

Editorial: Ukraine in the XXI century - the multidimensional challenges for the country and international community

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The full scale Russian aggression against Ukraine launched on February 24, 2022 once again attracted interest in this big European country, located between the Russian Federation and the European Union. For observers from Central Europe, the current geopolitical position of Ukraine might remind a seminal essay by Milan Kundera (1984) published in 1984 *Tragedy of Central Europe*, where he makes the point that although Central Europe was politically ‘kidnapped’ by the Soviet Union, culturally it still belonged to the West. One can discern similarities with the current, somehow tragic, position of Ukraine as a country stuck in between, trying to resist imposition of the Kremlin’s demarcated political borders, and at the same time having its cultural identity already embedded in the realm of Western world and decisively declaring orientation towards the EU. The geopolitical importance of contemporary Ukraine and its specific position results in complicated, multidimensional processes and challenges, leading to a variety of questions to be addressed by the scholarly community. These are questions going beyond reflection on geopolitical and military aspects of the aggression against Ukraine, because Ukrainian history and current developments articulate wider problems faced by international community in the XXI century like e.g. intensification of forced migrations (Carrera et al., 2022; Bansak et al., 2023), challenges of political and economic integration (Duleba, 2022; Fiott, 2023), democratisation processes (Szostek & Orlova, 2022; Onuch, 2022) and variety of security threats (Kendall-Taylor & Shullman, 2018; Schuette, 2023). Thus, Ukraine is an important case to study not only as a separate political entity, but as a political system entangled and indicative of the processes occurring on an international scale in other geographic and political contexts.

An idea to publish the special issue on Ukraine emerged in 2023 and at that time it was associated with the Visegrad + project: *Ukrainian refugees in Central Europe and the Balkans – lessons learned and policy recommendations*. The project was prepared and implemented by the academics (universities) of the Border and Regional Studies Network¹. Originally, we were focused mainly on the issue of Ukrainian

¹ To find out more about the network and the Visegrad + project see the network’s website and one of its bookmarks: <https://borderandregionalstudies.wnopiks.uni.opole.pl/>.

refugees and their reception in different, mainly Central European and Balkan countries, thus few of the articles published within this special issue are the result of this project. However, we wanted to have a wider and multidimensional picture of contemporary Ukraine, where the issue of refugees is one of many important topics to be covered as briefly enumerated in the previous paragraph. Thereby, as a result of an open call, we are able to present thirteen articles tackling a broader set of research problems demonstrating a variety of areas important in understanding Ukraine and its international surroundings. For the sake of providing a wider picture and some basic structure for the readers, we can distinguish three broad areas referred to by the articles, keeping in mind that this classification is neither the only one possible nor comprehensive enough to cover a wide scope of topics concerning Ukraine. The first area relates to the situation of Ukrainian refugees, mainly in Central Europe. The second one approaches Ukraine in the wider context of the European Union, demonstrating a variety of interactions between these two political entities. The last one investigates how the full scale aggression of Russia influenced the security and foreign policy arrangements in Ukraine and neighbouring countries.

1. The situation of Ukrainian refugees after the full scale Russian aggression

The first thematic area in the special issue looks at mass, compulsory migration movement triggered by the Russian aggression of February 24, 2022. In the article *A humanitarian superpower? The situation of the Ukrainian refugees and its evolution in Poland after the Russian invasion of February 24, 2022* we can find a comprehensive picture of the situation of Ukrainian refugees in Poland, the country which was one of the most important destinations for Ukrainians fleeing the war. The study concentrates on reactions of the most important political institutions, the local government and civil society tracing both the reception phase and problems with integration faced by the Ukrainians. The Ukrainian diaspora before and after 2022 is characterised, with its networks being an important facilitator of the immigration patterns. The article concludes that a successful reception of Ukrainian refugees was possible due to the social mobilisation, with the institutions of civil society and local as well as regional government playing the key role. After the two years of the war, there has been a wide spectrum of challenges that the refugees have been facing (housing, schooling, decline of acceptance among Poles), demonstrating the need for a more systemic and long-term approach to integrate refugees. Poland has found itself in a historically unprecedented situation calling for well-tailored and consensus-based immigration policy.

The second article *Political institutions and society reaction to the Ukrainian war refugees in Romania* takes a very similar approach focusing on the situation of Ukrainian refugees in Romania. The country emerged as a primary corridor for the refugees due to its extensive border shared with Ukraine, but also because of the networks with the pre-2022 Ukrainian community being the third-largest minority in

Romania. The authors focus on the central government's reaction to the inflow of Ukrainians, showing a comprehensive system for short- and medium-term reception and its management by governmental agencies. The local government and Romanian society are also described as important actors. In Romania, similarly to Poland, the local governments near the border crossing points were much more involved and burdened, because they had to manage a large influx of the refugees while simultaneously ensuring the sustainable delivery of services to its own population. The role of civil society organisations was of special interest, both at the early stage of reception and in the long run, when these organisations implemented actions aimed at integrating the refugees in line with the governmental strategy. The article concludes that the refugee crisis emerged as a timely humanitarian and economic opportunity both to improve Romania's regulatory framework regarding migration, as well as to recruit foreign labour. The policy recommendations are proposed as well.

