

Interview with Serhiy Kvit | Ukrainian universities engaged into the war effort beyond expectation

👤 Serhiy Kvit 📅 May 18, 2023 🗨️ 0 📁 Interview, Russia's war against Ukraine, Society



Oleksandr Pankiev: How has Russia's full-scale invasion affected universities and the education process in Ukraine?

Serhiy Kvit: Russia's destruction has been unprecedented. I am not speaking here of universities alone: Russians have wiped out entire cities and towns across Ukraine. If you add all this destruction to the distress caused earlier by the COVID-19 pandemic, Ukraine's system of education has had to endure a double strain.

For many, studying in conditions of war means a continuation of distance learning. At the National University of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy (NaUKMA) we introduced a hybrid approach—simultaneous face-to-face and remote interactions with students who are either physically present in Ukraine or connecting from Western Europe, North America, or any other part of the world. This approach relies heavily on online video broadcasts and streaming.

The consequences of the invasion are detrimental, but our educational system—especially higher education—is continuing to operate. I want to emphasize that wartime challenges have not had any significant effect on the quality of knowledge transmission. Our students and instructors remain very motivated and committed to their studies. In the past academic year, some members of the Kyiv-Mohyla academic community were participating in classes while being on territory occupied by Russians.

Another challenge to studying under wartime conditions is the threat of blackout. To mitigate it, the Kyiv-Mohyla Academy organized workspaces with autonomous power sources. Also, Starlink equipment (provided by Elon Musk) was installed to secure uninterrupted Internet access. Thus, today we at NaUKMA have the capacity to continue the educational process even under a blackout.

Regardless of the war, we are continuing our work and have developed different responses to new challenges.

Pankieiev: What is the role of Ukraine's universities in organizing resistance to Russia's aggression—specifically, that of the Kyiv-Mohyla Academy?

Kvit: In the first month and a half of the full-scale Russian invasion, our university turned into a fortress that resisted the threat of the Russian landing on Kontraktova Square and the advance of Russian troops from the Dnipro side.

The major challenge in coordinating resistance during wartime is that members of the academic community are dispersed across not only Ukraine but the whole world. This complicates efforts to communicate with them. As a matter of fact, however, most of

our Kyiv-Mohyla Academy instructors are working on campus, in the centre of the capital.

Moreover, our community initiated a few resistance measures that are not directly connected with research or teaching. For instance, within the first few days of the escalated invasion we established a specialized logistics centre to deliver supplies to the front line. This was an initiative of our graduates, who left their studies at American universities and returned to Kyiv to manage the centre.

We have a lot of recognizable media projects, such as [StopFake](#), which counters Russian propaganda by exposing it—in twelve languages—and the [Kul't \[cult\]](#) podcast administered by our professors Tetiana Oharkova and Volodymyr Yermolenko. The podcast is offered in two languages, English and French, and targets the worldwide audience of intellectuals. Apart from this, our students as well as instructors also work as journalists for international media. At the beginning of the full-scale invasion, it was crucial to help with translation and deliver objective information to foreign diplomats, military officers, and journalists, and members of our academic community did that—in six languages.

It is also worth mentioning that thirty-one different think tanks and research centres are based at the Kyiv-Mohyla Academy. Last year we even registered three new think tanks, which a specific focus on issues of national security and psychological support for civilians and soldiers in need. Our centre for mental health and psychological social support is one of the most advanced of its kind in Ukraine. Since the liberation of Bucha, such centres have been in demand and of great importance.

Also, we have a special IT unit that cooperates with Ukrainian authorities and contributes to the war effort in cyberspace. We have a special legal unit based at our law school that has been assisting Ukraine's parliament, the Verkhovna Rada, since the first day of the full-scale invasion. A year ago, many questions suddenly emerged regarding the interpretation of international law. It was this legal unit that helped to explain why Russian actions in Ukraine could be unequivocally defined as war. It also helped to prepare a draft of the appeal of Ukraine's parliament to the international

community, in which the Russian invasion was condemned as an act of genocide against Ukrainians.

Many members of our community—students, graduates, instructors, and administrative staff—joined the Ukrainian armed forces, most of them as volunteers. Fourteen of them have died on the front lines, with one more body, whom we suspect to be that of a NaUKMA graduate, being in the process of genetic identification. We have the necessary expertise to conduct such identification.

