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Liudmyla HOLUBNYCHA 
Yaroslav Mudryi National Law University, Ukraine
golubnichaya11@gmail.com

Tetyana KOSHECHKINA 
Yaroslav Mudryi National Law University, Ukraine
koshechkina.t@gmail.com

Hanna YERMAKOVA 
Interregional Academy of Personnel Management, Ukraine
asmetod@ukr.net

UKRAINIAN UNIVERSITIES AS POLITICAL RESISTANCE AND STATE-BUILDING DRIVERS DURING WARTIME

ABSTRACT: *This article investigates the role of Ukrainian universities as a driver of political resistance and state-building during wartime, with a focus on the case of Yaroslav Mudryi National Law University. Drawing on theoretical perspectives of political resistance and state-building, the study positions universities as pivotal actors in sustaining national sovereignty, institutional legitimacy, and civic resilience amid armed aggression. The concepts of “political resistance” and “state-building” are adapted to reflect the wartime context, emphasizing not only governance structures but also the defence of cultural, intellectual, and educational autonomy. Six key functions of Ukrainian universities are identified: as a symbol of sovereignty, a mechanism for state legitimization, a site of informational resistance, a platform for international visibility, a domain of adaptive governance, and a source of psychological resilience. Using qualitative data, policy documents, visual evidence, and institutional records, the research highlights how universities operate as agents of civil stability and ideological defence. The case of Yaroslav Mudryi National Law University, offering teaching and learning in bomb shelters and maintaining academic continuity under fire, demonstrates how education serves both strategic and symbolic functions in national survival. This investigation contributes to broader discussions on the role of education in fragile states and suggests that in times of crisis, universities can actively reinforce statehood, identity, and democratic values.*

KEYWORDS: *political resistance; state-building; Ukraine; universities; war.*

1. Introduction

In the modern unstable world, education plays a vital role both in social development and in the defence of democratic values. When new forms of fascism arise education must become a crucial instrument of democratic resistance (Giroux, 2024). The war in Ukraine that is an invasion unleashed by the Russian Federation represents not only a military aggression but also a calculated political strategy aimed at dismantling Ukraine’s statehood, civic identity, and intellectual autonomy. In this context, Ukrainian universities become a frontline of resistance, sovereignty preservation, and cultural continuity.

The Russian aggression against Ukraine strategically extends beyond the battlefield, aiming

to dismantle Ukraine's symbolic and institutional sovereignty. Educational institutions have emerged as key political spaces in this struggle. Universities, traditionally dedicated to teaching and learning, are now integral to civil defence, psychological resilience, and national sovereignty. The deliberate destruction of schools and universities, especially in eastern regions such as Kharkiv (Figure 1), reveals the depth of the assault on Ukraine's future and on the institutions that cultivate its leadership, values, and critical thought.

Figure 1: H. S. Skovoroda Kharkiv National Pedagogical University after Russian attack



Source: authors' own photo (07.2022)

In this light, education institutions in Ukraine are no longer a secondary concern during war-time. It is central to political resistance and democratic continuity. Ukrainian universities such as Yaroslav Mudryi National Law University have not only persisted but transformed themselves, adapting to threats, safeguarding students and staff, and ensuring the uninterrupted transmission of knowledge. This study argues that such adaptations are not simply reactive but deeply political, asserting Ukraine's national agency through intellectual and institutional resilience.

Russia's protracted and brutal war against Ukraine has created a cascade of socio-legal, infrastructural, and political emergencies. The educational sector faced a particularly complex challenge. The targeting of educational institutions is seen as a method of destabilising Ukrainian civil society, weakening governance, and eroding the country's cultural and intellectual foundations. In regions like Kharkiv, once known as the student capital of Ukraine, missile strikes have devastated campuses, compelling educational institutions to pioneer inventive and adaptive strategies to preserve educational continuity (Kostikova et al., 2023).

The sacrosanct nature of the right to education, enshrined in Ukraine's Constitution, is being tested by the imposition of martial law and ongoing attacks on civilian infrastructure. Yet, the higher education sector has demonstrated tenacity and flexibility. The safeguarding of education under fire is both a humanitarian imperative and an act of political meaning, namely asserting Ukraine's role in defining its future. Educational sovereignty, in this context, becomes a cornerstone of national self-determination.

Higher education institutions located within active conflict zones have endured immense disruption. Many of them have relocated, shifted to online formats, or adopted blended learning approaches. These responses are not merely logistical solutions but they reflect deliberate political acts. By continuing operations and maintaining access to education, universities such as Yaroslav Mudryi National Law University counteract the erasure of national identity and affirm the state's legitimacy through educational continuity.

