More Open Letters from African Students from Ukraine who fled to Germany II

Datum : 23. November 2022

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Figure 1: Contact point for refugees from Ukraine. Cologne, Central Station (Copyright: Raimond Spekking / CC)

This series of letters began with an introduction written by Ziga Podgornik Jakil and published jointly by Blog Medizinethnologie of the Working Group Medical Anthropology and the Blogsite of the Working Group Public Anthropology of the German Anthropological Association. These letters highlight the personal experiences of African students who escaped the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 and settled in Germany. For the time being, they are excluded from Article 24, which grants EU-wide visas primarily to war refugees with Ukrainian citizenship,[i] and their legal situation in Germany remains uncertain.[ii] More letters will be published over the next few months in order to document their experiences.

Anonymous

Before the war began, I was in the process to complete a master's degree in international management in Dnipro, Ukraine. I had already graduated in law in Nigeria, specialising in international law, but I wanted to further my education in Europe. As a lawyer, I never thought that war would break out in Ukraine. I expected diplomacy to be the only logical solution to the growing tensions between Russia and Ukraine. But in the early morning of February 24, Russia lunched a missile at the nearby military station and the explosion woke me up. I couldn't believe that the war had started, but I figured it wouldn't last more than a week. Over the next four days, however, the situation escalated. Since I was responsible for a group of Nigerian students in Dnipro, I told them that we would take the train to Lviv.

It took us about fifteen hours to get to Lviv. When we got there, the train station was already packed with thousands of people who wanted to leave Ukraine. We wanted to cross to Poland, but only women and children were allowed to board the trains. I could understand that, because in wartime the rules of engagement change, and women and children should have priority to get to safety. At the same time, the Ukrainian authorities were aggressive toward black people. But I understood that they were on the edge because their country was under attack, and they reacted very emotionally. Every now and then everyone else was allowed to board a train, but really seldom. After 48 hours of waiting at the station in the middle of the cold winter, a train came and my instinct told me that this was our chance to board it. We succeeded and crossed the border to Poland. We were lucky. I know that some people stayed at the station freezing for seven days without any supplies.

Once in Poland, we got off the train. The volunteers there were very hospitable and helpful. They did their best to attend to us and give us emotional care. We [Nigerian students from Ukraine] were allowed to stay in Poland for fifteen days. I took my students to the Nigerian Embassy to plan their return flight to Nigeria because their parents were very worried. However, I did not return to Nigeria with them. I went to Krakow to stay with a friend and figure out what to do next. The clock was ticking and twelve days had already passed. I didn't want to become illegal, so I had to act quickly. I contacted the organization Each One Teach One from Berlin and they told me they could take care of me. I took a bus to Leipzig and travelled from there to Berlin.

I am now enrolled in the International Business Management program at the Berlin Professional School of the Berlin School of Economics and Law. I have been awarded a university scholarship which covers all of my tuition fees. I am also completing an A2 level German course and looking for employment that matches my education. Like other Nigerian students, I went to Ukraine to get a European education, and I find it discriminatory that Germany now treats third country nationals differently than Ukrainian citizens. I know Germany is doing its best, but it can also do better. Germany can't just send people back to Nigeria, back to their demons, fears, and nightmares. We went to Europe because we dreamed of a better future, which we wanted to achieve through better education, a good standard of living and, above all, security. Germany is wrong if it thinks Nigeria is a safe country. It is a country struggling with major economic, security, and social problems. Although our government should protect its citizens and their property, kidnappings, bombings, and murders by terrorist groups like Boko Haram occur daily. Nigeria also suffers from poverty and is currently facing high inflation rates. Most importantly, education is barely accessible. Public universities are on strike throughout the year, and private universities are too expensive for most people to study at.

Passing laws that separate third-country nationals from Ukrainian citizens is wrong, because we both fled to Germany to have a better future. Chasing us back to our countries is like killing us, because killing dreams and hopes kills you faster than pointing a gun to your head.

This letter was written on 9 September 2022.

Kelvin

I spent a year and two months in Kyiv to get a master's degree in computer engineering and worked as a sales manager. A week before the war started, there was a lot of conflicting news. The U.S. media said that Russia was preparing for a possible invasion, while Ukrainian news said that Russia would never launch a full-scale attack on Ukraine, but would only send its proxies to the Donbass region. When the war broke out, I thought it would last a week and the presidents of the two countries would meet to settle the fire. But I kept hearing the explosions. They were getting closer to the place where I lived. I could already see the smoke from the explosions. I decided to leave at the beginning of March. It was not an easy decision, but most of my friends had already left.

