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'Now We're Out of Ukraine, the Battle Is In Our Minds': Black Students Who Fled Ukraine Still Have Tough Road Ahead

By Kavontae Smalls | March 24, 2022 Comments (0)

"I just needed help, I was crying like a baby and the horrors I saw on the way were still fresh on my memory," said Desmond Muokwudo, a 30-year-old University of Customs and Finances student in Dnipro, Ukraine, who fled the country amid the ongoing conflict with Russia that began on Feb. 24.

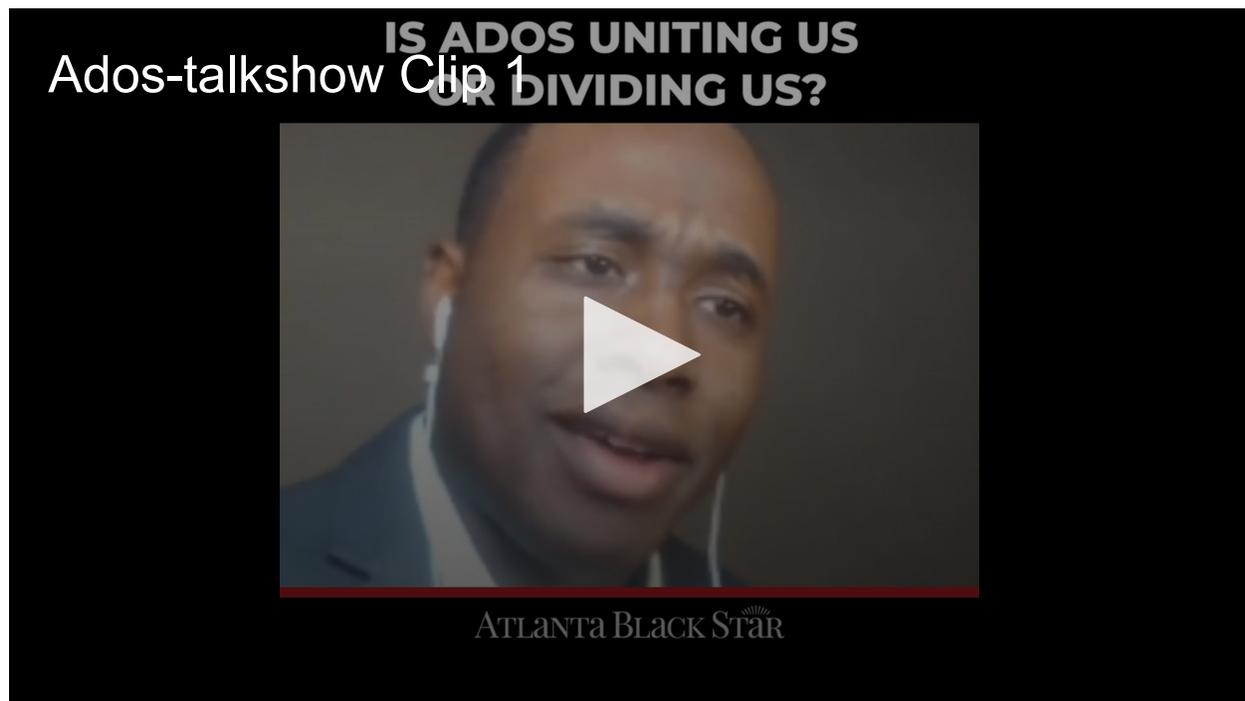
'Now We're Out of Ukraine, the Battle is in Our Minds': ...





Muokwudo is from Anambra State, Nigeria, who was just three months into his first semester when the war began. He says his family sacrificed everything for him to go to school. “My mom even sold our family land just to raise money for me to go to Ukraine and study,” he said.

As Muokwudo tried to escape Ukraine, he says he encountered skyrocketing prices for bus fares, which exhausted his financial resources. Korrine Sky of Zimbabwe, a 26-year-old second-year medical student at Dnipro Medical Institute who now lives in Leicester, England, was escaping the war zone at the same time.



As Sky was fleeing, she started sharing information with other Black students on pathways out of the country on the Telegram social media app. “When I was in Ukraine, I had no idea this had actually turned into a movement or a cause,” Sky said.



