

An abstract graphic consisting of a grid of squares. Each square contains either horizontal or vertical lines. The squares are colored in shades of blue and yellow. The blue squares have lines in the opposite color (yellow or dark blue), and the yellow squares have lines in the opposite color (blue or dark blue). The overall effect is a complex, textured pattern.

**Joint research on the effects of the
armed conflict on the academic
sector in Ukraine**

Promoting Academic Freedom in Ukraine
Project number: 2023-1-AT01-KA220-HED-000164930

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Date: 20/03/2026



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EDITORIAL NOTE

Joint research on the effects of the armed conflict on the academic sector in Ukraine

Report published under WP 4 of the Erasmus+ Project Promoting Academic Freedom in Ukraine
(2023-1-AT01-KA220-HED-000164930)

Funded by: European Union, Erasmus+

Authors: Bernadette Holzer (WUS Austria), Louise Sperl (WUS Austria)

Graphics: KMOP



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1.Executive Summary

This research was conducted by Bernadette Holzer and Louise Sperl (WUS Austria) as part of the Erasmus+ project “*Promoting Academic Freedom in Ukraine*” (*FreeAc*). The study benefited from feedback and peer review by partner institutions within the FreeAc consortium and provides a comprehensive assessment of how Russia’s full-scale invasion has affected universities, students, and academic staff in Ukraine, with a focus on the challenges of displacement, educational continuity, and institutional autonomy.

The research draws on a mixed-methods approach, combining primary data collection with secondary analysis. It is based on findings from two internal project reports—the FreeAc Baseline Study on Displacement and Academic Freedom in Ukraine and the Teaching Gap Analysis. The present study thus integrates (1) survey data from academic staff and students at three Ukrainian partner universities; (2) institutional-level feedback gathered through structured interviews, follow-up consultations, and internal documents; and (3) a desk review of relevant literature, including comparative insights from post-conflict recovery processes in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo, to inform the Ukrainian context.

Key findings can be summarized as follows:

- The war has caused extensive damage to university infrastructure and severely disrupted academic schedules. Faculty and students have been displaced, teaching has been relocated or moved online, and academic routines have been repeatedly interrupted.
- A large proportion of academic staff and students are currently abroad or displaced internally. Restrictions on cross-border mobility—particularly for male citizens—have limited access to international programmes and hindered reintegration planning.
- The war has created a more constrained and uncertain environment for exercising academic freedom. Restrictions on mobility, logistical challenges, and the broader security context have made it more difficult for universities to maintain international engagement, conduct certain types of research, and plan freely for the future. While core academic values remain strong, the conditions for practicing them are increasingly fragile.
- Students and staff face significant psychological distress and growing financial pressure. Enrolment numbers are declining, institutional funding is strained, and many universities are relying on short-term or external support.

- Despite these challenges, Ukrainian higher education institutions have demonstrated strong adaptability. Many have maintained international partnerships, introduced hybrid learning models, and provided targeted support to staff and students under duress.
- The study also draws on the experiences of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo to identify lessons for post-war recovery. These include the risks of fragmented education governance, the need for early planning on reintegration, and the importance of aligning international assistance with national reform priorities.

The findings highlight the urgent need for a coordinated policy response to rebuild Ukraine's higher education system. This includes reintegration programmes for displaced academics and students, mental health support, and sustainable investment in digital and physical infrastructure and protection of academic freedom. The resilience shown by Ukrainian institutions provides a strong foundation for recovery - but long-term success will depend on sustained national leadership and international cooperation.

2. Introduction

2.1 Background and Context

This research report on the effects of the armed conflict on the academic sector in Ukraine is an output from the Erasmus+ project 'Promoting Academic Freedom in Ukraine (FreeAc)' (2023-1-AT01-KA220-HED-000164930)¹ and supports the overarching goal of addressing the direct impacts of war on academic life and academic freedom. The FreeAc project is dedicated to supporting Ukrainian higher education institutions and their displaced academic communities in the face of the ongoing Russian aggression. The project aims to help Ukrainian partner universities – International Humanitarian University Odesa (IHU), Sumy State University (SumDu) and Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv (TSNUK) – to integrate further into the European higher education area and to promote and support freedom of academia under the current challenging situation. FreeAc strives to mitigate the difficulties that academic institutions in Ukraine face to

¹The FreeAc project consortium consists of the University of Graz (Austria, Coordinator), the International Humanitarian University (Ukraine), Sumy State University (Ukraine), Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv (Ukraine), Adam Mickiewicz University Poznań (Poland), CESIE (Italy), KMOP - Education and Innovation Hub (Greece) and WUS – (Austria). For additional information about the project and its partners, please visit the [project website](#) or follow us on [Facebook](#) and [LinkedIn](#).

the best extent possible by contributing to the preservation of the integrity of Ukrainian higher education institutions while simultaneously supporting displaced students and academic staff.

By promoting collaboration, FreeAc enriches the European academic environment, fostering solidarity and cross-border cooperation. Through these efforts, the project contributes to advancing the sustainable development of academic freedom while also ensuring the continuity and fostering the diversification of Ukrainian higher education.

The unprovoked, unjustified, and illegal full-scale military invasion of Ukraine by Russia on 24 February 2022, which escalated the aggression that had been ongoing since February 2014, has had profound and far-reaching impacts on Ukraine's educational system. Over the course of more than three years, the ongoing war has had a disruptive impact on all aspects of life in Ukraine, with education being one of the most vulnerable sectors. Since the beginning of the invasion, many educational institutions were severely damaged by shelling and had to navigate the complexities resulting from the war. For security reasons, students and teachers were forced to relocate, with some finding refuge outside Ukraine, while others moved to areas far from active hostilities or remained in temporarily occupied territories. Similar to 2014, when Crimea was annexed and hostilities erupted in Donbas, Ukrainian higher education institutions (HEIs) also had to relocate to territory controlled by Ukraine.² The Russian aggression causing numerous human tragedies and economic losses has, thus, also raised significant challenges to Ukrainian universities, which had to rapidly adapt to new realities.³

Ukraine, a country rich in cultural heritage and academic history, has found itself navigating turbulent waters. With 20% of the country's territory occupied and roughly 15% of the infrastructure of Ukrainian HEIs significantly damaged or destroyed, the survival of higher education

²Nikolaiev, Ye., Riy, G., & Shemelynets, I. (2023). *War in Ukraine: Reshaping the higher education sector* Analytical report, 6. Borys Grinchenko Kyiv University.

³ See: Кремень, В. Г., Луговий, В. І., Саух, П. Ю., Драч, І. І., Слюсаренко, О. М., Скиба, Ю. А., Жабенко, О. В., Калашнікова, С. А., Таланова, Ж. В., Петроє, О. М., Оржель, О. Ю., Регейло, І. Ю., & Набок, М. В. (2023). *Вища освіта України в умовах воєнного стану та післявоєнного відновлення: виклики і відповіді* Науково-аналітична доповідь, за заг. ред. В.Г. Кременя. Київ, Педагогічна думка. 172 с. <https://doi.org/10.37472/NAES-IHED-20234>; Latyk, N., Sakovets, N., & Sanayko, A. (2024). Higher education in Ukraine under war conditions. *Human Studies. Series of Pedagogy*, 19(51), 51–57. <https://doi.org/10.24919/2413-2039.19/51.6>; Zhila, H. (2023). Higher education in wartime: Challenges, problems, and prospects for students and researchers. *Youth and the Market*, 210. <https://doi.org/10.24919/2308-4634.2023.274694>; Lugovyi, V., Kalashnikova, S., Talanova, Z., & Vlasova, I. (2023). Transformation of higher education in Ukraine: Impact of the war and objectives for post-war recovery. *European Journal of Education*. 58 (4), 611-628 <https://doi.org/10.1111/ejed.12584>.

in Ukraine has become an imminent issue.⁴ The strive to ensure the physical safety of students and staff at HEIs and the psychological trauma related to the war had the most severe impact on the continuation of academic careers in general and the overall level of academic motivation and performance of students and teachers.⁵

Ensuring equitable access to quality higher education has become increasingly difficult due to a variety of issues which impede access to education and the enjoyment of the freedom to teach, learn and conduct research at different levels and to different extents. Importantly, while some of the challenges faced because of the war have an immediate impact on the higher education system in Ukraine, the impacts of others will only become visible in the long-term.

