“Relocated universities of Ukraine: Spatial-temporal mapping, trajectories, and lessons from two waves of displacement (2014–2025)”

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ARTICLE INFO	Taras Finikov, Igor Lyman, Serhii Kovachov and Yana Suchikova (2025). Relocated universities of Ukraine: Spatial-temporal mapping, trajectories, and lessons from two waves of displacement (2014–2025). *Knowledge and Performance Management*, *9*(2), 142-162. doi:10.21511/kpm.09(2).2025.11
DOI	http://dx.doi.org/10.21511/kpm.09(2).2025.11
RELEASED ON	Thursday, 25 September 2025
RECEIVED ON	Thursday, 21 August 2025
ACCEPTED ON	Monday, 22 September 2025
JOURNAL	"Knowledge and Performance Management"
ISSN PRINT	2543-5507
ISSN ONLINE	2616-3829
PUBLISHER	LLC “Consulting Publishing Company “Business Perspectives”
FOUNDER	Sp. z o.o. Kozmenko Science Publishing

NUMBER OF REFERENCES	NUMBER OF FIGURES	NUMBER OF TABLES
50	4	3

BUSINESS PERSPECTIVES

LLC "CPC "Business Perspectives"
Hryhorii Skovoroda lane, 10,
Sumy, 40022, Ukraine

www.businessperspectives.org

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RELOCATED UNIVERSITIES OF UKRAINE: SPATIAL-TEMPORAL MAPPING, TRAJECTORIES, AND LESSONS FROM TWO WAVES OF DISPLACEMENT (2014–2025)

Abstract

With the outbreak of war in eastern Ukraine in 2014 and especially after Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022, many Ukrainian universities underwent forced relocation. This phenomenon remains underexplored in both national and international academic literature, despite its profound consequences for Ukraine's higher education system. This study aims to identify the spatial-temporal trajectories of relocated universities in Ukraine, to typologize models of adaptation, and to formulate lessons based on empirical analysis. Methodologically, the study relies on mapping, monitoring data on the institutional capacity development of relocated Ukrainian universities, case studies, and an analysis of legislation and regulatory documents.

The study examines relocation trajectories of 35 higher education institutions, drawing on multiple data sources collected between 2014 and 2025. Two waves of relocation were recorded: the first (2014–2016) involved 14 universities, and the second (2022–2024) included 21. Most relocated universities are state-owned (24 out of 35), although the share of private institutions increased during the second wave. The study provides the first spatial-temporal mapping of relocated Ukrainian HEIs, reconstructing their movement across regions and over time and identifying recurrent adaptation patterns. The study concludes that relocation is not only a physical transfer but also an institutional transformation. It requires, even prior to the actual move, the development of an indicative action plan, followed by a rethinking of staffing models, the establishment of distance learning as a dominant mode, the provision of state and local support policies, a targeted focus on international cooperation, regulatory recognition of non-standard network models, and differentiated financing instruments.

Keywords relocated universities, displaced universities, university without walls, war, conflict, Ukraine, higher education, displacement

JEL Classification I23, H75, O15, R12, D73

Type of the article: Research Article

Received on: 21st of August, 2025
Accepted on: 22nd of September, 2025
Published on: 25th of September, 2025

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Conflict of interest statement:
Author(s) reported no conflict of interest

INTRODUCTION

Wars, like other large-scale crises, exert a profound impact on education systems – from disrupting the learning process to destroying infrastructure and reshaping the geography of educational institutions. In Ukraine, since 2014, this impact has taken on particular depth through the phenomenon of large-scale university relocation. Higher education institutions forced to leave occupied or frontline territories sought new places to continue their activities, often under conditions of lost material resources, dispersed academic communities, and legal uncertainty.

Despite the scale of the phenomenon, relocated universities have not received sufficient attention in either political discourse or academic analysis. Comprehensive studies are lacking that would allow us to

http://dx.doi.org/10.21511/kpm.09(2).2025.11

grasp not only the extent of this process and its influence on the national educational landscape, but also the deeper consequences and lessons of relocation: the transformation of governance models, the erosion of institutional identity, and challenges to educational quality. Meanwhile, as the war continues and the risks of further displacements increase, the need for a systematic analysis of this phenomenon becomes even more urgent.

This problem is not only of national but also of broader international significance. At different points in modern history, universities of various countries have been compelled to change their location and models of existence. Yet, compared to most other cases, the Ukrainian situation is distinctive in its scale, duration, complexity of trajectories, and the limited involvement of the state in shaping a coherent support policy. Importantly, unlike most other cases, the Ukrainian example continues to evolve dynamically: the relocation of Ukrainian universities is unfolding within a developed higher education system of a European country, in a context of high demand and competition in the educational services market. The relevance of this topic, therefore, lies both in the urgent need to understand the internal processes of transformation among Ukrainian relocated universities and in the model character of this process, which makes it possible to propose solutions for countries facing humanitarian or security challenges.