The psychological pressure on educators, students, and families is severe, marked by chronic insecurity and disruption. Yet, amid this adversity, the continuation of academic routines has become a stabilizing force, bolstering social cohesion and reinforcing civic identity. To maintain this continuity, Ukrainian universities have reimagined learning environments: subterranean shelters have been transformed into lecture halls, while digital classrooms have expanded access across war-affected regions. Such innovations reflect a broader commitment to preserving institutional stability and cultural resilience under threat.

The Ukrainian case illustrates how the delivery of education has evolved into a form of civil resistance. Traditional classroom models have been restructured to prioritize safety, mental health, and flexibility. In areas where in-person instruction is impossible due to constant missile attacks, distance teaching and learning have become not only a necessity but also a tool of democratic endurance. The integration of bomb shelters as permanent educational spaces highlights the intersection of pedagogy, security, and political resilience.

This research focuses specifically on Yaroslav Mudryi National Law University, situated in Kharkiv that is heavily impacted by war. The university exemplifies the broader national effort to preserve education as a pillar of statehood. Its ability to convert underground spaces into fully operational classrooms, implement flexible teaching models, and maintain academic standards under fire offers a compelling illustration of how universities function as acts of state-building and soft power.

This investigation is thus guided by the following research question: how can the university operate as a platform for political resistance, state-building under conditions of active warfare? To answer the question, the study undertakes a detailed analysis of the case of Yaroslav Mudryi National

Law University, with specific attention to its wartime adaptations, pedagogical strategies, and symbolic significance.

This work aims to provide a nuanced understanding of universities not merely as an institutional sector, but as a dynamic actor within national resistance. The resilience of universities during war is both practical and ideological: preserving civic identity, safeguarding the rule of law, and maintaining democratic routines. Ultimately, by examining how education is mobilized during existential crises, this study contributes to the broader discourse on education, political resistance, and state-building in conflict zones.

2. Literature review

As can be seen, in the context of war, education becomes more than just a pedagogical endeavour, it emerges as a mechanism of civic resilience, political resistance, and institutional state-building. Recent scholarship has addressed various dimensions of Ukrainian society's response to the full-scale Russian invasion, ranging from social cohesion and identity formation to resilience and European integration. However, the specific role of higher education institutions in fostering political continuity and resisting foreign aggression remains under-examined.

Within the mentioned framework, Kruglashov (2025) provides a comprehensive overview of Ukraine's transformation from a post-Soviet republic to a resilient political nation actively resisting Russian aggression. His study underscores the importance of civil society and institutional adaptability in navigating the armed aggression, highlighting how state functions (including education) have been reshaped under war conditions to sustain governance and national cohesion.

In this context, Deineko (2023) further emphasizes the wartime consolidation of Ukrainian society, reporting substantial growth in institutional trust, civic identity, and citizen engagement to resistance. These specific trends form the socio-emotional foundation upon which educational institutions, particularly universities, are operating under duress. The findings point to an intensified role of national identity as a unifying force, one that universities can both reflect and amplify.

Considering societal resistance and resilience, the theoretical framing of societal resilience is expanded in the work of Reznikova and Korniiievskyi (2024), who conceptualize resilience as a multifaceted interaction between human, cultural, and organizational components. Their systems-based approach highlights the integrative function of higher education institutions in mobilizing intellectual, emotional, and infrastructural resources to maintain civic resistance and continuity amidst disruption.

Shifting the focus from systemic analysis to socio-cultural foundations, Kudlenko (2023)

explores the agency of Ukrainian citizens through decentralized societal structures, shared values, and future-oriented identity. This framework allows for a broader understanding of universities as both transmitters of civic values and incubators of national resolve. Notably, Kudlenko's use of interview data from displaced persons and residents of frontline regions presents a grassroots perspective, which is particularly relevant when analysing the micro-politics of education in war-torn areas.

At the intersection of domestic and international politics, Grosse (2023) interrogates the implications of the Russian invasion for European integration and collective security. His work reveals that the war has catalysed a re-evaluation of EU defence mechanisms and state-building efforts, suggesting that Ukraine's educational and political institutions function as symbolic and strategic sites of alignment with Euro-Atlantic values.

Although most of the aforementioned studies situate higher education institutions within broader societal processes, direct investigations into the political role of education under wartime conditions remain limited. One exception is the pre-invasion research by Nikolaiets and Syniavska (2022), which investigates the influence of educational institutions on civic identity formation. Their findings demonstrate that patriotic education and civic consciousness, cultivated through formal education, are critical to safeguarding national security. These conclusions take on new urgency in light of the current conflict, where education represents both a medium and an outcome of national defence.

Complementing this, Torlone and Ishchenko (2024) explore students' autonomous learning strategies during the war, revealing the significance of peer networks and informal resilience. While their study focuses on individual learning processes, it indirectly affirms the importance of institutional frameworks in enabling self-directed education and psychological endurance during crises.