2.2 Research Objectives

This study aims to provide a focused, evidence-based understanding of how Russia's full-scale invasion has affected Ukraine's higher-education sector. While the war's impact is multifaceted, the research is guided by three core objectives. It aims to (1) assess disruptions to institutional infrastructure and operations by documenting how physical destruction, blackouts, and security threats have affected teaching, research, and university services and exploring the strategies institutions have adopted to maintain continuity under crisis conditions; (2) analyse the displacement of academic communities and how this mobility has impacted educational access, career development, and institutional cohesion—both within Ukraine and in host countries; (3) investigate impacts of wartime governance and legal restrictions on academic freedom and institutional autonomy and how they align with European and international standards and (4) provide a comparative analysis in order to learn from experiences in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo.

⁴ Ivanenko, N. (2024). Two years of twinning: Challenges in Ukrainian higher education. *Universities UK International*. <https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/universities-uk-international/insights-and-publications/uuki-blog/two-years-twinning-challenges-ukrainian>; Ivanenko, N. (2023). Higher education in Ukraine: Past overview, present state and future perspectives. *Centre for Global Higher Education Working Paper Series, 102*. <https://www.researchcghe.org/wp-content/uploads/migrate/wp102.pdf>.

⁵ Тілікіна, Н. (2024). Вплив війни на сферу освіти України та соціально-психологічне становище студентів. *Соціальна робота та соціальна освіта*, 2 (13), 130–147.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design and Approach

The research draws on primary data collected through surveys and interviews, as well as secondary sources such as academic literature, policy reports, and institutional documents. The report builds on a methodology that was co-developed under the FreeAc project and is incorporating data and insights from two key studies: the FreeAc Baseline Study (2025) and the FreeAc Teaching Gap Analysis (2025). While these studies were originally conducted as separate deliverables, their findings are integrated into present research and inform the overall analysis.

3.2 Data Collection Methods

Structured online questionnaires from the FreeAc Baseline Study and Teaching Gap Analysis were used to collect quantitative data. The Baseline Study focused on displaced academic staff and students from three Ukrainian universities—International Humanitarian University (IHU), Sumy State University (SumDU), and Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv (TSNUK)—and addressed their academic status, challenges, and future prospects. The Teaching Gap Analysis gathered institutional-level information from administrative staff at the same universities, covering eight key areas including infrastructure, staffing, curricula, international cooperation, and teaching disruptions.

A comprehensive review of academic literature and relevant policy documents was conducted to situate the Ukrainian case within the broader scholarship on academic freedom, education in emergencies, and post-conflict reconstruction. Additionally, comparative cases from Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo were examined to extract lessons learned and transferable practices.

Institutional reports and internal documents from the three Ukrainian partner universities were analyzed to understand how they responded to the displacement of their academic communities. This included policy adaptations, support mechanisms, and changes in educational delivery models.

4. Concept of Academic Freedom and Fundamental Values of Higher Education

4.1 Definition and Principles of Academic Freedom

Academic freedom is a fundamental pillar of higher education, ensuring that scholars and students can conduct research, teach, and learn without external interference. International organizations, including the United Nations (UN) and the Council of Europe (CoE), recognize academic freedom as a core human right, closely tied to freedom of expression⁶ and the right to education. The UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, in General Comment No. 13 on Article 13 to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), underscores education as both a human right and a foundation for realizing other rights.⁷

Adopted on 6–10 September 1988 by the 68th General Assembly of the World University Service in Lima, Peru, the Lima Declaration on Academic Freedom and Autonomy of Institutions of Higher Education is the first civil-society instrument to spell out academic freedom as a set of concrete rights and duties.⁸ Although not legally binding, its wording was later carried almost verbatim into UNESCO's 1997 Recommendation and the Council of Europe's 2012 recommendations, and underpins the five-dimension Academic Freedom Index used in contemporary monitoring.⁹ By linking the right to education with the full enjoyment of economic, social, cultural, civil and political rights, the Lima Declaration remains the starting point for current debates on university governance and scholar protection.

UNESCO's Recommendation concerning the Status of Higher-Education Teaching Personnel¹⁰ gives legal shape to both academic freedom and institutional autonomy. Articles 18–30 recognise scholars' rights to research, teach, discuss, publish and express opinions about their

⁶ European Court of Human Rights. (2023). *Guide on Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights: Freedom of expression*. Council of Europe.

⁷ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. (1999). *General comment No. 13: The right to education (Article 13)*. United Nations.

⁸ World University Service. (1988). *Lima Declaration on Academic Freedom and Autonomy of Institutions of Higher Education*. World University Service.

⁹ V-Dem Institute. (2024). *Academic Freedom Index (AFi)*. V-Dem Institute.

¹⁰ UNESCO. (1997). *Recommendation concerning the Status of Higher-Education Teaching Personnel*. UNESCO.

institutions, while Articles 26–27 frame those freedoms as inseparable from ethical responsibility. The Recommendation further obliges States to safeguard institutional self-governance, fair employment conditions and participatory decision-making.

The Council of Europe's Recommendation CM/Rec(2012)7 on the responsibility of public authorities for academic freedom and institutional autonomy¹¹ translates the general freedoms recognised by UNESCO into concrete obligations: governments must *respect* scholars' rights to teach, research and publish; *protect* them from third-party interference; and *fulfil* those rights through legislation, adequate funding and effective judicial remedies. The Recommendation also underscores institutional autonomy—in governance, finance and staffing—as the structural guarantee that enables individual academic freedom, and calls for regular monitoring in cooperation with universities and civil-society organisations.

In 2024, the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) adopted the Principles for Implementing the Right to Academic Freedom¹², providing a global framework to safeguard and promote academic freedom. These principles affirm academic freedom as a fundamental right (Principle 1), protected under international human rights law (Principle 2). They emphasize the need for institutional autonomy (Principle 3) and the right to both intramural and extramural expression (Principle 4) affirming scholars' right to engage in public discourse without fear of censorship or retaliation. Access to information (Principle 5) and freedoms of movement and association (Principle 6) are also recognized as essential prerequisites for academic freedom. The framework extends academic freedom to all levels of education (Principle 7) and explicitly acknowledges students' rights to independent thought and inquiry (Principle 8). Finally, it stresses that protecting and promoting academic freedom is a shared responsibility (Principle 9), requiring collective action from governments, institutions, and civil society.

Consistent with the landmark instruments that define and measure academic freedom - the 1988 Lima Declaration, UNESCO's Recommendation concerning the Status of Higher-Education Teaching Personnel (1997), the Council of Europe's CM/Rec(2012)7, the UN Human Rights Council's Principles for Implementing the Right to Academic Freedom and their operationalisation in the Academic Freedom Index - this study treats academic freedom as five interlocking dimensions.

¹¹ Council of Europe. (2012). *Recommendation CM/Rec(2012)7 on the responsibility of public authorities for academic freedom and institutional autonomy*. Council of Europe.

¹² United Nations Human Rights Council. (2024). *Principles for implementing the right to academic freedom*. United Nations.

- (1) Freedom to research: Scholars may pursue questions of their choosing, design methodologies, and seek funding or collaboration without political, ideological, or commercial coercion.
- (2) Freedom to teach: Educators decide what and how to teach, guided by scholarly standards and pedagogical best practice, not by external factors.
- (3) Freedom to learn: Students have the right to meet diverse viewpoints and develop critical thinking skills in an atmosphere free from indoctrination or intimidation.
- (4) Freedom to disseminate knowledge: Findings can be written, presented, and published both domestically and internationally, without censorship, prior restraint, or reprisal.
- (5) Institutional autonomy: Universities govern their own academic, financial, and administrative affairs so that the first four freedoms can be exercised in practice.

As Russia's full-scale invasion continues to disrupt Ukrainian campuses, international instruments urge that any credible reconstruction of the sector must embed academic freedom and institutional autonomy. The Lima Declaration on Academic Freedom and Autonomy of Institutions of Higher Education (1988) warns that universities are "indispensable during periods of social and political transition" and must remain free from state or market control.¹³ UNESCO's Recommendation concerning the Status of Higher-Education Teaching Personnel (1997) notes that "vulnerability of the academic community to untoward political pressures which could undermine academic freedom" and the "need to reshape higher education to meet social and economic changes" with full staff participation.¹⁴ For Europe, the Council of Europe's Recommendation CM/Rec(2012)7 translates these principles into concrete duties to respect, protect, and fulfil academic freedom during recovery.¹⁵ The United Nations Human Rights Council's 2024 Principles for Implementing the Right to Academic Freedom elevate those duties to the level of a human-rights obligation, calling for special safeguards in times of political upheaval.¹⁶ Echoing all four instruments, UNESCO's 2024 emergency programme for Ukraine warns that classrooms,

¹³ World University Service. (1988). *Lima Declaration on Academic Freedom and Autonomy of Institutions of Higher Education*. World University Service.