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At the outbreak of the invasion up to 76,000 international students were in Ukraine, mostly of Asian and African descent. About 16,000 of the students were African, [Reuters](#) reports.

Sky documented her escape on Twitter while on her way to Romania, but she knew thousands of other Black students were having a harder time because they lacked the money to leave. She started [posting](#) resources and organized a fundraising effort on her social media for students still stuck in Ukraine.

Tokundbo Koiki, a resident of London, England, saw Sky's posts requesting help. "There was a range of emotions I went through seeing what was happening and the annoyance that this keeps happening to us irrespective to where we are in the world," Koiki said of the plight of Black students fleeing Ukraine and encountering racism as they crossed the borders.

Filippo Grandi, commissioner of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, acknowledged the racism Black people faced amid the humanitarian crisis and formally apologized on March 21.

"We also bore witness to the ugly reality, that some Black and brown people fleeing Ukraine – and other wars and conflicts around the world – have not received the same treatment as Ukrainian refugees" Grandi said in a [statement](#).

Days after the war began, Koiki, Sky and Patricia Daley forged a friendship online, founded on the principle of helping Black students in need, and created Black Women for Black [Lives](#). They knew they had several obstacles ahead of them including avoiding being perceived as a scam operation as they ask for money to fund their operation to help Black students fleeing the country and others who are stuck.

"We were very rudimentary, I was having the money transferred from PayPal to my bank account, transferring that to Korrine Sky's U.K. bank account and she then transferred it

to her Ukrainian bank account,” said Koiki, who’s also a full-time social worker, entrepreneur and mother. ▲

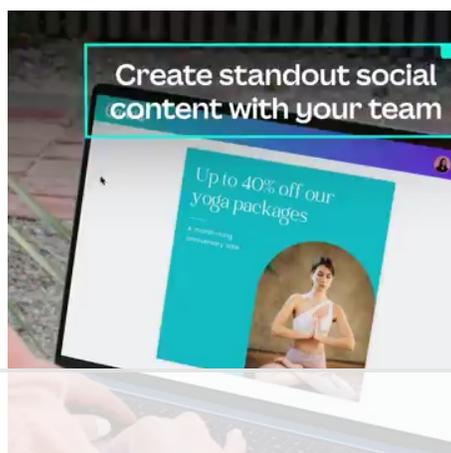
“In Ukraine there’s no Cash App. There’s PayPal now, but at that time there was no PayPal, no Cash App, and the only way to send money was by a bank transfer and a lot of the Western Unions and Money Grams had run out of money. So it was like, now I’m going to have to step in in a way to broker the transfers between people so they can get their money quickly,” Sky said of their process to transfer money to students.

The group created a verification system where students requesting financial assistance complete an application on their website, which Sky says has already exceeded 600 requests in single day.

“We realized one of the best ways to vet people is to ensure they have an Ukrainian bank account, because in order to have an Ukrainian bank account, you need to have Ukrainian resident permit, and that literally shows you’re in Ukraine, and most people in Ukraine have that. And if for some reason you don’t have a Ukrainian bank account yet, your student ID and other ways to prove or your resident permit,” Sky said.

Koiki says transparency is important to them which is why they’ve **posted** several of their money transactions to their social media accounts for all to see. She says they have raised hundreds of thousands of dollars so far to help students. She says many of the students either went back to their native countries in parts of Africa or to Western Europe.

Koiki shares some of the grateful feedback from students helped out of Ukraine on their social media **account**. Muokwudo also posted a thank you message for the Black Women for Black Lives. “The thing the Black women did for me that I am grateful for, when I was down and I almost threw in the towel and I hope you know what that means, I almost threw in the towel because I lost my education,” Muokwudo said.



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Muokwudo says he's now trying to figure out his next move as continuing his education is his top priority. Meanwhile Sky says she is back home staying with her parents in Leicester, U.K. along with her husband and 1-year-old daughter and she is also concerned about her future education pursuits.

In addition to figuring out their next move with their education, Muokwudo says for students affected by the war they also must deal with the psychological trauma of this difficult time. "We were facing the physical battle in Ukraine, but now that we're out of Ukraine, the battle is now in our minds," Muokwudo said.

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