**Racism in Europe**

BY R A F I A Z A K A R I A 2022-03-24

THE Poles and Ukrainians wanted to cover up the matter. When war broke out in Ukraine in February, millions of Ul(rainians fled to the Polish border. Also in the country were some 100,000 foreign students, the majority of whom were African and Indian. These students had gathered the fees for their courses of study after sacrificing a lot, with their parents selling property, jewellery, taking loans, etc. They were caught in the panic. Many lived in hostels in the cities of Sumy, Kherson and Kyiv. All of them were terrified and did not know how to get home. In Ukraine, they stuck together and travelled in groups, afraid of the white supremacist and neo-Nazi groups that attack non-white foreigners. How to leave safely? Speaking to Al Jazeera, one Nigerian student exclaimed: `I don`t even know right now [how I feel] because I cannot think. I am literally shaking.  
  
For most, it was a terrible journey to the border.  
  
According to one media interview, at least one group of students who had managed to get a car were stopped by Ukrainian soldiers and made to get out. Ukrainian women and children were put in the car instead. The students were left to walk to the Polish border. There they joined the thousands of others who were trying to leave Ukraine and get to safety. While a presidential decree forbade Ukrainian men to leave the country, male foreign students were still trying to make it to the border with female students.  
  
At the Polish border, both women and men who were foreigners in Ukraine were put in separate lines. It was bitterly cold and there was nothing to eat or drink. The students stood in line for hours on end. The lines for Ukrainians were also long, stretching out as far as the eye could see. Before long, however, the students saw that the lines for the Ukrainians were moving. The lines in which the students stood were not. For some Nigerian students, the wait became so long they actually decided to turn back and make the entire journeyagain so that they could try to exit the country through Hungary. Finally, the plight of the students came to the attention of a CNN news crew. If it had not been for the story being aired on CNN, several students might have died of hypothermia.  
  
In my experience, Ukrainian and Polish of ficials become defensive when questioned about the racism that these students suffered. They feel that the students` story is Russian propaganda than one of discrimination and racially based exclusion.  
  
Indeed, while the plight of the Ukrainians is truly tragic, racism must never be condoned. In wartime, the most vulnerable are the ones with least infor-mation about the context and hence the least able to get to safety. These would be individuals like the foreign students studying in Ukraine.  
  
The problem is not limited to one or two European countries. The ugliness of European racism is something that the invasion of Ukraine has laid bare. Poland, that had been building walls and boasting of creating a `fortress` to keep out refugees from Syria and Afghanistan, has somehow found it in their heart to welcome white refugees.  
  
Sadly, we live in a world where the depth of European empathy is quite literally skin-deep.  
  
Ukrainian children get toys when they arrive; Syrian children are allowed to drown, washing up like Aylan Kurdi on a European beach.  
  
The immigration schemes that have been created by countries like the UK and EU are yet another iteration of the help that was never of feredto the world`s black and brown refugees and migrants. There is permission to stay for up to three years, there are offers to work without penalty, continue courses of study. None of these are available to those unlucky foreign students who have been displaced from Ukraine. Germany for one has told all foreign students who arrived from Ukraine to leave the country by May 23, 2022, or face possible deportation.  
  
It is probably a good idea to leave the EU for other reasons too. In Poland, black and brown students leaving the train stations in border towns where refugees were arriving were accosted and harassed by members of Polish neo-Nazi groups.  
  
Even those students who reached Germany were afraid of leaving their rooms because of threats by far-right and neo-Nazi groups who have tried to create a visible presence on the streets of Berlin and other cities since the war began. Many use the language of `invasion` to describe the very presence of non-white foreigners.  
  
If ever there were doubts about the shallowness of European `civilisation`, the current conflict should put them to rest. Here are countries with lofty promises enshrined in their laws and constitutions, millions devoted to enabling `equality` among their citizens. As it turns out, the European `inability` to include Turkey in the EU, to accommodate refugees weary from wars caused by their own colonial decrepitude can all be pinned to race.  
  
White people are welcome, white people are human, white people`s pain matters. While Russia is also racist and Islamophobic (Uzbeks, Kazakhs, Azerbaijanis are targets), Europe is not much better. Indeed, if Europe is counting on their superior morals as an argument for why they and not Russia deserve support, they have lost that argument.  The writer is an attorney teaching constitutional law and political philosophy rafia.zakaria@gmailcom