

# ‘It is more than just education. It’s also a peace policy’: (Re)imagining the mission of the European Higher Education Area in the context of the Russian invasion of Ukraine

European Educational Research Journal

1–16

© The Author(s) 2023



Article reuse guidelines:

[sagepub.com/journals-permissions](https://sagepub.com/journals-permissions)

DOI: 10.1177/14749041231200927

[journals.sagepub.com/home/eer](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/eer)**Iryna Kushnir** 

Nottingham Trent University, UK

## Abstract

Following the launch of Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, scholarship has not yet addressed the role of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) in this context. This paper asks: What is the political role of the EHEA as an institution and the instrumentalisation of its higher education (HE) cooperation initiatives in the context of the invasion? To investigate this, the paper thematically analyses interviews with representatives from key HE stakeholders in three EHEA members – Germany, France and Italy, as well as key recent international communications related to the EHEA’s response to the war. The thematic analysis revealed two overarching themes leading us to consider that: (1) the EHEA has been regaining its lost significance through shaping and disseminating its response as an institution to the invasion of Ukraine; and (2) HE cooperation in the EHEA in the context of this war has been acquiring a new meaning. These themes lead us to conclude that the war has prompted the EHEA to re-establish its purpose, following the ebbing interest in standardising HE structures. Most importantly, the EHEA has begun to emerge as a platform for political cooperation beyond HE for the promotion of peace in the European region.

## Keywords

European Higher Education Area, Bologna process, higher education, politics, Ukraine, Russian, war, invasion

## Introduction

On the 24th of February 2022, the world witnessed the start of a shocking full-scale war in Ukraine. Russia’s government and military, in cooperation with their partners in Belarus, launched

---

### Corresponding author:

Iryna Kushnir, Nottingham Trent University, Clifton Campus, ABK 330, Nottingham NG11 8NS, UK.

Email: [iryna.kushnir@ntu.ac.uk](mailto:iryna.kushnir@ntu.ac.uk)

a military assault on Ukraine's sovereignty, infrastructure, civilians' freedoms and lives. One immediate consequence of this has been serious disruption to the work of Ukrainian higher education institutions (HEIs), and the number of these damaged and destroyed educational establishments is growing (Damaged Institutions, 2022). Recent media coverage of the events demonstrates that numerous Ukrainian academics and students are among those fleeing the country, seeking safety (BUILA, 2022). Some members of the higher education (HE) community in Ukraine are staying, putting on soldiers' uniforms and fighting for Ukraine (BBC, 2022). Some still manage to continue with their studies in the regions less affected by the war, with the Ukrainian government supporting HEIs and ensuring uninterrupted payment of academics' salaries (Ministry of Education and Science, 2022). Even so, the war has resulted in a major disruption to the work of the Ukrainian HE sector.

The Russia-orchestrated atrocities in Ukraine faced a serious response from many countries worldwide – not only in the form of economic sanctions against Russia, military support to Ukraine and the support for Ukrainian asylum seekers abroad (Georgiev, 2022) but also from an international HE space. The European Higher Education Area (EHEA), which has been a cornerstone of cooperation in HE in the European region (including both EU and non-EU signatories) since its inception in 1998 (Kushnir, 2016), has also responded by suspending the memberships of the Russian Federation and Belarus in the EHEA in April 2022 (EHEA, 2022).

The idea of EHEA member countries taking a political role is not new (e.g. Zgaga, 2009; Kushnir and Brooks, 2022), nor is the idea that the EHEA supports Europeanisation beyond HE in the European region, albeit modestly (Kushnir, 2016). However, the role of the EHEA as an institution and an instrument in the war context is unploughed terrain in the scholarship. This is not surprising, given the unprecedented current situation in modern Europe.

Relying on expert interviews with representatives from key policy-making stakeholders in the area of HE in Germany, France and Italy, and three recent international official communications from the EHEA related to its response to the war, the paper argues that the EHEA has been re-establishing its purpose in the context of the invasion of Ukraine, after the appetite for EHEA's emphasis on the standardisation of HE structures had subsided a while ago. The EHEA has explicitly started emerging as a platform for political cooperation beyond HE and, more importantly, for peace promotion in the European region, which also explains why the memberships of Russia and Belarus in the EHEA have been suspended – rather than cancelled altogether – in response to the war inflicted on Ukraine.

To unpack the complexity of the above argument, the paper proceeds with outlining theoretical ideas around HE being able to serve as an institution and as an instrument. It also contextualises the EHEA's response to the war through a relevant literature review. In doing so, the paper first maps prior studies on to the historical role of education in the politics of the European region, discusses the studies that deal with the politics of the EHEA, and explores what is known about the European region's education sector's response to the war in Ukraine. Following this, the methodological decisions that informed this empirical enquiry are presented before key findings are spelled out and discussed.

## **Higher education as an institution and an instrument**

This paper rests on the premise that HE is political and never neutral (Marshall and Scribner, 1991), justifying the perspective on HE as both: one of societal institutions and an instrument for a particular political agenda. The two-fold nature of this perspective presupposes a two-way relationship between the idea of HE being an institution and an instrument. Viewing HE as a societal institution implies the influence of the wider society on the institutions it contains, such as HE.

These institutions then emerge as vehicles for sustaining or transforming this society through its instrumental power. Hence, a complementary relationship exists between the idea of HE as an institutions and as an instrument.

### *Institution*

When theorising HE as an institution, I rely on a couple of important aspects of the neo-institutional theory. I adopt its premise that institutions are complex structures, the build-up and functioning of which is influenced by wider contextual factors, such as cultures and political discourses (Peters, 2019). This interconnected and dynamic nature of modern institutions and their proneness to influences is the very reason for recognising the embodiments of certain values from this wider context in their work.