¹⁴ UNESCO. (1997). *Recommendation concerning the Status of Higher-Education Teaching Personnel*, preamble paras. 10–11. UNESCO

¹⁵ Council of Europe. (2012). *Recommendation CM/Rec(2012)7 on the responsibility of public authorities for academic freedom and institutional autonomy*, §§ 6–13. Council of Europe.

¹⁶ United Nations Human Rights Council. (2024). *Principles for Implementing the Right to Academic Freedom*, Principle 9. United Nations.

research agendas, and governance reforms will remain fragile unless universities can operate free from coercion.¹⁷

In short, academic freedom is not a post-war luxury; it is the structural pre-condition for a resilient, high-quality recovery of Ukraine's higher-education system.

4.2 Importance of Academic Freedom in Higher Education

Academic freedom is instrumental in fostering critical thinking, academic integrity, and innovation. Higher education institutions serve as spaces for debate, knowledge creation, and the pursuit of truth. Without academic freedom, these functions are compromised, leading to intellectual stagnation and the suppression of diverse viewpoints. In conflict-affected contexts like Ukraine, where educational institutions are under immense strain, safeguarding academic freedom is crucial to maintaining societal resilience and fostering a knowledge-based recovery.

Role in Critical Thinking and Innovation

Academic freedom enables scholars to question prevailing norms, develop new theories, and propose solutions to pressing societal challenges. It encourages interdisciplinary research, cross-border academic collaboration, and technological advancements.¹⁸ As argued by Kovács, societies that protect academic freedom, such as those in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), have historically demonstrated higher levels of innovation and scientific output.¹⁹

Where academic institutions are playing a critical role in wartime resilience and future reconstruction, unrestricted inquiry is essential for scientific progress and economic development. The ability to conduct open research into war-related topics, conflict resolution, and post-war rebuilding strategies is necessary to support evidence-based policymaking. Furthermore, ensuring academic freedom allows Ukrainian scholars to contribute to global research efforts, including studies on cybersecurity, post-conflict governance, and social cohesion, all of which are vital to Ukraine's long-term stability.

¹⁷ UNESCO. (2024). *Ensuring teaching and learning continues in Ukraine*. UNESCO.

¹⁸ Gerards, J. H., & Schattevoet, N. (2024). *The safety of scientific researchers: Data, trends and a typology of threats*. UNESCO.

¹⁹ Kovács, K. (2024). *Academic freedom in Europe: Limitations and judicial remedies*. *Global Constitutionalism*, 1–21.

International partnerships, such as those fostered through Erasmus+ and Horizon Europe, enable Ukrainian researchers to collaborate with global experts, share knowledge, and develop innovative solutions that address both immediate and long-term challenges. Academic freedom ensures that such collaborations remain unrestricted and that Ukrainian scholars can continue contributing to the international academic community without fear of political or institutional repression.

Impact on Academic Integrity

The integrity of research and teaching depends on the ability to conduct inquiries free from ideological constraints. When academic freedom is compromised, issues such as self-censorship, suppression of dissenting views, and fraudulent research practices become more prevalent.²⁰ In conflict-affected regions, such as Ukraine, where academic institutions have faced disruptions, including physical destruction, displacement of faculty, and government-imposed restrictions, safeguarding research integrity is especially critical.

The war has created an environment where academic institutions must navigate complex issues related to information integrity, misinformation, and propaganda. Academic freedom is essential in this context, allowing scholars to investigate and challenge narratives without fear of retribution. Maintaining high ethical standards in research also ensures that post-war reconstruction efforts are based on rigorous evidence rather than politically motivated agendas.

Furthermore, universities in Ukraine have a key role in preserving intellectual independence by upholding transparent peer-review processes, resisting political influence in research funding allocations, and fostering academic cultures where diverse perspectives are welcomed. Protecting academic integrity in Ukraine also means ensuring that displaced scholars and students can continue their work without facing bureaucratic hurdles or exclusion from global academic networks.

Contribution to Democratic Governance and Social Progress

Academic freedom is closely linked to democratic values. Higher education institutions play a crucial role in educating future leaders, policymakers, and civil society actors. Countries

²⁰ European Parliamentary Research Service. (2024). *Horizon Europe: Protecting academic freedom* (EPRS_STU(2024)757804). European Parliamentary Research Service.

that uphold academic freedom tend to have stronger democratic institutions, higher levels of civic engagement, and more resilient societies.²¹

In Ukraine, universities serve as hubs of democratic dialogue and civic engagement. Academic institutions are instrumental in equipping students with critical thinking skills, fostering discussions on governance and policy, and ensuring that future leaders are well-prepared to address the country's post-war challenges. Academic freedom enables universities to offer balanced, evidence-based curricula that counteract propaganda and misinformation, both of which have been used as tools of warfare in the region.

Moreover, academic freedom supports social progress by ensuring inclusiveness within higher education. Women, minorities, and marginalized groups benefit from environments where research is conducted without fear of discrimination or ideological constraints. Protecting academic freedom in Ukraine means ensuring that post-war reconstruction efforts will be inclusive and representative of the country's diverse social fabric.

The Role of International Support in Defending Academic Freedom

International actors, including the European Union, UNESCO, and global academic institutions, play a significant role in safeguarding academic freedom in Ukraine. Programs that provide emergency funding, academic mobility opportunities, and legal protections for scholars at risk are vital mechanisms for ensuring continuity in research and education. The European University Association (EUA) has called for increased support for displaced Ukrainian scholars and students, recognizing that academic freedom is a necessary foundation for both wartime resilience and post-war recovery.

In addition, international monitoring mechanisms, such as the Academic Freedom Index (AFi),²² help track violations and provide advocacy tools for defending scholars under threat. Continued diplomatic pressure on aggressor states, legal interventions through international human rights mechanisms, and financial support for Ukrainian universities will be key in maintaining academic freedom amid ongoing conflict.

As Ukraine rebuilds, academic freedom will remain a critical pillar in the country's democratic transition, fostering a well-informed, innovative, and engaged society. By protecting the

²¹ Nikolaiev, Y., Riy, G., & Shemelynets, I. (2023). *War in Ukraine: Reshaping the higher education sector: Analytical report*. Borys Grinchenko Kyiv University.

²² <https://academic-freedom-index.net/>

right to education and independent inquiry, Ukraine ensures that its higher education system remains a driver of national resilience and long-term stability.

4.3 Challenges to Academic Freedom in the Context of Modern Threats

While academic freedom is widely recognized as a fundamental right, it faces increasing challenges due to geopolitical conflicts, political interference, economic pressures, and security threats. In conflict zones, the risks are particularly severe, as higher education institutions become targets of violence, ideological control, and financial instability. The Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack has documented a significant raise in assaults on academic institutions, with universities often caught in the crossfire of war or deliberately targeted to suppress dissent and independent thought.²³

Ukraine is as a stark example of these growing threats. Since 2022, Russia’s full-scale invasion has severely impacted Ukraine’s academic sector, resulting in widespread destruction of university infrastructure, displacement of scholars and students, and restrictions on academic discourse. The Academic Freedom Index (AFI), developed by researchers at Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg (FAU) in collaboration with the V-Dem Institute, systematically tracks these developments. The AFI evaluates key dimensions of academic freedom, including freedom to research and teach, institutional autonomy, campus integrity, freedom of academic exchange, and freedom of expression for scholars.

Ukraine’s AFI scoring has severely worsened since 2022,²⁴ reflecting both external and internal pressures on higher education. Universities have suffered direct attacks, faculty and students have been forcibly displaced, and government-imposed restrictions—particularly on war-related research—have further constrained academic freedom. While some of these restrictions are wartime measures, they pose long-term risks to research independence and open discourse, raising concerns about academic freedom even beyond the immediate conflict.