In addition to these conceptual and sociological analyses, recent empirical research offers important insights into how Ukrainian universities function under direct wartime pressure. Bugrov et al. (2023) examine Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv as an institution operating literally on the frontline, documenting administrative, psychological, and infrastructural adaptations that ensure educational continuity. Similarly, Greshta et al. (2023) identify the core challenges faced by universities during the war: ranging from staff displacement to infrastructural destruction. Moreover, the authors propose institutional solutions relevant for the national higher education sector.

Further, the work of Orzhel et al. (2023) sheds light on the experiences of displaced Ukrainian universities, proposing development models that support institutional continuity after relocation. Studies such as Ugryn et al. (2023) and Tsybuliak et al. (2023) provide broader overviews of the wartime functioning of Ukrainian higher education, documenting practices of adaptation, trauma mitigation, temporary relocation, and crisis management. Zayachuk (2025) focuses on war-related

challenges to quality assurance, while Zamkowska (2024) conceptualizes education as an instrument of war in the Russia – Ukraine conflict, underlining the political nature of educational institutions in times of aggression. Together, these works form a growing body of literature demonstrating that Ukrainian universities serve not only educational but also political, civic, and strategic functions during wartime.

Collectively, the analysed contributions provide valuable insights into the social, cultural, and political dynamics shaping Ukraine’s wartime resilience. However, none explicitly examine universities as agents of political resistance and state-building in a time of armed conflict. Moreover, despite the growing literature on institutional disruption and adaptation, there remains a lack of in-depth case studies illustrating how a single university embodies the intersection of educational continuity, political symbolism, and state legitimacy under fire. This lacuna is particularly significant given the central role universities play in preserving institutional normalcy, legal continuity, and civic identity under martial law. The present study addresses this critical gap by investigating how Ukrainian higher education institutions, particularly Yaroslav Mudryi National Law University, have restructured themselves to sustain educational services, promote democratic values, and symbolically assert Ukrainian sovereignty in the face of sustained external aggression.

Thus, the purpose of the work is to examine how Ukrainian higher education institutions, particularly Yaroslav Mudryi National Law University, have adapted to the challenges of full-scale war, and how these adaptations function as acts of political resistance and mechanisms of state-building. By analysing educational responses to wartime disruption, the study explores a university not only as a site of civil instruction but as a strategic force contributing to sovereignty, legitimacy, and national resilience.

The tasks are: 1) to find out notions such as “political resistance” and “state-building”; 2) to identify key characteristics of Ukrainian universities as drivers of political resistance and state-building; 3) to describe Yaroslav Mudryi National Law University case in the context of its role as a driver of political resistance and state-building.

3. Methodology

According to the stated research purpose, we employed a qualitative case study approach to our investigation. The research design integrates theoretical interpretation with empirical observation, using a single in-depth case to illustrate broader socio-political processes.

The case study method was chosen for its strength in exploring complex phenomena within

real-life contexts. It allowed for the detailed examination of how wartime higher education institutions respond to crisis, particularly in ways that are not only adaptive but also politically meaningful. The focus on Yaroslav Mudryi National Law University provides a rich example of institutional agency, symbolic resilience, and governance under duress of military aggression.

To solve the research tasks, the study drew on a triangulation of sources: firstly, theoretical triangulation for conceptual framework development, in particular, definition of “political resistance” synthesized from Scott (1985), O’Brien (1996), and Howard (2002); understandings of “state-building” drawn from the OECD (2010), Paris & Sisk (2009), and the Encyclopaedia Britannica (2025); the development of analytical categories (guided by the mentioned sources) used throughout the empirical analysis.

Secondly, data triangulation for examining institutional responses, namely, documentary and policy review presented by government reports (e.g., What, 2022), legal frameworks (e.g., Law of Ukraine, 2022); institutional materials provided insight into how universities are formally adapting and how the state frames their role; national education surveys and public policy data. They were used to understand institutional responses and student attitudes.

Thirdly, methodological triangulation for grounding claims in context-specific evidence, specifically, institutional observation, document analysis, and visual data like photographs (Figures 3–5) were collected directly from Yaroslav Mudryi National Law University, including underground classrooms, dormitory shelters, and administrative documentation of wartime pedagogical strategies. This material enabled the contextual grounding of abstract concepts like legitimacy and resilience.

Moreover, thematic synthesis was employed. Based on the reviewed materials, six key roles of Ukrainian universities in political resistance and state-building were identified. They were thematically analysed within the Ukrainian wartime context and used to interpret the university’s operational adaptations as political acts.

