

“Stolen Ukrainian universities: An invisible russian weapon”

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SPECIAL ISSUE "UKRAINIAN UNIVERSITIES IN NEW REALITIES: 10 YEARS OF WAR"

Alex Plastun (Ukraine), Serhiy Kozmenko (Ukraine)

STOLEN UKRAINIAN UNIVERSITIES: AN INVISIBLE RUSSIAN WEAPON

Abstract

This paper explores the issue of "stolen" Ukrainian universities. Over 1,500 Ukrainian educational and research organizations have been seized by Russia, including 289 higher education institutions such as universities, institutes, academies, colleges, and their branches. These institutions are now exploited to further Russia's geopolitical agenda through propaganda, territorial annexation justification, and the assimilation of the Ukrainian population in occupied regions. The study examines this using the following examples: the perception of stolen Ukrainian universities as Russian entities by international organizations and academic communities; recognition of stolen Ukrainian intellectual property as Russian, with silent approval or facilitation, such as the registration and confirmation of stolen Ukrainian academic journals by the International ISSN Centre. The paper highlights the use of these stolen institutions' resources as propaganda tools, their role in ideological manipulation, and their contribution to the assimilation of occupied territories. Recommendations include removing stolen universities from academic affiliations and databases, revoking ISSN registrations for stolen Ukrainian journals, and urging COPE to issue ethical guidelines for preventing collaboration with stolen universities. Additionally, it emphasizes the need for Ukrainian authorities and the academic community to engage proactively with global publishing institutions, database owners, and organizations handling publishing ethics to address these challenges. By bringing attention to this "silent war on knowledge", the paper underscores the urgency of addressing the misuse of stolen academic institutions by Russia to uphold the integrity of global academia and international law.

Keywords

university, Russian-Ukrainian war, propaganda, occupation, academic journal, authors, ISSN

JEL Classification

H56, I20, N30, N40

INTRODUCTION

War in Ukraine, which started with the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 and further intensified with the full-scale invasion in February 2022, has profound and multifaceted impacts on the Ukrainian academic sector. The war has not only resulted in widespread destruction of physical infrastructure but has also caused murders of Ukrainian scientists, disruption of the educational and research processes, and thousands of displaced students and educators.

Before the war, Ukrainian universities were increasingly recognized for their contributions to science, technology, and the humanities, serving as hubs of innovation and cultural exchange. However, the war has led to a catastrophic decline in the operational capacity of these institutions. Universities have faced extensive physical damage due to military actions, with many buildings destroyed or rendered unusable. The destruction of libraries, laboratories, and research centers has severely hampered the ability of academic institutions to deliver quality education and conduct meaningful research.

There are many publications and reports devoted to assessing and estimating the damage Russia has done to Ukrainian academia (ERAC,



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Conflict of interest statement:

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2023; Vlasenko & Zelmanov, 2023; UNESCO, 2024; Haraschenko et al., 2024; Chumachenko, 2024; Lyman & Moskovko, 2024).

Despite the significant amount of research into the damage Russia has done to Ukrainian science and academia, there is one relatively unexplored issue: Ukrainian academic institutions stolen by Russia. Since the illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014, a lot of Universities, research institutions, and their infrastructure, including academic journals, have been stolen by Russia. The problem significantly worsened after the start of the full-scale invasion because additional regions were claimed by Russia as annexed: Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhzhia, and Kherson Oblasts.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

Academicians explore the occupation of territories and related issues, which are regulated by international law. In international law, a territory is considered “occupied” when it is actually placed under the authority of the hostile army (Bouchet-Saulnier, 1998). Typical categories of discussion include security, human rights, refugees, sanctions, and violations of law. Robinson (1945) expanded this list with a discussion of the transfer of property in enemy-occupied territory.

Von Glahn (1957) explored additional aspects, many of which have been neglected in previous works on military occupation, including the status of collective farms, currency and banking controls, price levels, rationing, and guerrilla forces.

The issue of stolen universities and education under occupation is relatively unexplored. Russian aggression provides an unseen scale of the issue and new forms of its consequences.

The Hague Convention (1907) imposes on occupying powers the responsibility to respect and maintain the institutions and services of occupied territories, including educational establishments. However, it is quite typical for occupants to violate provisions of the Fourth Geneva Convention. Murphy (1999) reported that during Iraq’s occupation of Kuwait in 1990, university libraries and scientific laboratories were plundered.

In academic discourse, the appropriation of educational institutions during conflicts has been examined under topics such as cultural heritage protection, the impact of occupation on education, and the legal frameworks governing the administration of occupied territories.

Redzik (2004) explored the case of Polish universities during the Second World War and showed that the German occupying forces systematically suppressed Polish academic life by closing universities, confiscating their assets, and persecuting faculty and students. According to UNESCO (1945), this was a typical approach from the occupying forces during WWII: in countries like Czechoslovakia and the Netherlands, universities faced closures, staff dismissals, and strict censorship. Occupants aimed to suppress national identities and resistance by controlling educational content and access. As for the occupation from the Soviet side, Poland experienced a nationwide assimilation to Soviet educational and cultural standards (Redzik, 2004).

In Ukraine, there is no single list of stolen Ukrainian universities and research institutions. According to Kubijovyč (2022), as of 2013, there were about 100 scientific institutions conducting fundamental research in Crimea, including 20 branches of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine. Russia stole them all after the annexation of Crimea, including such famous ones as the Crimean Astrophysical Observatory, the Marine Hydrophysical Institute, the Institute of the Biology of Southern Seas of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine, the National Institute of Grape Growing and Wine-making ‘Maharach’, the Institute of Agriculture of Crimea, etc.

Most of these scientific research institutes became part of the Russian Academy of Sciences, and the saddest thing is that international organizations like Scopus recognize them as Russian institutions: Crimean Astrophysical Observatory RAS, Black Sea Hydrophysical Proving Ground RAS, Marine Hydrophysical Institute of RAS, “All-Russian National Research Institute of Viticulture and

Winemaking” Magarach “RAS”, A. O. Kovalevsky Institute of Biology of the Southern Seas of Russian Academy of Science, Nikitsky Botanical Gardens – National Scientific Center of Russian Academy of Sciences, Institute of Crimean Archaeology (Scopus, 2024).

According to Roache (2018), there were 16 Universities in Crimea in 2013–14, with an overall number of students up to 63,000. All these Universities and their material base were stolen by Russia.

Russia has stolen nine Universities from Donetsk Oblast and eight from Luhansk Oblast. According to the National Institute for Strategic Studies, an estimated \$4.9 billion in educational infrastructure in the east was lost.

Based on data from Nosok (2024), since 2014, 19 institutions of higher education have been relocated, including one from the temporarily occupied Crimea, as a result of the temporary occupation of the territories of Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts and the Autonomous Republic of Crimea, and the city of Sevastopol.

Nosok (2024) claims that after the start of the full-scale invasion, 31 institutions of higher education and 94 institutions of professional pre-higher state education, communal and private ownership from temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine, were able to organize their activities and educational process in new cities. As of November 1, 2023, 19,485 students are continuing their studies in relocated educational institutions.

Occupants of the Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts provide their own data right after the occupation (Bredikhin, 2015). According to their data from December 2014, there were 357 general education institutions in the so-called LPR (occupied part of the Luhansk Oblast) with a total of 77,348 students. There were 6 universities with 32,553 students. In the so-called DPR (occupied part of the Donetsk Oblast), there were 534 schools with a total of 146,969 students. There were seven universities with a total of 44,749 students.

As can be seen, existing evidence is non-systematic, non-official, and rather mixed. Plus, the issue of occupants using stolen Ukrainian universities

is still unexplored. Most of the research activity is concentrated on analyzing physical damage to infrastructure and its estimations, as well as its influence on the research.

The material damage is quite severe. According to the Vice-Rector of Kharkiv University, Anatoly Babichev, the losses only to his university infrastructure are preliminarily estimated at more than 100 million dollars (Vlasenko & Zelmanov, 2023).

According to UNESCO (2024), Ukraine’s public science sector comprises about 450 research institutes and 140 universities. From February 2022 to January 2024, a total of 1,443 buildings belonging to 177 institutions were damaged or destroyed. \$1.26 billion needed to restore public research infrastructure, including US\$ 980.5 million for universities, responsible for 52% of public research.

However, not all losses can be assessed, as many universities and scientific institutions are located in territories temporarily occupied by the Russian Federation.

Harashchenko et al. (2022) reported that right after the start of the full-scale invasion, 38.1% of Ukrainian researchers have relocated within the country, while an additional 14.7% are currently abroad. UNESCO (2024) later updated the data: 12% of Ukrainian scientists and university teachers had been forced to emigrate or relocate internally. About 30% of all Ukrainian scientists have been forced to work remotely. Another 1,518 scientists have volunteered for combat duty.

De Rassenfosse et al. (2023) highlight the profound impact of the ongoing war in Ukraine on the country’s scientific community. Many researchers have either emigrated or shifted to alternative professions. For those who continue their work in research, the destruction of civilian infrastructure and the psychological toll of the conflict have the potential to significantly hinder progress.

