

Nigerian students who fled war in Ukraine are being told to leave Europe

Thursday 7 March 2024, by [ADETAYO Ope](#) (Date first published: 25 February 2024).

Overseas students in Ukraine were granted a two-year stay in the EU when Russia invaded. Now their time is running out

Olabisi* was out to get groceries during her post-graduate clinical rotations at the Ivano-Frankivsk National Medical University in western Ukraine on the morning of 24 February 2022 when she heard loud bangs. Then came breaking news alerts: Russia was invading Ukraine. She rushed home to pack a few belongings.

“In the course of moving, I lost my certificates and even my passport,” she said.

She headed towards the border between Ukraine and Romania with hundreds of thousands of others. Thankfully, with her Ukrainian ID card, she was allowed passage. From Romania, she travelled by train to the Netherlands, along with other students whose lives had just been uprooted.

Olabisi chose the Netherlands because – like a number of western European countries – it had announced plans to take in people displaced from the Ukraine war, and she had heard it was cheaper and more welcoming than others.

In 2022, the European Union activated a rule called a Temporary Protection Directive, granting those fleeing war a stay for up to two years – until March 4, 2024. In mid 2023, the Netherlands decided that non-Ukrainian citizens or “third world nationals with temporary residence” must leave a year earlier than previously announced. They – most of them students – brought a collective case against the Dutch government insisting that they be allowed to stay the allotted time. The Council of State, the Netherlands’ highest administrative court, agreed.

But now time is running out for Olabisi and those like her. Roughly [2,200 people from different nationalities are said to be affected](#). (Students interviewed for this story say they prefer their luck in Europe over the option of returning to Nigeria, where they consider the academic system sub-par and prone to interruptions.)

Olabisi is one of an estimated 4,000 Nigerian students who had been studying in Ukraine before the war. The eastern European country had attracted African students, particularly medical students, partly due to the relatively low costs of studying and partly as a product of student exchange programmes dating back to the former Soviet Union’s investment in African countries.

Olabisi and other students say that, to make matters worse, the Nigerian government has not adequately intervened via its embassies to help them.

They say Nigeria has left them in limbo, just as it did with the [1,625](#) Nigerian students in Ukraine who were finally evacuated to Nigeria in July 2022, four and a half months after the war broke out.

Nigerian diplomats missing in action, in Europe?

The Nigerian mission in the Netherlands disputes this. Eniola Ajayi, Nigeria's ambassador to The Hague, told openDemocracy: "All the reprieve that students got in the Netherlands was due to my efforts... I have helped them as much as is possible within my capacity. This is the truth."

The embassy claimed the mission housed some "families at the Guest Chalet of [Ajayi's] Residence until they were able to get alternative accommodation" and cash assistance was given to others. The embassy also mentioned the case of a depressed student who was sent back to Nigeria for medical treatment.

The mission said it had given Nigerian nationals ample notice of the Dutch government's intentions. To stay beyond the March 2024 deadline, the Dutch government has advised students to either seek asylum if they could prove their lives would be at risk back home, or accept an independent offer of 5,000 euros to return there.

Olabisi does not qualify for asylum as her life is not at risk in Nigeria but she doesn't want to return to the country she left since she was 17. Now 30, she cannot imagine rebuilding her life again, especially as Nigeria experiences a steep economic decline.

Nigerian government, *still* missing in action

While the Nigerian government backs the return of students who are currently abroad, there is no safety net for those who do so, the students claim.

Wasiu Sidiq, 21, was studying at Lviv National Medical University when the war broke out and he was evacuated. When he returned to Nigeria, he attempted to continue his studies remotely - but stopped when the Medical and Dental Council of Nigeria [said](#) it would not recognise medical certificates issued for online study.

The government claimed it was providing an option for the evacuated students to continue their education in Nigerian universities instead. The Foreign Affairs Ministry published a call-out on its website asking concerned students to register towards being placed locally - but the website link never worked and no students could register.

Sidiq, frustrated, decided to return to Europe, where he headed for Lisbon and is currently working in customer services for 890 euros a month. He tried to start uni there, but does not speak Portuguese and so has been unable to.

"If I don't go to work, I cannot eat or pay my rent," he said. "So I don't have the time to go to the language class. All of us are just doing that."

Sidiq claims students have tried to contact the Nigerian embassy in Lisbon for assistance with resettlement and negotiations on residence permits.

"They have not responded to us at all," he said. "The embassy is not working. I have to leave Portugal to go and renew my passport."

openDemocracy approached the Nigerian embassy in Lisbon for comment. A consular assistant insisted the embassy could only respond in person, in a physical meeting. Written questions and requests for a virtual meeting were ignored. Repeated requests were also made to Aminu Tanko, head of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs and Diaspora and the Abuja office of the Nigerian in Diaspora Commission (NIDCOM). The latter promised a response that did not come.

Consular failures, according to John Osuntokun, a professor and former Nigerian ambassador to Germany, are largely due to lack of priority.

“It is a large country and there are so many issues waiting for attention and this situation is going to be the least important to them,” he said. “My advice to them will be to come home.”

Osuntokun said standard practice is for complaints from Nigeria’s foreign missions to be relayed to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for advice.

Asked if the ministry had received any such requests from the embassy, the foreign ministry spokesperson told openDemocracy: “The ministry has not received any such complaints.”

Two years into the war and with fate hanging in the balance, experts believe there is little the embassies can offer now. “Consular services are not services that provide long-term solutions; they are supposed to provide immediate help and assistance,” said Matthew Ayibakuro, a governance adviser at the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office in Nigeria.

** Name has been changed.*

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