In this context, there is a need to study the spatial-temporal dynamics of Ukrainian university relocations, the types of adaptation strategies, and the consequences and lessons of these processes.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

War radically reshapes the social landscape, destroying not only infrastructure but also bonds of trust, institutional continuity, and life trajectories. Its impact extends across society, reaching far beyond frontline and border territories, and producing a wide spectrum of consequences: from mass displacement of institutions and populations, destabilization of the economy, transformation of state policies, to individual psychological trauma (Ben Hassen & El Bilali, 2022; Boubaker et al., 2022; Pereira et al., 2022; Tsybuliak et al., 2024a, 2024b; Tsybuliak et al., 2025).

As international practice shows, the relocation of higher education institutions can take various forms – from emergency evacuation to the establishment of universities in exile (Jiang & Gong, 2016). Studies of displaced universities have mainly focused on two types of situations:

(i) institutional relocation due to armed conflict (Spivakovsky et al., 2023); and

(ii) exile triggered by political persecution of scholars and academic staff, leading to the creation of universities in exile (Fletcher, 1986).

The relocation of universities reached a massive scale during and as a consequence of the First and Second World Wars. During these wars, every warring side whose territories faced occupation moved higher and secondary education institutions deeper into its territory (Lopes, 2021; Israel, 1999). The most difficult situation was faced by those relocated institutions that, after the wars ended, could not return to their original locations because the territories of their origin had been incorporated into other states (Shalvey, 2022).

Relocations of universities have been recorded under conditions of civil wars, authoritarian regimes, and military occupation (Caldwell, 1943). One of the most well-known historical examples is the creation of *The University in Exile* in 1933 at The New School in New York (USA), which became home to scholars persecuted in Nazi Europe (Friedlander, 2019).

In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, significant institutional relocations occurred across various continents, including Germany, France, China, Syria, Iraq, South Sudan, and Belarus. A notable case is that of the University of Strasbourg, which, after the Franco-Prussian War, developed rapidly as a German institution, later became a French university after World War I, and during World War II, evacuated to Clermont-Ferrand, where it continued educational activities until the liberation of France from the Nazis (Laszlo,

2015). In China, during the Japanese invasion, three leading universities (Peking, Tsinghua, and Nankai) evacuated to Kunming and jointly formed the temporary National Southwestern Associated University, which functioned under extreme conditions yet preserved academic continuity (Yang & Welch, 2011).

In Syria, during the civil war, which started in 2011, several universities lost control of their campuses and relocated to government-controlled areas (Buckner, 2013; Butler, 2015). For example, Al-Furat University moved faculties out of Deir ez-Zor but lost more than half of its students. Private institutions such as Al-Ittihad evacuated from Raqqa, controlled by ISIS, to Damascus, which allowed them to continue instruction, albeit with reduced quality (Milton, 2018). Similarly, in Iraq, after the capture of Mosul by ISIS militants in 2014, the university closed, and thousands of students and faculty were forced to flee. The government declared an academic "non-failure" year and organized emergency evening classes for displaced students in safer regions, such as at the University of Dohuk (Abdulazeez et al., 2018). However, hosting capacities were limited, and many students were unable to continue their studies.

Cases from South Sudan demonstrate the long-term evacuation of national higher education institutions. Universities from regions of active hostilities operated in exile in the north of the country (in Khartoum), and after the signing of the peace agreement, they returned, albeit facing new security challenges (Sobh et al., 2024; Iesa, 2024).

Another type – political exile – is represented by the case of the European Humanities University, which was closed in Belarus in 2004. Thanks to Lithuania's support, the EHU was re-established in exile in Vilnius, where it functions as a Belarusian university under Lithuanian jurisdiction, partly serving students in Belarus remotely (Johnson & Tereshkovich, 2014; Korablyova, 2023). Crucially, this was not a case of founding a new foreign institution. EHU, originally founded in Minsk in 1992 by Belarusian academics, was re-established in Vilnius through Lithuanian registration and accreditation, with governmental and European partner support. This legal and financial arrangement preserved its Belarusian mission while shifting to a blended/low-residency model that serves a substantial share of its students inside Belarus.

Regarding Ukrainian lands, a particularly interesting example is the case of Kherson State University, which officially traces its history back to 1917, when the Yuriev (now Tartu, Estonia) Teachers' Institute was evacuated to Kherson (Susorov, 2018; Belyaev et al., 2007). After the beginning of the Russian full-scale invasion in 2022, Kherson State University was forced to move from Kherson to Ivano-Frankivsk.

Beyond historiographical accounts of individual relocations, Ukrainian researchers also focus on particular aspects of displacement as a phenomenon, especially its institutional consequences in circumstances of the Russian aggression: loss of material resources, fragmentation of academic communities, psychological trauma, and erosion of identity (Suchikova & Danko, 2025; Tsybuliak et al., 2024c; Sych et al., 2025). Some displaced institutions never recover; others transform into "networked" or multilocational universities. Several scholars (e.g., Tozan, 2022) stress that the relocation of a university is not merely a change of physical location, but a profound stress test for governance models, quality assurance systems, and academic culture. Schools, colleges, and universities lose facilities, staff, and students; the learning process either halts or shifts into emergency mode (Mytsyk et al., 2025; Bohdanov et al., 2023; Popova et al., 2024).