I met with the rest of my friends who lived in Kyiv and we went to the train station to take the train to Poland. When we got there, the guards wouldn't let us on the train. They told us that only women and children were allowed to get on, but we saw that men were also getting on the trains. We could not go by bus because the drivers raised the prices up to fifteen times the normal price, especially if they saw that you were not Ukrainian. We didn't have that kind of money. Only with difficulty did we make it to the train that took us to Vinnytsia. Arriving in Vinnytsia, we had to struggle again to get on a train to Lviv. On the way to Lviv, the train stopped in one town. The conductor asked everyone to get off because this was supposedly the final stop. Not only I and my friends refused to do so, but other third country nationals from India, Brazil, etc. joined us and protested. Finally we succeeded and the train continued its journey to Lviv.

The train station in Lviv was so crowded that we could not catch the trains going to Poland. We decided to take a cab to the border. There was a cab driver who told us that we had to pay him in advance. We paid him, but he did not take us to the border. He stopped the car about fifty kilometres from the border crossing. We protested, but he pulled out a gun and threatened us, so we knew we had to walk. We walked and walked, and it snowed. On the way, I met many BIPOC people who were doing the same thing. We finally reached the border at 3 am. There was a huge line of people waiting to be allowed to cross the border. I heard that many had been waiting for more than 24 hours. We approached the checkpoint and were lucky that they let us pass immediately.

In Poland, they stamped our passports and put us on a bus. When we got off the bus, I witnessed how we were treated differently from Ukrainian nationals. We had to stay in a basketball court. I saw only BIPOC people there. Since I was not satisfied with this kind of reception, I decided to go to Germany. I thought it could be better there. There is a soccer player from my country who plays for the German team, and that influenced my decision. I asked the camp management if Germany would accept us [third-country nationals], and they immediately ordered a cab to take me to the train station, where I took a train to Berlin.

When I arrived in Berlin, there was a reception centre set up at the train station and they asked me if I wanted to stay or go somewhere else. I told them I wanted to go to Stuttgart, and they gave me a ticket. But when I arrived in Stuttgart, I couldn’t find a reception centre. I walked around the city for hours before deciding to return to the train station and head back to Berlin. There was a friendly person there who was very impressed when he heard that I had just come from Ukraine. Since he knew I wanted to return to Berlin, he bought me a ticket. Back at Berlin Central Station, I met a representative of the Tubman Network, an organization that specializes in BIPOC refugees. She helped me find a temporary place to stay in Berlin. These were local people who offered me a room in their apartment. On the second day of my stay, I met a person who was also a volunteer at Tubman Network. Since I had experience volunteering during the elections in my home country, I asked if I could join as well. That's how I got to know the people at Tubman Network better and have collaborated with them ever since.

As a non-Ukrainian citizen, it was really unclear to me how to proceed with my life in Germany. At first, the volunteers of the Tubman network advised me not to register. While helping BIPOC students from Ukraine, they met people who received deportation letters after registering in Germany. For this reason, I registered only last month. Because a person from Berlin allowed me to use his address, I can stay here. When I was registering, the officer asked me all kinds of strange questions, like how I met the person I was staying with and why I wanted to stay in Berlin. I told her that it was none of her business and that she had to register me because I had all the necessary papers. I had a similar experience of being treated differently when I had my first job interview. After the person who did the interview found out that I did not have a work permit and Ukrainian citizenship, he told me that his company was not allowed to accept refugees other than Ukrainian citizens. I heard from other BIPOCs from Ukraine that they experienced the same discrimination.

But I was lucky enough to find a part-time job as a web developer here in Berlin. This allows me to continue my studies in Ukraine, which I'm doing online now because of the war. I can say that

things are more or less okay at the moment. I had my first appointment at the Berlin Immigration Office (LEA)[iii] to submit my documents and tell about my current situation and my future intentions in Germany. What I don't understand is why my next appointment is already in two months, after I told them that I want to do a PhD at a German university after my Master's degree. I'm sure if I were a Ukrainian citizen, I would get a residence permit and they wouldn't ask me back so soon.[iv] In the meantime, I will work here, and I already have an apartment.

My demands to the German government are simple: We [third-country nationals] should be treated the same as Ukrainian citizens. Telling us to return to our countries is absurd, because we have already made Ukraine our home. How can we return home when there is war there? For those who want to study at German universities, the current requirement of a blocked account should be lifted.[v] I would like to stay in Germany and do my doctorate here.

This letter was written on 5 October 2022.

