

# New Europe College Yearbook

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# WORLD BANK COMES TO UKRAINE: IMPROVING HIGHER EDUCATION FOR RESULTS

Ararat Osipian

## Abstract

Ukraine continues its struggle for independence. In order to strengthen its statehood and sovereignty, Ukraine has to make many steps, including forming world class universities. In addition to financial, technical and military aid, international help is needed to form autonomous world class universities in Ukraine. After many years of inaction, the World Bank finally comes to Ukraine's higher education sector. The World Bank comes with a large project, with an approved \$200 million loan, announced in May 2021. The project begins in the fall of 2021 and will last until the end of 2026. The project, entitled "Ukraine Improving Higher Education for Results Project," has the objective to improve the efficiency, conditions for quality, and transparency in Ukraine's higher education system. The project facilitates university mergers. However, there is no certainty regarding the understanding of the true magnitude of the problems on the ground. When it comes to the project implementation, the World Bank will unavoidably face the challenges of over-bureaucratization, institutional rigidity, Stalinist legacies, and corruption. Furthermore, a no less significant challenge — the full-scale military aggression against Ukraine that started in February 2014 and drastically amplified in February 2022 — makes the realization of the World Bank project even more difficult, if not impossible.

**Keywords:** corruption, higher education, Ukraine, university mergers, World Bank

## 1. Introduction

Ukraine continues to fight its war for independence, a war in which Ukraine will no doubt prevail. In order to strengthen its statehood and sovereignty, Ukraine has to take many important steps, including forming world class universities. It is hard to find a single country on the world map

that does not have world class universities, and yet enjoys the benefits of strong statehood and national sovereignty. Ukraine is not going to be an exception in this sense. In addition to financial, technical and military aid, international help is needed to form autonomous world class universities in Ukraine. The time has come for the international community to move from declarations to actions.

After many years of inaction, the World Bank finally comes to Ukraine's higher education sector. The World Bank comes with a large project, with an approved US\$200 million loan, announced in May 2021. The project begins in the late fall of 2021 and will last until the end of 2026. The project, entitled "Ukraine Improving Higher Education for Results Project," has the objective to improve the efficiency, conditions for quality, and transparency in Ukraine's higher education system. The project is also focused on increasing the relevance of Ukraine's higher education to the needs of the national and global labor market. However, there is no certainty regarding the understanding of the true magnitude of the problems on the ground, as corruption remains a serious problem in the post-Communist higher education sector. This paper presents major challenges that the World Bank project faces in Ukraine. These challenges include fierce opposition to university mergers, student and faculty protests, corruption, and the on-going full-scale military aggression.

## **2. Improving higher education in Ukraine**

Ukraine has been a member of the World Bank since 1992. Over the last three decades, the World Bank realized around 70 projects and programs in Ukraine with a total of approximately \$13 billion in loans and aid delivered to the country. Some of these World Bank commitments are completed while others continue. The World Bank's current investment project portfolio in Ukraine exceeds \$3 billion. The nine ongoing investment projects support improvements in "basic public services that directly benefit ordinary people in areas such as water supply, sanitation, heating, power, energy efficiency, roads, social protection and healthcare, as well as private sector development" (Panajyan, 2021, p. 1). Clearly, education and higher education in particular was not on this list.

After many years of inaction, the World Bank finally comes to Ukraine's higher education sector. The World Bank comes with a large project, announced in May 2021. The Ukraine Improving Higher Education for

Results Project carries an approved \$200 million loan. The Project will be implemented over a five-year period by the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine. The Ministry will have overall responsibility for project coordination and monitoring of the implementation progress. The project begins sometime in the fall of 2021 with the effective date of December 2021 and will last until the end of 2026.

The World Bank Regional Country Director for Eastern Europe, Arup Banerji, says regarding the project that,

The World Bank is pleased to partner with Ukraine to modernize teaching and learning in universities in line with European standards in order to equip young Ukrainians with the skills they need for the 21st century. As Ukraine recovers from the pandemic, we also strongly support Ukraine's higher education system in its efforts to be better technically and digitally equipped for providing learning in the post-COVID-19 world (Panajyan, 2021, p. 1).

The project development objective is to improve the efficiency, conditions for quality, and transparency in Ukraine's higher education system. However, there is no certainty regarding the understanding of the true magnitude of the problems on the ground, as corruption remains a serious problem in the post-Communist higher education sector, including that of Ukraine.

When it comes to the project implementation, the World Bank will unavoidably face the challenge of corruption and strong Stalinist legacies in dealing with the Ukrainian academic bureaucracy. Bureaucratic rigidity remains in place. Furthermore, a no less significant challenge — the full-scale military aggression against Ukraine that started in February 2014 and drastically amplified in February 2022 — makes the realization of the World Bank project even more difficult, if not impossible.