The Kyiv-Mohyla Academy is in the process of registering a patent developed by scholars in our chemistry department. The patent describes how CO₂ can be used as a component of synthetic fuel in steelmaking. The discovered chemical process will not only increase the cost efficiency of the industry but prevent the emission of CO₂ into the atmosphere. It will also boost the competitiveness of Ukraine's steelmaking industry, which is especially important in the time of war.

Apart from the war, NaUKMA has also established new projects that are important for the development of the institution. For instance, the Faculty of Health Sciences will become a part of a future Faculty of Medicine. It will likely take two years to complete this project, which we are pursuing in collaboration with Dobrobut, one of the biggest medical networks in Ukraine. Our aim is to have the best medical faculty in the country. Another project is the establishment of an HR Department within the Kyiv-Mohyla Academy Centre for Quality Assurance. If we are successful, this department will become one of the first of its kind in Ukraine. The Kyiv-Mohyla Academy has unique programs for the national security and defence sectors and the military industry.

Pankieiev: What is the role of Russia's universities in Russia's invasion?

Kvit: There is no role, because unfortunately there is no civil society in Russia. Russian universities have stopped their primary function of being educational institutions. In my opinion, a university should be an independent platform that cherishes freedom of speech and the

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expression of diverse opinions; it should be a network of intellectual activities and discussion platforms. This is not the case in contemporary Russia, where universities have lost their sense of existence.

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Russian society no longer has any independent centres or mechanisms of critical thinking. From the point of view of political culture, the situation there has become much worse than in Nazi Germany during WW II. Professor Bohdan Osadchuk, who lived in Berlin during that war, told me once that even at the zenith of the Nazi regime Hitler did not control German media as firmly as Stalin did in the Soviet Union. Germany had always retained a strong tradition of freedom of speech, which allowed the public to look down on the Nazi journalists whom Hitler had installed in all media. Germans understood that Nazism was a temporary disaster for German political culture. Therefore, after the collapse of Hitler's regime Germans started to change their minds and political behaviour, because they could refer to alternative narratives and traditions that had always been around. On the other hand, Russians have never had alternative narratives or traditions. All of them have learned to submit to unified thinking and autocracy. Peter the Great, Lenin, Stalin, Putin, and other leaders have always promoted an exclusive authoritarian view of reality.

I am afraid that after the collapse of Putin's regime, Russians will start looking for a new Putin. That is why we need to encourage them to change their political culture. This will be possible if we help Russians create a new state within its national borders as well as build a new society with a true version of Russian history.

I believe that instead of a national history Russians today have adopted an imperial history. This is the cornerstone problem. All the people who have come to Ukraine to kill Ukrainians—all the soldiers and officers—are collectively referred to as Russians, but they are not. Chechens are not Russians, and neither are Buriats, Yakuts, or Volga Tatars. They are people who have Russian passports, but they are not Russians.

I used to be a professional athlete. I had the opportunity to travel across the Soviet Union. I remember very well, for instance, in Kazan or Ufa, in Tatarstan or Bashkortostan, the attitude to Russians and Communists. That attitude was very

ironic, even derogatory. In this light, we should not accept Russia as something stable and immutable in the future. We need to work to change its political culture and help Russian peoples to discover their true history, their true identity. This may lead to the creation of a new country with different borders. If we do not do this, the old imperial problems will return to us over the years.

Pankiev: When you say “we,” what do you mean?

Kvit: “We” refers to Ukrainians, of course. If you look at Ukrainian history, we had to wait for and deal with recurring Russian invasions, many times. In their daily speech, Russians mostly say “to go to the Ukraine [*na Ukraïnu*],” not “to go to Ukraine [*v Ukraïnu*],” which is an illustrative and symbolic turn of phrase. It manifests the unconscious understanding of Ukraine as a territory that Russia needs to subordinate and keep in check. From the military point of view, Russians never regarded Ukraine as a fully conquered part of their territory (though they wished to) or Ukrainians as people they could trust, because they had constant problems with them. That is why many times in their history Ukrainians would suffer new invasions. To break this vicious circle, Ukrainians must dismantle the current Russian Federation—which is the latest incarnation of the Russian Empire. I want to make it clear: Russia is not a country of Russians but rather an empire—or a prison of nations, as Taras Shevchenko defined it.

Pankiev: When the invasion started, the media landscape changed dramatically in Ukraine. The “United News” marathon news broadcast was launched on all TV channels. How would you define the national media landscape today? How are media functioning in the environment of a full-scale invasion?