David

I spent two semesters as a medical student in Kyiv. I went to Ukraine because the infrastructure and education system in my country are really bad. There are constant strikes at the universities. While I was studying in Ukraine, I also worked in the pharmacy. Before the war began, I no longer knew what or whom to believe regarding the growing tensions with Russia. Some people I talked to told me that Russia is just threatening and won't do anything. But at the same time I knew that some people had already left Ukraine. On February 24, I was at home producing my music late into the night, and I didn't really notice what was going on outside. But when I woke up, my cell phone was full of messages from my classmates asking me if Russia had attacked Ukraine. Suddenly, I heard jets flying overhead. This was followed by an explosion nearby so strong that our whole building was shaken. It was terrible.

I lived in the apartment with my minor siblings. We quickly went to the basement, which served as a shelter, but it was already crowded and it was very cold because it was winter. We had to go back to the apartment. I got very scared and told my siblings to pack the most important things and go together to the main train station in Kiev. But the public transportation didn't work, so I got us a cab, and we had to pay about a hundred dollars just to get to the station. That was really expensive. When we got to the station, there were no more tickets for Poland. We tried to get on a train without a ticket, but the people who worked there wouldn't let us. They said only women and children. My siblings were minors, and they still weren't allowed to take the train. Meanwhile, a rocket hit somewhere in the station. It was total chaos. There were so many people. They crowded our bodies, but we managed to get on the train to Lviv.

Lviv was a story in itself. We managed to board the train to Poland, but the police came on the train as well. When they saw us, it got really brutal. They literally threw us off the train, even my underage siblings! I had bruises all over. Then the Ukrainian soldiers who were letting people on the train came to us. One of the soldiers pointed his gun at my face and told me that only Ukrainians were allowed on the train. He even threw racist remarks at us. We had to find an alternative to get out of Ukraine. I tried to take a cab, but friends I had talked to on the phone told me that cab drivers drop people off in the middle of the ride to the border. Fortunately, we

met a very nice lady there who told us she would take us to the border in her car. We drove to the Slovak border because people had to wait up to three days to cross the border into Poland. There were about seven of us in the car. Without her we would never have made it.

After she dropped us off near the Slovak border crossing, we walked another hour to reach it. We were checked by the border guards. They took our papers and inspected our luggage, but they let us pass. When we crossed the border, we were met by volunteers. They took us to a shelter in a small village and gave us food. But we only stayed there for two days because the villagers kept calling the police when they saw us on the street. They had probably never seen Black people before. We went to Bratislava, because that was at least a city. First we went to a police station to ask if we could register, but they told us it was not possible to stay in Slovakia. Since it was already late, we went to the hostel to restore our energy. But in the middle of the night, someone in the hostel screamed very loudly, and I think this experience triggered PTSD[vi] in me. Shortly after that, we left for Germany.

Moving was not easy because I also had to take care of my siblings. I thought that Germany was the best destination to get a feeling of security. When we arrived in Berlin, we felt very welcome. Volunteers from the Tubman network came to us and helped us find a temporary place to stay. The first impression I got was that Germany is a very welcoming country. Everyone has equal rights here, and the people are very hospitable. The locals who helped me and my siblings did not know us and still gave us shelter and money.

The problem started when I tried to legalize myself and my siblings. I had heard that only Ukrainian citizens could apply for Article 24. So I tried to find another way to legalize us. I signed up for a German language course. But since I don't have legal papers for my siblings, the state took them to a youth protection facility. They were placed in a hostel for some time and then in an apartment. Currently, they have a tolerated status. In the meantime, I applied and was admitted to Bielefeld University. I got tired of looking for an apartment in Berlin, so I prefer to live in Bielefeld. I also got an Erasmus scholarship. But I have to take a C1 certificate in German first. After only a few months, I'm already taking a B2-level course. I know that I have to take my studies seriously.

The biggest problem I am currently facing because I am excluded from Article 24 is that I need a blocked account to apply for the student visa. As a student, I can only work for a limited time and that does not guarantee a student visa. I want to stay in Germany because I want to pursue my dream of becoming a doctor. Even if the German government does not want to admit us to Article 24, they should allow us [third-country nationals] to study here without having a blocked account.

This letter was written on 12 October 2022.