Given qualitative and interpretive methodology enabled a nuanced understanding of how an education institution may function not merely as a provider of education but as an actor in national endurance, identity assertion, and soft power diplomacy. The findings are intended to generate transferable insights for other conflict-affected contexts where education and politics intersect in urgent and transformative ways.

4. Results

While starting to research the stated scientific problem it is crucial to find out the meaning of central notions. In our investigation, they are “political resistance” and “state-building”. Having analysed definitions of “everyday resistance” (Scott, 1985), “civil resistance” (Howard, 2002) and “rightful resistance” (O’Brien, 1996) we understand “political resistance” as a multifaceted concept encompassing a range of actions aimed at challenging and transforming power structures. In the context of our research, these actions are aimed at challenging and transforming the conditions and circumstances put forward by the aggressor.

Considering concept of “state-building”, we have analysed its definition from different point of view: historical (Britannica, 2025), international (OECD, 2010), and post-conflict framework (Paris & Sisk, 2009), and made a decision to understand it as a multifaceted process involving the development of institutional capacities, governance structures, and legitimacy. However, within the wartime and our investigation context, state-building involves not only the formal development of institutional capacities, governance structures, and legitimacy, but also the defence and activation of cultural, intellectual, and educational systems as tools of political resistance and national consolidation.

As key characteristics of Ukrainian universities as drivers of political resistance and state-building we identified the following: 1) a symbol of sovereignty, 2) a site for countering Russian disinformation, 3) a tool for legitimising the state, 4) a platform for international visibility, 5) an arena for adaptive governance, and 6) a source of psychological and political resilience. These characteristics of Ukrainian higher education institutions can be best illustrated through the case of Yaroslav Mudryi National Law University.

Before turning to wartime transformations, it is essential to outline the pre-war and post-invasion profile of Yaroslav Mudryi National Law University. Prior to 24 February 2022, the university was one of Ukraine’s leading legal education centres, enrolling approximately 18,000 students across bachelor’s, master’s, and postgraduate programs, with an academic staff of more than 900 employees, including over 150 doctors of sciences and professors. The university operated 12 academic departments and maintained a vibrant academic life, including international moot court participation, an extensive Erasmus+ portfolio, functioning legal clinics, regular academic conferences, and strong research output.

After the beginning of the full-scale Russian invasion, the university experienced significant demographic and organizational disruption. By the end of 2022, total student enrolment decreased

by an estimated 20–25% due to displacement, temporary migration abroad, and security risks. Approximately one-third of academic staff temporarily relocated, though the majority continued to teach remotely. Despite these challenges, the university restored full teaching activity by April 2022. Academic life continued in hybrid forms: legal clinics operated online; moot court teams competed virtually; research centres shifted to digital formats; and international cooperation remained active, particularly with EU institutions.

By the 2023/24 and 2024/25 academic years, the university had stabilized its academic operations: student numbers partially recovered (returning to around 15,000–16,000), and nearly all academic staff resumed teaching either online or in Kharkiv. Notably, the conversion of underground facilities into permanent classrooms enabled the university to maintain in-person instruction earlier than most institutions in frontline regions. These transformations highlight the university's institutional resilience and make it a representative example of higher education as a mechanism of political resistance and state-building.

The current Russian war against Ukraine is not just a military assault – it is a strategic campaign aimed to weaken Ukraine's political infrastructure and institutional sovereignty. Within this context, the education system becomes a critical arena of political resistance, state continuity, and soft power. Ukrainian universities can be seen as a *symbol of Ukrainian sovereignty* as universities, particularly those continuing operation in wartime (as exemplified by Yaroslav Mudryi National Law University), have become more than only educational institutions but symbols of Ukraine's political autonomy and cultural perseverance. For instance, despite more than 1,600 educational institutions across Ukraine being damaged or destroyed by 2025 (UNESCO, 2025), the university has maintained uninterrupted teaching activities and admissions, demonstrating institutional survival under systematic attacks. By maintaining academic freedom and scholarly activity even under threat, Ukrainian universities assert the presence and continuity of the Ukrainian state.

By upholding academic liberty and intellectual pursuits despite challenges and risks, Ukrainian universities serve as key platforms for producing fact-based narratives and *countering Russian propaganda*. In 2022/23, Ukraine's Ministry of Education and Science, together with university-based media literacy research centres, initiated public information campaigns and academic fact-checking projects (e.g., VoxCheck, Detector Media) to debunk Russian narratives about Ukrainian statehood and territorial integrity. Therefore, they have become critical nodes in Ukraine's informational resistance, producing knowledge that counters Russian propaganda, through academic research, public communication, and international collaboration, it contributes to affirming Ukraine's identity and agency, making education a front of resistance.

