

Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515–2004

March 11, 2022

Ursula von der Leyen
President, European Commission
Rue de la Loi / Wetstraat 200
1049 Brussels
Belgium

Dear President von der Leyen,

We write to you today as members of the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, also known as the U.S. Helsinki Commission, who are concerned about reports that border officials are hindering, not helping, some refugees trying to flee Ukraine in the face of Russia's aggression. Overall, we commend Ukraine and neighboring countries' efforts to alleviate the unfolding humanitarian situation. However, we are concerned about ongoing reports of racial profiling and discrimination at border crossings, namely efforts to prevent Africans residing in Ukraine from fleeing to safe havens in neighboring countries. We respectfully urge the European Union (EU) to release information they have obtained regarding such reports, to take steps immediately to ensure that all who are threatened by the ongoing conflict can flee to safety in nearby nations without having to face racial or other forms of discrimination as they cross international borders, and ask that a thorough investigation be conducted into the difficulties that non-white refugees fleeing Ukraine are facing as they try to flee the country.

Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, more than a million people have attempted to flee the country and seek shelter in bordering nations. These nations include EU members Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, and Romania. Among the refugees, many African and other foreign nationals, particularly students, are reportedly being denied or delayed access to safety due to racial profiling and discrimination¹.

We were happy to see that Ukraine has taken note of this issue and has established a hotline for foreign students leaving Ukraine²; however, the reports of appalling racism are still emerging. At a time such as this when vulnerable individuals are desperately fleeing for their lives, we would like to remind EU member states of their responsibility to respect the human rights of all persons seeking to escape danger, regardless of their nationalities and skin color, as they leave a war zone in the Ukraine for safety in the EU. We also would urge the EU to examine the issue further as Ukraine's government tackles this invasion by Russia.

We recognize that the number of people coming into EU countries is unprecedented, and many Ukrainian citizens are doing their best to manage this crisis with limited resources and manpower. The U.S. is prepared to step up to provide billions in additional humanitarian aid to help Ukraine and our other allies in Europe respond to this tremendous humanitarian need.

¹<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/01/world/europe/ukraine-refugee-discrimination.html>

²<https://twitter.com/DmytroKuleba/status/1499094640552775682>

But it is critical that as this humanitarian crisis unfolds, the protection of all asylum seekers on an equal basis without respect to race, religion, or nationality be the concern of border officials both in Ukraine and receiving countries. Unfortunately, we are deeply troubled by these reports of blatant racial bias and discrimination against vulnerable refugees and ask for your leadership in strongly condemning any such acts, swiftly investigate the claims, and move quickly see that they stop, that all refugees can continue to freely move to safety and are able to receive food, water, and other basic humanitarian supplies as they undertake this arduous and dangerous effort to find safety.

However, we believe that the alarming number of reports and first-person testimonies of racism and discrimination warrants further investigation into the veracity of these claims. We would urge the EU to directly engage with Ukrainian officials to express their concerns and to provide technical assistance to ensure the discrimination stops.

Thank you for your attention to this matter.

cc: Fabrice Leggeri, Executive Director, Frontex
cc: Zbigniew Rau, OSCE Chairperson-in-Office

Respectfully,



Marc Veasey
Commissioner, CSCE



Gwen Moore
Commissioner, CSCE



Ben Cardin
Chairman, CSCE



Steve Cohen
Co-Chairman, CSCE