Chinoye

Before I came to Ukraine in 2021 to study mechanical engineering, someone warned me about the ongoing war in some regions of Ukraine. But I thought that if you stay away from trouble, you won't experience anything bad. After I moved to Ukraine, I kept listening to a famous

U.S.-Ukrainian Tiktoker reporting on the political situation in Ukraine. In January 2022, she said that war was imminent. When the U.S. government announced that U.S. citizens should return home,[vii] she also left the country, and at that point I began to panic. Early in the morning of February 24, I heard a loud explosion near my student dormitory. I went outside and a jet flew over my head. I quickly went to the people I knew in the dorm, and they hadn't heard a sound. They were still living their normal lives. But as they slowly woke up, they realized that the war had started. Actually, I had already booked my flight to my home country, but when I called the airline, they told me that the airspace was closed.

I tried to contact all my friends in Ukraine, but the signal was really bad. Finally, I went to the train station in Kiev together with three Indian and one Guinean student. When I arrived at the station, all my friends were already there. We wanted to leave Ukraine for Poland together, but we quickly realized that it was impossible. The Ukrainian authorities allowed mainly Ukrainian women and children to board the trains. We had to travel in separate trains because only a few of us could get on each train. Lviv was our first stop and it took us about fifteen hours to get there. At the station, the soldiers kept shouting, "Women and children first," but I saw that they were not allowing African women and children to board. I boarded the train with some female friends, and soon a soldier came up to us and asked us to get off the train. He soon started pulling at my shirt and tried to force me to get off. I told him to at least let my friends stay. But he didn't.

I managed to meet an understanding Ukrainian soldier. I used Google Translate because he didn't know English and he told me that there would be a special train for Africans that we could take. But it was getting really late and soon I got a call from a friend telling me to come to Vinnytsia. I agreed and took the bus. At eight in the morning I arrived at my friend's apartment. Four women and three men were already there waiting for a bus that had been organized by a church from Africa. When the bus arrived, I could not get on because the people who were ahead of me at my friend's apartment had priority. I had to return to Lviv.

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Figure 2: An Ukrainian official harasses BIPOCs trying to board the train. (Copyright: Chinoye)

At the train station in Lviv, one of my friends, who spoke some Ukrainian, asked a soldier about leaving Ukraine, and he replied that only African women and children were occasionally allowed on the train to Poland. He said that we should try trains to Slovakia, Hungary and Romania, but we still wanted to go to Poland. Another train arrived, and I saw a person from Egypt trying to get on the train, but was turned away by the soldiers. He shouted that they were racists, but one person calmed him down and told him that there was not much that could be done about it. Even animals were allowed on the train, but not us [African students]. The cold at the station made me feel sick. I was shivering. I wasn't sure at the time, but I think I heard a rocket explode near the station. Eventually a train to Slovakia arrived, and for some reason not many Ukrainians got on that train. I boarded and immediately fell asleep because I hadn't slept in two days. I got off in a border town in Ukraine and bought a ticket for a train to Hungary.

When I reached the border with Hungary, the Ukrainian soldiers stationed at the border crossing asked me why I didn't stay and fight for Ukraine. I told them that I had no military experience and had come to Ukraine to seek a better life. They kept me for a few hours, but finally allowed me to cross. On the Hungarian side, I met a Ghanaian pastor who took me to a Ghanaian mission church where I could stay for a few days to recover. The pastor was very committed to the people in Africa. He said that he and his church are ready to welcome all Africans fleeing war and coming to Hungary. I appreciated his hospitality very much, but I knew that I would not be able to stay there for long. A few days later, a friend from Berlin called me and told me that he had found a place to stay and that I could join him. I did not hesitate for long and took the next train to Germany.

At the Munich train station, the policemen boarded the train and demanded my papers. After checking them, they asked me to step off the train and come with them. I was not alone. I saw mostly African people being taken off the train. We were taken to another train, but the authorities did not tell us where. They only said that we should not worry because this was a standard procedure. When we reached another German city, I was taken to a room and asked to take off my shirt because they had to take a photo of me. They also took my biometric data without telling me why they were doing that. Then they took me and others to a basketball court where we had to wait before they took us to another location. I kept telling the authorities that I could stay in my friend's apartment in Berlin, but they wouldn't allow me.

After taking us here and there, they took us to a very strange place somewhere in Germany. It was a building populated with people from all over the world and it was very dirty. There were vomit stains on the walls. I didn't understand why I was there. One resident told me that it was because I was probably seeking asylum in Germany. But I didn't ask for asylum. I quickly went to the people who worked in that building and told them that I was not seeking asylum. A group of Nigerian and Ghanaian students from Ukraine were also unhappy and together we demanded to be moved to another place. The authorities complied with our request and put us on a bus. But again they did not tell us where they would take us. Fortunately, I had Google Maps with me and could see for myself.

