How Black African students experienced forced displacement from Ukraine

Lindsey N Kingston and Igho Ekakitie

The forced migration journeys of Black African students in Ukraine highlight the vulnerabilities that minority non-nationals experienced during the 2022 Russian invasion.

When Russia began its invasion in late February 2022 there were 76,548 international students from 155 countries enrolled in Ukrainian universities. Displaced international students are an important and interesting group because they are 'not quite' refugees. Their country of citizenship was not under attack, but they had to flee and their lives were uprooted. They had invested time and finances in educational programmes that have been interrupted or destroyed and they may lack the resources to simply start again.

This article draws on interviews with 15 Black African students, aged 19 to 29, who were displaced from Ukraine in February 2022. Interviews centred on the decision-making processes that brought them to safety and their migration journeys. Respondents primarily originated from countries in West and East Africa, and interviews were conducted via Zoom between May and October 2022.

Information gathering and decision making
The interview data suggests that the respondents – like many others – were unprepared for the 2022 invasion. African students were influenced by Ukrainian peers, local news and international news that underestimated the threat. Many respondents commented that Putin's aggressive comments were not taken seriously, especially because of the smaller-scale conflict in 2014. They did not expect widespread violence. "Who seriously thinks about war in the twenty-first century?" asked Moon (22, from Nigeria).[1] "Even the people who went home for Christmas, they came back afterward. We weren't really that worried." Kite (27, from Nigeria) reflected that it felt like social media was warning that "the whole world was burning" but people in Ukraine "were chilling, making summer plans, cooking."

Students used a variety of formal and informal sources to gather data. Social media and communication apps played central roles

in information sharing – including channels that were quickly created by displaced people. Respondents also used global news sources such as CNN, Al Jazeera, BBC and France 24. Sometimes social media translated the news from local Ukrainian news sources into English, and the Kyiv Post offered English language news. Others relied on personal networks, including local contacts within Ukraine and trusted friends and relatives outside the country.

The students engaged in information resilience[2]– that is, they reoriented and adjusted their knowledge base when their usual sources of information were disrupted by displacement. This involved reconstructing their information landscape[3] (how a person gathers and processes information), developing coping mechanisms and pooling information from a range of sources. Some respondents delayed their journeys in the hope of gathering reliable information, while others felt driven to move even without a clear idea of where they were going.

Sunny (19, from Nigeria) reflected: "We didn't really have time to filter what was right or wrong. We just tried to weigh options and think about what was best for us. Some information was false, some was accurate but stressful to attain… in the end we had to make decisions without proper thinking, just following the normal survival instincts."

These findings support existing research on information sharing during displacement journeys, which emphasises the role of other people (especially knowledgeable friends, family and social contacts) and the use of smartphone apps such as WhatsApp and Facebook.[4] Having many information sources to choose from, however, does not necessarily translate into having trustworthy data. People need reliable sources of practical information during emergencies.

Experiences of forced displacement

Students' initial experiences of displacement were stressful and difficult, with fear of violence exacerbated by social chaos and extreme winter weather. Respondents waited in long queues to purchase bus or train tickets that were frequently not available; taxi drivers charged exorbitant fares but were still blocked from border crossings by dense traffic. Many packed in a hurry and did not have enough food or warm clothing for long periods of waiting, especially outdoors. Destinations continued to shift in response to ever-changing information about border crossings and humanitarian aid. Panic often led to unsafe conditions in train stations and other gathering sites. Junior (22, from Rwanda) was taken aback by the sheer numbers of people in a train station, fearing a stampede as trains approached the platform. "People were getting stepped on, people were getting injured," he recalled. Praise (23, from Ghana) had similar fears, reflecting: "I can't run from a war and then die because I'm [suffocated] from someone pressing me."

Technological and logistical challenges compounded the situation. Initial internet blackouts limited access to news and their university accounts. When on the move, students were sometimes unable to recharge their phones, access mobile internet or access cash using ATMs.