Some Ukrainian authors conceptualize the university relocation as an institutional response to existential threats (Orzhel et al., 2023). It entails not only the loss of classrooms or a temporary suspension of classes, but a full-scale resettlement of the university: with a changed location, new organizational conditions, a transformed community, and often a revised mission (Porkuian et al., 2023; Lopatina et al., 2023). This phenomenon, extremely rare in peacetime, becomes widespread during conflict and thus constitutes a distinct subject of research interest (Doronina et al., 2025; Orzhel et al., 2023).

Even without physical relocation, Ukraine's education system during the war has been subjected to massive destructive pressures (Tsybuliak &

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Suchikova, 2025; Suchikova, 2024). According to UNESCO, as of mid-2023, more than 3,600 educational institutions in Ukraine had been damaged or completely destroyed, including over 100 higher education institutions (UNESCO, 2025). Over 90% of universities were forced to shift to online or hybrid modes of teaching. Beyond physical losses, universities are experiencing the dispersal of academic communities, loss of access to laboratories and international mobility, as well as psychological exhaustion among faculty and students (Glazkova et al., 2025; Polishchuk, 2025; Peregudova, 2023). Research reports that deteriorating mental health among scholars positively correlates with the intention to leave academia (Suchikova et al., 2024).

Nevertheless, despite the rapidly growing number of studies devoted to various aspects of the ongoing war's impact on Ukraine's education system, a significant gap remains in the systematic analysis of relocation models and their long-term implications for institutional identity. Existing research typically focuses on individual cases or descriptive accounts, but seldom on the analysis of relocation trajectories.

Moreover, no unified registry of Ukraine's relocated universities has yet been created — one that would consolidate their trajectories, current status, challenges, and governance responses. Nor has an analytical framework been proposed for interpreting this phenomenon from an interdisciplinary perspective.

The purpose of this article is to examine the phenomenon of Ukrainian relocated universities in 2014–2025 and to construct a spatio-temporal map of their trajectories, which makes it possible to identify typical models, stages, and factors that shaped repeated relocations or institutional closure.

This study goes far beyond the Ukrainian context, as it offers a new analytical perspective on university relocation as a global phenomenon that is increasingly relevant in the face of growing numbers of conflicts, ecological disasters, authoritarian pressures, and threats to academic freedom. The Ukrainian case, in its multilayeredness and longevity, serves not only as a unique empirical field but also as a source of conceptual insights for rethinking the very notion of the university in times of instability.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study is an attempt to interpret the results of the first large-scale monitoring of relocated higher education institutions (HEIs) in Ukraine that were forced to change their place of operation as a result of the armed aggression of the Russian Federation.

At the same time, it should be noted that this research does not aim to comprehensively cover the entire phenomenon of university relocation. Our focus is deliberately narrowed to one key aspect – the spatio-temporal mapping and analysis of relocation trajectories, followed by an attempt to identify types of adaptation strategies, consequences, and lessons of the two waves of Ukrainian university relocations. The personal experiences of faculty and students remain outside the scope of this article.

This paper is the first framework publication based on the results of a large-scale audit of relocated HEIs, conducted in 2024–2025 within the project *"Institutional capacity building of relocated universities: monitoring study and recommendations for improvement on the national scale."*

The methodology is based on the concept of *case-oriented mapping* (Aus, 2007) and includes several interrelated stages: verification of a complete list of relocated Ukrainian HEIs, analysis of their relocation trajectories, typologization of adaptation models, assessment of consequences, and formulation of lessons based on synthesis.

Unfortunately, due to subordination to different Ministries, no complete and reliable registry of relocated Ukrainian universities has been maintained that would timely reflect the dynamics of changes in the higher education network. Therefore, in the first stage, a three-component approach to information collection was applied:

1) Official data: Information requests were submitted to

    a) the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine;

    b) the Unified State Electronic Database on Education (EDEBO); and

c) through the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine, directly to the relocated institutions themselves.

2) Open sources: Monitoring of official HEI websites, public reports, media announcements, and databases of admissions campaigns for 2021–2024 was conducted.

3) Field research: A series of visits to relocated universities was carried out, during which expert interviews were conducted with representatives of management and the academic community.

At the same time, it must be acknowledged that even the basic task – to compile a complete map of relocated HEIs – proved to be rather complex. This is due to several structural features of the Ukrainian higher education system:

- the dynamic nature of processes of direct, repeated, and reverse relocations, as well as reorganizations and mergers of universities;
- subordination to different Ministries – in particular, some relocated HEIs are under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Health or the Ministry of Culture and Strategic Communications; in addition, several relocated institutions are subordinate to the Ministry of Internal Affairs, which complicates access to information due to partial restrictions;
- the diversity of organizational and legal forms of HEIs (state, municipal, private), which are subject to different reporting and regulatory regimes;
- the presence, within the same university, of multiple structural units, which in some cases have been relocated to different cities.

