

Open Letters from African Students from Ukraine who fled to Germany (with a Report on the “Welcome Conference BIPOC Ukraine” organized by Peace-by-Peace in Berlin on May 16, 2022)

Datum : 9. Juni 2022

Introduction

With the old deadline for applying for a residence permit for war refugees from Ukraine in Germany expiring on May 23, 2022,^[i] the situation of international students who fled the war in Ukraine to Germany has changed – again. These students do not have Ukrainian citizenship, but most had temporary residence permits in Ukraine, which they obtained after being admitted to a Ukrainian university. As a group of international students reported in previous open letters published on [Medizinethnologie](#) and [Public Anthropology](#) (2022), these students, mainly from African and Southeast Asian countries, have had to spend thousands of dollars,^[ii] often paid in advance, to study at Ukrainian universities and are now left without their money, rights, and graduation certificates.

According to available data, these students are among the less than two percent of people who have fled Ukraine for Germany by May 11, 2022 (Mediendienst Integration 2022).^[iii] Unlike Ukrainian citizens, they are excluded from the rights of the European Directive on Temporary Protection. The directive grants Ukrainian citizens residing in the European Union (EU) residency permit and access to free movement between EU member states, work, education, social benefits, and medical treatment for up to three years (European Commission). While war refugees with Ukrainian citizenship who register in Germany are granted temporary protection for one year, most likely renewable for up to three years (WDR 2022), during which they enjoy these rights, international students do not know what will happen to them when the new deadline for applying for a residence permit expires on August 31, 2022. At the moment, they can register like Ukrainian citizens, but they only receive a so-called fictional certificate (Fiktionsbescheinigung) which allows them to stay until the deadline.^[iv]

To the students' dismay, there is no longer much coverage of their situation in the German media. After initial reports of scandals of racist treatment at the Ukrainian and Polish borders during the first weeks of the war, topics about their current situation in Germany have been limited to BIPOC^[v] support and empowerment organisations such as [Each One Teach One](#) and [Tubman Network](#), pro-refugee organisations such as [Refugee Council Berlin](#), and a handful of [critical articles](#) (Meyer and Sharma, 2022).^[vi] In fact, on May 16, an event on these issues was organized by [Peace-by-Peace](#), an educational and empowerment organisation for BIPOC refugees in Germany. I decided to attend the event to learn more about the experiences of international students from Ukraine living in Germany and to add their words to the Open Letters series.

As my contribution to the third part of the Open Letters of African Students from Ukraine, I will share my short report on the event "Welcome Conference BIPOC Ukraine."[\[vii\]](#) While the conference consisted of two panel discussions, I will focus on the first panel where two African students from Ukraine, accompanied by members of various civil society organizations, presented the main problems they face in Germany and their demands. My text is followed by open letters from two African students with whom I spoke independently of the conference. As in previous open letters in the series, I composed and reviewed the open letters with them.

The Setting: The Student Hotel Berlin



(Figure 1: S-Bahn station Jannowitzbrücke. Copyright: Ziga Podgornik Jakil.)

I arrive at the city rail (S-Bahn) station Jannowitzbrücke in the early afternoon. I already feel the strong rays of the coming summer sun. As I exit the station, I am surrounded by avenues and prefabricated blocks which are characteristic of the former East Berlin. I make my way to the venue of the conference, which, as I soon see, takes place in Student Hostel Berlin, a co-living und co-working hybrid complex for students. When I enter the building, I notice the chic lobby, complete with hip tables and a cocktail bar, and head to the registration desk, where one of the organizers scans my ticket for the event. I quickly learn that the conference is taking place in the building's courtyard. The courtyard is surrounded by tall building walls with windows and glass panelled doors. I notice that there are chairs in front of a low stage where the speakers and technicians are making the necessary preparations for the conference. To my left is an improvised bar serving free ginger mint lemonade, as well as cold water, as our thirst will soon need to be quenched due to the strong sun and heat. Next to the improvised bar is a booth of the Bienvenida initiative, which offers BIPOC refugees help finding housing and legal advice. The whole arrangement is meant to create a welcoming and inclusive affective atmosphere.

