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

Curated by Mengnjo Tardzenyuy Thomas

4. Shock mobility as a new beginning

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Abstract

African migrants displaced by the war in Russia in 2022 are not simply victims, they are also active agents. In fleeing the war, some have chosen to return home, while others are pursuing opportunities and to continuing their education in Europe. This suggests that shock mobility can also provide opportunities to start new journeys in life.

Theme

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home, (non-)return, opportunity

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The Russian invasion of Ukraine has caused the greatest humanitarian crisis in Europe since the Second World War. Thousands of lives have been lost, and millions of livelihoods have been disrupted through displacement, and the loss of homes and incomes.² According to an African Center report from September 2022, the invasion has displaced more than 16,000 African students.³ While some have fled the war for safety, others have escaped to other areas in search of new livelihoods and/or new beginnings.

For migrants, returning home is the most common response to major disruptions like wars – and some African migrants displaced by the Russian invasion have done just that. This category of migrants is made up of those most traumatised by the war and who faced family pressure to return home. They saw evacuation as the best and last option to be safe from the war, and to re-strategise how to rebuild their lives from home. Examples of African migrants who went back home abound. Victor Osifo, a fifth-year Nigerian medical student who was studying in Kyiv when the crisis began, preferred to be evacuated to Nigeria. Upon arriving in Nigeria, he said: “... I am back home, what is important is my safety. I am happy I am safe now and I do not need to worry about war or any explosions.”⁴ Another Nigerian, fourth-year student Samuel Olaniyan, returned to his home state of Oyo. While in Nigeria, he said: “I was so relieved. I was so excited when I reached my family ... [i]t is a comforting feeling when you see family, see those that love you, that was like the best experience ever. I'm just really, really grateful.”⁵ The 23-year-old Ghanaian student Princilla Ayealey Adjar, who had spent almost five years studying medicine in Chernivtsi in western Ukraine, was one of 13 Ghanaian students who accepted the offer of evacuation back home.⁶ Another Ghanaian, first-year medical student Nana Boakye Agyemang, also preferred to be evacuated to his home country. Speaking to reporters at the airport, Agyemang noted: “This is quite unfortunate that we have to come home. Siblings should be calm, friends should be calm. The government is doing its possible best to make sure that we all come back home. For the meantime, we want to say thank you and we appreciate whatever has been done for us.”⁷

Some migrants in search of greener pastures have preferred to remain in Europe by fleeing to other countries like Poland and Germany. This category of migrant sees the options as more favourable there, and that they have a better chance of finishing their studies there than in their home country.

² Smit, Sven and Martin Hirt, Kevin Buehler, Olivia White, Ezra Greenberg, Mihir Mysore, Arvind Govindarajan, Eric Chewning. 2022. War in Ukraine: Lives and livelihoods, lost and disrupted. *McKinsey & Company*. Available online at: <https://www.mckinsey.com/capabilities/strategy-and-corporate-finance/our-insights/war-in-ukraine-lives-and-livelihoods-lost-and-disrupted>. Last accessed 21 November 2022.

³ The African Center. 2022. Issues, Limits and Possibilities: Responses to African Students Displaced by the War in Ukraine. Available online at: <https://www.theafricacenter.org/events/issues-limits-and-possibilities-responses-to-african-students-displaced-by-the-war-in-ukraine/>. Last accessed 20 November 2022.

⁴ Okafor, Chiamaka. 2022. Russia-Ukraine War: Nigerian returnees recount experiences. *Premium Times*. Available online at: <https://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/headlines/515390-russia-ukraine-war-nigerian-returnees-recount-experiences.html>. Last accessed 12 November 2022.

⁵ Fernando, Christine and Cady Stanton. 2022. After days long journey, international students finally escape Ukraine: ‘It felt like a miracle.’ *USA Today*. Available online at: <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2022/03/16/ukraine-refugees-sumy-state-university-students-return-india-nigeria/7026045001/>. Last accessed 12 November 2022.

⁶ Mugabi, Isaac. 2022. Africa rushes to evacuate nationals from Ukraine. *DW*. Available online at: <https://www.dw.com/en/africa-rushes-to-evacuate-nationals-from-ukraine/a-61000850>; last accessed 12 November 2022.

⁷ Mensah, Kent. 2022. Ghana Welcomes First Citizens Evacuated From Ukraine. *VOA News*. Available online at: <https://www.voanews.com/a/ghana-welcomes-first-citizens-evacuated-from-ukraine/6464744.html>. Last accessed 12 November 2022.