As a result, 44 institutions were initially identified as fully or partially relocated. These universities were first analyzed using primary information sources (official websites, requests to the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine). The preliminary list was then reviewed again. From the monitoring scope, the following institutions were excluded: universities subordinated to the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Ukraine, as well as the Kherson Academy of Continuing Education, the Donetsk Regional Institute of Postgraduate Pedagogical Education, and the Luhansk Regional Institute of Postgraduate Pedagogical Education. Institutions under the Ministry of Internal Affairs were excluded due to strictly limited access to information during wartime. The three postgraduate pedagogical education institutions were excluded because higher education programs are not their primary activity.

In addition, Donbas State Technical University was excluded: It was initially relocated from Alchevsk to Lysychansk, but in 2018, it was merged with Volodymyr Dahl East Ukrainian National University. The reason for excluding this HEI from the monitoring sample was precisely the seven-year gap since its institutional disappearance, which makes its separate analysis irrelevant. As a result of all filtering phases, 35 relocated HEIs were selected for analysis and mapping.

The second stage involved studying the spatio-temporal trajectories of relocation through a combination of documentary analysis, content analysis of official university websites and news reports, and visual mapping. Recorded parameters included the region of origin, host location(s), year(s) of relocation, type of displacement, and the presence or absence of physical infrastructure.

The third stage focused on developing a typology of adaptation models. This was based on analyzing changes in institutional status, governance structures, modes of organizing the educational process (offline, online, hybrid), and participation in networked or integrative forms.

The fourth stage comprised analytical synthesis of the consequences and lessons of the two waves of relocation. In particular, the data were interpreted in the light of international experiences of relocated universities (as outlined in the literature review) and the current support policies in Ukraine.

The coherence of the approach lies in combining an empirical reconstruction of the relocation map with a critical analysis of the military-political conditions and administrative decisions that shaped universities' trajectories. This allows not

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only to determine "from where," "to where," and "when" relocations occurred, but also to partially answer the questions of "how" and "why" certain institutions adapted or ceased active functioning.

The datasets generated and analyzed during this study are openly available in the Zenodo repository at https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17012150 (Finikov et al., 2025). The datasets include spatial-temporal maps of relocated Ukrainian higher education institutions (HEIs) and a bilingual registry (List-eng-ua.pdf), where numbering corresponds to the identifiers on the maps. The study protocol, interview procedure, and ethical approach were approved by the Ethics Committee of the International Charitable Foundation "International Foundation for Educational Policy Research" (Protocol No. 3, January 23, 2025). The study complies with the Declaration of Helsinki, the International Review Board Guidelines for research in conflict zones, and the European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity.

Informed consent was obtained from all participants involved in the study. University administrations that took part in the institutional audits agreed to the recording of interviews, the subsequent analysis of materials, and the use of aggregated and anonymized data for scholarly purposes.

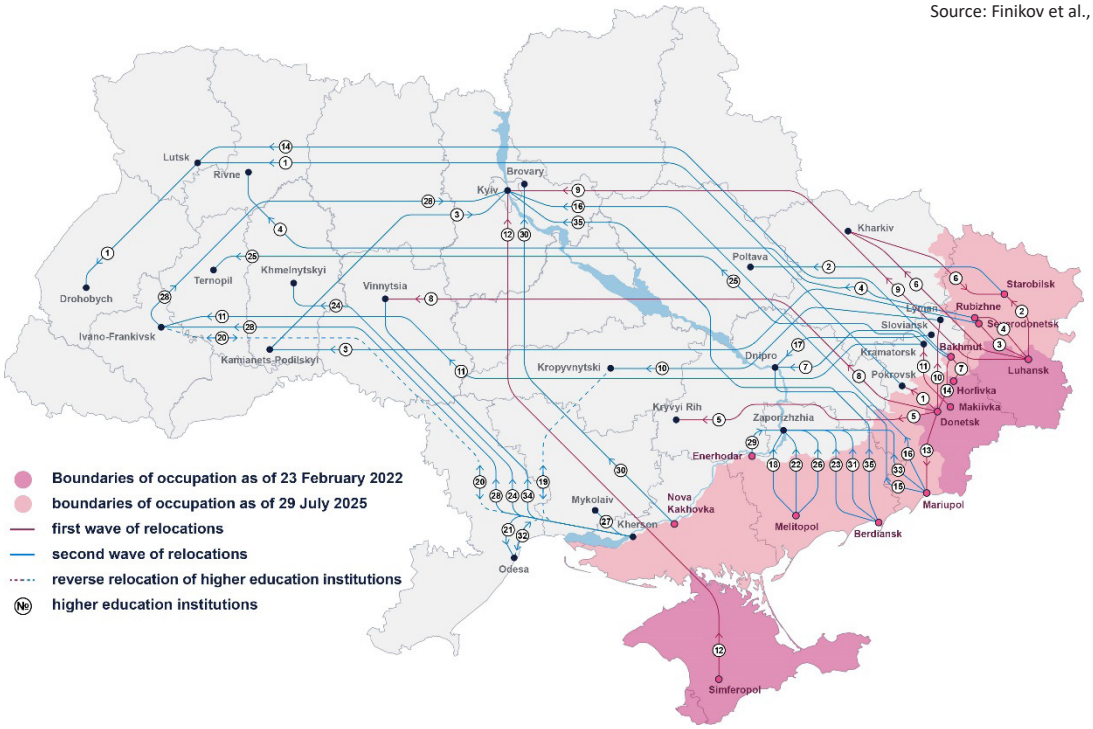
Despite the scale of the mapping conducted, the study has several limitations. The relocation processes are ongoing and dynamically changing, meaning the results reflect a "live snapshot" of the situation. The focus of this work is deliberately narrowed to spatio-temporal mapping and typologization of adaptation models, without a detailed analysis of the core activities of each relocated HEI. Finally, the timeframe is limited to 2014–2025 and does not attempt to formulate likely scenarios of future university relocation trajectories.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Spatio-temporal map of relocations: general trends