There are several questions regarding the World Bank project in Ukraine. Why higher education? The World Bank is usually more attracted to reforming elementary education, secondary schools, and improving literacy. How will university mergers bring "improvement of higher education for results"? Will the economy of scale principle be applicable to university enlargements achieved through mergers? It is not clear after reading all World Bank project documents, why and how the economy of scale principle will work in the case of Ukraine's higher education.

The title of the project itself — Ukraine Improving Higher Education for Results Project — hardly conveys any real meaning. Are there any improvements anywhere that are done not for results? What kind of results does the World Bank anticipate to achieve in Ukraine? What does higher education for results mean in the World Bank understanding in general? It is also not clear how the higher education for results mode will be achieved in this specific project. At the extreme end, one may even argue that trying to reform universities in Ukraine is trying to reform something that does not exist. There are no universities in Ukraine, or at least there are no universities as they are normally perceived in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, no autonomous universities that would have a potential to be transformed into world class universities.

### **3. University mergers controversy**

The World Bank loan will be spent on the modernization of teaching and research facilities and digital learning infrastructure of Ukraine's universities. This will be done in order to "ensure learning continuity through remote learning modalities and to support resilience and change management over the longer term" (Panajyan, 2021). The World Bank also promises to support the development of modern digital infrastructure for distance learning in Ukraine's universities. In addition, the creation of advanced teaching and research laboratories and learning support facilities is also anticipated in the course of the project realization. The major focus of the project appears to be on university mergers, also called restructuring and optimization.

It remains unclear from the project documents how and why university mergers are considered a center piece of the reform and the project. Was this project designed and launched at the initiative of the World Bank? Apparently, Ukraine's academic and political aristocracy wanted educational reforms to proceed this way in order to create new universities, lead them and de facto own them, or maybe even privatize them in the future, modernize them at the expense of the World Bank loan, and then have the state budget repay this loan with the Ukrainian citizens' tax money. A very smart scheme, one may say. However, replacing the prioritization of true university autonomy with politically motivated aristocracy and pseudo-public status will do nothing to improve education quality and transparency.



Thus far, the largest mergers - and the most scandalous ones - took place in Kharkiv, the second largest city in Ukraine. These mergers took place before the start of the full-scale military aggression. Karazin Kharkiv National University absorbed two small institutes in Kharkiv. Dokuchaev Kharkiv National Agrarian University, Kharkiv Petro Vasilenko National Technical University of Agriculture, Kharkiv State Zooveterinary Academy, and Kharkiv State University of Food Technology and Trade were merged in order to form the State Biotechnology University. In the fight for these universities, allegations of corruption, hostile takeover, political influence, and electoral fraud were all present (see, for instance, Simon, June 1, 2021).

The Kharkiv National University of Civil Engineering and Architecture is forced to become a part of Beketov Kharkiv National University of Urban Economy, while it would prefer to join National Technical University "Kharkiv Polytechnic Institute" (Gorod X, December 3, 2021). No wonder, faculty and students staged protests, speaking freely of their dissatisfaction with the merger (YouTube, December 2, 2021a). Finally, Kharkiv Medical Academy of Postgraduate Education will be absorbed by the Kharkiv National Medical University (Objectiv, September 16, 2021).

Kharkiv is being heavily bombed by the invading troops. International students at the Kharkiv National Medical University spend terrifying days and nights in cold and crowded bomb shelters (Times of India, February 26, 2022). With the beginning of the full-scale military aggression against Ukraine, the academic life in the country is put on hold. The Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine recommended stopping the educational process initially for two weeks (Gordon.ua, February 25, 2022). However, the university mergers in Ukraine will unavoidably re-appear on the forefront of academic and public debate.

These university mergers are highly controversial in design, process, and preliminary results. Each merger involves a set of groups of interests, problems, scandals, and protests. The World Bank project aims "To develop a stakeholder's engagement process that gives stakeholders the opportunity to participate and influence project design and implementation" (Nellemann, 2019). However, the continuing protests point to the opposite. Clearly, there is no unity in Ukraine's academic circles on the issue of university mergers and the role of the World Bank in this process.

#### 4. Justifying the World Bank presence

On May 7, 2021, Ukrainian media reported that the World Bank has supported a \$200 million loan to Ukraine aimed to modernize Ukraine's higher education system (NIK center, May 7, 2021). This news is reported in reference to the announcement by the press service of the Ministry of Finance of Ukraine. The statement by the Ministry of Finance says that on May 5, 2021, the Board of Executive Directors of the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development approves the project "Improving Higher Education in Ukraine for Results" to provide Ukraine with a \$200 million loan. The International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD) is part of the World Bank Group.

According to the project, the funds allocated by the World Bank are used by the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine to purchase modern equipment, create laboratories for students and scientists. The loan will also be used to carry out repair work on university buildings in order to improve the efficiency of the universities' educational space and physical learning environment. The money will be used to purchase modern computer equipment and software to increase the use of information technology in universities, as well as to provide a high level of education, including through the distance learning mode.