The experience of Ukrainian universities, and in particular institutions such as Yaroslav

Mudryi National Law University, provides valuable insight into how education serves as a stabilizing political force in the face of existential national threat. The ability to maintain operations and offer structured education under siege projects the image of a functional state. As of 2022/23, more than 1 million students continued their studies in Ukrainian higher education despite ongoing attacks (National Agency for Higher Education Quality, 2023), reinforcing the image of an operational national system. Legislative support enabling flexible educational formats affirms the government's role in safeguarding constitutional rights. The Law of Ukraine "On Amendments to Certain Laws of Ukraine Regarding State Guarantees in Conditions of Martial Law, Emergency Situation or State of Emergency" (2022) explicitly protects the right to higher education regardless of displacement status or temporary occupation, further strengthening state legitimacy. The continued provision of education underlines the *state's legitimacy* and capacity for governance.

Higher education institutions in Ukraine have actively maintained international academic partnerships, continued admission for foreign students, and engaged in research collaboration. For example, Ukrainian universities remained participants in Erasmus+ mobility programs, with more than 3,000 outgoing and incoming academic exchanges recorded in 2022/23 academic year (National Erasmus+ Office in Ukraine, 2024). This uninterrupted participation in global academic discourse, as seen at Yaroslav Mudryi National Law University, serves as a diplomatic tool that enhances Ukraine's *international visibility*. By aligning with Euro-Atlantic values in education, the university contributes to Ukraine's strategic narrative of belonging to the democratic international community.

For over three years, the Ukrainian educational community has been working under extreme duress to identify and apply teaching strategies that ensure both continuity and security. The provided *adaptive governance* reflects a national effort to protect not only pedagogical practice but the civic values and political institutions that education undergirds. Importantly, delivery models in Ukrainian universities vary widely depending on proximity to frontlines, highlighting regional disparities in wartime vulnerability and resilience. A joint survey by the State Service for Education Quality and National Agency for Higher Education Quality Assurance found a negative impact on education quality in war-affected regions (Kharkiv, Mykolaiv, and Zaporizhzhia), where more than 80% of institutions operate fully or primarily online, while in western regions such as Lviv and Ternopil, up to 60% of universities have partially returned to in-person teaching (National Agency for Higher Education Quality Assurance, 2023).

Frequent missile strikes in the east and south of Ukraine have forced educational institutions, located there, to respond innovatively. Their responses are not just logistical but they represent assertions of institutional legitimacy and commitment to rule-of-law amid chaos. In Kharkiv, where most educational institutions have been damaged or destroyed (see Figure 2), the attack on schools

and universities constitutes a direct assault on national identity and long-term civic development.

Figure 2: O. M. Beketov National University of Urban Economy in Kharkiv ruined by Russian rocket



Source: authors' own photo (02.2023)

According to Kharkiv Human Rights Group, during the first year of the war at least 315 educational buildings in Kharkiv Region (schools, colleges, and university buildings) were damaged during the war (Kharkiv Human Rights Group, 2023) and, according to different sources, from 21 to 23 higher education institutions in Kharkiv were affected, which is almost 96% of the total number of universities in the city (Ostrov, 2023). Table 1 presents a chronology of the Russian attacks on Kharkiv Universities that suffered significant damage.

Table 1: Chronology of the Russian attacks on Kharkiv Universities

Date	University	Reported Damage / Attack
01.03.2022	V. N. Karazin Kharkiv National University	Several buildings damaged: academic buildings, dormitories, roof, and internal infrastructure
02.03.2022		
02.01.2024		
08.11.2024		
18.11.2025		

02.03.2022 08.03.2022	Kharkiv National University of Construction and Architecture	Russian shells hit the “new building,” causing two floors to collapse; interior damage
02.03.2022	Kharkiv National University of Air Force named after I. Kozhedub	Building damaged by rockets and volley fire (since the university is military, all information is confidential)
08.03.2022	State Biotechnological University	During the Russian missile attack the building's facade and interiors were damaged
18.03.2022	National Institute of Public Administration under the President of Ukraine	The building was almost completely destroyed by a missile strike
01.04.2022 17.04.2022 19.04.2022 28.04.2022 02.09.2022	Zhukovskiy National Aerospace University “Kharkiv Aviation Institute”	Multiple shelling strikes damaged experimental workshops, roofs, ceilings, exterior walls, and interior decoration
19.06.2022	Kharkiv State Veterinary Academy	It was subjected to Russian missile fire; windows, doors, were blown out; interior damage
24.06.2022	National Technical University “Kharkiv Polytechnic Institute”	Two Russian missiles struck the sports complex, destroying the athletics arena and game hall; other structures were also damaged (windows, walls, pool)
06.07.2022	H. S. Skovoroda Kharkiv National Pedagogical University	Central building was hit and partially destroyed; three floors collapsed
20.07.2022 22.07.2022 05. 02.2023 26.02.2025	O. M. Beketov National University of Urban Economy in Kharkiv	Main building reportedly struck and damaged significantly; three floors collapsed
29.07.2022	Petro Vasylenko Kharkiv National Technical University of Agriculture	Russian missiles partially destroy university building
02.01.2024	Kharkiv National University of Radio Electronics	Six rocket strikes damaged and partially destroyed academic buildings and dormitories

