

The impact of Russia's invasion of Ukraine on the European borderland universities

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Extended abstract

1. The aim of the paper and research question

The war in Ukraine has impacted how universities operate, mainly their research and educational functions (but also the so-called third role of universities). The research questions of the paper is: How has the Russian invasion of Ukraine affected inequalities between institutions of higher education and science, in particular in the regions neighbouring Ukraine, Russia and Belarus? We assume the most suffering from the geopolitical challenges on the Russian, Belorussian and Ukrainian borders due to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The reasons are manifold, e.g. the studies related to borderlands are most common in the case of these universities; these universities attract students from across the eastern border. At the same time, institutions in these usually peripheral regions were already facing unfavourable conditions compared to those in more central regions (Benneworth, 2018). Thus, the current situation may have created new inequalities and, more importantly, exacerbated those that already existed.

Therefore, the study aims to determine how the Russian invasion of Ukraine has affected inequalities between institutions of higher education and science, in particular in the regions bordering Ukraine, Russia and Belarus. The investigated inequalities result from the consequences of war, including broken partnerships, collaborations and projects, obstructed flow of scholars and students, and disrupted student admission and retention. The analysis will consider the impact on the three functions of universities: research, education, and links to the socio-economic environment. The situation of universities in border regions will be compared with that of universities from other regions - this will allow us to assess the role of spatial proximity to the shock under analysis, namely the Russian invasion.

2. Literature review and contribution of the paper

This study positions itself within scholarly investigations into the impact of war on academic and educational activities in the context of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. While numerous works address this theme, the majority concentrate on the situation of Ukraine science sector, encompassing the general situation in science (Ganguli & Waldinger, 2023) relocation of universities from occupied territories (Lopatina et al., 2023; Zakharova & Prodanova, 2023), the analysis of situation and prospects of Ukrainian scientists both remaining in Ukraine and emigrant (de Rassenfosse et al., 2023; Fiialka, 2022; Suchikova et al., 2023).

At the same time, research on the impact of the Russian invasion of Ukraine on science and higher education beyond Ukraine is scarce. Noteworthy studies relate to aiding scientists from Ukraine

(Gharaibeh et al., 2023), the influence of economic sanctions imposed during the war affected EU–Russia knowledge flows (Makkonen & Mitze, 2023), investigations into the reactions of students outside Ukraine to the conflict and its effects on academic life (Kapsa et al., 2022), or analysis of the universities' responses to the Russian full-scale invasion on Ukraine (Kushnir, 2023; Kushnir et al., 2023).

The study analysed in this article stands out for its more complex research question. We are not only investigating the impact of war on the scholarly sector in the bordering regions, but what's more - we are trying to understand whether the war in Ukraine increases the existing inequalities among universities. Moreover, the study is characterised by a broad spatial scope, encompassing nine countries bordering Ukraine, Russia, and Belarus. The applied methodology incorporates in-depth interviews and a survey within a representative sample of scholars complemented by bibliometric data. This comprehensive research approach covers various aspects of the war's impact, including teaching, research activities, scientific communication, collaboration, strategies, and the tertiary function of the university. It considers diverse layers of the analysed problem, such as the individual scholar, specific discipline, institution, and region/city.

3. Explanation of the methods and data used

Within the methodology framework, in-depth interviews were conducted with one representative from each of the selected 11 universities located in European countries bordering Ukraine, Russia and Belarus, i.e., Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania, Moldova. A specialised interview schema was developed, allowing ample room for participants' spontaneous expression and enabling a thorough understanding of all aspects of the war's impact on academic and educational activities, as well as on scientific institutions and the regions in which they were located. The interviews, conducted either in-person or online, were recorded and subjected to descriptive analysis. The results of this interview analysis formed the basis for formulating the research questionnaire. The interviews proved to be a robust foundation for constructing the survey for scholars; the interlocutors confirmed some assumptions while also provided numerous insights that were not previously considered and were incorporated into the survey.

The sample of respondents for the survey was drawn from the population of corresponding authors of scientific articles published in recent years and indexed in the Web of Science database. It was assumed that for each of the nine countries included in the study, the sample size should be similar in order to allow for cross-country comparisons. Based on the collected data on the population of corresponding authors (technical: distinct email addresses) affiliated in the surveyed countries, it was estimated that a realistic expectation would be to collect approximately 200 surveys in each country. Based on previous similar research (online survey among scientists), a safe expected return rate for the survey was estimated at 5%. On this basis, it was estimated that the sample in each country should be 4,000 scientists. This approach was not possible in Moldova because the total number of unique emails to corresponding authors of papers indexed in the Web of Science in the case of this country is much smaller, approximately 1,200. In the case of the remaining eight countries, 4,000 unique email addresses were randomly selected from the available population.

The survey was programmed in the online survey tool "Startquestion". The survey was developed in English and in 8 languages of the surveyed countries (Estonian, Finnish, Hungarian, Lithuanian, Latvian, Polish, Romanian, and Slovak). The survey study was conducted in January-February 2024.

Our study follows a multi-stage approach. The qualitative content analysis of in-depth interviews is the basis for developing the primary research tool - a survey. The descriptive statistics of the survey results provide a comprehensive overview of the impact of the war on various aspects of university performance. To better understand inequalities between different types of universities, we will apply

logistic regression to the survey data. We will distinguish various types of universities based on questions related to the respondent's opinions on the academic institution's prestige in the research community, the number of applicants seeking admission, the quality of research and teaching, as well as respondents' perceptions of their university's position in international and national rankings.

4. Results and conclusions (tentative)

Interviews and the survey's preliminary results confirm that the impact of the war in Ukraine on research and teaching activity is negligible to many scholars. Moreover, the most substantial influence seems to be observed in relation to educational functions and a lesser effect on research functions or the so-called third role of the university.

Nevertheless, for a significant group of respondents, the impact of war on universities located along the borders with Belarus, Russia, and Ukraine is complex and multifaceted, with potentially enduring consequences. The effects vary across different borders, showcasing positive multiplier effects in regions bordering Ukraine, such as growing research opportunities in financial and collaborative terms and increasing student interest. On the other hand, regions bordering Russia and Belarus have experienced adverse consequences, such as the suspension of research, the severing of crucial collaborations, a decrease in the number of students, the need to redirect the research interests of particular scholars, and the adaptation of university strategies.

The impact of war depends on various factors, including the strength and importance of collaboration with Eastern scientific partners, the dependence of scholars and institutions on such collaboration, experience in providing education opportunities for international students, and the strategic orientation of the specific university or the specificity of the represented scientific disciplines. Apart from that, the war indirectly impacts the region's scientific sector. Decisions made by the authorities of regions neighbouring the area affected by armed conflict affect the borderland region's economic potential, demographics and image in the country and Europe. The scenarios vary for different institutions; some need to reorient and compete in specialised niches, some may build their success on visibility and recognition of their expertise relating to the area of conflict, and some improve their image as open to international students from Ukraine.

The paper presents the initial results of the ongoing study. The finalisation of the in-depth analysis of survey results is needed to validate the hypothesis on existing inequalities among universities regarding the scale and dimension of the impact of the war in Ukraine on their functions.

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