The main objectives of the World Bank project are to increase the competitiveness of higher education recipients in the labor market by updating approaches to teaching, learning and research in accordance with modern challenges. In addition, it is equally important to restore the high reputation of Ukrainian higher education institutions among students, including at the international level, according to the Ministry of Finance of Ukraine. The Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine will be implementing the five-year project based on the agreement concluded between Ukraine and the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development. The Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine is also charged with the development of criteria for the selection of higher education institutions that will participate in the project, funded by the World Bank.

The World Bank will conduct an audit of Ukraine's higher education institutions in order to examine the strengths and weaknesses of all of Ukraine's higher education. Based on the results of the inspection, the process of optimizing Ukrainian universities will begin. This is according to the announcement made by the then Minister of Education and Science of

Ukraine, Serhiy Shkarlet. Minister Shkarlet makes the announcement about the upcoming audit and optimization on July 7, 2021, in an interview with the national media (NIK center, July 8, 2021). According to the minister, the agreement with the World Bank, which provides for a \$200 million loan, will be signed around October 2021.

The audit of Ukrainian universities by the World Bank is not the only surprising issue presented by the media. Another—perhaps even more surprising and controversial issue—is the planned optimization of the higher education sector. In this case, “optimization” means a significant restructuring of universities and the process of liquidation of some of the universities. After the audit, conducted by the World Bank, the number of state universities in Ukraine is expected to be reduced. This reduction is to be made by the Ministry of Education and Science as the officially designated project implementation agency.

Prior to the start of the optimization campaign, there were 140 public higher education institutions under the authority of the Ministry of Education and Science in Ukraine. Accordingly, the reconfiguration of these universities and their restructuring through mergers is the prerogative of the Ministry of Education and Science. Naturally, academics, including faculty, administration, and staff, would like to know which universities are going to be merged by the Ministry, and on what conditions. Similarly, the media is eager to learn this information in order to convey it to the public. Nevertheless, the target number of universities remains unknown as it is not decided upon by the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine.

The lack of a target number as well as all related numbers, such as the total planned university mergers, creates a sense of confusion and uncertainty. The media tries to resolve this issue with the help of interviews with well-informed educators and other interested parties as well as brief news posts. Some responses and clarifications from the Ministry of Education and Science are needed. The Ministry considers the possibility of reducing the number of higher education institutions under its authority from 140 to around 80. Minister Shkarlet puts this in the following way:

Today, the Ministry has 140 higher education institutions. There are general trends regarding the number of residents studying at Ukrainian universities. I think 80-85 universities is enough. This is a certain optimal figure, but each university is unique. But I would not begin to talk about the figure of 80-85, but still need to wait for the conclusions of the World Bank experts (NIK center, July 8, 2021, p. 1).

Audit and optimization are just a good start to a plethora of questions regarding the World Bank project on reforming Ukraine's higher education, especially in its university mergers part. What universities will merge? How will these universities merge? When will they merge? How many total university merges will be done? How many new universities will emerge as a result of these mergers? Based on what criteria will universities be chosen for mergers by the state? What are the results of the audit? Who conducted the audit? Even this wide range of questions is just the beginning. Each university has a lot of property, including numerous buildings, land, and equipment. The issue with the property of universities that will be closed due to a merger will be decided on a case-by-case basis. Each Ukrainian university is unique and should be approached and considered individually. The Minister of Education and Science suggests that "It is possible that the State Property Fund will put the vacated premises up for sale" (NIK center, July 8, 2021, p. 1).

In 2019, the law that grants public universities the right to lease their premises came into effect in Ukraine (RBC UA, January 19, 2019). Ukrainian legislators do not stop at the threshold of leasing university premises for generating extra revenues. Verkhovna Rada, Ukraine's Parliament, wants to allow the privatization of property of universities that is not used by these universities (Struk, 2021). Minister Shkarlet clarified that the process of enlarging universities in Ukraine has already begun. "The Ministry of Education and Science is doing this today. About four unification projects have already been launched in different cities. The last one is Kharkiv, four agricultural universities have been merged into one," the Minister added (NIK center, July 8, 2021, p. 1).

## 5. Social consequences narrative

One of the major ideas developed in the media is that Ukrainian youth leaves the country due to the lack of economic and social perspectives, career growth, poor living conditions, political instability, and the on-going armed conflict. In order to prevent Ukrainian youth from leaving the country, a priority for the authorities should be to work on creating such conditions for life, study and work, in which young people will not have a desire to go abroad. One of the media resources, *RBC-Ukraine*, writes about this issue with reference to the statement of the Ukraine People's Deputy, Tetiana Plachkova. Plachkova represents the Opposition

Platform - For Life in the Verkhovna Rada, *i.e.* the Ukrainian Parliament. According to the opposition MP, the Ukrainian government is destroying the education system. This destruction is done under the slogan of reorganizing and optimizing the system of higher education, including universities and vocational education institutions.