Chala (2024) explored the experience of the Balkan Wars from 1991 to 1999 and showed that the decline in scientific productivity could be driven not only by the emigration of researchers but also by the loss of scientific networks and isolation from the international community.

As of February 24, 2023, 3,151 educational institutions were damaged by shelling and bombing, of which 440 were destroyed (MESI, 2023). Chumachenko (2024) claims that almost 3,500 educational institutions have been damaged, and 365 have been destroyed completely (Chumachenko, 2024). Among the damaged institutions are 93 universities (Lyman & Moskovko, 2024).

A joint study by the World Bank, the Ukrainian government, the European Union, and the United Nations concluded that, as of February 2024, 21% of Ukraine's higher education institutions had been damaged or destroyed during the ongoing Russian invasion. For research institutions, the rate rises to 31% (Carter, 2024).

Lutsenko et al. (2023) highlight that for researchers, key needs related to scientific activities during the war include access to scholarly literature, collaboration with research groups or colleagues, participation in ongoing projects and planning future research endeavors, as well as access to relevant information and data.

Suchikova (2023) examines how occupations can disrupt academic activities, highlighting how Russia has repurposed university facilities and imposed new curricula aligned with its ideological goals. These actions not only disrupt the educational process but also reshape cultural and intellectual landscapes to serve the occupiers' objectives. Science at Risk (2024) provides an additional aspect related to academia under occupation: the challenges of maintaining academic freedom under occupation. Orzhel et al. (2023) explored the issue of displaced universities and the challenges they faced. They pointed out that Ukrainian authorities have not developed a specific strategy for dealing with such universities.

Dodonov (2016) identified an additional issue concerning displaced universities from the occupied territories: the existence of "duplicates," where a university with the same name operated simultaneously in both Ukraine-controlled territory and Russian-occupied territory. Plastun (2025) provides (in Ukrainian) the list of such "duplicate universities" developed during this study, as well as some universities that were temporarily relocated, liquidated, or renamed. It also lists the

Ukrainian regulations based on which the institutional changes were made.

An additional issue that has not been explored in the academic literature is the stolen Ukrainian journals. They were part of the intellectual life of universities in the occupied territories and were seized by Russia along with Ukrainian universities. This could be part of a wider problem of hijacked journals (Abalkina, 2021). Abalkina (2024) thinks that this problem is a serious challenge to scientific integrity due to the legitimization of unreliable papers. Brennan et al. (2004) claim that universities play an important role in transforming societies. This transformation includes the economic, political, social, and cultural aspects.

By using the stolen Ukrainian universities, Russia can exploit all these roles. It can use universities as supporters of its political regime and provide a 'protected space' where critique and opposition could ferment. It can use the stolen universities to provide personnel for institution-building in occupied territories. It can use the stolen universities for the purposes of assimilation and propaganda, using the cultural and social roles of universities by encouraging and facilitating new values, and in training and socializing members of new Russian society. These and other aspects of stolen Ukrainian universities are out of the research scope.

This paper aims to explore the issue of stolen Ukrainian universities and show how Russia uses them as a tool of propaganda and assimilation.

2. METHODOLOGY

The term "stolen university" is not widely recognized or defined in international law or academic literature. In this paper, the term "stolen university" refers to a Ukrainian institution of higher education that, as a direct consequence of Russia's occupation of Ukrainian territory, has been forcibly deprived of its core assets. These deprivations include:

- **Material Property:** The university's physical infrastructure and tangible resources have been seized or rendered inaccessible.

- **Human Capital:** The academic community, including faculty, staff, and students, has been displaced, coerced, or otherwise impacted, leading to a loss of their capacity to contribute to the university.
- **Intellectual Property:** The university's unique intellectual output, encompassing academic journals, archives, research data, conference proceedings, and media resources, has been appropriated or rendered unavailable for its intended use.

Official data on stolen universities are mixed and non-systemized. The Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine (MESI) was requested to receive up-to-date official data. MESI, in turn, has requested the State Enterprise "Inforesurs", which is in charge of the Unified State Electronic Database on Education (USEDE) – an automated system for collecting, certifying, processing, storing, and protecting data, including personal data, regarding providers and recipients of educational services in Ukraine).

"Inforesurs," based on USEDE data, created two lists of educational institutions located or relocated in 2014-2024 from Luhansk, Donetsk, Zaporizhzhia, Kherson, Kharkiv Oblasts, and the Autonomous Republic of Crimea.

In accordance with paragraph 10 of Section IV of the Regulations on the Unified State Electronic Database on Education, approved by order of the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine dated June 8, 2018 No. 620, registered with the Ministry of Justice of Ukraine on October 5, 2018 under No. 1132/32584, the authorized entities ensure, in particular, the reliability, accuracy, and completeness of the information contained in USEDE, as well as the timeliness of its entry.

The first list consists of 1,536 titles and includes institutions of higher education, secondary education, postgraduate education, research institutions, and education management authorities. This list is used in the paper to provide a general analysis of all educational and research organizations institutions that were located or relocated in 2014-2024 from Luhansk, Donetsk, Zaporizhzhia, Kherson, Kharkiv Oblasts, and the Autonomous Republic of Crimea.

The second list consists of 443 titles of higher education institutions. The paper uses this list to explore the issue of "stolen universities."

Potential limitations of the above datasets are that the data is based on applications that voluntarily conclude an agreement with USEDE. That is, it is possible that not all of the educational/research organizations have been taken into account.

According to USEDE methodology, universities belong to the category "institutions of higher education." This category includes not only universities but also academies, institutes, branches, and faculties of the universities and colleges. That is why in this paper, "universities" refers to all elements of the USEDE category "institutions of higher education".

USEDE uses two options to classify the status of institutions in the occupied territories: "the institution is moved to controlled territory" and "the institution is blocked." This paper uses these statuses as a parameter to identify that the institution was stolen.

Potential issues regarding such an approach. In some cases, the institution was blocked because it was not stolen by Russia, but for economic or other reasons, in some cases before the full scale. In addition, some territories, for example, parts of Kharkiv and Kherson Oblasts, were recovered by Ukrainian armed forces and are currently under Ukrainian control. Such entries were removed from the final database and left only those records that can be treated as stolen (independently of what Russia has done with such institutions – closed them or reorganized or used as they were).

After all the above procedures, the final data set with institutions of higher education situated in the occupied territories was created. It consists of 289 titles.

The desk research method is applied to explore how Russia uses stolen universities. It includes collecting, analyzing, and synthesizing existing information from secondary sources: publications in press and media, official sites of stolen universities (both Russian and Ukrainian), and stolen journals. The Scopus and ISSN databases are also explored.

3. RESULTS

Overall, 1,536 educational institutions were located or relocated in 2014–2024 from the Luhansk, Donetsk, Zaporizhzhia, Kherson, Kharkiv Oblasts, and the Autonomous Republic of Crimea. This number includes all types of educational facilities and education management authorities, from institutions of higher education to departments of education of city councils (Table 1). Figure 1 provides the structure of stolen institutions of higher education by type.

Table 1. All types of educational facilities and education management authorities situated on occupied territories as of January 1, 2025

Type of educational facility	Number, units
Institution of Higher Education	417
Institution of General Secondary Education	10
Institution of Postgraduate Education	1
Institution of Vocational (Professional-Technical) Education	448
Institution of Professional Pre-Higher Education	152
Other Institutions	2
Other Educational Institution Providing Vocational (Professional-Technical) Education	78
Scientific Institute (Institution)	35
Education Management Authority	393
Overall	1536

As can be seen, the majority of higher education institutions belong to the category “College” (45% or 131 of 289). The next most common elements are “Branch of university” (18% or 53 elements), “Institute” (16% or 45 units), and “University” (11% or 31 units), which are the third most common types. Other types include academies, branches of institutes, and faculties of universities.

Figure 2 provides the geographical structure of stolen institutions of higher education. The regions

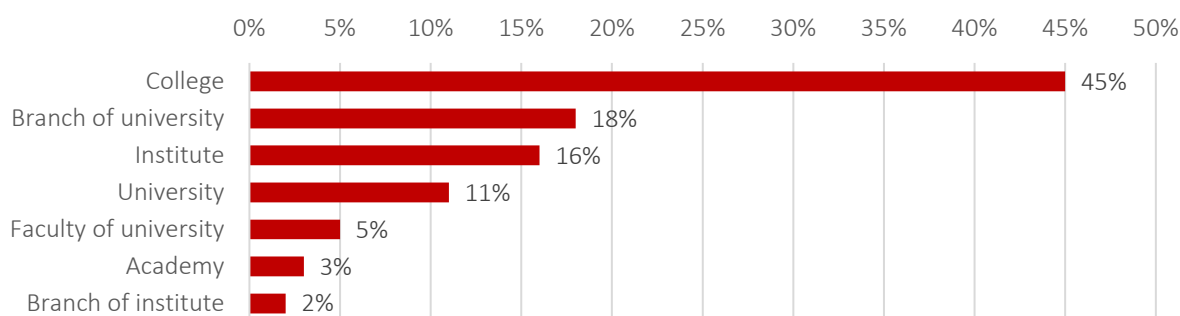


Figure 1. Structure of stolen institutions of higher education by type of education organization

that suffered the most are Donetsk Oblast (105 institutions were stolen by Russia), the Republic of Crimea (88), and Luhansk Oblast (64). Kherson and Zaporizhzhia Oblasts have lost 18 and 14 institutions of higher education, respectively.

