed 10 November 2022.

¹⁹ Nyam Daniel. 2022. ‘Not Allowing Any Black People’: Videos Show Africans Stranded In Ukraine, Blocked from Getting on Transportation While Some Were Forced to Walk Hours to the Border In the Cold. *Yahoo!news*. Available online at: <https://news.yahoo.com/not-allowing-black-people-videos-160000608.html>. Last Accessed 21 November 2022.