Based on the monitoring conducted, data were collected on 35 relocated higher education institutions (HEIs) that moved their main activities or parts of their structures between 2014 and 2025 (Figure 1). The resulting picture makes it possible

Source: Finikov et al., (2025).



Note: Map of relocated HEIs of Ukraine. An extended version with the full list of universities is available at https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17012150. The full list of 35 relocated universities is also provided in Appendix A.

Figure 1. Map of relocated HEIs of Ukraine

to outline the main waves of relocation, their geography, and the types of institutions that found themselves in situations of forced displacement. At the same time, this map should be understood as a "live snapshot," since relocation processes are ongoing, and the location or status of individual universities may change during the preparation of this article.

In temporal terms, two distinct waves can be identified. The first occurred during 2014–2016 and was directly linked to the occupation of Crimea and parts of the Donbas. During this period, 14 HEIs were relocated. The second wave, triggered by the full-scale Russian invasion in 2022, involved 21 institutions that moved for the first time.

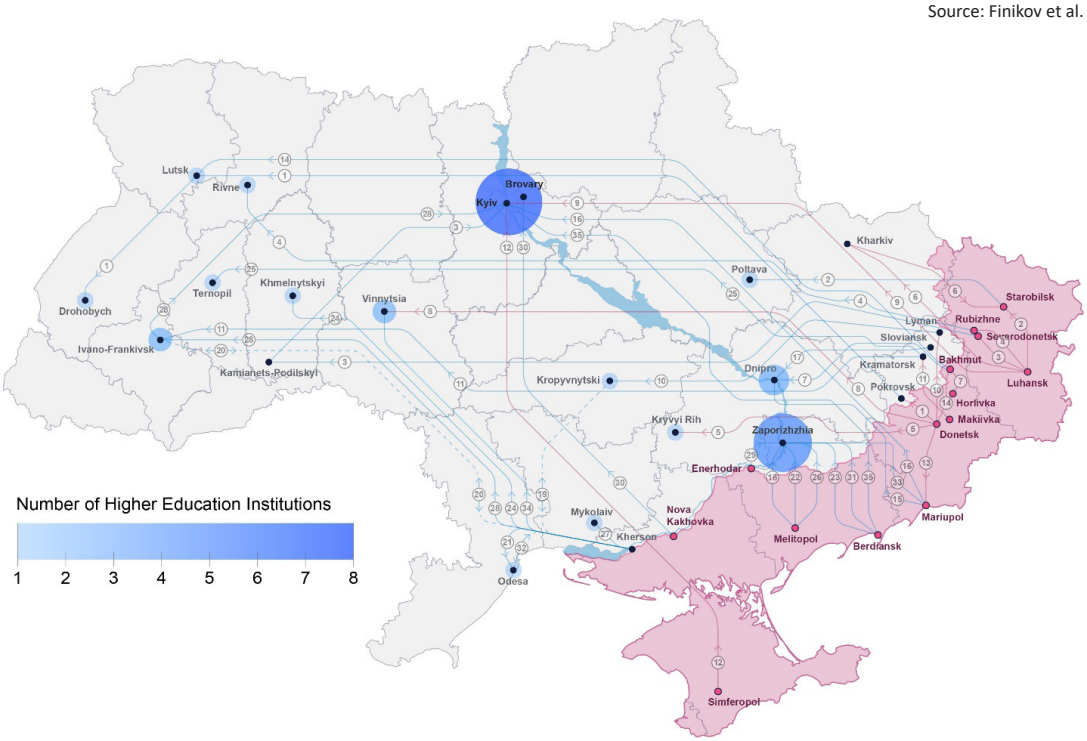
In territorial terms, the overwhelming majority of relocations took place from the southeast of Ukraine (Table 1). The Donetsk region accounts for the largest share – 13 institutions (37%) originate from this area. Next in number are the Kherson region (9 institutions) and the Zaporizhzhia region (7). In addition, five relocations were recorded from the Luhansk region and one from the Autonomous Republic of Crimea.