Attempts to develop a vision of HE as an institution, and arguably a related definition, date back to a few decades ago, when, for instance, Trow (1972: 61) discussed HE as ‘a system’, the structure of which, the functioning of which and the community that ‘did’ it was a product of a dialogue between national policies and international trends in the expansion of HE. A similar connotation of HE as a ‘system’ is present in more recent literature as well, such as in Cohen and Kisker (2009) who analyse the establishment of the contemporary HE system in the USA. Such analyses of HE are concordant with the modern neo-institutionalist stance, whereby HE could, arguably, be positioned as a one of societal institutions, which embodies and reflects its values and serves a purpose. Moreover, Trow’s (1972) and Cohen’s and Kisker (2009) ‘system’ perspectives also align with more explicit relevant references to ‘higher education as an institution’ (Meyer et al., 2007: 187) and Shaw’s (2019) recent analytical debate on whether HE in the case of Poland is a ‘strategic instrument or social institution’, concluding that it relates to both.

Marshall and Scribner’s (1991) idea of HE politicisation cannot let us forget about world geopolitics in our imagining of HE as an institution. The politics of global HE is shaped by the societal structures it represents, which imposes the idea of borders, albeit porous, on our theorisation on HE. While this idea on its own is a foundation for a separate discussion in another paper, a justification of its premise here could be support by the following example. The evolving architecture of HE in Afghanistan under the Taliban rule which, appallingly, excludes women from this institution highlights a stark difference of the Afghan institution of HE (Akbari and True, 2022) to that of, for instance, the countries of the EHEA which have been implementing a range of policies for inclusion of various marginalised groups in HE (Kushnir, 2020). Despite the striking differences, such as in this case, a degree of porousness of the borders on the (politicised) map of global HE should be acknowledged. Given the evolving globalisation processes and the influence of international individual and organisational networks as well as international organisations such as the United Nations on HE in different countries (Kushnir and Nunes, 2022), a collective image of the values that HE should embody and teach people to practise within and beyond HE is being developed. For example, United Nation’s *Education 2030* agenda advocates ‘inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning for all’ globally which support world sustainable development (UNESCO, 2016: 1).

### *Instrument*

Of course, all institutions survive through the adoption and operationalisation of certain instruments. So does HE, both on the national and international levels. There are numerous examples of HE instruments in the literature, such as, for example, the three cycles of studies, namely Bachelor’s, Master’s and PhD (Kushnir, 2019) or quality assurance instruments (Komotar, 2020). Aside from this, HE itself can serve and be defined as an instrument, or in other terms – a tool, for geopolitical

entities (e.g. countries and regions) to support their various agendas, which is my prime focus in the discussion below.

Since HE is a political field (Marshall and Scribner, 1991), all the instrumentalisation of HE for supporting particular agendas will, arguably, always be political. There is a body of literature which has been developing since the early 1990s which reviews the avenues in which HE or some of its aspects have been utilised by different countries as an instrument of positive societal transformations. Examples include HE serving as an instrument for ‘social integration’ in Tanzania (Mkude, 2011: 366), ‘social mobility and societal integration’ in South Africa (Badat, 2017: 125), ‘social inclusion for displaced students and refugees’ in Belgium, Germany, Norway, Romania, Australia and the USA (Kochhar-Bryant, 2019: 41), ‘economic growth’ in Kenya and Greece (Gouvias, 2012: 65; Nyangau, 2014: 7), ‘socio-economic development’ and ‘national development’ in the so-called ‘third world countries’ (Van Den Bor and Shute, 1991: 11) and an instrument for ‘fair societies’ globally (Goastellec and Välimaa, 2019: 1). Aside from the emphasis on such societal transformations, there are sources appealing predominantly to the idea of politicisation of HE as an instrument, such as in the case of China’s soft power facilitation in Pakistan (Nitzza-Makowska, 2022) as well as in how HE has been instrumentalised by the EHEA institution as discussed below. Aside from such country case studies, there is a case of HE serving as a tool to convey a political message. Prior to the establishment of the EHEA in the late 90s, Serbian universities were suspended from the European Rectors’ Conference in response to Serbian government’s autocratic actions and, in result, the rejection of European values of democracy (Uvalic-Trumbic, 2002).

The perspective on HE as one of societal institutions as well as an instrument for a particular political agenda, detailed above, frames the enquiry uncovered below. Following the review of literature into an instrumental role of HE in the politics of the European region and the gap in this literature about the politics of the EHEA, the paper explains the focus of the empirical enquiry in this paper. This focus is shaped by the theoretical framework presented above by viewing the EHEA itself as a societal institution and treating the HE cooperation it promotes as an instrument, the meaning of which is explored in the empirical section through the two relevant themes that came out from the data analysis.

## **An instrumental role of higher education in the politics of the European region**

The following literature review builds on the idea of HE being an instrument or a tool for influencing certain political agendas. Thus, the literature review aims to map prior research on to the historical *instrumental* role of education in general, and HE in particular, in the politics of the European region. This review also builds on the idea of HE being an institution and, thus, aims to discuss the studies that touch specifically on the politics of the EHEA as *an institution*, and explore the limited prior body of scholarship on the European region’s education sector’s response to the war against Ukraine.

Education, particularly HE, have historically played an important role in European politics. Writing 15 years ago, Grek (2008: 208) stated that education was ‘slowly moving from the margins of European governance to the very centre of its policy making’. More recently, Kushnir (2021) has highlighted a similar trend, emphasising how the European Education Area (a related but distinct initiative from the EHEA, built for all levels of education in the EU countries) has been utilised by EU policy-makers to aid EU deepening in the context of various interlocking crises (e.g. the rise of populism and economic crises). The motivations behind the establishment of the EEA

are multiple, however the preservation of specifically EU identity has been one of them Kushnir, 2021, which Robertson et al. (2022, p. 65) terms as EU's 'renewed state-making ambitions', as they are linked to demarcating EU's borders with the help of education initiatives.