MP Plachkova emphasizes that if the country does not maintain and develop its own national higher education system, other universities will come as a replacement. These other universities will be financed by neighboring countries. She says so in the Odesa region that borders Romania, and sums up:

Such conversations are already underway, but they will teach and train personnel not for work in Ukraine, but, for example, in Romania, and for some reason not all reformers understand this. In order to stop the outflow of people from the country, all of us, and first of all the state authorities, must prioritize not only the call to return to Ukraine for those who have already left the country, but also take care of creating such conditions for life and work in which the thought of departure abroad does not arise. The issue is especially acute for residents of villages where young people do not see prospects for themselves in work and normal conditions for building their families and their future (Gurkovs'ka, 2021a, p. 1).

Plachkova refers to her recent conversations with high school graduates in Odesa. In these conversations, high school graduates share their understanding of the future in Ukraine. Plachkova also refers to the situation with the Izmail State University of Humanities, located in the Odesa region, as an example. As of 2021, the university is under the threat of closure. According to the MP, "If such a decision is made, about 2,000 students of the only university in Bessarabia may lose the opportunity to study, and therefore will be a few steps closer to the decision to emigrate" (Plachkova, 2021, p. 1).

The leading role of the World Bank in the university mergers campaign conducted in Ukraine is acknowledged by many speakers and respondents, including administrators and academics. This role is usually being highlighted with a negative connotation. Mergers in higher education are rarely welcomed. There are several considerations here, including economic, social, legislative, and monetary components. Mergers — although conducted under the slogan of optimization — can cause problems in many respects. Such key terms and ideas as optimization

or restructuring are met by the academic community in Ukraine with suspicion and quite frequently with hostility. A good example would be an interview given by Yelena Goroshko, a professor at the National Technical University Kharkiv Polytechnic Institute:

Moreover, there is no model for such a combination. There is an economic component, a social one, legislation on higher education and there is money - 200 million, which the World Bank gave to reform Ukraine's national state universities. This reform does not apply to private education. We now have 212 state universities and 74 private ones in Ukraine, a total of 286. Of course, for a country like Ukraine, 286 universities are a lot, optimization is needed, but it must be carried out competently (Strel'nik, 2021, p. 1).

Academics point to the social consequences of university mergers in Ukraine. There are some teachers that will be cut. Many of them are of senior age, and thus it will be quite difficult for them to retrain. There are students who can be transferred to another training program, but only with their consent. If there is no such consent, the question arises on how to do this legally. The legal grounds for such a transfer are also not clear. Another issue is the support staff. Their future also becomes unclear. If universities are merged, many administrative services will be duplicated and thus unnecessary. Such are the views of academics who discuss the university mergers publicly. A significant number of academics and support staff will enter the labor market with no clear perspective.

Professor Goroshko points out that all universities are separate legal entities. In her view, university mergers can be done with the loss or without the loss of a legal entity status (Strel'nik, 2021, p. 1). Mergers may cause economic problems for university employees. These include furloughs, layoffs, and terminations. During the mergers, it is not clear which offices and positions will be preserved and which ones terminated or closed. Faculty members serving in universities that close due to mergers feel economic insecurity. This insecurity feels especially urgently given the fact that most university employees receive salaries below what is considered the average in Ukraine.

Many rudiments of the old Communist system are present in Ukraine's universities and — not surprisingly — they find their way into the discourse on universities mergers as well. One such rudiment that has survived for over three decades of post-Communist transition is the staff position of

engineers in academic departments. These positions of engineers exist even in academic departments that have nothing to do with engineering, equipment, laboratories, production, or safety standards. For instance, the Department of General Economic Theory at the National Technical University “Kharkiv Polytechnic Institute” has only ten faculty members and two engineers (Academic staff, 2021).

The resistance to the World Bank presence in Ukraine is growing. “Engineers of departments, for example, receive minimal salaries, and this is a very big problem,” suggests Goroshko (Strel’nik, 2021, p. 1). This suggestion is apparently referring to the possible dismissals due to the university mergers. “I have the impression that this wave of mergers is all about pursuing some kind of private interests, these are some kind of private agreements – that’s all,” suggests Goroshko, while commenting on the recently planned and on-going university mergers in Ukraine (Strel’nik, 2021, p. 1).

## **6. Negativity of the World Bank**

Overall, the expected impact of the World Bank project is portrayed as negative. Accordingly, perceptions about the World Bank formed by the general public under the influence of the media reports appear to be largely negative. The media is not in favor of the World Bank’s actions in Ukraine. In their rhetoric, the World Bank is considered as a hostile, occupying force. It is not unusual for major US-based international organizations, such as the IMF and the World Bank, to be considered as occupying or even colonizing forces. This perception may be based not on their character or the nature of their intentions and actions, but on the social consequences for the general public.