Table 1. Distribution of HEIs by region of origin (points of departure)

Region	State	Private	Total
Donetsk	11	2	13
Kherson	4	5	9
Zaporizhzhia	3	4	7
Luhansk	5	0	5
Autonomous Republic of Crimea	1	0	1
Total	24	11	**35**

The picture of host regions is less uniform (Figure 2). The largest number of relocated universities are now based in Kyiv (8), Zaporizhzhia (7), Dnipro (3), and Ivano-Frankivsk (3). At the same time, the remaining relocated HEIs are distributed across various cities – both regional centers and smaller settlements. This distribution reflects not only the existence of prior partnerships or resource bases, but also situational logistical decisions. This distribution also indicates the absence of a single state-coordinated relocation strategy. Instead, universities often relied on individual negotiations with local authorities, ad hoc availability of facilities, and the personal mobility of staff and students. As a result, host locations represent a mix of pre-existing academic ties and pragmatic choices made under extreme time pressure.

Source: Finikov et al. (2025).



Note: An extended version with the full list of universities is available at https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17012150.

Figure 2. Heat map of host cities

http://dx.doi.org/10.21511/kpm.09(2).2025.11

By type of ownership, 24 out of the 35 relocated HEIs are state institutions, while 11 are private. It is noteworthy that the first wave included only one private HEI, whereas in the second wave this number increased to 11 (including the second relocation of the sole private representative of the first wave).

The shifting military situation gave rise to complex relocation trajectories. Some universities underwent multiple relocations, while others adopted a distributed model of simultaneous presence in several cities. There were also several cases of mergers between relocated HEIs, in varying configurations and with differing degrees of success.

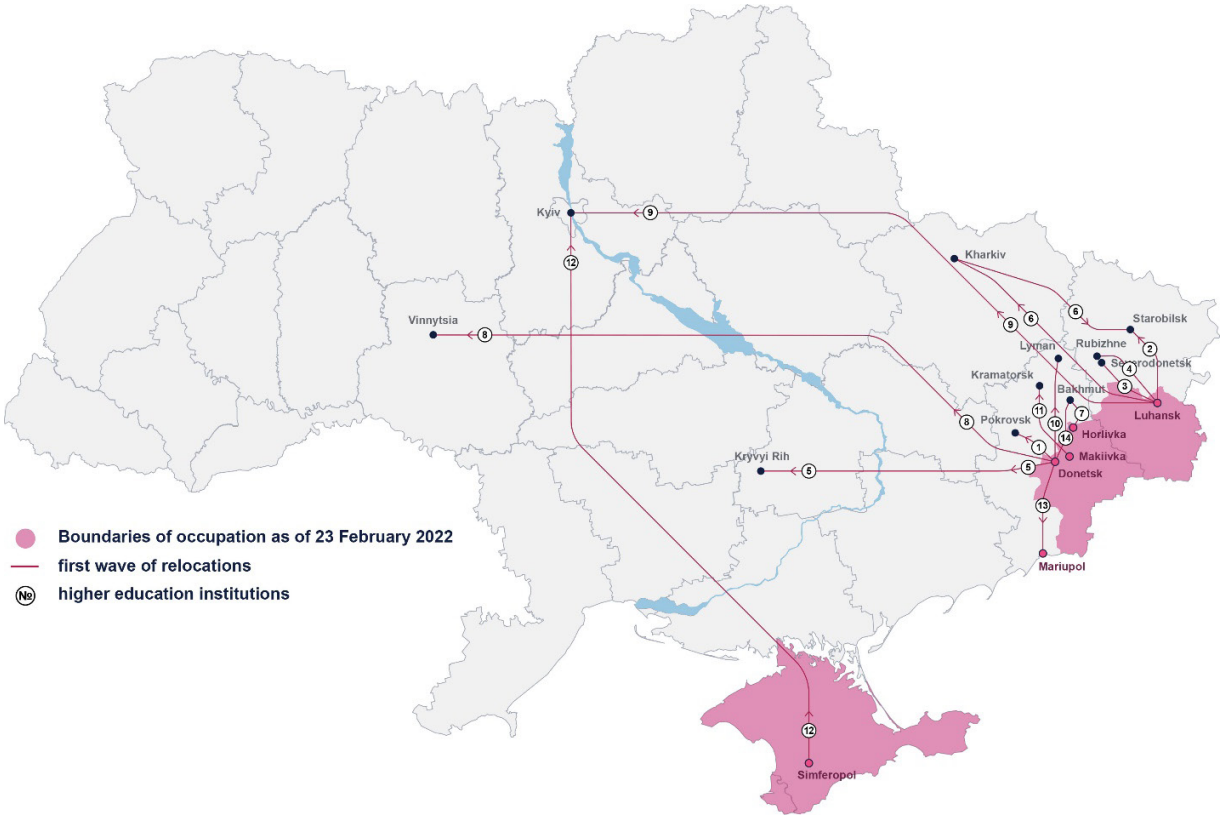
Overall, Map 1 demonstrates both the scale of spatial displacement and the diversity of institutional strategies. The following subsections examine the typology of trajectories, the logic of location choices, and the adaptation models that emerged in response to relocation.