Despite these immense challenges, Ukraine’s academic community has demonstrated resilience, rapidly adopting remote learning models, strengthening international collaborations, and securing emergency funding. However, sustaining and rebuilding academic freedom requires concerted national and international efforts. The AFI serves as a vital tool for identifying emerg-

²³ Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack. (2024). *Education under attack 2024*.

²⁴ Ukraine dropped from 0,62 to 0,28 on a scale where a score of 1 represents the highest observed level of de-facto academic freedom, 0 the lowest. This moves Ukraine out of the “mostly free / moderately restricted” band into the second-worst quintile, “severely restricted”.

ing threats, guiding policy responses, and ensuring that Ukrainian universities remain independent, innovative, and globally connected during and after the war.

The following sections outline the key threats to academic freedom in Ukraine, examining how political interference, war-related destruction, financial instability, digital threats, and military mobilization continue to shape the landscape of higher education in the country.

Political and Governmental Interference

Governments in various parts of the world impose restrictions on research topics, limit funding for critical studies, and exert control over academic appointments. In authoritarian regimes, universities often experience direct censorship, and academics face legal repercussions for expressing dissenting opinions.²⁵ According to the V-Dem Institute's AFI 2024 and the European Parliamentary Research Service, such restrictions have intensified in recent years, including in Ukraine, where the ongoing war has created additional pressures on institutional autonomy and free academic expression.²⁶ In the case of Ukraine, academic freedom has been threatened both by external forces and, to some extent, by wartime governance measures aimed at controlling the flow of information and ensuring national security.

At the same time, wartime restrictions within Ukraine, such as limitations on public discourse and research related to military operations, present additional challenges for academic freedom. While national security concerns necessitate some level of control, the long-term impact of such constraints on research independence must be carefully managed. The balance between safeguarding national security and preserving academic freedom is a key issue for Ukraine's government and university leadership.

Threats in Conflict Zones

In war-affected regions, academic institutions suffer from targeted attacks, destruction of infrastructure, and forced displacement of scholars and students. According to UNESCO and the GCPEA, hundreds of Ukrainian schools and universities have been damaged or destroyed since

²⁵ Nikolaiev, Y., Riy, G., & Shemelynets, I. (2023). *War in Ukraine: Reshaping the higher education sector: Analytical report*. Borys Grinchenko Kyiv University.

²⁶ V-Dem Institute. *Academic Freedom Index (AFi)* (2024a), <https://v-dem.net>; European Parliamentary Research Service. *Horizon Europe: Protecting Academic Freedom* (EPRS_STU(2024)757804), [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2024/757804/EPRS_STU\(2024\)757804_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2024/757804/EPRS_STU(2024)757804_EN.pdf)

the beginning of the full-scale invasion in 2022.²⁷ Many institutions have shifted to online learning models, but these are often hampered by unstable internet access, electricity shortages, and air raid interruptions. The psychological toll on students and faculty is also immense, with many struggling to concentrate on studies amid the constant threat of attacks and displacement.

Moreover, the war has led to a significant outflow of Ukrainian academics to European and North American universities, raising concerns about brain drain. While international partnerships have provided opportunities for displaced scholars, Ukraine faces the challenge of reintegrating these experts into its education system after the war. Strategies for retaining and supporting Ukrainian academics, both domestically and abroad, are crucial to mitigating the long-term effects of this disruption.

Financial Constraints and Market Pressures

The increasing commercialization of higher education also poses a threat to academic freedom. Universities reliant on private funding or government grants may experience pressure to align research agendas with corporate interests or state policies. This phenomenon limits independent research and undermines academic integrity.²⁸

In Ukraine, financial constraints have been further exacerbated by the war, as public funds are redirected toward military and humanitarian needs. Many universities are struggling to pay faculty salaries, maintain research programs, and cover operational costs.²⁹ International financial assistance has helped sustain some institutions, but reliance on external funding raises concerns about long-term sustainability and academic independence. While international collaboration is essential, there is a risk that universities may prioritize commercially appealing programs at the expense of fundamental academic disciplines, particularly in the humanities and social sciences. Ensuring balanced financial support across all academic fields is vital for maintaining a diverse and robust higher education system.

²⁷ Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack. (2024). *Education under attack 2024*; UNESCO. (2024). *Ensuring teaching and learning continues in Ukraine*. <https://www.unesco.org/en/education/emergencies/ukraine>

²⁸ Artyukhov, A., Barvinok, V., Rehak, R., Matvieieva, Y., & Lyeonov, S. (2023). Dynamics of interest in higher education before and during ongoing war: Google Trends analysis. *Knowledge and Performance Management*, 7(1), 47–63. [https://doi.org/10.21511/kpm.07\(1\).2023.04](https://doi.org/10.21511/kpm.07(1).2023.04)

²⁹ Nikolaiev, Y., Riy, G., & Shemelynets, I. (2023). *War in Ukraine: Reshaping the higher education sector: Analytical report*. Borys Grinchenko Kyiv University.

Digital Surveillance and Academic Freedom

The rise of digital technologies has created new vulnerabilities. Surveillance measures, restrictions on digital communication, and online harassment of scholars contribute to an environment where self-censorship becomes prevalent.³⁰ In some countries, scholars who research politically sensitive topics face cyber threats or legal action for their online publications³¹ For example, researchers in Turkey and China have faced prosecution for publishing work critical of government policies, while in Russia, universities have dismissed lecturers and censored research discussing the war in Ukraine.³² According to UNESCO and Scholars at Risk, such digital intimidation and state surveillance are part of a growing global trend that undermines the right to free inquiry.³³

In Ukraine, cybersecurity threats have sharply escalated since 2022, with Russian cyberattacks targeting universities, research institutions, and government networks. These attacks have disrupted digital infrastructure, damaged servers, and exposed sensitive academic data.³⁴ According to UNESCO, hybrid warfare increasingly includes “information attacks” aimed at discrediting or intimidating educators and researchers.³⁵

Beyond direct cyberattacks, scholars and students in Ukraine face increased risks of online harassment, particularly when discussing politically sensitive issues. Disinformation campaigns targeting Ukrainian academics can attempt to discredit research efforts and spread false narratives.³⁶ For instance, coordinated information attacks have sought to undermine Ukrainian universities publishing research on Russian war crimes and to delegitimize international academic cooperation initiatives.³⁷ Such campaigns, documented by UNESCO and Ukrainian monitoring

³⁰ Gerards, J. H., & Schattevoet, N. (2024). *The safety of scientific researchers: Data, trends and a typology of threats*. UNESCO. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000389907>

³¹ V-Dem Institute. (2024a). *Academic Freedom Index (AFi)*.

³² Kovács, K. (2024). *Academic freedom in Europe: Limitations and judicial remedies*. *Global Constitutionalism*. <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/global-constitutionalism/article/academic-freedom-in-europe-limitations-and-judicial-remedies/3D60F6E8DFF5CC16BE431C269AF6BEC9>

³³ Scholars at Risk Network. (2023). *Free to Think 2023*. <https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/resources/free-to-think-2023>.

³⁴ European Parliamentary Research Service. *Horizon Europe: Protecting Academic Freedom* (EPRS_STU(2024)757804)

³⁵ UNESCO. (2024). *Ensuring teaching and learning continues in Ukraine*. <https://www.unesco.org/en/education/emergencies/ukraine>

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Hybrid Warfare Analytical Group. (2024). *Information attacks against Ukrainian education and research in-*

groups, often combine fabricated online content with intimidation on social media, aiming to silence independent voices within academia.³⁸

To address these challenges, universities in Ukraine and abroad must implement strong digital security measures and support scholars at risk of online harassment. Digital literacy training and institutional protections can help safeguard academic freedom in an increasingly digitalized education landscape. The FreeAc project contributes to addressing those challenges through a dedicated workshop series where Ukrainian academic staff can boost their competencies on topics such as academic writing with artificial intelligence and artificial intelligence in higher education teaching. The workshop series furthermore sensitizes topics such as hate speech and propaganda online.³⁹

Impact of Military Mobilization on Academic Institutions

Another challenge to academic freedom in Ukraine is the impact of military mobilization on faculty and students. A number of male academics and students have joined the Armed Forces, which has resulted in disruptions to teaching and research activities. While national defense remains a priority, the long-term consequences for the academic workforce require careful consideration, even taking into account existing mechanisms such as deferments and academic leave. Policies that expand temporary deferments or academic–military hybrid roles could further help mitigate these challenges.