The World Bank and the IMF generally produce a negative public and media reaction in Ukraine. At one of the most recent events, in late December 2021, about four thousand people were protesting in the center of the capital against Ukraine’s cooperation with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) (Gurkovs’ka, 2021b). The protesters settled down under the Cabinet of Ministers and the Verkhovna Rada, claiming that under pressure from the IMF, the government is adopting anti-social laws that destroy jobs and small businesses, making life unbearable for the poor and pensioners. The protesters held posters demanding that the state authorities refuse loans received from this international organization.

According to the participants of this protesting action, the conditions that accompany the IMF loans harm the national economy and lead to the impoverishment of the population. In particular, the protesters did not agree with the sale of land, the privatization of state banks and state monopolies, fearing that this will lead to an increase in tariffs and prices.

In a similar manner, another protesting action was held near the President of Ukraine's Office in downtown Kyiv on the eve of the New Year celebration, in late December 2021. The protesters demanded an end to cooperation with the IMF. Approximately 7 to 8 thousand people took part in this political action, which was quite a score for Ukraine and its capital city in particular. Protest participants declared that regularly received foreign loans worsened the external and internal political, social, and financial situation of Ukraine. They also pointed out that the recommendations of the IMF were acquiring the format of an undisguised blackmail. The protesters believed that by cooperating with the IMF the state authorities were pursuing an anti-people policy in Ukraine.

The protesters were demanding to introduce a moratorium on the increase in public utility tariffs, and to stop the sale of strategically important objects of the economy. The protesters also demanded the disclosure of the content of loan agreements with the IMF and other international financial organizations, concluded by the Ukrainian government. According to the protesters, these posed a direct threat to the existence of the state and dragged the country into a new poverty trap. The authorities were urged to curtail the economic reforms promoted by the IMF, since these reforms, according to the participants in the action, turned ordinary people into beggars. The protesters demanded the abolition of the natural gas and electricity market together with the establishment of economically justified tariffs not only for electricity, but also for the services of other natural monopolists, such as regional gas companies, and national railways (Gurkovs'ka, 2021c).

Ukrainian media coverage is quite extensive when it comes to reporting on educational reforms in the country. The World Bank project and changes in Ukraine's higher education sector are not an exception in this sense. Judging by the content of news reports and the views expressed in these reports, Ukrainian media appears to be against the course of reforms suggested by the World Bank and taken by the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine. Such is the generally accepted media discourse, as follows from numerous media reports.



The national media highlights the issue of university mergers in Ukraine as directly linked to such negative economic and demographic processes as brain drain and outmigration. According to the media discourse, there is hardly any justification for the World Bank to be present in Ukraine's higher education system. While not necessarily compared to a colonial force, the World Bank is perceived as something alien to the system, while the World Bank's demands appear to be confronting structures and values of the academy. This narrative is supported by some academics who openly express their views.

## **7. Is corruption a target?**

One of the objectives of the World Bank project is to improve transparency in Ukraine's education sector through the modernization of the Higher Education Management Information System, the establishment of a National Student Survey and a unified information system on competitive research funding of universities (Panajyan, 2021, p. 1). That different approach or understanding of transparency does not abolish or nullify the paramount problem of corruption in Ukraine's higher education sector. There is only one paragraph allocated to the issue of corruption in the Project:

Corruption, including a mass disregard for academic integrity and a high tolerance for academic violations, also poses an ongoing challenge to education quality and the signaling power of Ukraine credentials. Although corrupt access to the higher education system has diminished since the introduction of the External Independent Test (EIT) in 2008, other issues persist, such as academic dishonesty and systematic violations of academic integrity principles, including cheating during exams and plagiarism. These instances are commonplace and are not perceived as abuses. Different estimates indicate that at least 25–30 percent of students have directly engaged in academic misconduct or bribery, with a much larger share exposed to and familiar with such practices. Given that higher education is central to public and private sector development and is a primary driver of social mobility, this challenge remains a major concern for the higher education system (Gresham and Ambasz, 2019a, pp. 6-7).

The corruption that characterizes Ukraine's higher education sector in its entirety takes a little bit more space in the World Bank Flagship

Report, being expanded to a modest three pages (Gresham and Ambasz, 2019b, pp. 130-132). This is surprising given that corruption in Ukraine's higher education is a paramount problem. Without tackling corruption, Ukraine's higher education sector is unlikely to move in a new direction or undergo any meaningful changes. This is even more surprising given that the production of the Final Report entitled "Ukraine - Resume Flagship Report (Vol. 2): Review of the education sector in Ukraine: Moving toward effectiveness, equity and efficiency (RESUME3)" involves well over two dozen authors, consultants and aides from both the World Bank and Ukraine.

In the small section titled "Corruption and Academic Integrity in Higher Education," the authors acknowledge that corruption and academic integrity violations in higher education remain endemic and of major concern. These academic and legal violations inhibit opportunities for knowledge acquisition and training, which are essential factors for social mobility and economic development (Gresham and Ambasz, 2019b, pp. 130). Referring to works by Denisova-Schmidt and Prytula (2017), Osipian (2017), Artiukhov and Liuta (2017), as well as some reports (OECD, 2017a; OECD, 2017b; KAS, 2017) and other publications (De Waal, 2016; Hallak and Poisson, 2007; Sherstjuk and Zharikova, 2017), the authors acknowledge that the Ukrainian higher education sector faces significant and persisting challenges in the form of academic misconduct and integrity violations.