It is already close to the beginning of the event, but I see only a handful of guests. Among other participants, scattered groups of people are talking in fluent German who I assume are familiar with or involved in the work of the Peace-by-Peace organization. Meanwhile, new people arrive and are offered headphones to listen to translations from German into English or French during the panel discussions which were due to start in a few moments.

Do you feel like you are treated like a second-class citizen?



(Figure 2: First Panel Discussion. Copyright: Ziga Podgornik Jakil.)

After some delay, the speakers sit in front of the stage. Around thirty guests take their seats opposite the speakers, while others remain scattered around the courtyard. The event is moderated by ShaNon Bobinger, an African-German moderator and systemic life and business coach, who introduces two international students who studied in Ukraine, as well as Edwin Grewe, the well-known anti-racism and anti-ableism activist from Germany, and an NGO worker. Although she introduces the presenters in German, she switches to English and asks the two international students about their experiences fleeing the war in Ukraine and arriving in Germany, and whether they felt treated as “second-class citizens.”

The first student begins to tell her story in a calm, but also worried voice. She is an engineering student and has spent the last three years studying in Ukraine. When the war started on February 24, she fled to Romania and then to Germany. Since then, she has been trying to continue her studies in Germany. She emphasizes that she and her fellow students went to Ukraine: “To find a future, but now we don’t even have our high school diploma, because it stayed at the [Ukrainian] university.”^[viii] She finds it frustrating that the Ukrainian citizens she knows are admitted to German universities relatively quickly to continue their studies, but it remains unclear what will happen in her case. She also does not want to return to her home country because she faces the same problem there of not having a certificate to prove she graduated and because the universities are already so underfunded that she cannot continue her studies there.

After she finishes speaking, the moderator is visibly moved by the student’s story, but immediately passes the floor to the second student. I notice that a few more guests, equipped with headphones, have joined the panel discussion. The second speaker studied medicine in Dnipro, Ukraine’s fourth largest city. She begins with her experiences at the beginning of the war, recalling the difficult decision she had to make to flee to another European country. When she tried to cross the border to Slovakia, she quickly discovered that she was treated differently than other Ukrainian citizens. In her own words: “At the border there was one passage for Ukrainian citizens and one for us [non-White international students]. We had to cross the border separately.” After staying in Slovakia for a few days and not feeling welcome, she and her companions decided to go to Germany because they had the impression that Germany was more liberal in terms of accepting war refugees. She pauses for a moment and continues in a surprised voice: “Unfortunately, in Germany is another kind of racism, namely structural racism. In Ukraine, we already had our own lives, we could study and work. And many of us wanted to stay there after graduation and work as doctors and dentists. In Germany, we have to legalize ourselves through work or study, but we are not allowed to do either.”

She then stresses that lack of information and misinformation was another major problem she faced when she arrived in Germany, and the other speakers nod in agreement with her. She claims that the staff at the registration centre in Berlin told her that she would receive a residence permit for up to two years after registration. However, after she tried to legalize herself at the Immigration Office and apply to Humboldt University in Berlin, she was quickly reminded that: “I am a third-country national and I do not have the same rights as Ukrainian citizens. It became clear that everything in Germany was closed to me.”

Section 24 of the Residence Act for Everyone!

The highly affective narratives of the two students are followed by members of civil society organizations who describe the situation of international students from Ukraine in Germany from a legal perspective. The core issue, according to them, is that Section 24 “Granting of Residence for Temporary Protection” of the German Residence Act,[\[ix\]](#) which implements the European directive in Germany, only grants 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. In most cases, the international students only had a temporary residence permit in Ukraine and thus do not fulfil this legal requirement.