The third article deals with *Czech immigration and integration policy before and after the war in Ukraine*. The authors focus mainly on the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the Regional Assistance Centers for Help, subordinated to the ministry, in order to evaluate how the immigration and integration policies in the Czech Republic have changed as a result of the influx of the Ukrainian refugees. The article is a single case study of the Regional Assistance Center for Help located in Ostrava in the Moravian-Silesian region, which was the main institution responsible for supporting and integrating the refugees. The text is based on the document analysis complemented by expert interviews. It traces the organisational evolution of the center in Ostrava. At the first phase of reception the centre was staffed with the employees from many different institutions who were ad-hoc selected in order to manage emergency situation and who used their informal contacts for coordinating regional response of different institutional actors. In later phases, the cooperation was slowly professionalising and the interactions among different institutions were formalised. Thus, the study demonstrates how the Regional Assistance Center for Help evolved towards a more professional, specialised agency coordinating the regional efforts of managing the massive influx of Ukrainian refugees.

The last article in this thematic area is of special importance, because it concentrates on the specific category of the Ukrainian refugees. The text titled *Navigating forced migration in the EU: challenges for families with disabled children affected by the Russo-Ukrainian war* gives a comprehensive picture of challenges faced by families with disabled children forced to escape the war. The study is based on interviews with the refugees relocated to six EU countries (the Czech Republic, Germany, France, Hungary, Italy, and Poland), who shared their experience of the escape to the EU, adapting to the new environment and integrating into host communities. Each of these phases was marked by numerous obstacles encountered by parents, like difficult conditions of evacuation and border crossing, difficulties in obtaining refugee status and having their child's disability recognized abroad or inadequate financial support. The study underscores the unpreparedness

of both the Ukrainian state and European Union countries for the mass migration of refugees seeking shelter, especially for vulnerable population groups, such as individuals raising children with developmental disorders or health impairments. However, despite facing numerous challenges, respondents highlighted opportunities that migration presents for both migrants and the host society.

2. Ukraine in the context of the EU

The first article entitled *Does rhetoric matter? Narratives of Visegrad Group and Baltic States' leaders on Ukraine's accession to the EU* presents an analysis of the political discourse of leaders from the Visegrad Group and Baltic States regarding Ukraine's accession to the European Union and its impact on the formation of the EU foreign policy. By analysing the content of these speeches, the authors investigate the perspectives of the aforementioned leaders on the subject of the EU enlargement and the necessity of reforming EU foreign policy in response to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The study concentrates on the impact of the examined rhetoric on the EU institutions and the EU-Russia relations, with a particular focus on the support expressed for Ukraine's integration into the EU. Therefore, the study emphasises the strong pro-Ukrainian stance of the majority of Central European and Baltic states, particularly Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and the Baltic countries, and their pivotal role in advocating for Ukraine's EU membership. The leaders of these nations have consistently called for Ukraine's accession, intertwining their discourse with support for Ukraine's resistance against Russia and the need for democratisation within the EU. In contrast, Hungary represents an exception due to its pro-Russian stance.

The second article deals with *Ukraine – Kosovo – EU: Old Dilemmas and Challenges of the Ukrainian – Russian War* and examines the complex interactions between the European Union, Kosovo, Serbia, and Ukraine, particularly in the context of Russia's military intervention in Ukraine. The full scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia in 2022 has served to intensify the efforts of the EU to promote the integration of the Western Balkans, including Kosovo and Serbia, into the European framework. Kosovo's strategic goal of EU membership is hindered by unresolved tensions with Serbia, with the EU acting as the primary mediator between the two and attempting to balance Moscow's influence over Serbia while backing Ukraine's fight against Russian aggression. Ukraine has historically avoided recognizing Kosovo's independence due to concerns about setting a precedent that might weaken its stance on reclaiming Crimea and other territories occupied by Russia. The war has also prompted speculation as to whether Ukraine might reconsider its position on Kosovo's independence as well as has intensified the contradictions between Ukraine, Serbia, and Kosovo. Despite all these issues, the most probable scenario remains the continuation of existing policies without dramatic shifts in recognition or relations.

