

EDUCATION UNDER SIRENS: HOW UKRAINIAN UNIVERSITIES FIGHT FOR THE FUTURE

Yahodzinskyi S.

Dr.Sc., Professor,

PHEE “European University”

Kyiv, Ukraine

Yahodzinska V.

PhD,

Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv

Kyiv, Ukraine

The full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 marked the beginning of a new chapter in the history of Ukrainian higher education. Universities, which had long been centers of intellectual growth, social mobility, and international cooperation, suddenly faced unprecedented challenges. The sounds of air raid sirens became part of everyday academic life, replacing the expected silence of lecture halls with uncertainty and fear. Education, however, did not collapse. Instead, it transformed into a symbol of resilience, adaptability, and the unbreakable will to defend the future of the nation through knowledge.

When the first missiles struck Ukrainian cities, academic life was paralyzed. Classes were abruptly suspended; electricity and internet connections became unstable. Thousands of students and teachers were forced to flee their homes. Foreign students, who once formed a vibrant community in Ukrainian universities, left the country. Some members of academic staff and students even joined the armed forces. Under such circumstances, concentration on studies seemed nearly impossible, and yet, the determination to continue learning prevailed.

The destruction of university buildings has become a tragic hallmark of the war. The main building of European University in Kyiv was almost completely destroyed in March 2022. The State Tax University in Irpin suffered heavy damage, as did the National University of Shipbuilding in Mykolaiv, which endured direct missile strikes in both summer and autumn of 2022. Even Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv, the country’s academic flagship, has repeatedly been damaged by attacks on the capital. By now, more than 1,800 schools and universities have been destroyed or severely damaged across Ukraine. These losses extend beyond

bricks and mortar: they represent the loss of safe spaces for intellectual growth and the erosion of academic traditions built over generations.

With lecture halls turned into ruins, many universities shifted their teaching to basements and improvised bomb shelters. Students of Oles Honchar Dnipro National University and Kryvyi Rih National University often study underground, surrounded by concrete walls and poor ventilation. While some institutions have begun to construct modern shelters, the majority still lack adequate facilities. Studying under sirens has become an existential paradox: the pursuit of knowledge continues in spaces designed primarily for survival.

Despite these hardships, Ukrainian universities remain active in global academic networks. Institutions continue to appear in prestigious international rankings such as QS, Times Higher Education, ARWU, and CWUR. The very presence of Ukrainian universities in these lists during wartime is a testimony to their resilience and the professionalism of their faculty. Ukrainian academia is not merely surviving; it is asserting itself on the global stage as a community determined to protect its intellectual sovereignty and contribute to international knowledge production.

The phrase “education under sirens” has become both a literal description and a powerful metaphor of Ukrainian higher education in wartime. It reflects the constant duality between destruction and renewal, despair and hope, survival and development. Ukrainian universities are not just fighting for the continuity of studies – they are fighting for the cultural identity, intellectual independence, and future prosperity of the nation. The resilience of teachers and students proves that even under bombardment, knowledge remains a form of resistance. Education in Ukraine today is not only about acquiring skills; it is an act of defiance, a declaration that the future will be built on learning, innovation, and freedom.