Robertson et al. (2016) suggest that HE in particular has played a key role in crafting the European project through the facilitation of academic mobility, aiding the creation of a European single market and a European citizen. The centre-stage that education has enjoyed in the European region has been, undoubtedly, significant – but not as uniting as the peace-building mission that led to the creation of the EU, and the birth of Europeanisation politics beyond it. The European institutions that were created after 1945, understandably, were designed in part to make another war in the European region politically unthinkable and materially impossible. However, inevitably, those institutions placed a strong emphasis on elite governance rather than popular participation. A Europe based on education seems to have started emerging as a more genuinely people's Europe than the post-war institutions bequeathed to us. Education became a tool for overcoming a lack of unity within the EU amongst the peoples of Europe, and moreover, to develop deep connections between the EU, its member states and importantly, its neighbours. Nevertheless, these peace-promotion ideals gradually became a thing of the past to which new generations could not relate. Polyakova (2016: 70) maintains that 'Mainstream politicians too often rely on the worn-out trope of a Europe 'whole, free, and at peace' – a phrase that spoke to generations that remembered World War II and the Cold War. But younger Europeans are searching for a vision for the future that speaks to their values now, not to ideals that emerged out of past calamities'. As the findings section below will demonstrate, Polyakova's (2016) observation has begun to change with the start of the war in Ukraine, evidenced by the case of the EHEA.

Given that HE cannot be politically neutral (Marshall and Scribner, 1991), as explained in the theoretical framework section above, it would be naïve to accept that the creation of the EHEA institution back in 1998, and its signatories' instrumentalisation of their memberships in it before the full-scale Russian war in Ukraine, had no political motivations. For example, earlier studies about Central-Eastern Europe emphasise that their EHEA memberships were a means to address the countries' socio-economic interests and contribute to their journey to joining the EU by showcasing their willingness to participate in European projects (Huisman & Van Der Wende, 2004; Zgaga, 2009). For the post-Soviet countries, 'it was not the EU accession that encouraged them; it was rather a strong 'getting together' with (West) European higher education and an awareness that keeping outside this movement can't contribute to the progress of a national system' (Zgaga, 2009: 90). EHEA's political relevance is also clear in the rejection of Belarus' application to join the EHEA in 2012 because of its undemocratic practices (Gille-Belova, 2015). Even though Belarus' accession to the EHEA did take place 3 years later in 2015, Bergan (2022) mentions a concern on the part of European HE actors regarding the repressions of the recent pro-democracy movement in Belarus. Aside from this, EHEA's role in supporting Europeanisation beyond HE in the European region has also been explicated in prior research (Kushnir, 2016).

That said, little is known about the response of the EHEA as an institution to human rights violations in the EHEA signatories in the available scholarship. This lacuna is evident in literature concerning the war in Ukraine, as well as prior events such as the repressions against students in Belarus who stood up to their country's dictatorial rules, that gained very little research attention (Terzyan, 2019). In the context of the war in Ukraine, some studies related to the area of education have focussed on Ukraine's challenges to adapt to online education delivery (Lavrysh et al., 2022) and the impact of the war on the mental health of staff and students (Kurapov et al., 2022). Elsewhere, with regard to Ukrainian HE, Al Ajlan's (2022: 1) commentary article puts forward 'key steps that academic communities can take to support and integrate their refugee colleagues' and Morrice's (2022: 251) commentary piece debates whether the war will be 'a pivotal moment

in refugee education in Europe'. This paper's empirical focus on the political role of the EHEA as an institution and the instrumentalisation of its HE cooperation initiatives in the context of Russia's invasion of Ukraine is, therefore, borne from this apparent gap in the available scholarship. It is also important to mention that what is meant by the cooperation initiatives is EHEA's key foci of HE cooperation which have been targeting the harmonisation of HE systems across its signatories and have been evolving since EHEA's creation (e.g. system of study cycles and student-centred education; X3 – anonymised).

## Methodology

This paper addresses the aforementioned gap in the scholarship about the politics of the EHEA, which prompted the following important question: *What is the political role of the EHEA as an institution and the instrumentalisation of its HE cooperation initiatives in the context of Russia's invasion of Ukraine?*

This paper reports on an aspect of a larger project focussed on a Europeanisation agenda and the memberships of the EHEA in the four countries that founded it. The overarching research design of the project was informed by BERA (2018) Research Ethics Guidelines, and following a favourable ethics decision from Committee Y at University Z, relied on in-depth semi-structured elite interviews with an opportunistic/snowball sample of key Bologna stakeholders in the countries of interest as well as their official communications. The data used for this paper consists of the semi-structured interviews conducted in 2022 (Italy n=7, Germany n=8, France n=4). This paper is informed by the interviews from three out of the four founders of the EHEA, given that the interviews in the UK (another EHEA founder) were conducted in 2021, as the first phase of the larger project, mentioned above. The timing of the UK interviews way before the launch of a full-scale attack on Ukraine meant that the response to the war was not a matter of discussion.

Each interview that informs this paper reflects on the EHEA's response to the war and the implications the war has for the EHEA (Supplemental Appendix 1). Additionally, three international-level official communications related to EHEA's response to the war, issued in 2022, were collected from the EHEA website to supplement the analysis (Supplemental Appendix 2). These were key communications testifying the process of shaping this response (i.e. Extraordinary BFUG Board meeting minutes and the outline of the adoption of the Statement with EHEA's reaction to the war) and its final product – the actual 'Statement by members and consultative members of the Bologna Follow-up Group on consequences of the Russian invasion of Ukraine' (EHEA, 2022). Acknowledging the fact that the interview data gives primacy to the views of a handful of EHEA actors, the inclusion of these official communications was done in the effort to consider the important role of other members and consultative members of the EHEA.