Of the 289 titles of stolen institutions of higher education, 242 were “blocked,” and 53 were “moved.” 6 cases were identified when “moved” institutions were “blocked” afterward, meaning they do not exist anymore.

Status “blocked” means that the institution of higher education at this moment does not provide any activity or is already liquidated. The reasons for the “blocked” status are provided in Table 2.

Table 2. Reasons for the “blocked” status

Reason	Number of cases	Share
Liquidated	35	14%
Temporary Suspension of Access	16	7%
Suspension of Activity	6	2%
Terminated	4	2%
Reorganization	22	9%
Located in Temporarily Occupied Territory	158	65%
Other	1	0%
Overall	242	100%

The main reason for the stoppage of activity by the institution of higher education is location in temporarily occupied territory (65% of cases) or total liquidation (14%). In some cases, institutions were reorganized (9%).

The annexation of Ukrainian territories by Russia has caused severe damage to the Ukrainian academic sphere: material losses, human losses, intellectual losses, etc. But this is not the only problem. After Russia stole Ukrainian universities, it started using them against Ukraine.



Figure 2. Geographical structure of stolen institutions of higher education

Stolen academia is widely used for the purposes of Russian propaganda, justification of annexation of Ukrainian territories, and the assimilation of the Ukrainian population in the occupied territories.

Appendices provide a detailed analysis of how it works for concrete stolen Ukrainian universities from different occupied regions: Crimean University (Appendix A), Donetsk University (Appendix B), and Luhansk University (Appendix C).

3.1. Issue #1. Ukrainian Universities/territories are marked as Russian by international organizations; as a result, they are present in the international academic sphere

Plastun et al. (2024a), using the Scopus database, showed that there is a systematic issue of misrepresenting Ukrainian territories as part of the Russian Federation in academic publications. The fraction of publications affected depends on the duration of the occupation by the Russian Federation and

the claimed annexation date. It is over 90% for the cities in Crimea, which were temporarily occupied and claimed to be annexed by Russia in 2014, versus 50% for Donetsk and Luhansk, temporarily occupied in 2014 but claimed to be annexed only in 2022. For Mariupol (temporarily occupied by Russia since 2022), it remained zero in 2022, rising to 4% in 2023, which is an unfortunate trend. An interesting case is Kherson, which was briefly occupied for a few months in 2022. No publications affiliated Kherson with the Russian Federation in 2022 and 2023, but in 2024 (two years after Ukraine liberated it), two articles appeared in Scopus-indexed journals.

The heart of the problem is that international journals choose to accept publications with problematic affiliations. The majority of such publications are published in Russian journals by Russian publishers. But over 30% of the publications with problematic affiliations in 2023 were propagated through international publishers, heavily dominated by Springer Nature/Pleiades (Germany/USA), followed by MDPI (Switzerland), EDP Science (France), IEEE (USA) and Elsevier

(Netherlands). Individual publications appeared in ASV Publishing, CSIRO, MM Publishing, Science Press, Wolters Kluwer Medknow Publications, and World Scientific.

Most publishers' position can be summarized as "territorial and political neutrality." This means they totally ignore the issue of stolen Ukrainian universities and occupied territories and are ready to provide misinformation on their official sites.

As a result, on official sites of publishers like Springer, Taylor, and Francis, scientometric databases like Scopus/Wos, and academic social networks like ResearchGate or Academia.edu, there are thousands of cases where Ukrainian territories are marked as the Russian Federation and stolen Ukrainian Universities are mentioned as authors' actual affiliations.

3.2. Issue #2. International ISSN Centre and legalization of stolen Ukrainian journals

The ISSN, an international organization responsible for registering academic journals, has decided not to adhere to ISO 3166. As a result, it registers Russian journals in occupied Ukrainian territo-

ries (Crimea, Donetsk, and Luhansk Oblasts). No compliance measures have been taken, and no sanctions have been imposed against these journals for spreading propaganda.

As a result, stolen Ukrainian journals are present in the international academic sphere. In this paper, the term "stolen Ukrainian journals" refers to academic journals seized by Russia and the universities to which they were affiliated. This includes the unlawful appropriation of their archives, ISSN numbers, editorial boards, and other intellectual assets.

For example, Russia has stolen two Ukrainian journals: "Uchonyye zapiski Tavricheskogo natsionalnogo universiteta imeni V. I. Vernadskogo": seriya "Filosofiya. Kulturologiya. Politologiya. Sotsiologiya" ["Scientific Notes of the Taurida National V.I. Vernadsky University": Series "Philosophy. Cultural Studies. Political Science. Sociology"] (KB No. 15718-4189P dated September 28, 2009) and "Uchonyye zapiski Tavricheskogo natsionalnogo universiteta imeni V. I. Vernadskogo": seriya "Problemy pedagogiki sredney i vysshey shkoly" ["Scientific Notes of the Taurida National V.I. Vernadsky University": Series "Problems of Pedagogy of Secondary and Higher Schools"] (KB No. 19680-9480P dated

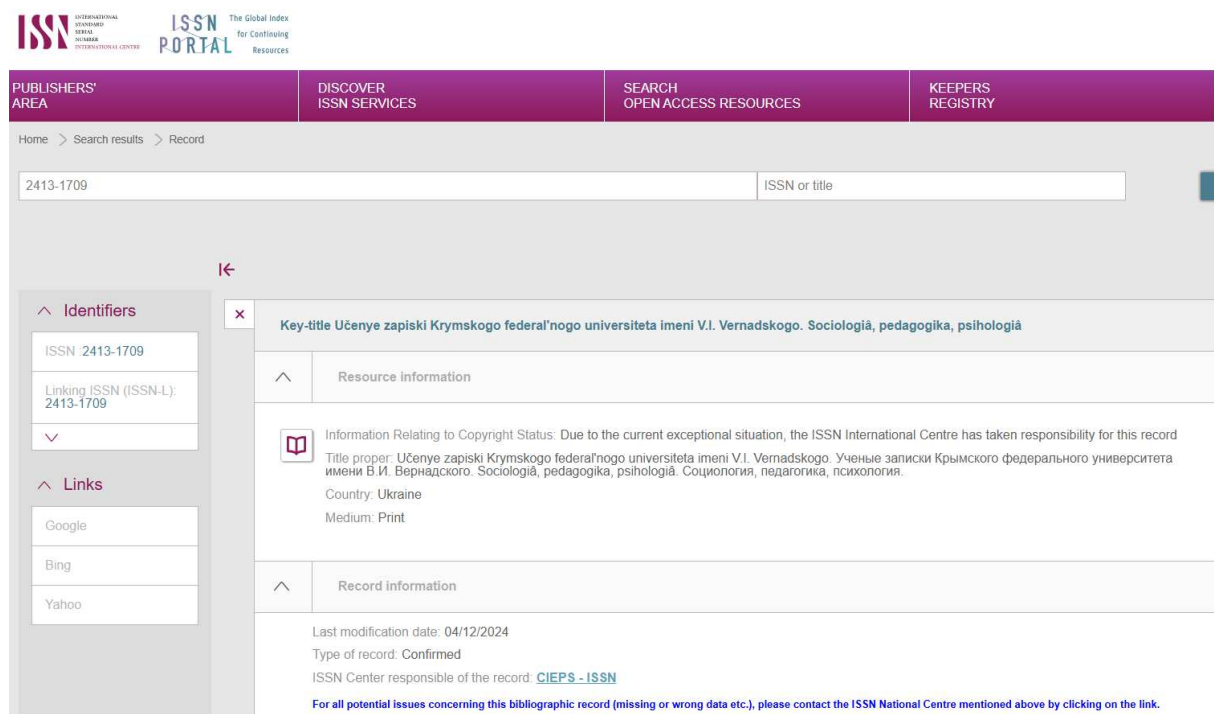


Figure 3. A screenshot from the ISSN portal for the record 2413-1709

The screenshot shows the ISSN Portal interface. At the top, there are navigation tabs: PUBLISHERS' AREA, DISCOVER ISSN SERVICES, SEARCH OPEN ACCESS RESOURCES, and KEEPERS REGISTRY. Below the navigation is a breadcrumb trail: Home > Search results > Record. A search bar contains the ISSN number 2312-5330. The main content area is divided into sections: Identifiers (ISSN 2312-5330, Linking ISSN (ISSN-L): 2312-5330), Links (Google, Bing, Yahoo), Key-title (Naukovij visnik: finansi, banki, investicii), Resource information (Title proper: Naukovij visnik: finansi, banki, investicii. Науковий вісник: фінанси, банки, інвестиції. Country: Ukraine. Medium: Print), and Record information (Last modification date: 05/02/2024, Type of record: Confirmed, ISSN Center responsible for the record: ISSN Centre for Ukraine). A note at the bottom states: "For all potential issues concerning this bibliographic record (missing or wrong data etc.), please contact the ISSN National Centre mentioned above by clicking on the link."