3.2. The first wave of relocations: Crimea, Luhansk, and Donetsk regions as epicenters of displacement (2014–2016)

The first wave of Ukrainian university relocations was directly linked to the annexation of Crimea and the occupation of parts of the Luhansk and Donetsk regions in 2014. In total, 14 relocations were recorded during this wave: five from the Luhansk region, eight from the Donetsk region, and one from Crimea (Figure 3).

Notably, the relocation of V. I. Vernadsky Taurida National University to Kyiv began only in 2015 and was officially completed in 2016, when it was re-established as a separate institution on a new basis by absorbing the Academy of Municipal Management. This case represents more of an example of institutional reconstitution than of physical evacuation.

Source: Finikov et al. (2025).



Note: This map is a partial enlargement of Figure 1. An extended version with the full list of universities is available at https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17012150.

Figure 3. Map of relocated universities in the first wave

By contrast, in Luhansk and Donetsk regions, relocations took place on a massive and urgent scale.

Universities from the Luhansk region predominantly adopted a strategy of *intra-regional relocation*, i.e., moving within the same region to territories controlled by the Ukrainian government – Sievierodonetsk, Lysychansk, Starobilsk, Rubizhne. Luhansk National Agrarian University was relocated to Kharkiv in October 2014, but on 20 August 2018, the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine approved its return to Luhansk and Donetsk regions. Since then, it has operated through its separate structural subdivisions in Starobilsk, Sloviansk, and Kostiantynivka. This illustrates an initial attempt at centralized interregional relocation, which proved relatively unsuccessful, followed by the implementation of a decentralized network model near the institution's original home region.

All the cities chosen for intra-regional relocation were located close to the frontline. Although under Ukrainian control, security there was highly precarious. The choice of such locations demonstrates the universities' determination to preserve regional identity and maintain ties with their student communities, even at the cost of heightened risks.

By contrast, Luhansk State Academy of Culture and Arts rejected the intra-regional model and immediately moved to Kyiv. This relocation strategy was influenced both by subjective staffing considerations and by the need for a broader cultural environment, which the capital could provide, as well as by the particular vulnerability of an arts institution to the loss of infrastructure.

Thus, the Luhansk region largely exemplified intra-regional relocation during the first wave. This strategy enabled universities to preserve basic functionality while simultaneously exposing them to prolonged uncertainty and proximity to military threats.

For universities in the Donetsk region, intra-regional relocation was likewise a typical strategy, with institutions moving to Pokrovsk, Kramatorsk, Lyman, and Bakhmut. This approach also allowed them to maintain regional presence and avoid losing connections with local applicants. In many cases, teaching activities could be restored relatively quickly thanks to the availability of existing branch infrastructure in host cities.

Exceptions included Vasyl' Stus Donetsk National University and Donetsk National University of Economics and Trade named after Mykhailo Tuhan-Baranovskyi, both of which rejected the intra-regional model. The former, after the occupation of Donetsk, relocated to Vinnytsia, requiring the establishment of a new institutional presence in central Ukraine. Key reasons for this choice included the large pool of potential applicants in the host region and the absence of a classical multi-profile university there. The latter moved to Kryvyi Rih in the neighboring Dnipropetrovsk region – a relatively close but still extra-regional relocation. In this case, the decisive argument was the absence in Kryvyi Rih of a higher education institution specializing in economics, trade, and service.

It is noteworthy that HEIs in the Donetsk region after 2014 employed diverse models of adaptation to wartime conditions. During the first wave, no institutions relocated out of the Ukrainian-controlled part of the region, even while operating close to the frontline. In particular, universities in Mariupol remained in place on the southern edge of the region. Moreover, in this city, located just dozens of kilometers from the occupied territory, construction of the private Technical University *Metinvest Polytechnic* began. Universities in the northern part of the Donetsk region, such as in Sloviansk and Kramatorsk, likewise remained in their places.

Therefore, within a single region, a hybrid picture emerged: some universities were forced to relocate, while others continued to operate in their original locations under increasing threat.

Overall, in the first wave, most universities sought to maintain a link with their home region, remaining within the same cultural, educational, and administrative ecosystem. In doing so, they created a specific map of educational mobility, where the frontline became a line of rupture in academic continuity, and new locations became spaces of adaptation to a different political and governance context. The first wave thus constructed a model

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of *short-distance relocation*: geographically limited, but infused with attempts to preserve institutional identity, with universities situated close to their native regions but already operating in a new reality.

It should also be noted that after the occupation, collaborative higher education institutions registered on the material basis of almost every displaced university, in many cases keeping the old name. As part of the monitoring, among other things, the attitude of the displaced university staff towards higher educational institutions established on their material base in the occupied territories was studied. This is the topic of a separate article.