They believe that the exclusion of these students from the European Temporary Protection Directive is a “case of double moral standards,” as the German state does not recognize them as people fleeing the same situation as Ukrainian citizens. They can register and receive temporary access to health care, social assistance, the labour market, and education in Germany, but only until August 31, 2022. In their opinion, all war refugees from Ukraine should be granted Section 24 protection, and there are existing federal legal instruments that could make this possible. However, they currently see a “lack of political will” that prevents this.

The panel discussion ends with the moderator asking the two international students about their demands to the German authorities. The first student points out that she wants to continue the studies she has already started in Ukraine, while the second adds that she does not want to be threatened by police harassment because of her legal status. In calm and modest voices, both assert, “We just want the same rights.”

Below are letters from two African students from Ukraine who are struggling not only to stay in Germany (or other EU countries) but also to continue their studies. Although the two students did not attend the conference organized by Peace-by-Peace,[\[x\]](#) they share the experiences and demands of the speakers. I hope that their letters can help amplify the voices of international students who studied in Ukraine and had to flee for their lives to other European countries and portray their complex situation.

Passport, by Ghoulam Arra[\[xi\]](#)

In the early morning hours when the war in Ukraine started, I could not believe that this was happening. At my university in Kyiv, Ukraine, I was told over and over again that the social media was playing up the story and everything would be fine. I was shocked that day and didn't know what to do, especially because I kept hearing bomb explosions near me and near the university. I tried to call some of my friends and most of them told me that the war was real and we should quickly move to another city. I packed my bags and took a train with my colleagues to Lviv in western Ukraine. There we stayed for a few days, hoping that the war would stop and we could live a normal life again. But soon we heard new bomb explosions and we decided to go to the European Union. We saw on the news that Germany and other European countries were taking in people fleeing the war, but we didn't know that they were only taking in people with special passports.

We tried to board the train, but the police wouldn't let us. We waited for four nights, sleeping outside while the bombing continued. Somehow we managed to board the train, and we first went to a town in Poland. There we saw a policeman holding a baby in his arms on the train while the journalists filmed him and made him look like a hero. We all laughed. We went to a group of volunteers and one of them told us that he could help us get to Warsaw. The trains in Poland were reserved only for Ukrainian citizens. We were sceptical at first because it could have been a scam. But he was a good person and he helped us. He suggested that we go to Berlin afterwards because there were better living conditions and we could continue our studies there. But I wondered if it would be so easy, because I had heard that Germany has very strict immigration laws. I called the German embassy in Poland and they told me that I could enter Germany as a third-country national. I was really happy and we travelled to Berlin.

Once we arrived in Berlin, we were again supported by the volunteers. Berlin is a city with a diverse population of women and men. Open-mindedness, tolerance, and mutual respect guarantee their coexistence. This does not mean that there are no cases of discrimination and racist violence. But if you feel discriminated against, you can seek advice and help at the Berlin Welcome Centre. Since my arrival in Berlin, I moved from house to house, to people who took me in. I met a lot of good people, but they all told me not to register because I won't get the right to work or study. But I want to find a university to continue my studies, because that is the only way to stay in Germany. As an international student from a "Third Country" who was studying and working as well spending his time and life in Kyiv as a normal student, I now do not hold the same rights like someone holding an Ukrainian passport in Germany.

With my simple story, I wanted to send the message that the world is still not a just place where all people can live equally on the basis of their origin. Even when racism is denounced by decision-makers and authorities, they largely continue to reproduce it. I don't know how we can expect to guarantee a good and just life for our next generations when a piece of paper (a passport) discriminates against you.

Ryan

I am a first year student of Economics at Kharkiv University, but I have already completed one year of Ukrainian lessons. I am also an aspiring basketball player and have already played in clubs in Ukraine. When the war started, I was in Kyiv because I wanted to pick up my four-year residence permit at the immigration office. Early in the morning of February 24, I heard the first blast and immediately received a call from a friend in Ukraine telling me that the war had started. My first thought was that it was just a provocation, so I stayed in the house with my friend whom I was visiting in Kyiv. Until noon that day, we tried to find a solution about what to do. My family called me and asked me to come home, but I did not want to return to Nigeria. Finally, I decided to go to Lviv. I hurried and took three bags of my stuff to the metro station in Kyiv, where I met up with a friend and we left together.