Figure 4. A screenshot from the ISSN portal for the record 2312-5330

January 25, 2013) and created in 2015 a new journal “Scientific Notes of V.I. Vernadsky Crimean Federal University. Sociology. Pedagogy. Psychology” (III № ФС77-61813 from May 18, 2015). All the previous archives of both Ukrainian journals were stolen and are present on the website¹ of this new journal). Somehow in 2015, this journal received ISSN number 2413-1709² (see Figure 3).

It is unclear how a stolen journal from an occupied territory received international registration. ISSN refused to comment on this issue. In addition, ISSN has confirmed the ISSN numbers of Ukrainian journals for years despite the fact that some were stolen and not controlled by their founders.

For example, Russia stole the journal “Scientific Bulletin: finance, banking, investment” in 2015. Despite this, ISSN for 10 years confirmed the record 2312-5330, which belongs to the Ukrainian journal “Naukovii visnyk: finansy, banky, investitsii” This record³ is still active in 2025.

Moreover, stolen universities are used as an instrument of Russian propaganda. Plastun et al. (2024a)

defined the following forms of Russian propaganda within the academic environment with the use of stolen universities:

- Spread of Russian propaganda narratives to support its aggression against Ukraine: This appears in academic papers that justify and support Russia’s actions published by authors from the stolen universities (Plastun et al., 2024).
- Support and justification of aggression by the stolen universities or their representatives (Plastun & Makarenko, 2024).
- Stolen Universities are actively involved in Russian efforts to assimilate the Ukrainian population on occupied territories. For these purposes, different instruments are used: Russian textbooks used in the educational process, events organized by Russia where students from stolen universities are involved, academic mobility within Russia (students from stolen universities can study in Russian universities), etc.

Human Rights Watch (HRW, 2024) documented violations of international law by the Russian authori-

1 <https://sn-spp.cfuv.ru/arhiv-1995-2014-gg/>

2 <https://portal.issn.org/resource/ISSN/2413-1709>

3 <https://portal.issn.org/resource/ISSN/2312-5330>

ties in relation to the right to education in formerly occupied areas of Ukraine's Kharkiv Oblasts and other Oblasts that remain under Russian occupation.

Russia has created a special "university changes" program to recruit Ukrainian schoolchildren from the TOT. In 2024, about 3,700 children from the occupied Donetsk region were taken for excursions and consultations on admission to Russian universities (Zelenetska, 2024).

Russians have deported more than 20,000 Ukrainian children for "re-education" under the "University Sessions" program, according to research by the Almenda Centre of Civil Education. "University Sessions" is one of the projects of educational programs used by Russia to form the so-called "Russian identity" in children from the temporarily occupied parts of the Luhansk, Donetsk, Zaporizhzhia, and Kherson Oblasts (Lychko et al., 2024).

Almenda has identified 81 Russian universities where the so-called University Sessions are implemented. Among them are stolen Ukrainian universities – V.I. Vernadsky Crimean Federal University⁴⁵ and Sevastopol State University⁶.

The President of the Russian Union of Rectors, Rector of Moscow University V.A. Sadovnichy spoke at the opening of the First Forum of Educational Organizations of Russia, the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics, which took place in Rostov-on-Don from June 3 to 5, 2022. Its goal is to facilitate the rapid integration of universities of the Donetsk People's Republic and the Luhansk People's Republic into the educational space of the Russian Federation (Moscow State University, 2022a).

Rector of the University Viktor Sadovnichy: "This year we accepted 115 [applicants] – these are the children of those who participated in the military actions, and those who participated themselves. Another hundred, or even several, we transfer from other universities, if they ask, from universities in new territories or other universities, we also transfer them, despite the lack of places" (Moscow State University, 2023; Moscow State University, 2022b).

New history textbooks with an operation in Ukraine were presented in Moscow. The goal of the military operation in Ukraine is stated in the textbook as "the defense of Donbas and the preemptive provision of Russia's security" (RBC, 2023).

From November 25 to December 6, 2023, the Winter School on Financial Security was held. Students in grades 9–11 attended from different regions of the Russian Federation, including the Luhansk and Donetsk People's Republics, the Zaporizhzhia and Kherson Oblasts, the Republic of Crimea, and Sevastopol. More than half of the participants represented "new territories" – Institute of Physics Named After P.N. Lebedev of the Russian Academy of Sciences (The Lebedev Physical Institute, 2023).

4. DISCUSSION

The most obvious form of responsibility for such actions could be sanctions: against Russian institutions that have participated in the theft or illegal use of resources of the stolen universities; against those Russian universities that were created on the basis of the stolen Ukrainian universities; against those academic journals that were stolen among with the Ukrainian universities; against those international organizations/institutions that collaborate with Russian copies of the stolen Ukrainian universities and academic journals as well.

Despite more than 22,000 different sanctions against Russia, the academic sphere is still relatively untouched. Key arguments against sanctions are as follows: science is out of politics; sanctions might disrupt a free flow of thoughts and might punish innocents; Russian science is an essential element of global science, and sanctions might hurt worldwide science and human development; overall, sanctions are costly and inefficient.

Chumachenko et al. (2022) claim that neutrality is inapplicable. Russia's unjustifiable military invasion of Ukraine is unprecedented; it requires unprecedented reactions from the world scientific community.

4 <https://kianews24.ru/news/prepodavateli-kfu-chitayut-lekcii-shkol/>

5 <https://crimeapress.info/universitetskie-smeny-shkolniki-donbassa-proydu-obuchenie-v-krymu/>

6 <https://sevastopol.bezformata.com/listnews/sevgu-startovali-universitetskie-smeni/106774407/>

A proper discussion is needed to change the existing consensus: if there is a crime, there should be a punishment. It is not about politics; it is about justice. However, sanctions are not the only option on the table.

Plastun et al. (2024a) provide the following potential solution: academic journals, publishers, and scientometric databases should monitor the material published on their websites to prevent the publication, indexing, and display of Russian propaganda related to its appropriation of Ukrainian territories.

Plastun and Makarenko (2024) believe that a sharp increase in reputational risks for international organizations (publishers, scientometric databases, etc.) caused by the growth of attention to these issues within the academic community and publications in media can be a reason to review cooperation with Russian academic institutions and journals and may cause the implementation of their compliance to prevent using science as a tool of propaganda.

The first step to fix the problem might include the following:

- Publishers/database owners should stop mentioning stolen universities in affiliations since they officially do not exist.

- Publishers/database owners should stop marking Ukrainian territories as Russia.
- The International ISSN Center should cancel the registration of stolen Ukrainian journals and media.
- COPE should issue guidance for journals/publishers on collaborating with stolen Ukrainian Universities/Facilities/Journals.

It is worth mentioning the example of a responsible position taken by the international publisher Brill regarding the Russian journal “Scrinium.” Right after Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine started, Brill contacted the chief editor of “Scrinium” directly to clarify his position regarding the war and its relationship with the RAS. After successfully ensuring compliance, Brill decided to continue publishing “Scrinium.” Additionally, Brill ensures that it does not accept funding from the Russian Federation.

Ukrainian authorities should take a more proactive position and initiate discussions with leading international publishers (Springer, Elsevier, Taylor and Francis, MDPI, etc.), database owners (Clarivate, Elsevier), and related organizations (COPE, International ISSN Center, and others) regarding these issues.

CONCLUSION

This paper examines the phenomenon of “stolen Ukrainian universities” and their instrumentalization by Russia to undermine Ukraine. A total of 289 universities, their branches, academies, colleges, and affiliated institutes have been effectively seized by Russia following the annexation of Ukrainian territories during 2014–2024 from Luhansk, Donetsk, Zaporizhzhia, Kherson, Kharkiv Oblasts, and the Autonomous Republic of Crimea. The majority of these institutions are located in the Republic of Crimea (31%) and Donetsk Oblast (36%).

The findings reveal that the stolen academic institutions serve multiple purposes for Russia. These institutions are leveraged to legitimize the annexation of Ukrainian territories in the international sphere and spread Russian propaganda; they play a critical role in assimilating the Ukrainian population in occupied territories through the manipulation of educational content and the suppression of Ukrainian identity.

Some international organizations inadvertently list these stolen universities as Russian entities, thereby legitimizing Russia’s occupation. The International ISSN Centre has registered stolen Ukrainian journals under Russian entities, allowing them to circulate within the global academic community.

To address these issues and mitigate their impact, this paper proposes several steps, including imposing sanctions on the Russian counterparts of stolen universities, ceasing to list stolen universities in affilia-

tions, avoiding the labeling of Ukrainian territories as part of Russia in publications and databases, and revoking the registration of journals and media originating from stolen Ukrainian universities.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

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Investigation: Alex Plastun.

Methodology: Alex Plastun.