The third article entitled *The Approximation of Ukrainian Social Legislation to the EU Acquis in Times of War: Key Challenges for Reforms* explores the challenges Ukraine faces in aligning its social legislation with EU standards (EU acquis), especially after obtaining EU candidate status during the ongoing war with Russia. Prior to the war, Ukraine had achieved only limited progress in aligning its social policies with the EU law, as documented in the 2023 European Commission report. The war has served to point up the necessity for reforms, highlighting the importance of social protection amidst increasing demands for social support. The research outlines the key issues with Ukraine's social security system, noting that many pre-war reforms were incomplete, fragmented, or insufficient to address the growing financial and social challenges. The author explores the evolution of Ukraine's social protection system from independence to the present day, identifying the limitations of past reforms and emphasising the growing necessity for comprehensive change. Although the initial reforms introduced a variety of social benefits, they often lacked financial sustainability and failed to address the more profound societal and state-level challenges. The EU-Ukraine Association Agreement prompted significant amendments in areas such as occupational safety and health, non-discrimination, equal opportunities, reforming of social services' system, social state insurance etc. However, many reforms remained incomplete or insufficient, including the promised Labour Code and state compulsory accumulative pension. The ongoing war has created new challenges for the country, which is struggling to meet its social obligations and is reliant on international assistance to cover social expenditure. Despite these challenges, the article stresses the importance of reforming Ukraine's social legislation to meet the EU standards as part of the broader European integration process. This includes overhauling key areas like labour legislation, social services, and pensions.

The fourth article is analysis of the *Ukraine-EU Summits as a mechanism for implementing the Association Agreement*, presenting the pivotal role played by these summits in fostering high-level political dialogue, advancing shared goals, and facilitating the implementation of the Association Agreement. Since the 1990s and particularly after the signing of the AA in 2014, these summits have provided a crucial platform for setting strategic priorities and monitoring progress in Ukraine's integration into the EU. By analysing the evolution and effectiveness of these summits, the article highlights both their successes and limitations, offering a nuanced view of their contributions to regional stability and reform efforts. Ukraine-EU summits have played a key role in guiding reforms, addressing economic barriers, supporting anti-corruption efforts, and promoting sectoral cooperation. However, domestic challenges and external pressures, particularly Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022, have hindered progress in some areas. The article outlines areas for improvement, such as enhancing institutional frameworks, expanding technical assistance, and prioritising sectoral integration. Finally, the summits are seen as a vital mechanism for advancing Ukraine's European integration, reinforcing commitments, and ensuring sustained

progress despite the ongoing challenges. The authors provided the recommendations for further strengthening the summit process and enhancing its effectiveness in the future.

The fifth article entitled *Ukrainian Orthodox Community Amid Russia's War and European Integration* explores the evolving role of Ukraine's Orthodox churches in the context of Russia's war and Ukraine's progress toward European integration. The establishment of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) in 2019 represented a pivotal moment in the country's religious history, marking a significant step towards religious independence. Nevertheless, the Ukrainian Orthodox community remains divided between the OCU and the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate (UOC-MP), with each responding in a distinct manner to the war and Ukraine's aspirations for European integration. The article analyses the ways in which both churches have attempted to overcome the dual challenges of war and the process of aligning with the EU. While the OCU has actively supported Ukraine's resistance against Russia, the UOC-MP has been slower to condemn the invasion, reflecting its ongoing ties to Moscow. Nevertheless, both churches have expressed support for Ukraine's European integration, attempting to reconcile traditional Orthodox values with a pro-European stance. The author highlights the complexity of these positions. As Ukraine continues its path to EU membership, the role of its Orthodox churches in shaping the country's political and social landscape will remain pivotal.

The last article in this section gives wider picture of the EU's enlargement policy, where Ukraine's future integration with the block is investigated together with such prospects for the Republic of Moldova and the Western Balkans. In the text titled *The EU's enlargement and NATO's prospects in the context of the war and post-war political dynamics* the author applies the advocacy coalition framework as a method for drawing five possible scenarios of integration with the EU in the next ten years. The method takes into consideration possible 'coalitions' of agents of influence at global, European and regional level, and the 'policy subsystems' related to the dynamics of the EU in the new legislature (2024-2029). In this way we can learn about two positive, one neutral and two pessimistic versions of the future enlargement. The author concludes that the path which will be eventually taken depends on the agenda setting in Brussels, being combination of political rationality with emotions of the public opinion. Both can change rapidly, depending on external and internal developments, with the war against Ukraine being among crucial factors. It seems a paradox but the war opened a window of opportunity to relaunch the discussion on EU enlargement.