In Lviv, a man with a private car offered us a ride to the Polish border for a fee. We paid him one hundred and twenty dollars, but he did not take us to the border. It turned out to be a scam. He dropped us off in the middle of the road and told us we were really close to the border. But he was lying. We had to walk for more than eight hours, with me carrying all my luggage. We

arrived at the border at midnight and waited all night to cross. But they did not let us pass. They only let Ukrainian citizens pass. Every time we tried to cross the border, the Ukrainian authorities insulted us with racist remarks. The next day, at three in the afternoon, we went to another border crossing with Poland and waited there in the cold for three days without being allowed to cross. I saw Ukrainians crossing the border in buses. I lost two of my bags, which contained my laptop, clothes, and documents. At that border crossing, we were sleeping in a garage and it was snowing outside. I saw three people collapse. I got frostbite on my leg and to this day I can't use cold water because I am still so traumatized.

On the third day I decided to leave the border crossing and go to Lviv. I was lucky that one person gave me a ride. From Lviv, I made my way to the Slovakian border and crossed it on foot, after waiting there for six hours with my friends. Once in Slovakia, I went to a church where there were already thirty people who had crossed the border from Ukraine. While some of my friends left early, I stayed there for two weeks. Then I moved to Hungary because a friend told me that I could get a residence permit there. However, I only stayed in Hungary for five days and did not receive any positive feedback. I contacted a friend who had fled to Germany, and he told me that Germany was helping third-country nationals fleeing the war in Ukraine. As a result, the friends I was traveling with and I decided to go to Berlin.

When we arrived in Berlin, I contacted the friend who was already living in Berlin and he gave me the contact to the [Tubman](#) network. We went to their office and the person who worked there gave us a private address where we could stay for a week. After a week, we were lucky enough to have a couple take us in and we have been staying with them ever since.

I am currently enrolled in a guest study program "International Business" at the Berlin School of Economics and Law and play for three basketball teams. I am also learning the German language in a German course. However, the guest study at the university is only for a limited period of time and I would like to enrol for the bachelor's degree to continue my studies. So far, I can only do that if I get a scholarship or have a blocked account with a lot of money. But I want to have the same rights as Ukrainians to study at a German university without limitations. I also feel financially insecure because I am not allowed to work, but I want to find a part-time job. Germany should understand our [international students from Ukraine] situation because we have already paid a lot of money for our studies in Ukraine.

Apart from these challenges, I have had a good experience in Germany so far. I have the feeling that international students are treated the same here as German students. I also see that in the basketball clubs where I currently play. In Ukraine, if you were Black, you were always the second one when decisions were made. I experienced a lot of racism in Ukraine. I could easily see some people not wanting to sit next to you on the subway, or worse, a friend of mine getting beaten up by a gang until he passed out. But in Berlin, I have had a different experience. I was immediately offered to play in three clubs, and I'm still thinking about where I want to play. I want to continue my career as a professional basketball player. In Berlin, there is already a unity of Black and White people, and I want to stay because I have more opportunities here.

This contribution was written on 24 May 2022.

Author

Ziga Podgornik Jakil received his PhD from the Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology at the Freie Universität Berlin. His research focuses mainly on (forced) mobility, activism, solidarity, class inequality and logistical capitalism. He is currently working as a postdoc at CRC 1171 "Affective Societies" at Freie Universität Berlin.

Contact

zigajakil@gmail.com

Open Letter Series

This series of letters began with an introduction 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. More letters will be published over the next few months in order to document the experiences of African Students from Ukraine who fled to Germany.

Bibliography

European Commission. Temporary Protection. https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/policies/migration-and-asylum/common-european-asylum-system/temporary-protection_en. Last access: 24/05/2022.