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APPENDIX A. The case of Crimean University

Before annexation, it was Taurida National University named after V.I. Vernadsky. After annexation, the name was changed into Crimean Federal University named after V. I. Vernadsky. Following the annexation of Crimea, Russian authorities created the Crimean Federal University in January 2015, closing seven Ukrainian universities and colleges and five research centers.

Taurida National University Rector Vladimir Kazarin estimates that of a university population of 76,000 before annexation, Crimea lost 50,000 people in three years, including 20,000 students who left for the mainland. Many teachers left for Russia, mainland Ukraine, or abroad.

Taurida National University relocated to Kyiv in mid-2016. At the beginning of 2018, the university's population was estimated at 5,000 (Roache, 2018).

The number of students at Crimean Federal University is 30,000+. The total number of university employees is 6,567, including 2,851 faculty members. International organizations do not accredit the Crimean Federal University; its diploma is not recognized anywhere outside of Russia. The international academic community limits interaction with institutes and scientists registered in the occupied territory. Crimean students cannot do internships outside of Russia.

Despite such limitations, Crimean Federal University is used to spread Russian propaganda within the international academic community, actively supports the war against Ukraine, and helps to assimilate Ukrainians on the temporarily occupied territories.

Next, Crimean Federal University named after V. I. Vernadsky is an active supporter of war against Ukraine. The Rector of the Crimean Federal University named after V.I. Vernadsky Falaleev Andrey Pavlovich signed the so-called Rector's letter (a public letter of support of invasion and aggression against Ukraine signed by rectors of 300+ Russian universities). After that, Crimean Federal University became deeply involved in aggression against Ukraine.

The Tavrichesky College of the Crimean Federal University named after V.I. Vernadsky (2024a) was collecting New Year's gifts for the combatants of the special military operation. The students were proud of the soldiers. Almost every letter contains warm words addressed to the soldiers, wishes for a speedy victory and requests to return home quickly alive and well.

A master class on tactical medicine was held at the Medical Institute of the Crimean Federal University (2024b). Its participants were 20 fighters of the Bars self-defense unit of the Republic of Crimea. The classes were conducted by cadets and

Table A1. Stolen Ukrainian universities and research centers used to create the Crimean Federal University

Stolen Ukrainian universities	Stolen Ukrainian research centers
1. Taurida National University named after V. I. Vernadsky (including the University College, Scientific Library and the Computer Technology Center)	1. Crimean Scientific Center
2. National Academy of Environmental and Resort Construction	2. Seismology Department of the Institute of Geophysics named after S. I. Subbotina
3. Southern Branch of NUBIPU "Crimean Agrotechnological University" (including Bakhchisaray College of Construction, Architecture and Design, Crimean Agro-Industrial College, Pribrezhny Agrarian College, Crimean Technical School of Hydromelioration and Agricultural Mechanization)	3. Crimean Scientific and Methodological Center for Education Management
4. Humanities and Pedagogical Academy (the city of Yalta, including the Evpatoria Institute of Social Sciences, the Institute of Pedagogical Education and Management and the Economics and Humanities College)	4. Crimean Branch of the A. E. Krymsky Institute of Oriental Studies
5. Crimean Economic Institute	5. Head Territorial Research and Design Institute "KRYMNIIPROEKT"
6. Crimean Institute of Information and Printing Technologies (including the Department of Training Junior Specialists)	6. Crimean Experimental Station of the National Scientific Center "Institute of Experimental and Clinical Veterinary Medicine"
7. Crimean State Medical University named after S. I. Georgievsky (including the Medical College)	7. Crimean Mountain and Forest Research Station

employees of the Military Training Center of the Crimean Federal University.

“Such classes have been organized since the beginning of the special military operation. In addition to conducting them, our cadets work in the hospital on a voluntary basis. There they help wounded SVO fighters. In addition, the guys are actively involved in volunteering, including traveling to the Kherson region.”

A lecture dedicated to the heroes of the special military operation was held at the Academy of Construction and Architecture of the Crimean Federal University (2024c). The event was organized within the framework of the project “Knowledge.Heroes” of the Russian society “Knowledge” and was timed to coincide with the Day of Heroes of the Fatherland.

Crimean Federal University has stolen not only Ukrainian academic institutions but all their infrastructure, including academic journals. Overall, there were 25+ journals stolen¹.

For example, the “Bosporos Studies” journal (Bosporoskie issledovaniya) was founded by the Crimean branch of the Institute of Oriental

Studies named after A.E. Krymsky of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine (Simferopol) in 2001. Since 2015, the Crimean Federal University named after V.I. Vernadsky has stolen this journal, along with all its archives and ISSN.

The International ISSN Center did nothing to prevent this theft. For years, it has been providing and confirming the ISSN of this journal² (see Figure A1).

In 2024, the International ISSN Center decided to legalize the theft and illegally changed the country from Ukraine (see Figure A1) to International³ (see Figure A2).

As a result, stolen journals, as well as authors who publish in international journals, can be used as sources of Russian propaganda.

The source of the Russian propaganda is another interesting issue. Here is an example of the paper from the stolen Crimean Federal University:

Birkun, A. (2024). Misinformation on first aid for seizures communicated through the fastest growing social media platform: A cross-sectional study of TikTok content. *Epilepsy & Behavior*, 161, Article 110116. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.yebeh.2024.110116>

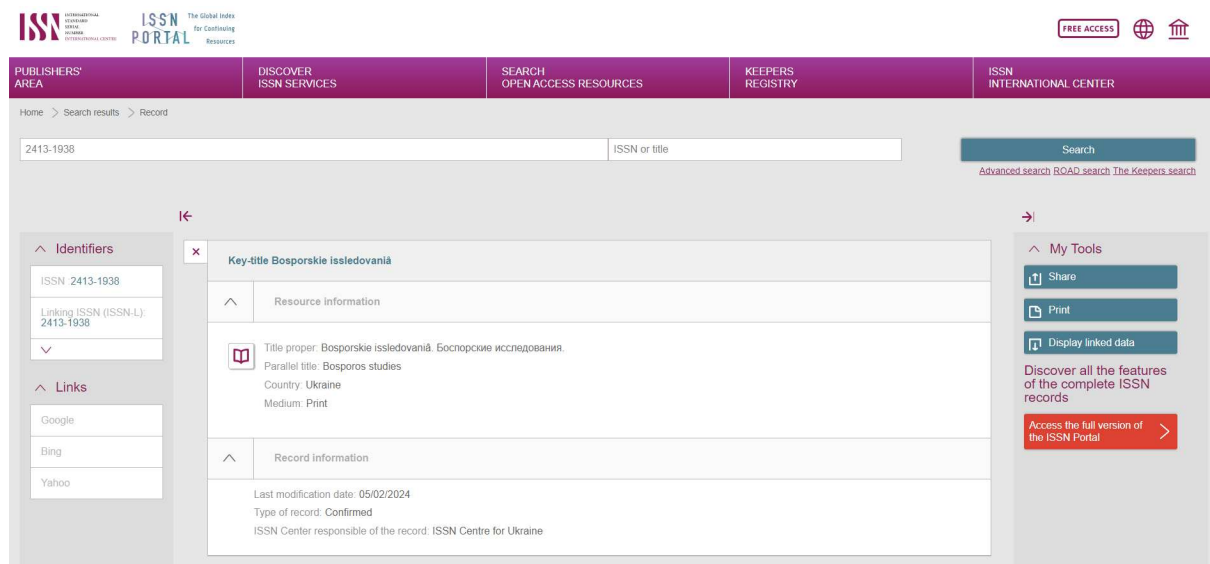


Figure A1. A screenshot from the ISSN portal for the record 2413-1938 (date of access May 1, 2024)

- 1 <https://science.cfuv.ru/nauchnye-zhurnaly-kfu>
- 2 <https://portal.issn.org/resource/ISSN/2413-1938>
- 3 <https://portal.issn.org/resource/ISSN/2413-1938>

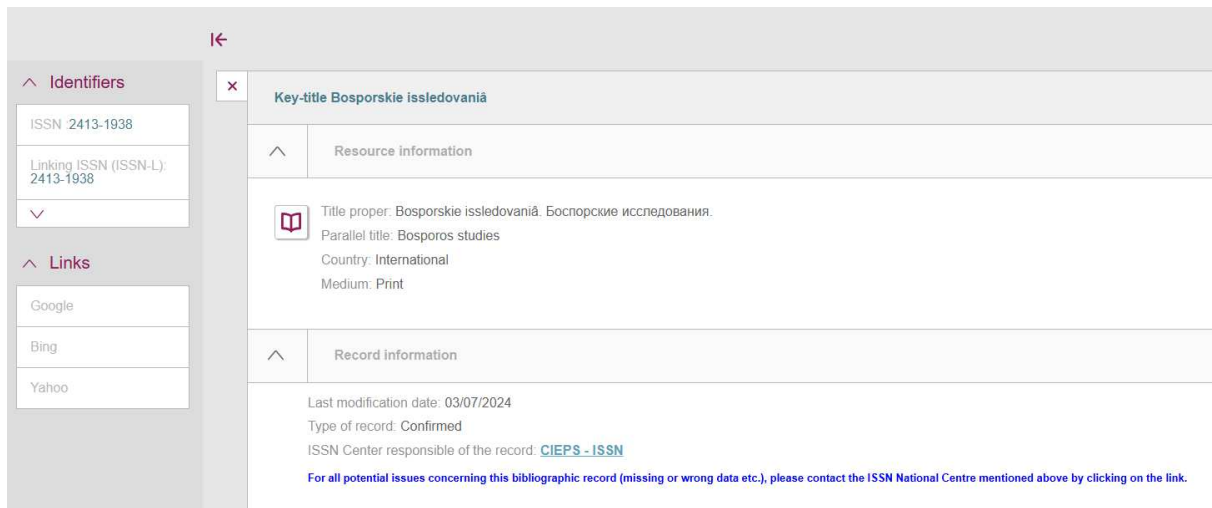


Figure A2. A screenshot from the ISSN portal for the record 2413-1938 (date of access January 1, 2025)