23.01.2024	Yaroslav Mudryi National Law University	The building of the National Academy of Legal Sciences of Ukraine suffered serious damage: the floors and roof collapsed, and the interior decoration was largely destroyed
14.05.2024	Semen Kuznets Kharkiv National University of Economics	An airstrike damaged classrooms, windows, and facade of a building
01.03.2025	Kharkiv National Medical University	The attack damaged two floors and the ceiling of the dental department and the genetic centre
16.09.2025	Kharkiv Pharmaceutical University	A Russian drone damaged the roof and cabinets of this university

Other Kharkiv universities that are not presented in Table 1 suffered less significant damage or they are military and all information about them is confidential.

The relocation of universities from high-risk areas to safer western regions allowed some restoration of classroom teaching, while others adopted online or blended models. This shift was not simply pedagogical but deeply political: it asserted the state's commitment to civil services, constitutional rights, and intellectual continuity even under martial law. The strategic use of online teaching in high-risk areas offered both safety, psychological comfort and educational continuity.

In August 2022, the State Service for Quality of Education conducted a nationwide survey involving 24,000 educators and students (What, 2022). This sample revealed that most participants from higher education institutions (69.4%) were ready to resume in-person education. However, due to continuing threats, many universities implemented blended or distance formats (Huszti et al., 2024), i.e., models that combine safety with the political imperative of public service provision.

Significantly, 80% of respondents supported distance education as a viable model under war-time conditions, highlighting its potential as a civic stabilizer. Beyond preserving access, it also maintained Ukraine's academic presence internationally, as universities continued to teach and recruit international students. Such ongoing engagement with global education networks works as *a tool for legitimising the state*, reinforcing Ukraine's international legitimacy, and defies attempts to isolate it politically and academically. The ability of Ukrainian higher education institutions to continue attracting international students and uphold global academic standards serves as *a platform for international visibility* presenting a form of soft diplomacy, reinforcing Ukraine's alignment with Euro-Atlantic educational and political values.

While distance formats have enabled educational continuity, there is a strong preference for in-person teaching and learning. Recognizing such a request, the Ukrainian government has allowed

universities to autonomously determine teaching formats within the wartime (Law of Ukraine, 2022). On the one hand, the active role of the government in supporting and regulating education during martial law legitimizes the state's role as a responsive and legitimate actor, capable of protecting its citizens' rights even in wartime. On the other hand, this legally allowed autonomy not only improves logistical flexibility but importantly serves as a reaffirmation of decentralized democratic governance during wartime. In Kharkiv, where missile warnings often do not leave even seconds for evacuation, universities have undertaken the transformation of subterranean spaces into permanent classrooms – a bold demonstration of institutional resolve.

At Yaroslav Mudryi National Law University, its underground spaces have been converted into fully functional teaching and learning environments, complete with ventilation, emergency egresses, power supplies, and communication systems (Figures 3 and 4). The provided adaptations enable secure, uninterrupted teaching and learning even during active missile alerts.

Figure 3: Bomb shelter for students



Source: authors' own photo (09.2023)

Figure 4: Classroom in the bomb shelter



Source: authors' own photo (09.2023)

Student dormitories have also been retrofitted with safe zones (Figure 5), ensuring round-the-clock protection for the student body. The mentioned actions reflect a comprehensive institutional strategy to uphold civic life and educational access that are cornerstones of democratic resilience. Moreover, the continuation of providing higher education services in bomb shelters or under fire is not just about teaching and learning but about resisting erasure that aligns Ukrainian universities with state-building.

Figure 5: Sleeping space in a bomb shelter



Source: authors' own photo (09. 2023)

The demonstrated decision-making within the university under crisis (e.g., decisions to teach underground, reconfigure timetables, ensure safety etc.) reflects *adaptive governance*, an emerging model of wartime university administration. Thus, according to broader governance theory, the capacity of institutions to remain functional during crisis is core elements of state-building.

Considering chronology of the educational activity of Yaroslav Mudryi National Law University in the wartime in general, we may divide it into three periods: firstly, from 24.02.2022 to 31.03.2022 the university administration announced holidays for both students and academic staff; secondly, from 01.04.2022 to 15.07.2023 distance format of teaching and learning was utilized; thirdly, during the 2023/24 academic year, students were offered a choice between fully distance and blended learning formats. With these actions the university administration proceeded from the personal psycho-emotional coping mechanisms of students (for example, safe learning spaces for those who are more psychologically comfortable with face-to-face learning; organization of distance learning for those who have moved to safer regions or feel safer with their family at home). Such approaches not only protect students physically and psychologically, but also model strategies of societal resilience that politically stabilize the situation, linking individual well-being with national stability.