Global Detention Project 2022. The Ukraine Crisis Double Standards: Has Europe's Response to Refugees Changed. <https://reliefweb.int/report/ukraine/ukraine-crisis-double-standards-has-europe-s-response-refugees-changed>. Last access: 24/05/2022.

Mediendienst Integration 2022. Flüchtlinge aus der Ukraine. <https://mediendienst-integration.de/migration/flucht-asyl/ukrainische-fluechtlinge.html>. Last access: 24/05/2022.

Meyer, Laurence und Sharma, Mihir 2022. Zwischen Unterkunftsuche und Lobbyarbeit. <https://www.akweb.de/bewegung/gefluechtete-of-color-aus-der-ukraine-zwischen-unterkunftsuche-und-lobbyarbeit/>. Last access: 24/05/2022.

WDR 2022. Für Ukrainer in Deutschland: Aufenthalt und Asyl - was muss ich beachten? <https://www1.wdr.de/nachrichten/fluechtlinge/ukraine-deutschland-einreise-aufenthalt-asyl-100.html>. Last access: 24/05/2022.

Medizinethnologie 2022. An Open Letter from African Students from Ukraine who fled to Germany (with an Introductory Text on the Situation of African Students in Germany by Ziga Podgornik Jakil). <https://www.medizinethnologie.net/open-letter-from-african-students-from-ukraine/>. Last access: 24/05/2022.

Public Anthropology 2022. Open Letters from African Students from Ukraine who fled to

Germany. <http://publicanthropology.de/2022/05/05/letters-af2/>. Last access: 24/05/2022.

UNHCR. Operational Data Portal. Ukraine Refugee Situation.
<https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/ukraine>. Last access: 25/5/2022.

[i] Germany has set a time limit within which war refugees from Ukraine can stay in Germany without a residence permit. This deadline has been extended until August 31, 2022.

[ii] According to my interlocutors, tuition fees in Ukraine had to be paid in dollars, although the state currency is the Ukrainian hryvnia. They told me that the academic year for BA students cost around two thousand dollars, while medical studies were even more expensive.

[iii] Since the Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, 14 million people have been displaced, of whom 6.6 million have already fled to other European countries by May 25, 2022 (UNHCR). While most Ukrainians are currently in Ukraine's neighbouring countries, most of them in Poland, Germany has already taken in some 727,200 Ukrainian war refugees as of May 11, 2022 (Mediendienst Integration 2022). This already almost exceeds the number of asylum-seekers who arrived in Germany during the "European refugee crisis" in all of 2015. On the different and unequal treatment of asylum-seekers who arrived in the European Union during the 2015 "refugee crisis" compared to current Ukrainian war refugees, see the Global Detention Project's early report (2022) and the first open letter in the series of Open Letters from African Students from Ukraine who fled to Germany, published on [Medizinethnologie](#) and [Public Anthropology](#) (2022).

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

[v] BIPOC stands for Black, Indigenous, and people of colour.

[vi]
<https://www.akweb.de/bewegung/gefluechtete-of-color-aus-der-ukraine-zwischen-unterkunftsuche-und-lobbyarbeit/>

[vii]
<https://www.eventbrite.de/e/willkommenskonzert-bipoc-ukraine-by-pxp-one-registrierung-336578303767>

[viii] As mentioned in the first open letter (2022), international students must present original documents when enrolling in a Ukrainian university. Due to the war, these documents were left behind and may have been destroyed by the destroyed educational institutions.

[ix] Full name in German: Gesetz über den Aufenthalt, die Erwerbstätigkeit und die Integration von Ausländern im Bundesgebiet 1) (Aufenthaltsgesetz - AufenthG) § 24 Aufenthaltsgewährung zum vorübergehenden Schutz.

[x] I talked with Ghoulam on WhatsApp and I met with Ryan in a restaurant in Berlin.

[xi] This letter was written by Ghoulam Arrar and edited by me. I have returned the edited letter to the author and he has confirmed that it can be published.