In this paper, Ukrainian territory is marked as Russia. The affiliation of the author is as follows:

Department of General Surgery, Anaesthesiology, Resuscitation and Emergency Medicine, Medical Institute named after S.I. Georgievsky of V.I. Vernadsky Crimean Federal University, Lenin Blvd, 5/7, Simferopol 295051, Russian Federation. Electronic address: birkunalexei@gmail.com

This paper was published in the journal *Epilepsy & Behavior*⁴ (published by Elsevier).

Epilepsy & Behavior did not provide any compliance related to author affiliation and allowed the marking of Ukrainian territory as Russia and use as an affiliation a stolen Ukrainian university. However, it was just the first step. Next, this paper⁵ was indexed by Scopus, the biggest international scientometric database (see Figure A4).



Figure A3. A screenshot from Elsevier for the record 10.1016/j.yebeh.2024.110116 (date of access January 1, 2025)

4 <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S152550524004980>

5 <https://www.scopus.com/record/display.uri?eid=2-s2.0-85208193276&origin=recordpage>



Figure A4. A screenshot from Scopus for the record 2-s2.0-85208193276 (date of access January 1, 2025)

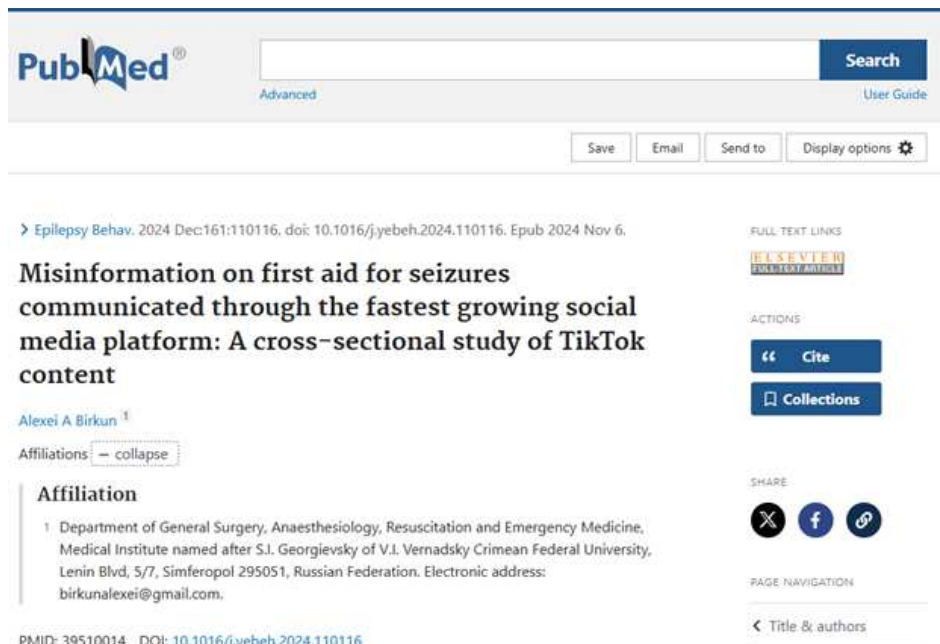


Figure A5. A screenshot from PubMed for the record 39510014 (date of access January 1, 2025)

Thanks to Scopus, this article was presented to the international academic community. The same applies to PubMed ⁶, the biggest database of references and abstracts on life sciences and biomedical topics (see Figure A5).

Also, this paper, as well as the author, are present on ResearchGate⁷ (Figure A6).

As a result, millions of readers all over the world are now misled to think that Crimea is part of the Russian Federation and that Crimean Federal University is not a stolen Ukrainian university (actually a number of Ukrainian academic institutions) but a legal Russian academic institution.

⁶ <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/39510014/>

⁷ https://www.researchgate.net/publication/386309749_Misinformation_on_first_aid_for_seizures_communicated_through_the_fastest_growing_social_media_platform_A_cross-sectional_study_of_TikTok_content

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Article

Misinformation on first aid for seizures communicated through the fastest growing social media platform: A cross-sectional study of TikTok content

December 2024 · *Epilepsy & Behavior* 161(10):110116
DOI: 10.1016/j.yesbeh.2024.110116

Alexei A. Birkun

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Figure A6. A screenshot from ResearchGate for the record 386309749 (date of access January 1, 2025)

APPENDIX B. The case of Donetsk University

Before annexation, the name was Donetsk National University named after Vasyl Stus. After annexation, Russia changed it into Donetsk State University. Despite having lost its entire material and technical base which remained in occupied Donetsk, by November 3, 2014, the Donetsk National University resumed its educational activities in the central part of Ukraine in the city of Vinnytsia. 70 percent of the thousand teaching staff and 60 percent of the 14,000 university students managed to move there (Nosok, 2024).

Donetsk State University is a stolen version of the Ukrainian Donetsk National University named after Vasyl Stus. According to their official site, the total number of students is 16,500. Donetsk State University is an active supporter of the war against Ukraine.

As part of the campaign “Everything for the Front. Everything for Victory”, which is regularly held at the Faculty of Law, a diesel heat gun was purchased for our combatants through the joint efforts of all employees (Donetsk State University, 2024a). Deputy Dean for Educational Work Svetlana Gulina organized the delivery

of aid to the destination. “Having received the valuable cargo, our defenders expressed their gratitude to everyone and sent a video message with words of gratitude. We hope that our modest assistance will help bring victory closer!”

On December 4, the Center for Ethnopolitical Rehabilitation of Donetsk State University, with the support of the Russian Ministry of Education and Science, held a strategic session entitled “Modern History of Novorossiia. Practice of Civil Resistance to Neo-Nazism” (Donetsk State University 2024b). The event was dedicated to the tenth anniversary of the Russian Spring in Donbass. Scientists from Donetsk, Moscow, Luhansk, Rostov-on-Don, Melitopol, and Genichesk gathered at the V. Dal Leningrad State University to summarize and scientifically systematize the practical experience of civil resistance of Novorossiia residents to Ukrainian neo-Nazism.

Up to 20 Ukrainian journals were stolen as well⁸. All these journals confirmed their ISSN in 2024. Below is just one example: “*Studia germanica, romanica et comparatistica*”⁹.

8 <https://donnu.ru/science/journals>

9 <https://portal.issn.org/resource/ISSN/2415-8720>

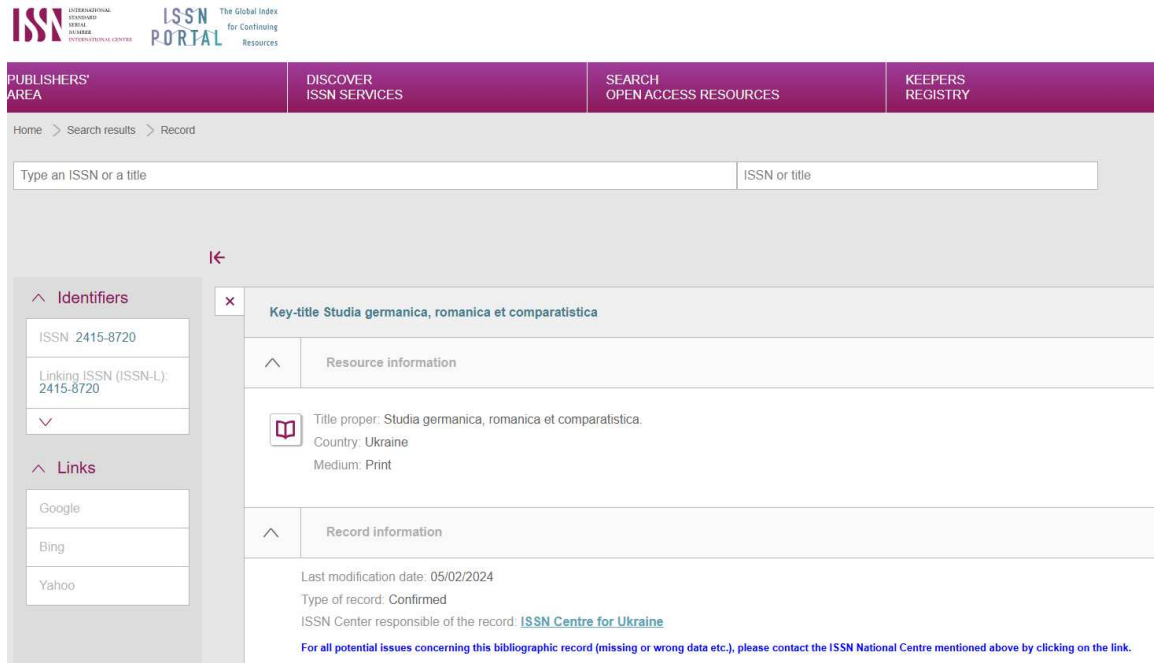


Figure B1. A screenshot from the ISSN portal for the record 2415-8720 (date of access January 1, 2025)