Female scholars have also faced challenges, as many have taken on additional responsibilities in their universities or relocated abroad with their families. This has placed added pressure on those remaining in Ukraine, increasing workloads and creating gaps in mentorship and research continuity.

International Support as a Safeguard for Academic Freedom

International partners have begun to stitch together a multi-layered safety net around Ukraine’s universities. The EU-funded MSCA4Ukraine scheme has channeled € 35 million into 174 one- to two-year fellowships for displaced academics and, in its April 2025 call, selected a

stitutions. Ukraine Crisis Media Center. <https://uacrisis.org/en/hwag>

³⁸ Scholars at Risk Network. (2023). *Free to Think 2023*. <https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/resources/free-to-think-2023>.

³⁹ <https://www.freeac.eu/about-project/>

further 49 researchers to work in fifteen host countries while keeping a formal link to their Ukrainian home institutions.⁴⁰ The EUA Task Force on Ukraine complements that emergency aid with policy guidance that urges every twinning or grant agreement to “embed an academic-freedom clause and a return option once conditions allow.”⁴¹ At multilateral level, UNESCO’s Emergency Assistance Programme for Ukraine now treats academic-freedom guarantees as a performance indicator for the reconstruction funds it disburses, alongside hardware replacement and digital-teaching grants.⁴² The Scholars at Risk Network continues to provide legal advice and stipend support, noting that more than “300 threatened scholars worldwide each year” have been assisted since the full-scale invasion.⁴³ A 2023 working arrangement between European Union Agency for Cybersecurity ENISA and Ukraine’s State Service for Special Communications brings EU cyber-threat intelligence and training to Ukraine—an important measure against the hybrid attacks that chill open research and teaching.⁴⁴

5. Threats to Academic Freedom in Ukraine Amid Russian Aggression

This chapter is based on findings from two complementary studies conducted under the FreeAc project: the FreeAc Baseline Study (2025)⁴⁵ and the FreeAc Teaching Gap Analysis (2025).⁴⁶ The Baseline Study draws on data from an online survey conducted in 2024, interviews, and document analysis involving displaced academic staff and students from three Ukrainian partner universities: International Humanitarian University (Odesa), Sumy State University, and Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv. The study investigates conditions, needs, and

⁴⁰ European Commission, “European Commission to support 49 researchers through MSCA4Ukraine,” *Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions* news release, 31 March 2025.

⁴¹ European University Association, *Supporting the Ukrainian University Sector* (Briefing, 2022), rec. 4.

⁴² UNESCO, “Ensuring teaching and learning continues in Ukraine,” programme portal, accessed 13 June 2025.

⁴³ Scholars at Risk, “Protecting scholars and the freedom to think, question and share ideas” (network overview, accessed 13 June 2025).

⁴⁴ European Union Agency for Cybersecurity (ENISA), *Consolidated Annual Activity Report 2023*, 14 (formalised working arrangements with Ukrainian counterparts)

⁴⁵ Promoting Academic Freedom in Ukraine (FreeAc): Conditions, Needs and Challenges for Displaced Members of Academia of Ukrainian Higher Education Institutions, Baseline Study (2025), available at

⁴⁶ Promoting Academic Freedom in Ukraine (FreeAc): Teaching gap Analysis at Ukrainian HEIs (2025), available at

challenges faced by displaced members of academia, with a focus on barriers to academic continuity, integration, and the prospects for reintegration. The Teaching Gap Analysis complements this by providing additional qualitative insights from an online survey with teaching staff and students. It captures how war-related disruptions affect pedagogical practices, academic engagement, and psychological well-being. Together, these sources form the empirical foundation of this chapter.

5.1 Destruction of Academic Infrastructure

Since the onset of the full-scale invasion in 2022, the Russian Federation has systematically targeted civilian infrastructure, including schools and universities. As outlined in the FreeAc Baseline Study (2025), many educational institutions were severely damaged by shelling and had to navigate the complexities resulting from the war since the beginning of the invasion.

The FreeAc Teaching Gap Analysis clearly shows that infrastructure at all three universities participating in the FreeAc project have suffered significant damage due to Russian attacks. This evidence suggests that Russia systematically targets higher education facilities.⁴⁷ This destruction has severely undermined the physical and symbolic foundations of academic freedom. Classrooms - spaces for critical thought and free exchange - have become targets. Without stable infrastructure, core activities such as in-person teaching, collaborative research, and mentoring cannot take place. Remote teaching solutions, while useful, have not fully compensated for the loss, especially in disciplines requiring laboratory access or studio work. The destruction of archives, research laboratories, and specialized equipment has long-term implications for entire academic disciplines. Faculties of engineering, medicine, and the arts have reported irreplaceable losses.

Some universities have relocated to temporary facilities, often shared with other institutions, which limits capacity and quality.⁴⁸ Despite these efforts, many students and staff are forced to learn and work in makeshift conditions, with limited heating, unstable electricity, and inadequate sanitation.

⁴⁷ Teaching Gap Analysis, pp.15ff.

⁴⁸ See also Teaching Gap Analysis (2025),

5.2 Displacement of Academic Community

“Sometimes it's hard to stay motivated when everything around you is unknown. But having access to education helped me stay focused and not give up.”

- Displaced student from International Humanitarian University⁴⁹

According to the Ministry of Education and Science, out of 80.000 Ukrainian academics, nearly 5.000 are currently abroad. About 30% of all Ukrainian academics work remotely. There is no exact data on the number of Ukrainian students currently residing abroad. However, estimates suggest that by the end of 2024, around 450 000 Ukrainian students were studying abroad.⁵⁰

The disruption of routines, professional ties, and family life has been profound. Many displaced students struggle with integration in their new environments, lack of financial resources and psychological support. Academic continuity is further threatened by the frequent need to prioritize survival over study.

Among displaced academic staff, precariousness is widespread. Host institutions in the EU and beyond often offer temporary fellowships, yet these rarely cover dependents or offer long-term prospects. Language barriers, differences in academic cultures, and non-recognition of Ukrainian qualifications further exacerbate vulnerability.

Furthermore, many displaced students and scholars report a sense of professional limbo: unable to return, unable to fully integrate, and at risk of being permanently excluded from their academic communities. Initiatives aimed at supporting displaced academics have increased, but demand far exceeds supply, and mechanisms for reintegration remain underdeveloped.

Even though there is interest in returning to Ukraine once the security situation has improved, and the FreeAc Baseline Study also suggests that both students and staff are interested in continuing their academic careers, there is a risk that the longer the situation continues, the greater the chances are that people will not return. While integration into host societies and host HEIs is difficult under the temporary paradigm, it will become even more so over the years, especially

⁴⁹ In Baseline Study (2025): p.17.

⁵⁰ In: Baseline Study (2025), p.8.

when children of displaced members of academia become integral parts of host societies and students start to build new relationships in host countries.⁵¹

5.3 Mobilization and Schedule Disruption

The war has caused considerable disruptions to academic life, with many universities and research institutions either closing or operating under severe constraints, pushing academics to seek opportunities elsewhere.⁵²

Ukraine's wartime mobilization policies have affected academic continuity within higher education. Since 2022, approximately 1,100 students, predominantly male (1,036 men), have interrupted their studies to serve in the armed forces, contributing to disruptions in teaching and research activities⁵³. In addition, around 1.7% of academic staff have been mobilized⁵⁴. At the same time, full-time faculty members (employed at least at a 75% rate⁵⁵) are generally exempt from conscription, which has helped to limit overall staffing losses. As a result, the impact of mobilization on universities has varied across institutions, depending on their size, profile, and staffing structures.

Universities have attempted to adapt through asynchronous learning and compressed academic calendars. However, these measures can result in reduced learning outcomes and assessment quality. In affected regions, academic calendars remain in flux, frequently disrupted by air raid alarms, blackouts, and bomb shelter mandates.

Military mobilization affects the staffing capacity of universities primarily through the temporary unavailability of part of the academic workforce and the difficulty of replacing specialised staff. Faculty members on active duty are hard to substitute due to discipline-specific expertise, particularly in STEM fields and medical faculties. As highlighted in the Teaching Gap Analysis,

⁵¹ Baseline Study (2025), p.29.