3. The Russian aggression against Ukraine and its impact on foreign policy and security

The first article in this thematic area examines Hungary's pragmatic foreign policy within a broader context, highlighting a series of crises marked by the rise of

populism and the emergence of the concept of illiberal democracy. The article titled *Pragmatic Foreign Policy of Hungary in the Shadow of the Russian–Ukrainian War* seeks to introduce the changes in the government’s foreign policy positions and the reasons behind them, particularly in relation to the EU, Russia, and the Russian-Ukrainian war. It focuses on the factors supporting Hungary’s ‘super-pragmatic’, interest-driven approach. This article employs elements of discourse and speech analysis, with a particular focus on the national and EU statements made by Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and other prominent FIDESZ politicians between 2010 and 2024. The authors aim to explore how meaning is conveyed through language and how interpretations shift because of contextual factors, emphasising the rhetorical elements that support Hungary’s pragmatic government approach, particularly the role of the Prime Minister in shaping Hungarian diplomacy. The article situates Hungarian communication within a broader context, examining the Orbán regime’s communication strategies from an international perspective and noting how they differ from or align with statements from leading European politicians. The authors conclude that the outbreak of the Ukrainian war in 2022 and the European Union’s response further deepened the isolation of Hungarian foreign policy, amplifying its detachment from the West. Sympathy toward Hungary significantly declined, as authors concluded and, as is often the case, this loss of goodwill might eventually lead to disengagement from investors—a development that would be costly for both the government and Hungarian citizens.

The second article entitled *Public diplomacy of Ukraine in wartime: A path to reputational security* explores the current trends and challenges in public diplomacy (PD) based on the evidence and experiences arising from the Russian-Ukrainian war. Specifically, Ukraine’s PD efforts and Russia’s foreign disinformation campaigns during the conflict allow us to confirm and further elaborate on several PD trends identified by leading researchers. While the study spans the period since Ukraine’s independence in 1991, the primary focus is on the events of the Russian-Ukrainian war, which began in 2014 with Russia’s annexation of Crimea and invasion of Donbas. The study heavily draws on, among others, Nicholas J. Cull’s theory of reputational security (RS) (2019; 2022; 2024), which is applied to the Ukrainian context, contributing to its development by identifying different levels of RS and defining PD strategies aimed at bolstering RS at each level. Additionally, authors also use Pamment’s (2021) approach to PD, which frames the field as a tripartite interaction between the PD actor, target groups abroad, and a third party, which can be an adversarial nation or its agents. The study demonstrates the critical importance of RS for the public diplomacy of a vulnerable country like Ukraine and strategies for strengthening its RS through PD, considering the current geopolitical situation and other influential factors.

The third article *Sense of security in the face of the war in Ukraine. Comparative study of Czech Republic and Poland* presents partial findings from a survey conducted on the topic of the full-scale war in Ukraine and its aftermath, especially the sense of

security among students. The respondents in the study were university students from Poland (The Jacob of Paradies University) and the Czech Republic (Silesian University in Opava), representing various but comparable fields of study. The study concluded that Russian aggression against Ukraine initially heightened the respondents' sense of threat immediately following the outbreak of the war. However, by the time of the survey (November–December 2023), these fears have subsided for many. The majority of respondents now feel safe and are no longer concerned about the ongoing conflict in the east. That said, it is important to note that a significant portion of respondents still reported feeling threatened. From the results of this study it can be concluded that Polish students are more sceptical of Russian messages about the war compared to Czech ones, while Czech students tend to trust messages from both sides more equally. The study shows that some respondents are susceptible to Russian disinformation, including conspiracy theories related to the war in Ukraine. Nevertheless, the percentage of people who openly believe in these theories is relatively low. The research presented here is exploratory in nature, identifying key issues and raising questions that could be further addressed through studies conducted on a larger, more representative sample for each country. Understanding and defining the relationship between contemporary crises, the sense of security, and the influence of disinformation on that sense requires deeper investigation.

The fourth and the last article in this thematic area is entitled *The art of war: examining the visual narratives of Ukrainian video games* presenting an interesting study, an analysis of visual narratives, by selecting 26 video games centred on the events of the Russian-Ukrainian war. The focus is given to Ukrainian video games as a form of social practice among game developers, approached from a cultural perspective using both structuralist and critical approaches. The author captured screenshots to examine the visual scenes of these games, in order to identify recurring themes, motifs, and narrative structures across different titles. Based on the conducted analysis, the author explores the visual representation of national narratives of resistance and resilience, highlighting their role as a form of media resistance against dominant socio-political landscape. The article examines how war-themed video games contribute to strengthening the national efforts for resistance to external threats and shape a broader culture of resilience. The research critically analyses the formal structures and visual elements in video games, such as depictions of cultural heroes, values, norms, traditions, and paradigms, to understand how they convey messages of unity and resilience. It emphasises how these games can deconstruct hostile narratives, challenge falsehoods, and inform the global community about events in Ukraine. The majority of the analysed games focus on depictions of war, while only a few are dedicated to the theme of peaceful reconstruction of the country.

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