While briefly discussing the problem of corruption in Ukrainian higher education sector, the Flagship Report by the World Bank team mentions a set of very standard clauses. One such passage is that,

integrity is vital to good governance and institutional trust, and a high-performing education system must have policies and structures in place to safeguard integrity. Integrity is one of the key pillars of political, economic and social structures. It is essential to the economic and social wellbeing and prosperity of individuals and society as a whole (Gresham and Ambasz, 2019b, pp. 130).

Other standard clauses presented in the Flagship Report include points that, "At the higher education level, corruption and academic violations have the additional harmful effect of normalizing corrupt practices among young people," and that "Corruption in higher education also increases social inequality, because people from poor families cannot pay bribes to

get into prestigious universities or pass exams, and hence they miss their opportunity to use education for social mobility” (Gresham and Ambasz, 2019b, pp. 130). Although necessary as an introduction, these statements contribute little to understanding the problem of corruption in Ukrainian higher education.

According to the Flagship Report produced by the World Bank team, the dominant problems of Ukrainian colleges and universities in terms of corruption include a mass disregard for academic integrity. Academic violations are well-tolerated as they are considered a norm. Referring to the report on academic integrity in Ukraine done by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2017a) the authors point out many forms of integrity violations. These forms range from misuse of resources, assets and authority, to bribery, cheating, plagiarism, and undue recognition of academic achievements. More references to academic works (Osipian, 2009, 2017) and reports (Sondergaard et al., 2012; KAS, 2017), make Gresham and Ambasz (2019b, pp. 130) conclude that, in regard to higher education in Ukraine, “tolerating mediocrity seems common, and systemic violations of academic integrity principles (for example, cheating during exams, or plagiarizing master’s and/or doctorate theses) are not perceived as abuses.”

Although just 3 pages out of the book-size 177-page document, it is obvious that the Flagship Final Report by the World Bank Group pays attention to corruption in Ukraine’s higher education sector. The Report acknowledges the existence of corruption in higher education and that it constitutes a serious problem. Moreover, corruption and other breaches of academic integrity in higher education remain endemic and of major concern for possible reforms. These academic and legal violations have far-reaching negative consequences, blocking or narrowing opportunities for knowledge acquisition and training. These are universally recognized key determinants for high social mobility and economic development. The significance of the problem of corruption in Ukraine’s higher education sector is acknowledged as well. The challenge of dealing with and tackling corruption remains a major concern for the higher education system.

Despite all of these considerations, there is no mention of corruption in the official project document, produced by the World Bank Group. Certainly, there is no mention of any measures to be taken within the project to curb corruption in Ukraine. There appears to be no intent to do anything about higher education corruption within this project’s action frame. Obviously, when it comes to the World Bank project on Ukraine’s

higher education sector, corruption is not a target. The key question is: How does the World Bank expect to improve Ukraine's higher education results, while understanding the seriousness of corruption problem and yet not planning on doing anything about corruption in the Project?

## **8. Humanitarian crisis in education**

The Karazin Kharkiv National University, ranked highest among Ukrainian universities by world university rankings, suffers from the full-scale military aggression. The School of Economics at the Karazin Kharkiv National University that enrolls thousands of students, including many international students, was damaged beyond repair in the course of the full-scale military aggression. The historical building of the school was destroyed by missile strikes. Reports by the Ukrainian news show the true degree of devastation suffered by the School (Abrashina, 2022). The main building of the University, located at Kharkiv's central square, also suffered significant damages, including numerous shattered windows from the previous missile strike that destroyed the Regional Administration building.

The Donbas armed conflict that started in 2014 made several universities from Donetsk and Luhansk regions homeless. A handful of humanitarian organizations stepped in to help. Unfortunately, the World Bank was not among those helping the forcefully relocated higher education institutions. Some of them have already disappeared or are about to disappear. Others, such as the Donetsk National Medical University, have no true home even 10 years after the start of the Donbas armed conflict. The World Bank indicated no interest in helping restore higher education in Ukraine-controlled parts of Donbas, in eastern Ukraine, over this period. This approach would have to change. The international community should call the World Bank to focus on Ukraine's educational reform, and more specifically, to the crisis and post-crisis restoration of the higher education sector.

For Ukrainian universities, being closed temporarily with the educational process put on hold is nothing new. Many Ukrainian colleges and universities were closed for different periods of time due to the virus-born health and safety concerns in 2020, 2021, and 2022, trying to organize on-line courses and distance learning. Before that, Ukrainian universities were closed due to the inability of the state to pay their utility bills, especially for heating during winter months. However, the present

situation is different. The full-scale military aggression brought a true humanitarian crisis to Ukraine's higher education.