Although there are no official statistics, examples do exist. Maurice Nwokejezi, a Nigerian medical student who was in his final year at Vinnitsa National Pirogov Memorial Medical University, fled to and remained in Germany. Nwokejezi, who was preparing to take his final year examination, continued attending online classes for its displaced students organised by his Ukrainian university.⁸ Likewise, Olawale Abdulmajeed, a 32-year old Nigerian who was into his fifth year of medical studies at the Dnipro Medical Institute in Ukraine, fled to Dordrecht in the Netherlands after the outbreak of the war. While noting that he hoped to one day complete his medical degree, he said that the war in Ukraine had opened up career options beyond medicine: “I am hoping to find a balance between these dreams and expectations. For my part, I know I want to pursue other things than medicine. You only get one chance in life, so I am hoping I can work as a doctor during the day and as an actor at night. The war has opened my eyes to this ... [t]hese are the sacrifices you have to make if you truly want to be happy ... [b]ut I still want to sign up to a casting agency in the Netherlands.”⁹ This implies that shock mobility can also be a new beginning, as illustrated by Olawale. It is thanks to the war and his displacement to the Netherlands that he came to believe that he could practice his medicine alongside making a career in acting.

The hospitality of some Europeans in other countries is another factor which motivated African migrants fleeing the war to remain in Europe. Chizzy, a 23-year-old Nigerian economics student who was studying in the Ukrainian city of Kharkiv, decided to stay in Germany. After being housed in a camp for a while, he was rescued by a German woman who came to his aid when he was homeless in Berlin. Chizzy said: “She’s a mother to me; she cares about me and harbors me. I don’t know how to thank her enough.”¹⁰ Likewise, Sanusi Salihu, a Nigerian student who escaped to Slovakia, was sheltered and fed by a resident. Salihu said: “We are seven in his house ... [h]e just took us all out for lunch ... (and) has been very nice.”¹¹

The wide and equal opportunities that exist in Europe in terms of employment, education and respect for human rights and social justice, amongst other liberal policies, have also prompted some African migrants to remain in Europe. Most of these migrants cited bad governance practices – including civil war, high unemployment, sky-rocketing petrol prices, high social inequality and lack of respect for human rights – as the main factors preventing them from returning to their home countries. That was why Nigerian Lukman Ibrahim, an artist and a student at the International European University in Kyiv, had sought refuge and was rebuilding his life in Poland: “I will seek for [a] student permit and continue my life from here ... [b]ecause home is not safe, everybody knows this ... [a]s war has broken out, we are supposed to run to our country for safety ... [w]e are all here risking our life, but

⁸ Akaeze, Anthony. 2022. Displaced by the war in Ukraine, some Nigerian medical students won’t be allowed to practice if they come home. *Baptist News Global*. Available online at: <https://baptistnews.com/article/displaced-by-the-war-in-ukraine-some-nigerian-medical-students-wont-be-allowed-to-practice-if-they-come-home/>. Last accessed 12 November 2022.

⁹ Fröhlich, Silja. 2022. ‘I want to return to Ukraine’. *DW*. Available online at: <https://www.dw.com/en/the-escape-diaries-i-want-to-return-to-ukraine/a-62963806>. Last accessed 23 November 2022.

¹⁰ Ovuorie, Tobore. 2022. Africans fleeing Ukraine accuse Germany of double standards. *DW*. Available online at: <https://www.dw.com/en/africans-fleeing-ukraine-accuse-germany-of-double-standards/a-61879479>. Last accessed 21 November 2022.

¹¹ Chinedu, Asadu and Anna Cara. 2022. Foreigners who fled Ukraine team up to help others escape. *AP News*. Available online at: <https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-europe-africa-poland-nigeria-f19ac3c87645c69142b27a587dd8a796>. Last accessed 11 December 2022.

going back to our country is more risky.”¹² Going back to Nigeria also remained dangerous because of his dreadlocks: “As an artist, I can’t even dress like this in my home country.” In most African countries, and in Nigeria in particular, people with deadlocks are often perceived as dangerous and attract negative attention. This perception is deeply rooted in the traditional religious beliefs and myths of the Yoruba and Igbo people in Nigeria, which hold that men with dreadlocks are volatile, dangerous, uncultured and unruly. Dreadlocks or “unkempt hair” is seen as akin to the forest – dark, mysterious, to be avoided.¹³

From the analysis above, it becomes evident that shock mobility can open up new spaces because it urges people to confront fundamental questions, such as meaning in life. And it forces them to make consequential decisions about, for example, what kind of freedom and safety one really wants. Against this backdrop, shock mobility has opened up pathways towards new beginnings for many displaced African migrants. While some have sought new beginnings by returning to their home countries, others have remained in Europe to rebuild their lives.

¹² Elusoji, Solomon. 2022. ‘More Risky’: The Nigerians Who Don’t Want To Return From Ukraine. *Channels TV*. Available online at: <https://www.channelstv.com/2022/03/05/more-risky-the-nigerians-who-dont-want-to-return-from-ukraine/>. Last accessed 12 November 2022.

¹³ Agwuele, Augustine. 2019. In Nigeria, dreadlocks are entangled with beliefs about danger. *The Conversation*. Available online at: <https://theconversation.com/in-nigeria-dreadlocks-are-entangled-with-beliefs-about-danger-123463>. Last accessed 10 February 2023.