A thematic analysis of the interview transcripts was conducted following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase guide for analysis. Familiarisation and coding – the first two phases – focused on grouping similar data segments. This allowed us to identify and take note of patterns associated with the politics of the EHEA institution in the context of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. For example, codes such as 'invasion/war/conflict/crisis', 'forum for exchange' and 'peace' were identified in the interviews. The multiplicity of the codes became the foundation for the next two phases – searching for themes and reviewing them. The remaining two phases focussed on defining and naming the themes. I restructured the themes to establish relationships amongst them and finalise the super-ordinate themes. Three key themes with important sub-elements were identified: (1) the war gave the EHEA a new purpose after the appetite for the Bologna Process had subsided; (2) the EHEA started emerging as a platform for political cooperation and peace promotion; (3) reasons for suspending rather cancelling Russia's and Belarus' memberships in the EHEA in response to their waging war against Ukraine. Illustrative interview quotations for these themes



and sub-themes were finally supplemented and supported by relevant quotations from the three policy documents.

## The EHEA in the context of the invasion

Building on the theoretical underpinning of the paper about HE serving both as one of societal institutions and an instrument for a particular political agenda, the two insightful interlocking themes that came out from data analysis have led us to consider (1) how the EHEA has been regaining its lost significance through shaping and disseminating its response as an institution to the Russian invasion of Ukraine; and (2) how HE cooperation in the EHEA in the context of war has been acquiring a new meaning.

### *The EHEA regaining its lost momentum through shaping its response as an institution to the invasion*

The widespread agiotage around the development of the EHEA that existed in the first decade of its existence has, clearly, subsided over the years, as illustrated by a German key HE actor:

*The relevance for EHEA has been changing over the years. . . And long before war in Ukraine, I often thought that it would be almost impossible to get the European Higher Education Area going nowadays (B4).*

Some scholars, evidently, even anticipated or assumed the end of EHEA's initiatives in 2020 given their explicit references to developments *after* Bologna (Gareis and Broekel, 2022; Mendick and Peters, 2022; Pires Pereira et al., 2021). While 2020 was the deadline for achieving a fully functioning EHEA, further work on fundamental values of the EHEA until 2030 such as inclusion, innovation and interconnectedness were announced that year in Rome Communique, which marked the continuation of the work on the EHEA (EHEA, 2020). A representative from the Education and Science Workers' Union (GEW) in Germany confirms that these three types of fundamental values gained more momentum after a full-scale war against Ukraine was launched:

*. . . the addressing of fundamental values has become more important after the [start of the] war. . . we have these international tensions, and even a war in Europe. And therefore, this has become more important and what we could not foresee a few months ago (B8).*

Not only did the interest in the fundamental values, that the EHEA formalised in 2020, gained more prominence in the context of the war, but also the EHEA as an institution itself has started regaining its lost reputation:

*Right now, with the war in Ukraine, there has been some sort of attention towards the European Higher Education Area (key HE actor in Italy, A4)*

The EHEA institution reminded everyone of its existence with its condemnation of the invasion in the joint *Statement by members and consultative members of the Bologna Follow-up Group on consequences of the Russian invasion of Ukraine* (EHEA, 2022):

*We. . . condemn in the strongest terms the armed attack on Ukraine by the Russian Federation in violation of international law. . . The Russian Federation invasion of Ukraine. . . disregards the values and goals of the EHEA (EHEA, 2022: 1).*

The condemnation featured in a collective Statement issued by the members and consultative members of the Bologna Follow-up Group, although not all of them signed it. The list of signatories in the document (EHEA, 2022) suggests that the countries that abstained included not only the Russian Federation and Belarus, but also Turkey, Serbia, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Kazakhstan, Hungary, Holy Sea, Bulgaria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Azerbaijan and Armenia. We could, of course, speculate on the political motivations, or rather, constraints, of these countries' representatives, given the influence that Russia has managed to ensure in these countries. A representative of the Assembly of Directors of University Institutes of Technology (ADIUT) in France (C3) exemplifies this by mentioning Kazakhstan's position, and a former vice-chair of the Bologna Follow-up Group in Italy (A6) generalises the same argument to a lot of other geographical neighbours of Russia:

*Kazakhstan has reacted in a very embarrassing way to the aggression. Because, of course, it knows that it could be invaded by Russia. . . I mean it was recently, when Russia had this operation against them (C3).*

*. . . a couple of countries, amongst which is the UK, immediately jumped on the ball and said 'you must throw them out' [expel Russia and Belarus from the EHEA]. . . Other countries, I knew, would not do that. How could they? Because they, too, were like Ukraine – on the border [with Russia] (A6).*

The politics behind the (lack of) formal and explicit reaction from the countries listed above would form an interesting point of enquiry in subsequent research, building on a brief analysis in this paper. A representative of French ADIUT rightly added an explanation for the lack of explicit reactions from some of these countries' representatives in the EHEA, including those from Russia and Belarus:

*. . . with the rector of Russian universities supporting the war, probably because they're not informed. Probably because they are under duress. Or coerced: if you say this you will stay in your job, if you don't, then you lose your job. . . I mean you can't be a hero everywhere when you have to pay for your house or your car, I suppose (C3).*

The specifics of the relationships between Russia and the EHEA signatories that abstained from explicitly and formally reacting to the invasion are beyond the prime focus here. What is worth emphasising, though, is the mere fact of this abstinence is a political decision on its own and illustrates a political nature of HE, argued by Marshall and Scribner (1991). One key HE actor in Italy recognises precisely this in their analysis of the reaction from Italy, which, in the end, did sign the Statement:

*. . . there is a very high interest [in the Italian ministry] to keep these issues [response to the war] technical and not political, which is actually a political question (A4).*

Others tried to argue the opposite, such as in the example from another key HE actor in Italy:

*They [the Italian ministry] wanted the European Higher Education and the Bologna Process to not be involved with respect to political matters (A2).*

Political permeability of HE in general (Marshall and Scribner, 1991) and the political motivations of creating and sustaining the EHEA to help the construction of Europe (X1 – anonymised) make claims about a possibility of an institution dealing with HE, such as the EHEA, to be an apolitical



domain seem like an act of self-deception. The reaction of the EHEA signatories that signed the Statement also explicated the suspending of the memberships of the Russian Federation and Belarus in the EHEA:

*We therefore. . . ask the Bologna Follow Up Group (BFUG) to suspend the Russian Federation's rights of participation in all structures and activities of the EHEA, including the BFUG, working groups, task forces, peer learning groups and similar structures. We ask the BFUG to extend the same measures to Belarus. . .suspend contact and cooperation with any central government agency of the Russian Federation or any other EHEA country that actively supports the Russian Federation invasion of Ukraine and to ensure that they only engage in cooperation with organizations and institutions from the Russian Federation where these are clearly based on shared European values' (EHEA, 2022: 2).*

The decision about action on the condemnation was a true core of the countries' decisions regarding a formal reaction to the invasion through the EHEA. Actions go a longer way than words and entail causing some self-harm through breaking established cooperations that work and have a benefit return. But then why suspending and not expelling those who 'disregards the values and goals of the EHEA' (EHEA, 2022: 1), given that the decision to act was taken? GEW representative in Germany details that suspension was a compromise between those for expulsion and those who felt they had to abstain:

*I think it was a compromise somehow. And why a compromise? Compromise because some countries wished to exclude both countries immediately, and other countries were somehow reluctant to do anything. . . There was no country which was against. But some countries somehow abstained. . . from the decision. There was no formal decision, and no votes were counted. But a lot of countries declared their opinion. And the majority said they are in favour of the suspension. There was no other proposer, in the end, on the floor. And some said that they have no clear opinion or that they are abstaining. I think maybe because of the same arguments I mentioned that there are still connections, and that they must keep them. And others maybe rather would have stressed that the EHEA is a neutral area concerning higher education and not an area for foreign politics, so this is not the right place (B8).*

Again, the inherent contradiction in the view on HE not being related to foreign politics was well explicated by a former vice-chair of the Bologna Follow-up Group in Italy, who revealed that the support for Ukraine from all EHEA members was unquestionable regardless of their (explicit) stance on what should be done about Russia's and Belarus's memberships:

*. . .the support for Ukraine, which is true – everyone is unanimous about this, and Italy certainly very strongly (A6).*

The indisputability of the reaction to the war and the fact that it eventually did take a formal form shows exactly the opposite – the EHEA is an area for foreign politics, as detailed in the next subsection. However, it is worth mentioning here that the doubt about taking action on Russia's and Belarus' EHEA memberships, and later the decision to suspend then rather than expel was also justified precisely by taking a foreign politics perspective:

*. . .if you ban them [Russia from the EHEA], you lose another. . . platform for exchange (Rectors' Conference representative in Germany, B4).*

*. . . [through the suspension] we keep an open door, more or less, for Russia if they behave for the future (key higher education actor in Germany, B7).*

## *A (re)established instrumentalisation of higher education cooperation in the EHEA in the context of war*

Almost all interviewees are unanimous in emphasising a paramount instrumental role of cooperation that the EHEA platform facilitates in the context of war. Stunningly, the focus on HE in this cooperation process discussed is not prominent at all. What is presented as crucial is that the EHEA facilitates wider political cooperation, and more importantly, peace-promotion in the region. A representative of the Conference of Italian University Rectors (CRUI) highlights the political role of such cooperation in the EHEA, that does happen to be predominantly related to HE:

*We believe that having contacts with other geographical systems, education systems. . . is very important to connect, to have exchanges, to exchange good practices and so on. And this is from a political point of view (A7).*

Collective work on implementing the Bologna Process emerges as a platform for this wider cooperation:

*And now, of course, the war on Ukraine. . . We would rather see the importance of the Bologna Process in this area now as a forum for exchange (Rectors' Conference representative in Germany, B4).*

The benefits of a sense of community that the EHEA has been aspiring to create is, clearly, what came to the forefront after the attack on Ukraine. This is evident in, for instance, French AUDIT representative's (C3) analysis that the invasion shows 'in retrospect that we were right to start working on European community' or German Erasmus+ National Agency DAAD representative's (B6) plea that 'a European identity, in a larger way than the European Union [such as in the EHEA] is something which is needed in Europe, in order to assure that we all will live peacefully together'. This proves that X1's (anonymised) work on the role of the Bologna Process in defining Europe remains timely, becoming more important than ever. A few years ago, the author analysed how the inclusion of countries like Russia into the EHEA was changing European geopolitics through expanding European borders and promoting the idea of a common European identity within those wider borders. However, such transformations led to 'aggravating tensions in the development of a territory–identity integrity in Europe constructed by the Bologna Process – when the identity of peoples residing in a certain territory is not aligned with the geopolitics of the territory. The difficulty, if not impossibility, of achieving instantly such a compatibility between the borders of the EHEA and identity of peoples within them makes Europe dynamic and constantly under construction in the Bologna Process' (X1 – anonymised: 665).

Apparently, the need for such a wide range of countries for the European community was indeed induced by the need to overcome a lack of unity within the EU and to develop deep connections between the EU member states and its neighbours (Robertson et al., 2016). However, the original ideals of post-WWII peace building which had created the EU itself and inspired its cooperation with its neighbours were long forgotten by the new generations who could not grasp the meaning of a war (Polyakova, 2016). Russia's aggression in geographical Europe has revived the peace-building sentiment in Europe, in which the EHEA is seen to play a crucial role, being at the heart of educating current and next generations of citizens of this world. A testimony to this is a powerful reference made by a representative from the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research a couple of weeks before Russia started bombing Ukraine on the 24th of February 2022. Everyone was already aware of the amassing of Russian troops and military equipment around the Ukrainian border.