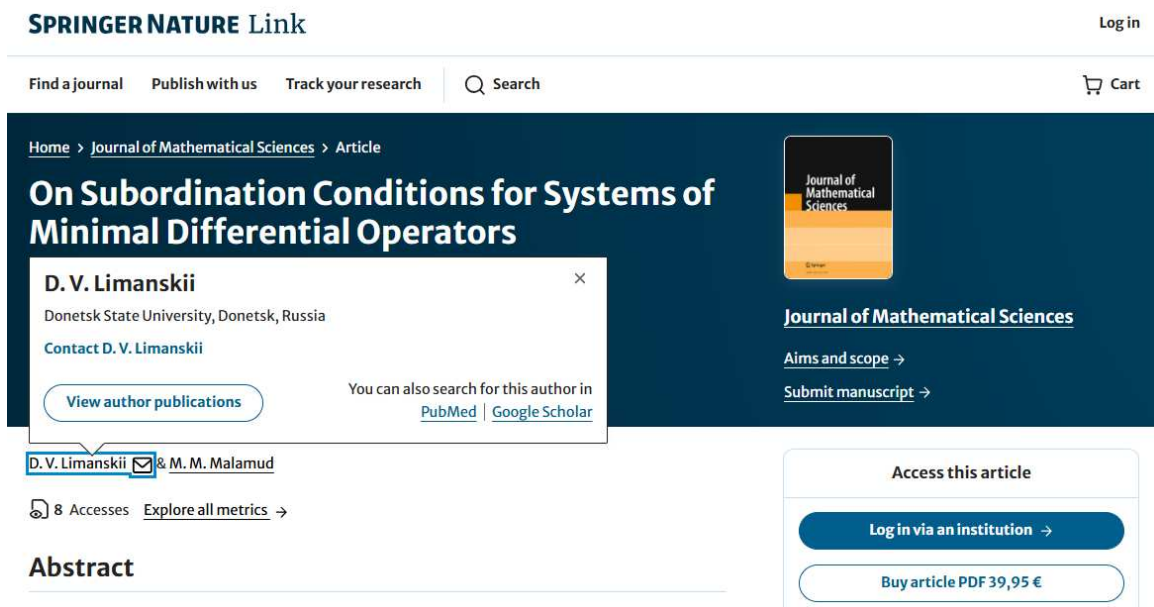


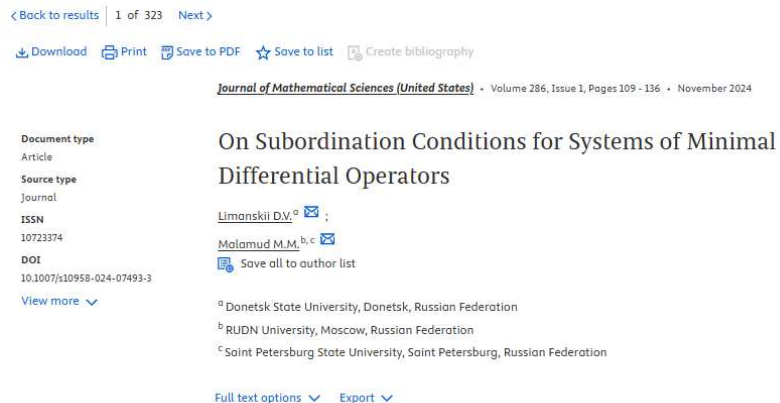
Figure B2. A screenshot from the official Springer site for the record s10958-024-07493-3 (date of access January 1, 2025)

These stolen journals, as well as the affiliation of the stolen Donetsk State University, are actively used for Russian propaganda within the international academic environment.

Here is how it works for the case of the following paper by the author from Donetsk State University:

Limanskii, D.V., & Malamud, M.M. (2024). On subordination conditions for systems of minimal differential operators. *Journal of Mathematical Sciences*, 286, 109-136. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10958-024-07493-3>

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Journal of Mathematical Sciences (United States) • Volume 286, Issue 1, Pages 109 - 136 • November 2024

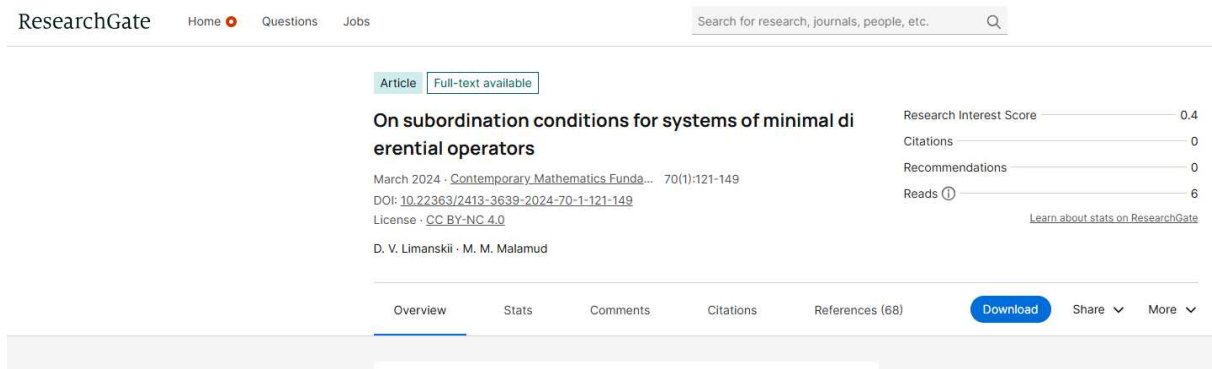
Document type
 Article
Source type
 Journal
ISSN
 10723374
DOI
 10.1007/s10958-024-07493-3
[View more](#)

On Subordination Conditions for Systems of Minimal Differential Operators
[Limanskii D.V.](#) ^a [✉](#) ;
[Malamud M.M.](#) ^{b,c} [✉](#)
[Save all to author list](#)

^a Donetsk State University, Donetsk, Russian Federation
^b RUDN University, Moscow, Russian Federation
^c Saint Petersburg State University, Saint Petersburg, Russian Federation

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Figure B3. A screenshot from the official Scopus site for the record 2-s2.0-85210511743 (date of access January 1, 2025)



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On subordination conditions for systems of minimal differential operators

March 2024 · *Contemporary Mathematics Fundamentals* · 70(1):121-149
 DOI: 10.22363/2413-3639-2024-70-1-121-149
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D. V. Limanskii · M. M. Malamud

Research Interest Score 0.4
 Citations 0
 Recommendations 0
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Figure B4. A screenshot from ResearchGate for the record 379710011 (date of access January 1, 2025)

nal “Journal of Mathematical Sciences.” Author D. V. Limanskii is affiliated with Donetsk State University, Donetsk, Russia. As can be seen (Figure B2), Springer Nature does not provide any compliance regarding ISO 3166 and ignores the fact that Donetsk is a Ukrainian city and Donetsk State University is a Ukrainian university stolen by Russia¹⁰.

Afterward, this paper appeared in Scopus, where Limanskii D.V. is affiliated with Donetsk State University, Donetsk, Russian Federation¹¹ (Figure B3).

This paper is also presented on ResearchGate¹² (Figure B4).

10 <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10958-024-07493-3#citeas>

11 <https://www.scopus.com/record/display.uri?eid=2-s2.0-85210511743&origin=recordpage>

12 https://www.researchgate.net/publication/379710011_On_subordination_conditions_for_systems_of_minimal_differential_operators

APPENDIX C. The case of Luhansk University

Before annexation, one had Luhansk State Medical University. After annexation, the university became Luhansk State Medical University named after St. Luke. Luhansk State Medical University named after St. Luke is a stolen version of Ukrainian Luhansk State Medical University, which was relocated in 2014 from Luhansk to Rubizhne and in 2022 from Rubizhne to Rivne. Luhansk State Medical University named after St. Luke (2024a) is an active supporter of war against Ukraine.

On December 15, students Shumskikh A.A. and Omelchuk I.A. together with the supervisor delivered medicines, syringes, warm socks and letters to the “N” location. All combatants were very grateful to our students for their support and care.

On December 16, employees of the Department of Hygiene and Ecology, together with students of the Federal State Budgetary Educational Institution of Higher Education Luhansk State Medical University named after St. Luke (2024b) of the Ministry of Health of Russia, joined the important

patriotic action “Congratulate a Hero on the New Year”, organized by the administration of the city of Luhansk. The goal of the action is to support the participants of the special military operation, who are away from their families during the holidays, defending the Motherland.

