



The Indian Dilemma in Ukraine -

Racism, Politics and Career Fallout for Medical Students

“The war will never be over, never, as long as somewhere a wound it had inflicted is still bleeding,”

Heinrich Böll

There is new conflict in Europe again after the Bosnian war in 1995, which led to large scale displacement of people, estimated to be around 2 million.[1] The Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014[2], was probably not felt to any great extent by people. In the current war in Ukraine, over a million people have been displaced within a week. A rate of displacement hardly ever seen before and estimated to end up affecting over 4-5 million people if the aggression continues. [3] The number of people [displaced](#) globally by conflict and persecution stood at 65.6 million at the end of 2016, the greatest number since World War II. [4] In addition to loss of freedom and human rights, conflicts lead to destruction of life, property, infrastructure and lead to huge setbacks in education, health and wellbeing for those who manage to survive.[5]

There are over 200,000 Indian students reading medicine outside of India. As seen in Wuhan, at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020, events such as disease and conflict have devastating consequences for students who are caught out in such areas of disaster. India had to arrange evacuation of over 600 students from Hubei province at the epicentre of COVID-19 and over 18,000 from China before the lockdown. [6]

The challenge that Indian students face in Ukraine is not just of risk to life from incessant shelling but also one of discrimination, racism and a political scapegoating due to the Indian government’s decision to abstain from the UN Security Council resolution condemning the Russian invasion of Ukraine.[7] Many of the students have reported being harassed, assaulted and openly discriminated because of their foreign status (versus Ukrainian nationals competing for space on public transport in the exodus towards the border), in being denied or delayed access to Poland, Hungary and Romania at the checkpoints;

Indranil Chakravorty PhD

*Hon Professor, Life & Medical Sciences, University of Hertfordshire, UK
Consultant Physician, St George's University Hospitals, London, UK*

indranil.chakravorty@nhs.net

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and most worryingly being scapegoated for the Indian government's UN security council abstention. The draft resolution was not adopted as Russia used its privilege as a permanent member to veto the text. While 11 Council members voted in favour, all three Asian members – India, China and the United Arab Emirates – abstained. India's decision to abstain from voting at the UN Security Council against Russia's war on Ukraine was explained as a way of keeping dialogue and diplomacy options open. India reiterated its call for immediate cessation of violence and an end to all hostilities.

However, India's position in the UN Security Council resolution perhaps stems from a deep-rooted grudge against the role Western players as well as the UN have played in safeguarding New Delhi's own national security interests — be it in relation to Jammu and Kashmir, Bangladesh, or for that matter, China.[8] During India's last stint on the United Nations Security Council in 2011-12, it was unable to pursue the originally charted strategy of demonstrating responsible diplomacy in the leagues of the great powers while also making the body a more legitimate and representative organisation. [9]

The fallout on the desperate Indian students either in Ukrainian cities under siege or amassing at the western border is palpable. There are media reports of Ukrainian authorities using uncalled for force in restraining and pushing back Indian students. There are also reports of residents turning against Indian students. The students via social media reports share their concerns and perception that this is either due to their foreign citizenship status or as a reaction to India's UN abstention. [10]

There is another dark side to this issue- one of colour. Ukraine is not a novice in terms of racism. According to non-governmental organisations, there were 60 racist attacks in Ukraine in 2007 and six of these resulted in the death of the victims. In 2008, an Amnesty International report highlighted 30 racist incidents, of which four were murders. The majority of the victims have been African or Asian. More often than not the police have failed to react with the needed

urgency to calls for help from victims of racist attacks or have refused to do so. In many cases victims do not report crimes because they have no confidence that they will get justice.[11] Prejudice and violent attacks against Jews and Jewish properties also continue. Foreign-looking people are arbitrarily stopped for document checks. All members of certain Roma communities including women and children have been fingerprinted and photographed by the police apparently purely because of their ethnic identity. A kind of racial profiling which was in violation of Ukraine's international obligations.