Thus, the university serves as *a source of psychological and political resilience*. Authoritative sources and recent Ukraine-focused studies show that continuity of education and structured learning routines (regular timetables, predictable course formats, academic advising and facilitated peer contact) provided by universities act as protective factors during conflict and are associated with reduced distress and greater psychological stability among students even if online (UNESCO, 2024). These findings reinforce the argument that educational continuity functions as a mental health stabilizer during wartime.

The flexible model, proposed by the university, takes into account individual risk assessments while maintaining the integrity of education. An analysis of the composition of students who study in a blended learning model and those who chose online learning shows that in the 2023/24 academic year, the university organized blended teaching for 49% of first-year students having selected such form of learning, while 51% chose to pursue their studies entirely online (Holubnycha et al., 2024). A similar trend persisted the following academic year 2024/25, with 47% choosing blended learning and 53% of new students preferring distance learning (Kostikova et al., 2025). These figures indicate that a significant share of the student population either remained concerned about personal safety or had relocated abroad, creating persistent operational difficulties for the university. Thus, the second and the third years of the war most of the students preferred online learning.

The pattern shifted in the 2025/26 academic year, however, when 54% of first-year students opted to attend classes on campus, i.e., in equipped bomb-shelter classrooms, while 46% continued online studying. This reversal may reflect growing fatigue with wartime restrictions and a renewed desire among students to return to more typical academic and social experiences.

Importantly, according to the staff of psychological counselling centre established at Yaroslav Mudryi National Law University, there have been recorded over 1,200 individual student consultations since March 2022, demonstrating the increased demand for mental health support as an integral part of academic resilience.

From the academic staff's side, this model provided comparative insights into blended teaching efficacy under extreme conditions. Initially, underground classrooms were used only during alarms, but missile speed and short warning times made it unsafe to wait. As a result, the university administration's decision to conduct all in-person classes underground reflects an intentional commitment to pedagogical stability, safety, and institutional control in conditions of continuous threat.

Current higher instruction in Kharkiv therefore occurs across a wide spectrum: from bomb shelters to virtual platforms like Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Google Meet. Educators use both traditional and modern tools, including printed materials and blackboards, gamification, interactive whiteboards, and mobile technologies. This hybrid pedagogical methodology is not just an adaptation to provide educational services during war – it symbolises the political will to preserve knowledge transfer, critical thinking, and institutional routine as acts

of national self-determination.

In sum, the persistence of Ukrainian universities under siege, epitomized by the case of Yaroslav Mudryi National Law University, demonstrates how Ukrainian universities are acting as pillars of state resilience, psychological fortitude, and democratic continuity. Their operation under fire sends a powerful message: that Ukraine's academic institutions remain sovereign, functioning, and committed to rebuilding the intellectual foundation of a free and self-governed nation. Therefore, psychological resilience is not a secondary outcome but a core mechanism through which higher education contributes to sustaining national resistance and future recovery.

5. Discussion

The findings of our study align with and contribute to existing research on education as a driver of political resistance and state-building. Drawing on the theoretical contributions of Giroux (1983, 2024), Tarlau (2014), and others, our case illustrates how Ukrainian higher education institutions, particularly during wartime, function as more than a provider of education; universities become a dynamic arena for contesting power, cultivating agency, and sustaining democratic values.

In light of this, Giroux (1983) emphasizes in his theory of resistance in education how power, resistance, and human activity intersect within education institutions to advance social justice. In the Ukrainian context, the adaptation of Yaroslav Mudryi National Law University to conditions of war exemplifies the given framework. The university's transformation into a resilient educational and civic space, completed with subterranean classrooms and governed by autonomous decision-making, reveals education's capacity to oppose oppressive aggression while fostering democratic engagement and national identity.

In this regard, Tarlau (2014) expands on the issue by stating that schools are not only places of providing education but also pedagogical spaces within social movements. The Ukrainian case demonstrates this idea with clarity: universities serve as frontline institutions in a broader national struggle. Their continued operation during missile attacks confirms their status as both educational and political actors, supporting civic routines, modelling governance under duress, and providing continuity that resists military aggression and chaos.

The opposite opinion is expressed by McGrew (2011) critiquing the resistance theory. The scholar warns against the decontextualization of resistance as a static theoretical construct. This study addresses that concern by presenting resistance as operational and evolving. Ukrainian universities' responses are not theoretical abstractions but lived, institutional choices grounded in existential necessity and national commitment.