Kvit: The “United News” marathon has different shades to it and has changed the media landscape in different ways. On the one hand, many TV channels, especially those loyal to the government, have continued to work with little change to their information policies. Those channels that were not necessarily loyal [to the ruling party] had to adjust to the new environment and limit their criticism. On the other hand, all the TV channels in Ukraine have felt the lack of resources and needed to reduce the scope and quality of their information products. It has been a real problem

across the board. Last but not least, a few TV channels with a visible pro-Russian position were shut down, as they were no longer welcome by the Ukrainian public.

Speaking of civil society, it is very active. If Ukrainians want to obtain the information they are interested in, no obstacles will likely stop them. They will find the sources and means.

A very important point to highlight is that in times of armed combat, the nation should be united. This is why I think that some media discussions, especially on sensitive political topics, should be postponed until the end of the war. In this light, the “United News” telethon is providing a new experience to Ukrainians, who are receiving similar bits of information across the country. I also think that it is important for Ukrainians to trust their military command and generals. Our officers, unlike those of Russia, look very professional and competent, and the telethon helps to build up this trust.

At the same time, even under martial law restrictions, there remains a lot of hidden political struggle in Ukraine. Many powers are trying to influence the messages of the “United News” telethon.

Apart from TV channels, a variety of media outlets is also offering more diversity to interested consumers. Not that the “United News” is an exclusive source of information, but still more could be done to increase diversity.

Pankieiev: In Ukraine there are quite a few independent media personalities who are not associated with any specific outlet. What is their role in the wartime media landscape?

Kvit: Indeed, we have many well-known journalists, among whom I specifically like Vitaliy Portnikov and Larysa Hubina. We also have a lot of visible and well-known figures on social media who are brilliant experts with their own brands. The existence and activities of these people guarantee that freedom of speech unquestionably remains in Ukraine even in this time of war. I would even say that the reason Ukrainians have freedom of speech is because they demand it no matter what.

If there are any problems with freedom of speech, social unrest will follow. The major flaw of [former President] Viktor Yanukovych's policies, which led to his downfall, was that he did not understand the nature of Ukrainian political culture. The Ukrainian population needs to be heard. They are the ones to decide when to speak, what to say, where and when to say it, and how much. I believe that all political actors who are currently or will ever be in Ukraine's government should never forget this.

Pankiev: Ukraine is experiencing a tremendous brain drain. Many Ukrainians are scattered around the globe in different countries, and there is a high probability that they will stay there. What effect will it have on Ukraine? How can Ukraine attract them back or engage them?

Kvit: I think that currently we are not dealing with a brain drain as such but with a potential brain drain. We do not know how events will unfold in Ukraine and what will happen with the Ukrainians who are abroad. My initial reaction to the situation is positive: it is very good that our people, including students and instructors, have the opportunity to find secure shelter and study at high-ranked foreign universities.

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At the same time, the intellectual and demographic threat that looms is related to uncertainties that Ukraine will need to resolve. To what extent will postwar Ukraine be attractive for people who have left it today? How will the country and society change after the war? What reforms will be implemented to rebuild Ukraine? Will these reforms offer more opportunities for the young generation to live in and develop their country? In a word, I think that the extent of damage from the brain drain will depend on the postwar offers that Ukraine makes to its people.

We need to change the country, change our relationship to Ukrainian society, and continue implementing reforms. In times of war, as many examples from history show, mass migration and fleeing the battlefield are not unique, and Ukraine is no exception. Nothing irreparable happened. However, it may happen if we fail to change our country and society. I think that universities should

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play an instrumental role in designing and implementing these changes. Ukraine's universities should seek and find answers to the questions and uncertainties of today and the future.



Serhiy Kvit

Serhiy Kvit is the current and former (2007–14) president of the National University of Kyiv Mohyla Academy. He was the Minister of Education and Science of Ukraine in 2014–16 and head of the National Agency for Higher Education Quality Assurance of Ukraine in 2019–22. He founded the Kyiv-Mohyla School of Journalism (2001) and has headed the Centre for Media Reforms and the Consortium for University Autonomy (2005–10). He is a former champion of Ukraine in fencing. He was awarded Fulbright Scholar grants to Ohio University (2006–07), Stanford University (2017–18), the Kennan Institute (Washington, 2009), and the DAAD German Academic Exchange Service (Cologne, 2010). He graduated from Kyiv Shevchenko National University's Faculty of Journalism (1986–91) and obtained a D. Phil. from that university's Institute of Journalism as well as a PhD from the Free Ukrainian University in Munich. Kvit's works on mass communications, higher education reform, and philosophical hermeneutics have been published in Ukraine, USA, Canada, UK, and Germany.