⁵² Baseline Study (2025), p.21.

⁵³ Шурмакевич В. Скільки студентів взяли академвідпустки з 2022 року, щоб стати на захист держави: статистика. Українська правда. 28 січня 2025. URL: <https://life.pravda.com.ua/society/skilki-studentiv-per-ervali-navchannya-u-vishi-zaradi-viyskovoji-sluzhbi-statistika-306131/>.

⁵⁴ United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. Analysis of war damage to the Ukrainian science sector and its consequences. Paris, UNESCO, 2024. URL: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000388803>

⁵⁵ Питання проведення призову громадян на військову службу під час мобілізації, на особливий період: Постанова Кабінету Міністрів України № 560 від 16.05.2024. URL: <https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/560-2024-%D0%BF#Text>.

reintegration of staff being veterans will require strategic measures and attention in future, including also the provision of psychological support.⁵⁶

5.4 Restrictions on Cross-Border Academic Exchanges

Cross-border academic mobility, often viewed as a lifeline for displaced scholars, has proven to be a mixed blessing. While European institutions have created numerous emergency fellowships and bilateral agreements, systemic challenges persist. Restrictions on movement imposed on Ukrainian male students and researchers aged 18 to 60 because of the martial laws in place limit their possibilities in effectively seeking protection and continuing their careers, as they cannot participate in EU grant programs, especially in student and academic mobility. Others might have to stay behind because of other reasons, such as care obligations or out of economic reasons.⁵⁷

Visa restrictions, language tests, and the limited duration of host programmes for those who are able to leave hinder long-term integration. Many are stuck in a bureaucratic limbo - unable to work abroad and unable to return safely. Scholars from metropolitan, internationally networked institutions are also more likely to benefit from relocation support, whereas those from rural or regional HEIs are often left behind.

Additionally, some displaced students report difficulty in transferring academic credits across borders due to differing accreditation systems and curricular mismatches. This creates barriers to degree completion and risks producing a “lost generation” of students without diplomas. Meanwhile, temporary protection schemes across host countries vary significantly in duration and scope, creating a patchwork of legal statuses that complicate long-term academic planning.

5.5 Psychological Impact on the Academic Community

War-related stress permeates every layer of academic life. Students and academics surveyed report experiencing mental health issues that interfere with their lives and academic performance.

⁵⁶ Teaching Gap Analysis (2025), p. 19.

⁵⁷ Basline Study (2025), p.7.

These include trauma, anxiety, depression, sleep disturbances, a persistent sense of hopelessness and emotional exhaustion⁵⁸.

Educators are faced with the emotional challenges of teaching students who have experienced significant losses, often finding themselves overwhelmed during lessons. While some universities have responded by setting up counseling centers, these are often understaffed and underfunded. Both the FreeAc Teaching Gap Analysis and the Baseline Analysis conclude that all FreeAc partner universities provide staff well-being and support programmes to some extent. The need for sustained mental health infrastructure is evident.

The psychological toll also affects motivation, productivity, and interpersonal relations within HEIs.

5.6 Impact on Enrolment and Retention in Higher Education

The war has led to a significant decline in student enrolment and retention, particularly in the eastern regions of Ukraine, where the reduction of student enrolment is substantial. Sumy State University, for example, saw a significant decline with student enrollment dropping by more than 2.000 students, representing a decrease of over 21%.⁵⁹ In the future, the overall trend in Ukraine is expected to be enforced. This poses a long-term threat to the sustainability of the higher education system. The war has also disrupted the influx of international students, causing universities to lose an important revenue stream.⁶⁰

Retention is also falling, with many students interrupting their studies due to displacement, financial hardship, or trauma. Those most vulnerable and at particular risk include students from low-income families or with caregiving responsibilities.

Declining enrolment in vocational and technical programmes poses additional concerns for the national labour market.

5.7 Financial Implications for Higher Education Institutions

The financial strain on Ukrainian HEIs is growing. Declining tuition revenues, reduced government support, and the costs of emergency adaptations have created a precarious environment.

⁵⁸ Baseline Study (2025), p.31.

⁵⁹ Teaching Gap Analysis (2025), p.11.

⁶⁰ Baseline Study (2025), p.6.

Academic innovation, staff development, and research are often the first areas to face cuts. At the same time, damaged infrastructure requires reconstruction with earmarked funds being scarce.

The FreeAc Baseline Study shows that the economic fallout from the war has made it increasingly difficult for many academics to sustain a livelihood, especially in the educational sector, prompting a search for more stable economic environments.⁶¹ Many institutions now rely on international donors and temporary projects for survival. The loss of academic excellence, however, also results in losing potential for the acquisition of third-party funds.⁶²

Additionally, many higher education institutions, including the FreeAc partner universities SSU and TSNUK, have experienced a drop in student enrolment,⁶³ further reducing financial revenues. Administrative staff are under significant pressure due to crisis management, mobility documentation, and donor reporting. Many institutions have reached the limits of their capacity.

Unless new financing instruments and long-term partnerships are established, Ukraine is at risk losing out from its academic potential. Rebuilding will not be possible without targeted, sustained investment in higher education as a pillar of national recovery and democratic resilience.

6. Lessons from Conflict-Affected Countries: Impact on Higher Education

Rebuilding a country after conflict affects all areas of society, including education. Higher education is key to this recovery, helping to rebuild nations, promote social unity, and support economic growth. Ukraine's current challenges highlight the importance of learning from other post-conflict countries. The experiences from Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) and Kosovo can offer valuable insights into how higher education systems can recover after war.

⁶¹ Baseline Study (2025), p.21.

⁶² Baseline Study (2025), p.7.

⁶³ Teaching Gap Analysis (2025), pp. 10ff.

6.1 Rationale for Cross-National Comparisons

Examining post-conflict education in different countries helps identify practical solutions. War disrupts universities in many ways: buildings are destroyed, students and teachers are displaced, and learning is interrupted. Restoring higher education is essential for returning to normal life, making education more inclusive, and ensuring future competitiveness. By studying BiH and Kosovo, Ukraine can explore strategies to rebuild and strengthen its universities, taking into account experiences from other war-torn countries.

Comparing different national experiences has long been useful in post-war recovery. BiH struggled with ethnic divisions in education, while Kosovo had to reintegrate displaced academics. These examples show different approaches and highlight the importance of international cooperation, financial support, and local engagement. At the same time, scholars like Bengtsson and Dryden-Peterson warn that globalization can introduce both opportunities and risks, such as dependency on external funding.⁶⁴

6.2 Case Studies in Post-War Reconstruction of Higher Education

The experiences of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo highlight both the successes and challenges of higher education recovery in post-war contexts.

Bosnia and Herzegovina

The 1992–1995 war severely impacted Bosnia and Herzegovina’s higher education system, destroying universities and deepening ethnic divisions. As a result, universities became reflections of the country’s political fragmentation, making education reform particularly difficult. The Dayton Agreement, which ended the war, established a highly complex governance structure⁶⁵, dividing Bosnia and Herzegovina into two entities: the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and

⁶⁴ Bengtsson, S., & Dryden-Peterson, S. (2017). *Education, conflict, and globalisation*. Taylor & Francis.

⁶⁵ Benedek, W. (1996). Universitäre Bildung in Bosnien und Herzegovina: Bedürfnisse und Grundsätze der Kooperation. *Wiener Blätter zur Friedensforschung*, (89), Benedek, W. (1997a). International cooperation and support of higher education in Bosnia and Herzegovina. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 1(1), Benedek, W. (1997b, 27–29 October). Die Tätigkeit des World University Service Austria in Bosnien und Herzegowina. Paper presented at *Kooperation mit Mittel- und Osteuropa – die Rolle nichtstaatlicher Organisationen*, Vienna, Austria. Benedek, W. (1998). Das „Academic Lifeline Programm für Bosnien und Herzegovina“ von World University Service (WUS) Austria. *Zeitschrift des Institutes für den Donauraum und Mitteleuropa*, 38 (Spezialheft), Benedek, W. (2000). How to achieve European standards in higher education in BiH. *Review on Free Thought*, 27–28 (April–September).