This wartime educational resilience is also connected with state-building research. In this context,

Paglayan (2022) and Alesina et al. (2021) argue that mass education historically serves as a state response to mass violence and threats to social cohesion. Our findings support this view: Ukrainian higher education's continuity during the military crisis is not just reactive but strategic, reinforcing national unity, legitimacy, and long-term institutional presence.

Moreover, as Davies (2011) suggests, capacity development in fragile states requires alignment between educational policy and political context. The adaptive governance of Yaroslav Mudryi National Law University exemplifies this by combining logistical flexibility (e.g., online and blended models, bomb-shelter classrooms) with affirmations of state function and sovereignty. This localized, culturally embedded capacity development resists homogenization and aligns with democratic resilience.

Importantly, our findings also resonate with the emerging empirical literature documenting how Ukrainian universities function under war conditions. Studies by Bugrov et al. (2023) and Greshta et al. (2023) confirm that universities have become key sites of organizational innovation, crisis management, and symbolic resistance. Meanwhile, research by Orzhel et al. (2023) and Tsybuliak et al. (2023) highlights institutional relocation, trauma-informed governance, and the preservation of academic communities as essential elements of educational resilience. Zayachuk (2025) and Zamkowska (2024) similarly reinforce the idea that higher education is not merely impacted by war but actively shapes political narratives, national identity, and the state's international legitimacy. Our case study contributes to this growing field by providing a detailed illustration of how a single institution enacts these broader processes in practice.

In sum, the Ukrainian case contributes to both educational and political theory by revealing how universities can function as agents of civil cohesion, knowledge continuity, and political resilience. The case of Yaroslav Mudryi National Law University offers a compelling model of higher education not merely surviving but advancing national objectives through pedagogical, logistical, and ideological resistance.

The proposed theoretical-empirical synthesis enriches our understanding of how Ukrainian universities operate at the intersection of national defence, identity, and democratic continuity. By integrating our findings with recent research on displaced universities, crisis governance, and wartime educational adaptation, this study demonstrates that universities in Ukraine have become not only educational institutions but strategic actors within the national defence ecosystem. Our research encourages further inquiry into how universities may be structured or supported in conflict zones globally to function not only as educators but as defenders of civic order and social justice.

6. Conclusions

Thus, our investigation examined how Ukrainian higher education institutions (specifically Yaroslav

Mudryi National Law University) function as a mechanism of political resistance and state-building during wartime. By analysing the adaptive strategies and governance responses under extreme conditions, we identified how universities have become not merely educational providers but pillars of sovereignty, democratic continuity, and national identity.

Through the lens of “political resistance,” Ukrainian universities demonstrate agency in contesting the aggression of an occupying force. By continuing to operate, teach, and engage internationally, they affirm Ukraine’s autonomy and institutional coherence. At the same time, they participate actively in “state-building,” not only through the maintenance of governance structures and institutional legitimacy but also through the symbolic and functional reinforcement of national values and civic cohesion.

Among core characteristics defining Ukrainian universities’ contribution to political resistance and state-building in wartime Ukraine we identified the following: 1) a symbol of national sovereignty (universities, especially those operating in high-risk regions, serve as enduring markers of Ukraine’s cultural and intellectual independence); 2) a site for countering disinformation (institutions like Yaroslav Mudryi National Law University actively participate in informational resistance, producing verified knowledge to counter propaganda and reaffirming Ukraine’s identity); 3) a mechanism for state legitimization (the uninterrupted provision of education under martial law exemplifies the state’s functionality and commitment to constitutional rights); 4) a platform for international visibility (continued global engagement through student mobility, partnerships, and outreach reinforces Ukraine’s alignment with European democratic values and its rejection of isolation); 5) an arena for adaptive governance (flexible institutional responses, including teaching and learning in bomb shelters and blended instruction models, exemplify governance that is both resilient and democratic); 6) a source of psychological and civic resilience (academic environments have become safe places fostering emotional security, community belonging, and collective endurance under threat).

The uninterrupted functioning of institutions such as Yaroslav Mudryi National Law University under harsh conditions of military aggression elevates them to political symbols of Ukraine’s will to maintain its legal order, cultural identity, and intellectual sovereignty. Their pedagogical activity has become inseparable from acts of political resistance – opposing attempts to occupy, safeguarding civil society, and contributing to the broader geopolitical struggle for national independence.

This investigation chronicles the resilience of Ukrainian universities as agents of political endurance, preserving civic identity, resisting erasure, and reaffirming the autonomy of the Ukrainian state through the continuity of knowledge. The Ukrainian case offers not only a model of educational persistence but also an international example of how universities can serve as a vital instrument of national survival, reconstruction, and democratic renewal in times of war.

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