Kharkiv, Ukraine's major hub for international students, was heavily bombed during the first days of the full-scale military aggression, in late February 2022, and is still being bombed regularly in 2023, 2024, and 2025. Many international students managed to escape the bombarded Ukrainian cities and evacuate, and many more are still under fire. They are simply trying to survive under the conditions of the full-scale military aggression and continuous intense bombardments. While international students in Ukraine's largest cities spend terrifying days and nights in cold and crowded bomb shelters, universities do not function (Times of India, February 26, 2022). The academic life in Ukraine was stalled, as the Ministry of Education and Science had to order to stop the educational process in schools, colleges and universities throughout the country due to the full-scale military aggression. Some students even had to walk on subway railway tracks in underground tunnels in order to leave their dormitories and reach a safe shelter (Kharkiv Today, March 2, 2022).

Following the full-scale military invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the World Bank project was restructured at the request of the Ukrainian government. The restructuring was done in order to reallocate funds to finance scholarships for university students during the time of this acute crisis. The agreed restructuring allowed the World Bank to reallocate US\$100 million from Components 2 and 3 to the newly created Component 5, called "Support to Academic and Social Scholarships for Higher Education Students." Components 2 and 3 were reduced in scope according to this new reconfiguration of funds. Despite the restructuring, the project development objective to improve the efficiency, conditions for quality, and transparency in Ukraine's higher education system has not been changed.

Under the Support to Academic and Social Scholarships for Higher Education Students component, the World Bank paid for academic and social scholarships to students in professional pre-higher and higher education institutions in Ukraine during the 2021-2022 academic year. Academic scholarships cover an estimated 172,000 students, and social scholarships cover approximately 50,000 students (Gresham, 2022). The restructuring also established a Contingent Emergency Response Component in the project in order to finance emergency expenditures if requested by the Ukrainian government. This is done in order to mitigate the on-going humanitarian crisis in education.

Neither the financier—the World Bank — nor the implementing agency — the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine — give up on the project, despite the crisis. In June 2022, the Ministry of Education and Science confirmed all relevant documentation to allow for verification of achievement of Performance-Based Condition (PBC) 4 on entrance into at least 50 performance-based contracts, including key performance indicators with higher education institutions (Gresham, 2022). Thus far, the Ministry of Education and Science has been unable to produce a staffing capacity necessary to implement the planned project investments under Component 3. The Ministry also attempts to assess the current needs of higher education institutions and to create an assessment survey of higher education institutions (HEIs) for that matter. Following steps include finalizing selection of key consultants for the Project Implementation Unit, launching the project’s communications campaign, and revising investment needs of public HEIs in line with the latest assessment of needs.

Both the World Bank and the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine acknowledge the need to revise the project’s results framework in order to accommodate the changes in the scope of its components. The two agencies also acknowledge that the situation in Ukraine has changed significantly since the onset of the full-scale military action, and priorities continue to shift. Many HEIs have been damaged, and the needs of HEIs are also shifting. The World Bank and the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine try to ensure that the project’s investment activities can be flexible and aligned to the changing needs in the country’s higher education sector. Despite this claim on flexibility and adaptation, it is not at all clear what the World Bank project implementation status and results may be. The planned Mid-Term Review date for Ukraine Improving Higher Education for Results Project was scheduled for February 12, 2024. Given the instability and uncertainty in Ukraine, the Actual Mid-Term Review date for the project has yet to be determined.

## **9. Uncertainty as a defining factor**

The full-scale military aggression against Ukraine is in full swing, and the scale of destruction is very significant. If this unfavorable military, political, and economic situation persists, uncertainty regarding the realization of the World Bank project will continue to increase. Repayment of the World Bank’s educational loan may become a problem. The World Bank project

as an attempt at modernization and westernization has a very unclear future. The data on the annual and cumulative expected disbursements of the World Bank project for the period of 2021 to 2026, expressed in US\$ millions, is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Expected Disbursements (in US\$, Millions)

WB Fiscal Year	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025	2026	2027
Annual	0.00	55.20	53.60	43.30	25.80	21.50	0.60
Cumulative	0.00	55.20	108.80	152.10	177.90	199.40	200.00

Source: World Bank Group, IBRD, 2021, p. vii.

The data on the financial transactions of the World Bank project prior to the full-scale military aggression against Ukraine, expressed in US\$, is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Financial Transactions prior to the full-scale military aggression

Period	Financier	Transaction Type	Amount (US\$)
May, 2021	IBRD92380	Commitment	200,000,000.00
December, 2021	IBRD92380	Disbursement	10,500,000.00
December, 2021	IBRD92380	Fees	500,000.00

Source: World Bank, 2021, p. 1.