Representatives of the Fund for Assistance to Disabled People and Veterans of Combat Operations “We Don’t Abandon Our People” arrived at the Department of General Medical Practice and Medical Rehabilitation of the Luhansk State Medical University named after St. Luke (2024c), where the project “One for All and All for One” supported by the Presidential Grants Fund for the rehabilitation of demobilized participants of the Special Military Operations is being implemented.

Together with Luhansk State Medical University, Russia has stolen the journal Problemy ekolohichnoi ta medychnoi henetyky i klinichnoi imunolohii [Problems of ecological and medical genetics and clinical immunology]¹³.

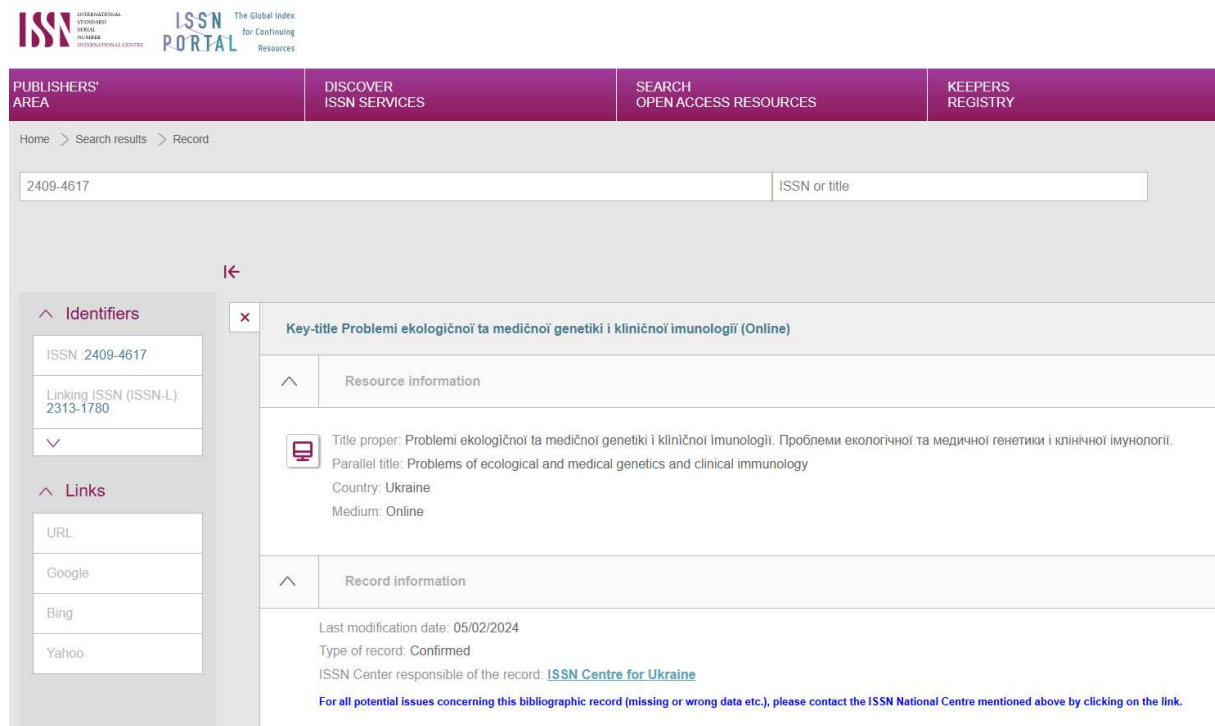


Figure C1. A screenshot from the ISSN portal for the record 2409-4617 (date of access January 1, 2025)

13 https://ecoproblemlug.ucoz.ua/index/oficijnij_sajt_zbirnika/0-2

Home > Russian Journal of Bioorganic Chemistry > Article

Synthesis and Hypoglycemic Activity of New Nicotinitrile-Furan Molecular Hybrids

Published: 09 April 2024
Volume 50, pages 554-570

E. Yu. Bibik
St. Luke Lugansk State Medical University, 91045, Lugansk, Russia
Belgorod State National Research University, 308015, Belgorod, Russia

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D. A. Tilchenko, E. Yu. Bibik, V. V. Dotsenko, S. G. Krivokolysko, K. A. Frolov, N. A. Aksenov & I. V. Aksenova

56 Accesses [Explore all metrics](#) →

Figure C2. A screenshot from the official Springer site for the record S1068162024020183 (date of access January 1, 2025)

Despite being stolen, the ISSN Center confirmed its ISSN 2409-4617 in 2024¹⁴ (Figure C1).

Here how it works in the case of the following paper by the author from Luhansk State Medical University:

Tilchenko, D.A., Bibik, E.Y., Dotsenko, V.V., Krivokolysko, S. G., Frolov, K. A., Aksenov, N. A., & Aksenova, I. V. (2024). Synthesis and hypoglycemic activity of new nicotinitrile-furan molecular hybrids. *Russian Journal of Bioorganic Chemistry*, 50, 554-570. <https://doi.org/10.1134/S1068162024020183>

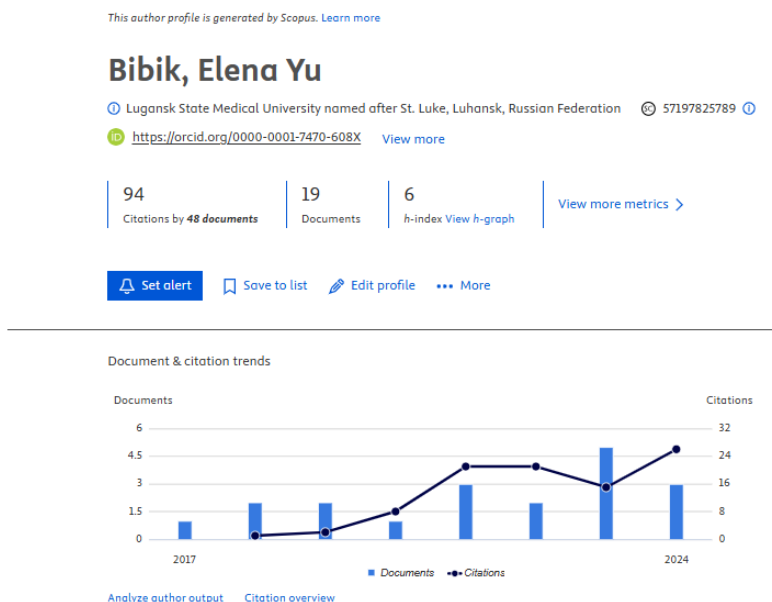
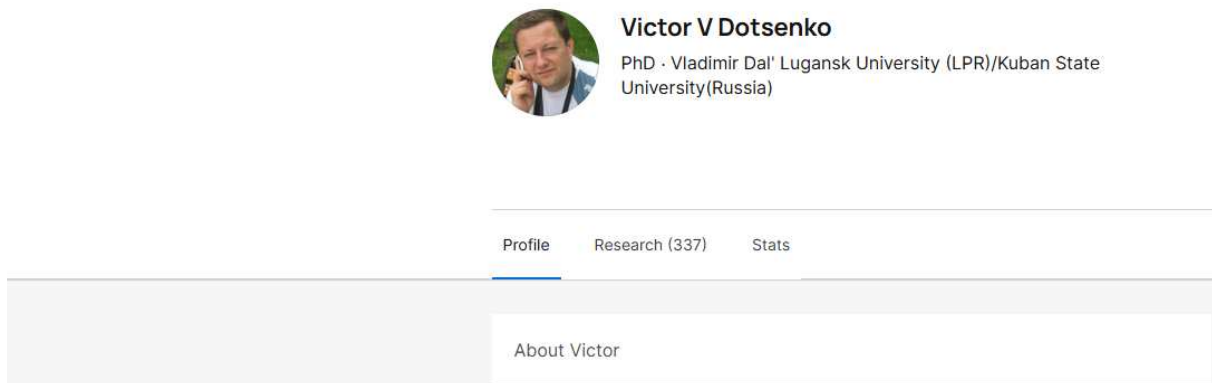


Figure C3. A screenshot from the official Scopus site for the record 57197825789 (date of access January 1, 2025)

14 <https://portal.issn.org/resource/ISSN/2409-4617>



Victor V Dotsenko
PhD · Vladimir Dal' Lugansk University (LPR)/Kuban State University(Russia)

Profile Research (337) Stats

About Victor

Figure C6. A screenshot from the ResearchGate site for the profile Victor Dotsenko (date of access January, 1, 2025)

Also, this paper¹⁸ is presented on ResearchGate (Figure C5), where one of the co-authors, V. Dotsenko¹⁹, is affiliated with another stolen Ukrainian University, Vladimir Dal' Luhansk University (Figure C6).

18 https://www.researchgate.net/publication/379707935_Synthesis_and_Hypoglycemic_Activity_of_New_Nicotinonitrile-Furan_Molecular_Hybrids

19 <https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Victor-Dotsenko>