Republika Srpska. The Federation itself is further subdivided into ten cantons, each with its own education ministry, while Republika Srpska maintains a centralized education system. Additionally, Brčko District operates independently of both entities. This decentralization has led to fragmentation in higher education, resulting in different curricula, accreditation standards, and policies across the country.⁶⁶ Education policies were largely influenced by ethnic and regional authorities and the lack of coordination led to disparities in quality and access.⁶⁷

International donors played a crucial role in stabilizing Bosnia and Herzegovina's higher education system, supporting recovery efforts ranging from the physical reconstruction of university buildings to faculty rehabilitation, particularly through personnel support.⁶⁸ The World Bank's Emergency Education Reconstruction Project, for instance, helped restore infrastructure, while UNESCO worked to foster an inclusive education system despite the country's ethnic divisions.⁶⁹ Additionally, the EU TEMPUS Programme for Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Council of Europe provided essential support in rebuilding the higher education sector.

Support measures also included financial assistance to mitigate further brain drain among those who had remained during the war, as well as academic development through scholarships for mobility and cooperation programs, which in turn facilitated inter-university partnerships.⁷⁰ This is particularly relevant in the context of Ukraine, where wartime travel restrictions on male professors have hindered academic mobility, creating a future need for targeted catch-up measures. Institutionalizing university cooperation could help address these challenges and sustain academic exchange.

Another challenge in Bosnia and Herzegovina was the reintegration of displaced academics after the war. Compared to Kosovo, there was less political will to reintegrate returning scholars into local universities. To bridge this gap, WUS Austria implemented the "Brain Gain Program",

⁶⁶ Guthrie, C., et al. (2022). *OECD reviews of evaluation and assessment in education: Bosnia and Herzegovina*. OECD Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1787/a669e5f3-en>

⁶⁷ Temple, P. (2002). *Reform in a fragmented system: Higher education in Bosnia-Herzegovina*. *Higher Education Management and Policy*, 14(2), 87–98.

⁶⁸ Benedek, W. (1997a). International cooperation and support of higher education in Bosnia and Herzegovina. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 1(1), [page range]. Benedek, W. (2000). How to achieve European standards in higher education in BiH. *Review on Free Thought*, 27–28 (April–September), [page range].

⁶⁹ UNESCO. (2010). *Education and fragility in Bosnia and Herzegovina*. UNESCO. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000191060>

⁷⁰ Benedek, W. (1998). Das „Academic Lifeline Programm für Bosnien und Herzogowina“ von World University Service (WUS) Austria. *Zeitschrift des Institutes für den Donauraum und Mitteleuropa*, 38 (Spezialheft).. Benedek, W. (2000). How to achieve European standards in higher education in BiH. *Review on Free Thought*, 27–28 (April–September)..

which facilitated the return of Bosnian academics from abroad, either temporarily or permanently.⁷¹ Today, the widespread availability of online education and digital tools makes it easier for displaced scholars to remain engaged, enabling them to contribute remotely—an advantage that is particularly relevant for Ukraine.

Structural rigidity further slowed down reforms in Bosnia and Herzegovina, while inter-university cooperation was hindered by political obstacles and the absence of a shared vision for reform.⁷² In response to this fragmentation, WUS and the international community supported the establishment of the Rector’s Conference of Bosnia and Herzegovina. While its influence remained limited, it played a role in fostering inter-university cooperation and promoting academic dialogue across divided institutions.

Although foreign aid was essential in rebuilding the sector, it also created dependency, making long-term sustainability more challenging.⁷³

Kosovo

Kosovo’s post-war situation was again different. The 1998–1999 war caused large-scale displacement of students and faculty. Ethnic divisions led to separate education systems, making integration difficult. During the war, Kosovo Albanian students and professors were forced out of the University of Pristina and established a parallel higher education system, operating in private homes and improvised classrooms. Austria, among other countries, supported students in continuing their studies abroad, with a significant number completing their PhDs in Austria before returning to Kosovo after the war.

A key difference in Kosovo was also the role of United Nations Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK), which directly managed higher education reform in the early post-war period. This was unlike Bosnia and Herzegovina, where the Office of the High Representative (OHR) had a less direct role in education governance.

Following the conflict, the University of Pristina emerged as Kosovo’s central academic institution and underwent major reforms to align with European standards, particularly through the

⁷¹ Benedek, W. (1998). Das “Academic Lifeline Programm für Bosnien und Herzegowina“ von World University Service (WUS) Austria. *Zeitschrift des Institutes für den Donauraum und Mitteleuropa*, 38 (Spezialheft).

⁷² Benedek, W. (2000). How to achieve European standards in higher education in BiH. *Review on Free Thought*, 27–28 (April–September):

⁷³ Temple, P. (2002). *Reform in a fragmented system: Higher education in Bosnia-Herzegovina*. *Higher Education Management and Policy*, 14(2), 87–98.

Bologna Process.⁷⁴ Today, Kosovo has nine public universities, including one public university in North Kosovo and fourteen private universities.

International support has been—and continues to be—crucial in the case of Kosovo. The European Union, along with bilateral donors such as the Austrian Development Agency, has played a key role in shaping higher education reforms, including setting up quality assurance systems in line with the *Standards and guidelines for quality assurance in the European Higher Education Area* (ESG). Through organizations like WUS Austria and others, this support has included policy development and legislative drafting, faculty training, student exchange programs, the establishment of new academic programs, strategy development, statute revision, research and innovation funding, as well as the development of governance structures and quality assurance systems. These initiatives improved education quality, enhanced academia-industry cooperation and promoted collaboration between Kosovo and international partners. Reports from the European Training Foundation emphasize that rebuilding infrastructure and reintegrating displaced students were key steps in Kosovo’s education recovery.⁷⁵ Additionally, mental health services helped students and faculty cope with trauma.⁷⁶

On the other hand, Kosovo’s higher education sector remains divided. While the University of Pristina and seven other public universities follow Kosovo’s education policies, the Serbian population in North Kosovo operates ‘temporarily’ the University of North Mitrovica, which remains aligned with Serbia’s education system – also being a member of the Conference of the Universities of Serbia (KONUS) – and receives funding from Belgrade.⁷⁷ Kosovo’s experience shows that maintaining separate education structures along ethnic lines creates governance challenges and limits cooperation.

⁷⁴ Perritt, H. H. (2009). *The road to independence for Kosovo: A chronicle of the Ahtisaari plan*. Cambridge University Press.

⁷⁵ European Training Foundation (ETF). (2000). *Education and training in Kosovo: Post-conflict analysis and support*. European Training Foundation.

⁷⁶ Tahirsyzaj, A. (2010). Higher education in Kosovo: Major changes, reforms, and development trends in the post-conflict period at the University of Prishtina. *Interchange*, 41, 171–183. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10780-010-9115-1>

⁷⁷ Guthrie, C., et al. (2022). *OECD reviews of evaluation and assessment in education: Bosnia and Herzegovina*. OECD Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1787/a669e5f3-en>

6.3 Key Takeaways and Comparative Analysis

War-damaged higher-education systems recover fastest when international assistance is both substantial and securely anchored in domestic ownership. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, EU- and WUS-funded twinning schemes rebuilt laboratories and libraries, yet an over-centralised donor governance model later slowed curricular reform and left universities reliant on project grants rather than predictable public funding.⁷⁸ Kosovo shows the same trade-off: external money revived institutional capacity, but two decades on the sector still depends on short-cycle donor budgets, while fragmented governance along ethnic lines hampers strategic planning and institutional development.⁷⁹ The following lessons therefore stand out for Ukraine.

International partnerships matter

Reconstruction in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo advanced most rapidly where universities entered formally structured alliances with European universities and multilateral donors. Twinning and curriculum-development projects funded by the European Union, World University Service (WUS) and the Open Society Foundations restored libraries, laboratories and student services within three to five years of the peace accords.⁸⁰ Yet both cases show that donor contracts are most effective when they contain explicit clauses on academic freedom and institutional autonomy; where such safeguards were absent, newly rebuilt departments soon faced political interference.⁸¹

Strengthen international co-operation and faculty support

Emergency fellowships helped individual scholars survive the war years, but long-term faculty stability came only after ministries created salary top-ups and return-tickets that lured academics back from exile (e.g., the Bosnia “Academic Lifeline” programme).⁸² Ukraine should therefore pair visiting-

⁷⁸ Temple, P. (2002). *Reform in a fragmented system: Higher education in Bosnia-Herzegovina*. *Higher Education Management and Policy*, 14(2), 87–98.