*. . . it [the BP] is more than just education. It's also a peace policy, if you want (B1).*

This representative from the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research goes on to explain this further:

*. . . [the BP is] about unity and having a European common mindset, feeling at home in Europe. This is what many Germans do, when they think about our neighbour countries. They would not really have the feeling they are abroad when they go to the Netherlands, or Austria, or even Spain. But of course, they would still not feel at home when they go to Russia. That's the reality. I think it is clear this will not change dramatically in the next ten years. But of course, at least we want to reach that we don't have war against each other. That we talk to each other; that we understand each other. And we think that the EHEA can facilitate that process. And at least, I personally, I think there should be a development where we, in a way, not really integrate these countries [not traditionally thought of as European]. But at least have trade with them, have exchanges of opinions, of science. And let people meet with each other; so that they can't imagine anymore to have war with each other (B1).*

Sadly, the hope for not having another war in Europe after WWII did not materialise. This may lead one to questioning the value of EHEA's unifying idea. However, as a key HE actor in Germany explains:

*. . . if you put a dictator who's crazy [referring to Russia's president] into a position where he has power, it doesn't matter what happens, like, whether you have a dialogue. . . So, I don't think it's a failure of the European Higher Education Area or the dialogue. It's just something that happens if the wrong people have power (B3).*

It is worth mentioning that X1 – anonymised (672) recognised well before the start of the full-scale invasion (but after the invasion of the Crimea and the launch of the war in the east of Ukraine in 2014) that 'Russia's membership in the EHEA is an interesting case. Its authoritarian government and antiwestern ideology (Kuzio, 2012) seems to be at odds with the European values associated with the respect for diversity. . . Solutions to this discrepancy between one growing space [the EHEA] and the non-unified identity of its peoples have been sought but, to date, not found'. Clearly, ideology discrepancies were there a long time ago, it is just that no one expected Russia to plan to invade another country in the way it started doing it in 2022. This revealed that:

*. . . the original idea to have an umbrella for the entire continent concerning higher education politics somehow has changed now (GEW representative in Germany, B8).*

It changed, though, the way that the two aggressor countries are not part of EHEA's current initiatives, and yet, the EHEA has re-established its unifying mission with the consideration of peace-promotion in the following major ways: using the fact that the two aggressor countries are not expelled from the EHEA as a precedent to help students from those countries who oppose the actions of their governments; facilitating east-west political relationships and promoting democratic values in the active EHEA signatories. The need to help Russian and Belarussian students who oppose these atrocities is illustrated by the appeal of a representative from the Free association of students' unions (FZS) in Germany to the change of the status of the two countries in the EHEA as a conducive platform for providing such help:

*It's like just stopping the membership, like putting it on ice, but you're still in here. . . some students have already been expelled in Russia. . . there's a question: how can we help those students? (B5).*

Bridging east and west in the European region is another strategic aspect of EHEA's work, as exemplified by a representative from the Federal Ministry of Education and Research in Germany:

*. . . it is still the dialogue with Eastern Europe, especially the Russia-influenced countries that were part of the Soviet Union before. . . So, this is still one strategic point. The other is, of course, to have a link with Western countries, that are not parties in the EU, but that are traditionally strong partners of Germany, like Turkey, Norway, UK, Switzerland. They are not at the table when we talk about higher education in the EU. But that are at the table when we talk about it in the Bologna process. So, this is also a chance (B1).*

This also resonates with the reasons to allow Belarus to join the EHEA in 2015 despite Belarus' undemocratic practices, as explicated in Bergan (2022). Finally, political soft power that countries can exert on one another through HE cooperation in the EHEA for the promotion of democracy is another valuable aspect, exemplified by a key HE actor in Germany:

*And I do believe, as I said, that for Germany, the EHEA is also a way to promote, or use soft power to promote, certain standards and to also have a way of cooperation in the educational and scientific sector with countries, which usually would not. . . the European Higher Education Area is a place where you can come together and have dialogues and try to promote different values and standards (B3).*

One may wonder why on earth is the EHEA attributed so much importance in promoting the politics of stability in the European region, while there are other, seemingly, more related policy spheres of influence, such as, arguably, defence, immigration, etc. Yet, the centrality of education in nation-building and a constructing impact of education processes specifically on the European project, that has been increasingly transcending EU borders, has been recognised in scholarship (e.g. Robertson et al., 2016; X5 – anonymised). Nevertheless, the interest in the EHEA subsided a while ago, as explained earlier in the paper. The shock of a full-scale attack on Ukraine has given the EHEA a new life, a new purpose – unity in Europe and the promotion of liberal values such as the need for peace:

*. . . the attack on Ukraine shows. . . that if we don't act as a continent, we just are going to lose millions of our citizens. . . Some people, as I said, the extreme right or the extreme left will criticise Europe and say that we would be better without. But I mean those attract a very small amount of the vote, perhaps not more than 10% or 12% of the vote. But I'd say that every one is absolutely convinced that education, and a European education is our way forward. I'm sure there's no question about that (representative from AUDIT in France, C3).*

## Conclusion

Education is our way forward indeed. The interest here lied particularly in HE cooperation in the framework of the EHEA. Viewing HE through the lens which recognises their complementary roles of being both an institution and an instrument has added value to our understanding of the political role of the EHEA in the recent unprecedented climate. This perspective allowed us to see that, indeed, the EHEA has emerged as an important institution, so ingrained in international politics, with the capacity to instrumentalise its key tools – HE cooperation initiatives. The EHEA has been instrumentalising them more than ever in the context of Russia's attack on Ukraine, for community building, reaction to injustice, knowledge cultivation in our post-truth world and an instrument for peace.

Clearly, Russia's attack on Ukraine brought to the forefront the crisis of democracy promotion in the wider Europe, which, according to X1 (anonymised), has been expanded by the borders of

the EHEA. This crisis had a constructive influence on EHEA's almost forgotten mission which appeared to support the harmonisation of HE structures in Europe for easier mobility, ultimately, the development of a European identity (Zgaga, 2009). While international formalities in the form of various meetings did continue taking place, the EHEA with its BP had long turned into old news for the HE community across the EHEA, and the European Education Area targeting specifically only the EU countries had started gaining more prominence instead (X5 – anonymised). The EHEA institution had, arguably, been stagnating for a while prior to the war, being fuelled, in part, by a lack of common purpose for why a united Europe was needed all together (Polyakova, 2016).