Racial discrimination

Early media reports suggested that people of colour were treated differently from white Ukrainians and other white Europeans fleeing the Russian invasion. The African Union issued a statement on the "reported ill treatment of Africans trying to leave Ukraine", urging "empathy and support to all people fleeing war notwithstanding their racial identity."[5] Students had mixed reactions when asked whether they experienced racial discrimination, both before and after the invasion began. Most respondents expressed positive feelings toward Ukraine and its people. Some noted underlying tensions even if their overall experiences were positive, while a few pointed to deeper problems with racism in Ukraine.

Respondents who had positive experiences in Ukraine before the invasion were sometimes surprised by their treatment during displacement. Peace (18, from Nigeria) was told to expect a "racial hierarchy" on trains, which privileged white Ukrainian women over Black African women. Indeed, her group had to sit near the train door while cabins were mostly occupied by Ukrainians, with many aisles

filled with Black African and Indian students. Yet she was also careful to note that Ukrainians came to her rescue when others tried to push her back onto the train platform; Ukrainians shouted "Why are you pushing them down? They are running for their lives" and helped the students board.

Some students attributed racial tensions to the realities of forced displacement, rather than reflecting broader or deeper patterns of discrimination. In Kyiv train station, Eli (29, from Liberia) observed security personnel "harassing foreigners to allow Ukrainian citizens to get on board." Some noticed that travel was easier for Black students if they travelled with white companions.

Concerns about racial discrimination were sometimes factored into decision-making. Praise (who describes herself as "not light, not chocolate, I'm dark") made travel decisions on the assumption she would face racial discrimination at border crossings. One of her friends had reported that some Black African and Muslim students "had to fight" to gain entry to trains, and she believed that a dark-skinned Black woman would have fewer options in transit. She was prepared to spend a lot of money if necessary, she reflected: "If I have to spend $2,000 to save my life, that's what I have to do".

Onward journeys

After initially seeking refuge in border countries such as Poland and Slovakia, students continued their journeys and usually ventured further from the Ukrainian border. Some were in EU countries at the time of their interview, while others had returned to their home countries in Africa. Roughly three to eight months after the students were initially displaced, most students' plans were still in flux. Many students had been given the option to continue their studies online with Ukrainian universities but such learning environments were not always ideal. Some were optimistic that they would return to continue their studies, or at least to celebrate graduation one day. Others, however, doubted they would return to Ukraine, at least as students.

The conflict initially created both opportunities and challenges for Black African students.

For some, it opened up possibilities for travelling within the EU and earning degrees at institutions with perhaps more resources or better reputations. For others, displacement meant interrupted studies or even the need to start again at great financial and personal cost. Several students mused about taking their chances and returning to wartime Ukraine to finish their studies, despite the risks, because they stood to lose so much if they could not complete their degrees. Junior reflected on the impact that his displacement experience had on his mental health and well-being:

"It was when I got home that I began to feel the mental effects of the war… Getting home, you realise you could have died... It took me about a month and a half, just mental trauma."

Further research needs

This project offers rich data for understanding the forced migration journey of Black African students in Ukraine, and the vulnerabilities of minorities in crisis situations. Yet those early stages of displacement are only part of a larger story that is becoming increasingly fragmented. Longitudinal data on displaced international students could uncover the consequences of their forced displacement in the years to follow, possibly in comparison with the experiences of displaced Ukrainian nationals.

Lindsey N Kingston
Lkingston54@webster.edu @LindseyKingsto3
Associate Professor of International Human Rights, Webster University

Igho Ekakitie
Ighoekakitie@gmail.com @ighoekakitie
Student researcher, Webster University

1. Names changed to protect respondents' identities.

2. Lloyd A (2014) 'Building information resilience: how do resettling refugees connect with health information in regional landscapes – implications for health literacy', *Australian Academic & Research Libraries*

3. Lloyd A (2006) 'Information literacy landscapes: An emerging picture', *Journal of Documentation*

4. Fisher K E (2018) 'Information Worlds of Refugees' in Maitland CF (Ed) *Digital Lifeline? ICTs for Refugees and Displaced Persons*, MIT Press

5. African Union (2022) 'Statement of the African Union on the reported ill treatment of Africans trying to leave Ukraine' bit.ly/africans-trying-leave-ukraine