The same degree of racism was reported to be on the rise and affected Black people with Ukrainian nationality. [12] and members of groups of ethnic minorities, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people and rights activists at risk, subjecting them to physical attacks and hate speech.[13] A BBC Panorama documentary, called "Euro 2012: Stadiums of Hate", was broadcast on 28 May and testified to the presence of racism and anti-Semitism in Polish and Ukrainian football stadia. The film featured several video clips of apparent Nazi saluting during football matches in Kiev and Kharkiv – both of which will host Championship matches – and violence by football fans. [14] In Uzhgorod, the town's local aqua-park denied entrance to the black-skinned students of local university who happened to be from India and Nigeria. The pool's owner, former mayor of Uzhgorod and deputy to the Supreme Parliament, Serhei Ratushnyak, explained his pool's policy by mentioning concern about the public health of the town residents in the face of the danger caused by "syphilitic and tuberculosis Gypsyhood of the area and of the whole world." [15]

About 40 per cent of the students at the National Medical University were from African countries, and there were also some 2,000 Asians at the same school; there were reports about verbal discrimination against those students. In 2016, the Ukraine government had adopted the 2012 Human Rights Resolutions and had harmonised its anti-discrimination laws with the European Union provisions. Concrete measures to combat

discrimination were contained in the National Strategy for Human Rights and its Action Plan to 2020. The National Point of Contact on Combatting Hate Crimes, and the Unit for combatting radical groups and criminal organizations were created within the police to counter intolerance and racial discrimination, and preventive police work was ongoing with the leaders and participants of radical youth organizations.[16]

“A refugee is a refugee, whether European, African or Asian,”

The differential of treatment of refugees from the war in Ukraine at the borders of EU is also reported to be clearly discriminatory. When it comes to Ukraine, the change in tone of some of Europe's most extreme anti-migration leaders such as the Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban was striking from advocating not to let anyone in when it came to refugees from Syria in 2015, to welcoming people with open arms in the current conflict. [17]

The Ukrainian Ambassador at UNSC, without naming India, the UAE or China, said,

“It is exactly the safety of your nationals in Ukraine that you should be the first to vote to stop the war to save your nationals in Ukraine, and not to think that you should vote or not vote.”[18]

There are reports of international students either forced to stay back in their university accommodation, against instructions issued by embassies to evacuate, threatened with suspension from their courses if they decided to leave which may have contributed to the last minute rush to evacuate. The Ukrainian University authorities will have to answer to these allegations once the current conflict is over and governments of countries whose citizens are in such universities do have a role in investigating these allegations.

Where Next?

The immediate priority of Ukrainian authorities, the diplomatic missions of countries with their citizens trapped in the conflict zone or at the borders, is to protect life, provide humanitarian aid and a safe passage out of the conflict zone. An example is the Indian government's Operation Ganga which is a coordinated effort to evacuate citizens through Hungary and Romania. This should also include providing speedy access to safe routes of evacuation from conflict besieged cities.

University authorities must remove any restrictions on students and remove any impediments which penalise them from evacuation. How and when university education can be resumed will depend on how the planned negotiations go between Ukraine and Russia and restoration of civic society.

Until that time, the governments in India have a responsibility to provide safety, support including humanitarian as well as mental health to all those who are affected.

Before, international students are returned to Ukrainian universities, there needs to be an acknowledgement at the highest level of the inherent racism and discrimination that exists in Ukrainian society (not uniquely though) and robust measures that prevent recurrence once civic society returns.

Whatever, the Indian stance in the UN Security Council has nothing to do with the safety, wellbeing and aspiration of Indian students in Ukraine and it will be against their human rights to be scapegoated for such actions.

Ultimately, India and other African nations will need to introspect the resources, innovation and investment needed to provide essential medical education and training for their own healthcare systems. This will include measures to mobilise private international investment in systems for regulating private training providers; and to prioritise research that includes evaluation of the social rate of return in economic analyses.

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