Invaluable data collected at the time as the EHEA was shaping its response to the invasion did not only highlight how the EHEA has been regaining its lost significance through responding to the atrocities and how HE cooperation in the EHEA in the context of war has regained a new meaning. The data analysed here also illustrated by the case of the EHEA how Europe has stepped on a path of finding a common purpose – that of calling out injustice, supporting Ukraine and its wounded HE community and preventing the war from spreading and re-emerging in the future after the current attacks stop.

The great impact of the invasion on the HE landscape in Europe necessitates the continuation in further research of the line of enquiry started in this paper. While the findings in this paper were generated considering international communications of the EHEA that represent a multitude of EHEA stakeholders voices, the reliance was predominantly on the voices of a limited range of EHEA stakeholders who were interviewed, representing three EHEA countries. Such future research could build on the findings in this paper by exploring the role of HE stakeholders in other EHEA countries and consultative members, as well as exploring wider resulting issues in the shifting geopolitics of the European HE space.

## **Acknowledgements**

Special thanks go to Y (anonymised) for her valuable initial suggestions regarding the development of the theoretical framework for this paper.

## **Data availability statement**

The dataset with interview transcripts, generated and analysed during the current study, is available in the Research Data Archive of Nottingham Trent University, at <https://doi.org/10.17631/RD-2022-0001-DDOC>

## **Declaration of conflicting interests**

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

## **Funding**

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: The research reported in the article was made possible (in part) by a grant from the Spencer Foundation (#202200185) awarded to Dr. Iryna Kushnir. The views expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the funder.

## **Ethical approval**

The overarching research design of this project was informed by BERA (2018) Research Ethics Guidelines, and data collection followed a favourable ethics decision (Ref: KUSHNIR 2021/414) from the Schools of Business, Law and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (BLSS REC) at Nottingham Trent University.

## Informed consent

Written informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to the interviews.

## ORCID iD

Iryna Kushnir  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0727-7208>

## Supplemental material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

## References

- Akbari F and True J (2022) One year on from the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan: Re-instituting gender apartheid. *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 76(6): 624–633.
- Al Ajlan A (2022) How academia should support scholars fleeing war and persecution. *Nature Human Behaviour* 6: 1188–1190.
- Badat S (2017) The idea of higher education as an instrument for social mobility and societal transformation. In: Soudien C (eds) *Nelson Mandela. Comparative and International Education*. Rotterdam: SensePublishers, pp. 125–136.
- BBC (2022) War in Ukraine: Uni to uniform – Ukraine’s new teenage army recruits. Available at: [https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-60724560?at\\_medium=RSS&at\\_campaign=KARANGA](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-60724560?at_medium=RSS&at_campaign=KARANGA) (accessed 22 January 2023).
- BERA (2018) Research ethics guidelines. Available at: <https://www.bera.ac.uk/publication/ethical-guidelines-for-educational-research-2018> (accessed 19 January 2023).
- Bergan S (2022) Education for democracy: Balancing intellectual rigor and political action. In: Klemenčič M (ed.) *From Actors to Reforms in European Higher Education: A Festschrift for Pavel Zgaga*. Cham: Springer International Publishing, pp. 239–251.
- Braun V and Clarke V (2006) Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3(2): 77–101.
- BUILA (2022) Education community supports fleeing Ukrainian students. Available at: <https://www.buila.ac.uk/news/2022/education-community-supports-fleeing-ukrainian-students> (accessed 19 January 2023).
- Cohen AM and Kisker CB (2009) *The shaping of American higher education: Emergence and growth of the contemporary system*. San Francisco: John Wiley & Sons.
- Damaged Institutions (2022) Children of war in Ukraine. Available at: <https://saveschools.in.ua/en/> (accessed 18 August 2022).
- EHEA (2020) Rome communique. Available at: [http://www.ehea.info/Upload/Rome\\_Ministerial\\_Communique.pdf](http://www.ehea.info/Upload/Rome_Ministerial_Communique.pdf) (accessed 25 January 2023).
- EHEA (2022) Full members. Available at: [http://ehea.info/page-full\\_members](http://ehea.info/page-full_members) (accessed 25 January 2023).
- Gareis P and Broekel T (2022) The spatial patterns of student mobility before, during and after the Bologna process in Germany. *Tijdschrift voor economische en sociale geografie* 113(3): 290–309.
- Georgiev V (2022) International law and support for Ukraine – between “responsibility to protect” obligation and collective self-defense right. *Politics & Security* 6(1): 14–23.
- Gille-Belova O (2015) Beyond the limits of the European Higher Education Area: The case of Belarus. *European Journal of Higher Education* 5(1): 83–95.
- Goastellec G and Välimaa J (2019) Access to higher education: An instrument for fair societies? *Social Inclusion* 7(1): 1–6.
- Gouvias D (2012) Accountability in the Greek higher education system as a high-stakes policymaking instrument. *Higher Education Policy* 25: 65–86.
- Grek S (2008) From symbols to numbers: The shifting technologies of education governance in Europe. *European Educational Research Journal* 7(2): 208–218.
- Huisman J and Van Der Wende M (2004) The EU and Bologna: Are supra- and international initiatives threatening domestic agendas? *European Journal of Education* 39(3): 349–357.