The data on the financial transactions of the World Bank project after the start of the full-scale military aggression against Ukraine, expressed in US\$, is presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Financial Transactions after the start of the full-scale military aggression

Period	Financier	Transaction Type	Amount (US\$)
October, 2022	IBRD92380	Interest and Charges	1,986,792.61
October, 2022	IBRD92380	Fees	101,484.75
August, 2022	IBRD92380	Disbursement	35,049.00
June, 2022	IBRD92380	Disbursement	20,000,000.00
May, 2022	IBRD92380	Disbursement	11,352,890.57
April, 2022	IBRD92380	Interest and Charges	46,198.19
April, 2022	IBRD92380	Fees	202,763.70
April, 2022	IBRD92380	Disbursement	88,647,109.43
October, 2022	IBRD92380	Total	122,372,288.25
October, 2022	IBRD92380	Grand Total	133,372,288.25

Source: World Bank, 2023, p. 1.

More recent data on major financial transactions made by the World Bank within the Project's frame after the start of the full-scale military aggression is not available. The Summary Status of World Bank Financing (US\$ Millions) as of May 31, 2024 is stated as "No data available." The Detailed Financial Activity as of May 31, 2024 is also stated as "No data available" (World Bank, 2024, p. 1). Some expenses are listed under the Project Procurement Plan (Artemenko, 2024).

As follows from the data presented in Tables 1, 2, and 3, financial transactions after the start of the full-scale military aggression differ significantly from what was initially planned in the project. The changes due to the March 2022 amendment are drastic, indeed. The grand total of the project disbursements reached US\$133,372,288.25 in October, 2022. According to the initial project plan, that level of disbursed funds should have been reached by the World Bank project only around October, 2024. This is explained by the emergency relief funds of US\$88,647,109.43 disbursed in April 2022. The funds were channeled to cover stipends for higher education students in Ukraine. Ukrainian students' finances were negatively affected by the full-scale military aggression. At the same time,



no data is available on Summary Status of World Bank Financing (US\$ Millions) as of January 31, 2023.

Components of the World Bank project after the March 2022 restructuring were reset as follows: Sector-Wide Improvements to Governance, Financing, Quality and Transparency: (Cost US\$54 million), Alliances and Partnerships for Improved Efficiency and Quality: (Cost US\$3 million), Capacity Building and Education Environment Enhancement: (Cost US\$39 million), Project Management, Monitoring & Evaluation: (Cost US\$4 million), Support to Academic and Social Scholarships for Higher Education Students: (Cost US\$100 million), Contingent Emergency Response Component (Gresham, 2022). There is less than US\$70 million left in the project budget to achieve the project goals.

The World Bank considers the progress towards achieving the project development objective to improve the efficiency, conditions for quality, and transparency in Ukraine's higher education system as satisfactory. Surprisingly, overall progress in the project implementation was considered as satisfactory as well. On May 8, 2024, the most recent available report produced by the World Bank shows more realistic estimates, downgrading the overall progress in the project implementation from satisfactory to moderately satisfactory. At the same time, the World Bank estimates the overall risk rating as high. However, looking at the finances of the project, one may develop an impression that the World Bank is trying to disburse all the project money as soon as it can through emergency relief funding in order to deplete the projects' total budget and by doing so to achieve the de facto end of the project. Needless to say, the results of such actions will not bring any positive results, proclaimed in the initial project. The goals of the World Bank project may not be achieved. Thus, supplemental funding may be needed and should be approved by the Board of Directors.

The "Improve efficiency in higher education" component that involves a performance-based funding formula (PBF formula) is marked as "In progress". The World Bank Group (2024) acknowledges that, "The PBF formula was used to allocate public funding in 2021. Following the Russian military invasion to Ukraine in February 2022, the PBF formula has been temporarily suspended for the duration of the martial law. However, it was reinstated in January 2024." Apparently, the World Bank has optimistic views regarding the project, hoping to stabilize the entire enterprise, and thus reinstating the PBF formula. This update comes from May 8, 2024, the most recent available report. The PBF formula is used to allocate public funding to HEIs during at least two consecutive fiscal years. This indicator

measures implementation of the performance-based funding formula for the allocation of public funds to HEIs for at least two consecutive years during the project period. The indicator is met when performance metrics are used as part of the formula for allocating funds to HEIs, as envisioned in the higher education reform and legal and regulatory changes that are anticipated (World Bank Group, 2024).

## **10. Conclusion**

During the times of military action, scholars and international organizations should think of restoration. This should be characteristic of the World Bank too. The World Bank was founded in 1944 with a core mission to help “rebuild countries devastated by World War II” (World Bank, 2023). Ukraine is a country of many colleges and universities, and these institutions of higher education suffer immensely from the full-scale military aggression. Buildings, infrastructure, research laboratories, scholarly cooperation, projects, financial and other assets, international reputation, and, most importantly, lives of faculty and students, are in immediate and grave danger. Given the level of devastation caused by the military aggression, Ukraine higher education sector’s reconstruction and reform appear to be the World Bank’s return to its original mission.

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