We got off the bus in a small town and the local municipality welcomed us very kindly. Again I

insisted on going to Berlin, but the local authorities told me that this would be against the law. I didn't want to have any problems, so I stayed. They gave me and other African students a place to stay in a hotel and took care of us. The mayor's sister was especially helpful to us. May nature bless her! At some point an appointment was made with the local immigration office, and we were told that the office would decide whether we could stay or had to return to our home countries. I had my hearing very quickly and the immigration office gave me a Fiktionsbescheinigung[viii] for three months. The immigration officials told me that I had to find a job in order to get a residence permit. I was really surprised, because I knew that Ukrainian citizens get a two-year residence permit immediately and didn't need a job for that. But the officials told me that people from my country are treated differently from Ukrainians.

I agreed and after a few months I found a job in a warehouse. Before that, I was not allowed to work because of my legal status. At my next appointment at the immigration office in July, I showed my work contract and proved that I was earning enough money to support myself so that I could get a work visa. But the official told me that I could not get a work visa because I was doing low-qualified work. I had to find a job that matched my level of education. The problem was that I needed a German language certificate for that. I couldn't do that because I was working full time and couldn't just terminate my employment contract immediately. I also couldn't apply for a student visa because the university in Ukraine had my original documents and they wouldn't give them back to me.

To make matters worse, the local government cancelled the contract with the hotel where I and other African students were staying, and we had to leave our rooms the next morning. At least they should have given us a period of time to find something else, but we were suddenly homeless. On our complaint, they offered us another accommodation, but we had to pay too much for it. I was too stressed to stay in this small town. I made an appointment at the immigration office and told them that I was going to Berlin to do vocational training and live with a friend there. The officials told me that I could do that, but a new problem arose when I reached the registration office in Berlin. The officials told me that I could not stay in Berlin because I was already registered in Bavaria. I replied that I never wanted to be registered there. It was the fault of the German police, who racially profiled me and gave me something to sign that I didn't understand.

I don't want to return to Bavaria because Berlin offers much more opportunities to study and work. At the moment I have an admission to a university in Berlin. I am waiting to get all the necessary documents, which I will send to the immigration office to get the student visa. But new problems are coming my way, like setting up a blocked account. I urge the German government to be more considerate about the situation of African students from Ukraine. For example, those who have studied in Ukraine for many years should be given immediate access to German universities. Others who have been there for only one year or so should be offered a program to learn the German language so that they can decide whether to pursue vocational training or university studies later. We need equal rights.

This letter was written on 31 October 2022.

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[i] Article or Section 24 "Granting of Residence for Temporary Protection" of the German Residence Act implements the European Temporary Protection Directive, which grants up to three-year renewable residence permits to Ukrainian citizens, third-country nationals with recognized refugee status in Ukraine, and third-country nationals who cannot safely return to their place of origin. Section 24 also includes third-country nationals with family members of Ukrainian citizenship and third-country nationals with a permanent residence permit in Ukraine. In most cases, however, the international students from African (or other) countries had only temporary residence permits in Ukraine, so they do not meet this legal requirement and thus do not benefit from the article.

[ii] Germany has set a time limit within which war refugees from Ukraine can stay in Germany without a residence permit. This deadline was initially set for May 24, 2022, but was extended to August 31, 2022. In August, 2022, the Berlin Senate has extended the deadline by another six months, arguing that the additional time would allow third-country nationals who studied in Ukraine to apply to German universities. This indicates that these students face different legal situations in different states in Germany.

[iii] Landesamt für Einwanderung (LEA).

[iv] Ziga Podgornik Jakil, the co-author of the open letters, accompanied Kendrick, one of the students who published an open letter in the series (Medizinethnologie, 2022), to the LEA, and he also received the next appointment in two months. The official explained that this is a new policy of the Berlin Senate, which wants third-country nationals to participate in consultations at reception centres about their future prospects in Germany. These nationals are expected to submit a plan for their next appointment at the LEA, outlining their reasons for staying in Germany. As a result, they should receive a fictional certificate that allows them to stay in Berlin for six months without a visa, primarily to enrol in a university.

[v] To obtain a study visa, international students from non-EU countries must prove that they can support themselves while studying here. One way to do this is to have an annual blocked account of EUR 11,208 as of January 2023 (source: https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/de/sperrkonto/375488).

[vi] Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.

[vii] In early February 2022, U.S. President Joe Biden urged U.S. citizens to return home in light of Russia's increased military activity on the Ukrainian border (source: Taylor, 2022).

[viii] A fictional certificate is issued when it is not yet possible to decide on an application for a residence permit (Berlin Service Portal).