- Kochhar-Bryant C (2019) Higher education as an instrument of social inclusion for displaced students and refugees. In: Arar K, Haj-Yehia K, Ross D, et al. (eds) *Higher Education Challenges for Migrant and Refugee Students in a Global World, in the Series, Equity in Higher Education Theory, Policy, and Praxis*. New York: Peterlang, pp. 38–46.
- Komotar MH (2020) Discourses on quality and quality assurance in higher education from the perspective of global university rankings. *Quality Assurance in Education* 28(1): 78–88.
- Kurapov A, Pavlenko V, Drozdov A, et al. (2022) Toward an understanding of the Russian-Ukrainian war impact on university students and personnel. *Journal of Loss and Trauma* 28(2): 167–174.
- Kushnir I (2016) The Role of the Bologna Process in Defining Europe. *European Educational Research Journal* 15(6): 208–218.
- Kushnir I (2019) Policy Learning in the Development of Bologna Study Cycles in Ukraine. *Higher Education Policy* 34: 277–296.
- Kushnir I (2020) The Voice of Inclusion in the Midst of Neoliberalist Noise in the Bologna Process. *European Educational Research Journal* 19(6): 485–505.
- Kushnir I (2021) The role of the European Education Area in EU integration in times of crises. *European Review* 30(3): 301–321.
- Kushnir I and Brooks R (2022) UK membership(s) in the European Higher Education Area post-2020: A ‘Europeanisation’ agenda. *European Educational Research Journal* 22(5): 718–740.
- Kushnir I and Nunes A (2022) Education and the UN Development Goals Projects (MDGs and SDGs): Definitions, links, operationalisations. *Journal of Research in International Education* 21(1): 3–21.
- Kuzio T (2012) Twenty years as an independent state: Ukraine’s ten logical inconsistencies. *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 45(3–4): 429–438.
- Lavrysh Y, Lytovchenko I, Lukianenko V, et al. (2022) Teaching during the wartime: Experience from Ukraine. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*. Epub ahead of print 11 July 2022. DOI:10.1080/00131857.2022.2098714.
- Marshall C and Scribner JD (1991) “It’s all political” inquiry into the micropolitics of education. *Education and Urban Society* 23(4): 347–355.
- Mendick H and Peters AK (2022) How post-Bologna policies construct the purposes of higher education and students’ transitions into Masters programmes. *European Educational Research Journal* 22(2): 236–253.
- Meyer JW, Ramirez FO, Frank DJ, et al. (2007) Higher education as an institution. In: Gumport PJ (ed.) *Sociology of Higher Education: Contributions and Their Contexts*. Johns Hopkins University Press, pp. 187–221. Available at: <https://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/document?repid=rep1&type=pdf&doi=47d65fd9c671fa7b31087e1c1496c7b4a4b39571> (accessed 11 February 2023).
- Ministry of Education and Science (2022) Government order about the financing of HEIs during the war [12 March 2022]. Available at: <https://mon.gov.ua/ua/news/uryad-uporyadkuv-finansuvannya-zakladiv-vishoyi-osviti-v-umovah-voyennogo-stanu> (accessed 22 December 2022).
- Mkude D (2011) Higher education as an instrument of social integration in Tanzania: Challenges and prospects. *Research in Comparative and International Education* 6(4): 366–373.
- Morrice L (2022) Will the war in Ukraine be a pivotal moment for refugee education in Europe?. *International Journal of Lifelong Education* 41(3): 251–256.
- Nitza-Makowska A (2022) Can the China-Pakistan economic corridor help Beijing win Pakistanis’ hearts and minds? Reviewing higher education as an instrument of Chinese soft power in Pakistan. *International Journal of Cultural Policy* 28(3): 274–289.
- Nyangau JZ (2014) Higher education as an instrument of economic growth in Kenya. *FIRE: Forum for International Research in Education* 1(1): 7–25.
- Peters B (2019) *Institutional Theory in Political Science: The New Institutionalism*. Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Pires Pereira ÍS, Fernandes EL, Braga AC, et al. (2021) Initial teacher education after the Bologna process. Possibilities and challenges for a renewed scholarship of teaching and learning. *European Journal of Teacher Education* 46(1): 6–34.
- Polyakova A (2016) The great European unravelling? *World Policy Journal* 33(4): 68–72.

- Robertson SL, de Azevedo MLN and Dale R (2016) Higher education, the EU and the cultural political economy of regionalism. In Robertson SL, Olds k, Dale R, et al. (eds.) *Global Regionalisms and Higher Education*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, pp. 24–48.
- Robertson SL, Olds K and Dale R (2022) From the EHEA to the EEA: Renewed state-making ambitions in the regional governance of education in Europe. In Klemenčič M (ed.) *From Actors to Reforms in European Higher Education: A Festschrift for Pavel Zgaga*. Cham: Springer International Publishing, pp. 65–76.
- Shaw MA (2019) Strategic instrument or social institution: Rationalized myths of the university in stakeholder perceptions of higher education reform in Poland. *International Journal of Educational Development* 69: 9–21.
- Terzyan A (2019) State-building in Belarus: The politics of repression under Lukashenko's rule. Post-soviet politics research papers. Available at: [http://eurasiainstitutes.org/files/file/psprp\\_n\\_2\\_belarus\\_2019.pdf](http://eurasiainstitutes.org/files/file/psprp_n_2_belarus_2019.pdf) (accessed 29 December 2022).
- Trow M (1972) The expansion and transformation of higher education. *International Review of Education* 18: 61–84.
- UNESCO (2016) Education 2030. Available at: [https://uis.unesco.org/sites/default/files/documents/education-2030-incheon-framework-for-action-implementation-of-sdg4-2016-en\\_2.pdf](https://uis.unesco.org/sites/default/files/documents/education-2030-incheon-framework-for-action-implementation-of-sdg4-2016-en_2.pdf) (accessed 26 January 2023).
- Uvalic-Trumbic S (2002) Universities and politics: Reshaping relations in South Eastern Europe? *Universities and Politics* 1000–1018. Available at: <http://digital.casalini.it/10.1400/44079>
- Van Den Bor W and Shute JC (1991) Higher education in the third world: Status symbol or instrument for development? *Higher Education* 22(1): 1–15.
- Zgaga P (2009). The Bologna process and its role for transition countries. *Revista de La Educacion Superior* 38: 83–96.

### Author biography

Dr Iryna Kushnir is an Associate Professor at the Nottingham Institute of Education at Nottingham Trent University. Her interdisciplinary research combines the following main areas: higher education policy and sociology and European integration and social justice. She is particularly interested in the higher education policy and politics of the European Higher Education Area. A wider societal impact of Dr Kushnir's work is in co-establishing and co-developing the Ukrainian Education Research Association which has become the biggest national research association in Ukraine and a hub for education research and quality.