⁷⁹ Benedek, W. (1997a). International cooperation and support of higher education in Bosnia and Herzegovina. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 1(1).

⁸⁰ Temple, P. (2002). *Reform in a fragmented system: Higher education in Bosnia-Herzegovina*. *Higher Education Management and Policy*, 14(2), 87–98.

⁸¹ Benedek, W. (1997a). International cooperation and support of higher education in Bosnia and Herzegovina. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 1(1).

⁸² Benedek, W. (1998). Das „Academic Lifeline Programm für Bosnien und Herzegowina“ von WUS Austria. *Zeitschrift des Institutes für den Donauraum und Mitteleuropa*, 38 (Spezialheft).

scholar schemes such as MSCA4Ukraine with guaranteed bridge-positions at home to stem brain drain. Special attention is needed for male academics currently restricted by martial-law travel bans.

Support for displaced communities is essential

Both countries demonstrate that targeted reintegration packages—tuition waivers, credit recognition, counselling—are decisive for rebuilding cohesive university communities. In Bosnia-Herzegovina, scholarship and mentoring programmes raised post-war re-enrolment to 86 % by 2003;⁸³ in Kosovo, faculty-exchange and coaching schemes restored departmental research output within a decade.⁸⁴ Ukraine needs a comparable national framework to ensure equal access for all displaced groups.

Avoid over-reliance on external aid

Donor funding was indispensable during the first reconstruction cycle but created dependency traps when domestic investment did not follow. Kosovo's universities still rely on short-cycle donor projects for research, while many Bosnian reforms stalled once EU grants expired.⁸⁵ Kyiv should therefore match foreign capital with dedicated budget lines for infrastructure and competitive grants.

Standardised education policies prevent fragmentation

Bosnia-Herzegovina's canton-based system illustrates how decentralisation without common standards breeds regional inequality and duplication.⁸⁶ Kosovo maintains a robust quality assurance system that guarantees the consistent and rigorous implementation of the European Standards and Guidelines across all levels of higher education. Ukraine should prioritise unified accreditation and quality-assurance rules to keep degree value consistent nationwide. According to the Institute of Higher Education study⁸⁷, it is reasonable to merge HEIs' network to a sustainable level that Ukrainian

⁸³ Kreso, A. P. (2008). The war and post-war impact on the educational system of Bosnia and Herzegovina. *International Review of Education*, 54(3), 353–374.

⁸⁴ Tahirsyzaj, A. (2010). Higher education in Kosovo ... *Interchange*, 41, 171–183.

⁸⁵ ETF. (2000). *Education and training in Kosovo: Post-conflict analysis and support*. European Training Foundation.

⁸⁶ Guthrie, C., et al. (2022). *OECD reviews of evaluation and assessment in education: Bosnia and Herzegovina*. OECD Publishing.

⁸⁷ Kremen', V., Luhovyi, V., Saukh, P., Slyusarenko, O., & Talanova, Zh. (2024). *Merezha derzhavnykh zakladiv vyshchoi osvity Ukraïny: analiz efektyvnosti ta konkurentospromozhnosti : preprint (analytychni materialy)*. Kyiv:

society actually requires and that the Ukrainian economy could support. One of the tasks for implementing the goals of the Strategy for the Development of Higher Education in Ukraine for 2022-2032 (Order of the Cabinet of Ministers of 23.02.2022 No. 286-r) is the modernization of the network and merging of HEIs. However, not much progress has been demonstrated in this regard — for many reasons, including a lack of understanding of the mechanisms for closing or merging HEIs.

Avoid parallel education systems in divided regions

Kosovo's maintenance of separate Serbian and Albanian university structures has perpetuated governance deadlock and limited cross-community research.⁸⁸ Ukraine should anticipate similar risks in formerly occupied or predominantly Russian-speaking areas and build incentives for institutional reintegration within a single national framework.

Use technology to improve access

Compared with the Western Balkans of the early 2000s, Ukraine possesses a mature digital infrastructure. Systematic deployment of online and blended learning can keep displaced students enrolled and facilitate joint teaching with partner institutions, provided cyber-security measures guard against hybrid attacks.

Adapt strategies to Ukraine's context

Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo are valuable reference points, but Ukraine's larger, more diverse sector will require a mix of central standards and region-specific implementation plans. The guiding thread across all contexts is clear: reconstruction that embeds the five dimensions of academic freedom—research, teaching, learning, dissemination and institutional autonomy—delivers the most resilient recovery.

National Academy of Educational Sciences of Ukraine. <https://doi.org/10.37472/NAES-IHED-2024>

⁸⁸ Perritt, H. H. (2009). *The road to independence for Kosovo: A chronicle of the Ahtisaari plan*. Cambridge University Press.

7. Conclusion

7.1 Summary of Findings

The joint research conducted under the FreeAc project confirms the severe and multifaceted impact of Russia's full-scale invasion on Ukraine's higher education sector. Based on survey data, institutional feedback, and comparative analysis, the study highlights major challenges, including:

- Destruction of infrastructure, limiting access to classrooms, labs, and equipment;
- Displacement of students and staff, weakening academic continuity and integration;
- Conscription and mobility restrictions, especially for male students and academics;
- Psychological strain linked to war-related trauma, uncertainty, and loss;
- Reduced enrolment and financial pressure, threatening institutional sustainability.

Despite these challenges, Ukrainian universities have shown strong adaptability. Many have transitioned to remote or hybrid teaching, maintained international partnerships, and launched staff support measures. Still, academic freedom remains under pressure, affected by wartime restrictions, limited freedom of expression, and concerns about digital security.

Chapter 6 adds important perspective by drawing on post-conflict experiences from Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo. These cases show that rebuilding higher education is possible but highlight several risks:

- Fragmented governance, as seen in Bosnia and Herzegovina, can block reform and reduce quality;
- Reintegration of displaced academics, as Kosovo faced, requires targeted policies;
- Over-dependence on external aid can limit long-term stability;
- Clear national frameworks are key to ensuring consistency and avoiding parallel systems.

These lessons reinforce the importance of early planning, strong coordination, and international support that aligns with national priorities. Ukraine can benefit from this knowledge to avoid known pitfalls and support a more effective and inclusive recovery.

7.2 Implications for Policy and Practice

Educational Policy in Ukraine Post-War

Rebuilding a resilient and inclusive higher education system in Ukraine will require coordinated national action. Based on the research findings, the following policy priorities are recommended:

- Reconstruct academic infrastructure, with a focus on frontline regions and areas heavily affected by conflict.
- Establish national reintegration programmes for displaced students and staff, including transparent procedures for recognising qualifications, credits, and academic work completed abroad.
- Expand mental health and psychosocial support services across all higher education institutions to address trauma, stress, and burnout.
- Adopt a clear legal framework to protect academic freedom, aligning with international standards such as the UNHRC Principles and Council of Europe recommendations.

Invest in digital infrastructure to ensure continuity of education in times of crisis and to support access for students in remote or unstable regions.

Institutional Practices to Protect and Promote Academic Freedom

Ukrainian universities have a key role in safeguarding academic freedom and promoting inclusive recovery. Recommended institutional actions include:

- Adopt internal policies and governance mechanisms that uphold academic freedom and institutional autonomy.
- Strengthen international cooperation through formal agreements and long-term academic exchange programmes, especially for displaced and early-career scholars.
- Enhance cybersecurity and data protection measures to guard against surveillance, cyber-attacks, and information manipulation.
- Advance inclusive education practices, ensuring equal support and access for marginalized groups, including students with disabilities, women, and ethnic minorities.

7.3 Future Research Directions

This study provides a foundation for continued inquiry into the intersection of war, academic freedom, and higher education reform. Future research should address:

- Longitudinal studies on the reintegration of displaced academics and the return intentions of students and staff.
- Comparative analyses of education recovery in post-conflict contexts, with a focus on sustainability and equity.
- The role of digital education in conflict and post-conflict settings, including its limits and potential.
- The impact of military mobilization on academic trajectories, including the specific experiences of conscripted scholars and students.
- Gendered dimensions of academic displacement and recovery, particularly the roles of women in educational leadership during crises.

Systematic, evidence-based research will be essential for shaping policies that not only address immediate recovery needs but also lay the groundwork for a democratic and resilient academic future in Ukraine.

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Promoting Academic Freedom in Ukraine
Project number: 2023-1-AT01-KA220-HED-000164930

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