3.3. Normative-legal challenges and legislative responses to first-wave relocated universities

The outbreak of armed conflict and the occupation of certain territories in 2014 created unprecedented challenges for higher education institutions located in the combat zone or under the control of unrecognized entities. Relocated universities lost a significant portion of their material and technical base: academic buildings, laboratories, equipment, library collections, as well as access to archives and financial resources. One of the main reasons for these losses was the absence at that time of a state mechanism for the organized evacuation of educational institutions from occupied territories. The situation was further complicated by internal divisions – in particular, the decision of some university administrations to remain or to come under the jurisdiction of occupation authorities, as well as cases of sabotage or resistance to relocation by staff who stayed behind in the occupied areas.

At the beginning of the relocation process, Ukrainian legislation contained no provisions regulating the actions of educational institutions under conditions of hybrid war. As a result, universities encountered numerous regulatory and administrative barriers: inability to quickly re-register at new locations, difficulties in managing financial assets, and the freezing of salary and scholarship payments. In 2014–2015, many relocated universities functioned largely thanks to the initiative of individual leaders, faculty, and students, often without resources or legal certainty. These circumstances necessitated the creation of a special legal regime to support displaced institutions and their students.

In April 2016, the Verkhovna Rada adopted, and in June of the same year enacted, the Law of Ukraine "On Amendments to Certain Laws of Ukraine Regarding the Right to Education of Persons Residing in the Territory of the Anti-Terrorist Operation" (VVR, 2016, No. 22). This law established preferential admission conditions for applicants from occupied territories, contributed to the increase in student numbers in relocated universities, and was generally aimed at preserving the educational potential of the region and counteracting the outflow of youth from Ukraine's education system.

In response to demands from the academic community, and with the support of the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine and members of parliament, another law was developed and adopted in November 2016: the Law of Ukraine "On Amendments to Certain Laws of Ukraine Regarding the Activities of Higher Education Institutions and Research Institutions Relocated from Temporarily Occupied Territories and Settlements Where State Authorities Temporarily Do Not Exercise Their Powers" (VVR, 2016, No. 51). This law established the legal status of relocated institutions, enabled them to reissue licenses, register in new locations, and gain access to state funding.

Legislative support for relocated universities thus became a response to a complex set of institutional, managerial, and humanitarian challenges. However, even with the adoption of special laws, a number of issues remained unresolved. These included the absence of reintegration mechanisms, difficulties in restoring disrupted international partnerships, the return of foreign students to Ukrainian universities, and the provision of sustainable financing. In conditions of scarce resources and high competition in the educational services market, relocated universities were forced to combine strategic adaptation with survival efforts. In addition, in the temporarily occupied territories, institutions controlled by the occupying authorities have emerged that duplicate Ukrainian universities and appropriate their names and sym-

bols. This creates risks of brand confusion and undermines the identity of the relocated HEIs within the legal framework of Ukraine and in the international arena (Plastun & Kozmenko, 2025).

Thus, the period of 2014–2016 became a critically important stage in the formation of relocated HEIs as a distinct segment of Ukraine's higher education system and in the development of legal and organizational foundations for their activities. The adopted laws laid the groundwork for their continued functioning, although they did not establish an adequate system of guarantees for their full integration into the new educational environment and future development.

3.4. Second wave of relocations

With the onset of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the processes of university relocation expanded significantly. In addition to regions already experienced in displacement, new ones emerged – notably Zaporizhzhia and Kherson oblasts, large parts of which came under occupation.

3.4.1. Zaporizhzhia region

In the case of the Zaporizhzhia region, a dominant pattern of intra-regional relocation can be observed. With many cities (Melitopol, Berdiansk, Enerhodar) occupied, the regional center, Zaporizhzhia, remained under Ukrainian control and became the main point of concentration for displaced institutions. Thus, all three state universities – Bohdan Khmelnytsky Melitopol State Pedagogical University, Dmytro Motornyi Tavria State Agrotechnological University, and Berdiansk State Pedagogical University – resumed operations specifically in Zaporizhzhia.

The situation with private HEIs in the region outwardly appears similar, but in reality is marked by considerably greater uncertainty. Unlike state universities, private institutions demonstrated much less transparency. For example, within the structure of the Classical Private University, based in Zaporizhzhia, three displaced branches are listed – from Berdiansk, Melitopol, and Enerhodar. Formally, all three were relocated to Zaporizhzhia. However, the refusal of the latter two to participate in monitoring, their non-responsiveness to requests from the Ministry of Education and Science, and the absence of verified up-to-date information about their activities make it impossible to confirm their actual educational functioning in Zaporizhzhia.

As for the Berdiansk Institute of Public and Municipal Administration of the Classical Private University, it has been blocked in the Unified State Electronic Database on Education since 15 November 2021 and has not submitted updated information since then. Another private HEI, the Berdiansk University of Management and Business, announced its relocation to Kyiv following the occupation of Berdiansk, yet the absence of updates on its official resources also casts doubt on the reality of its relocation and continued operations.

Thus, the second wave of relocations contributed to the further development of a phenomenon in Ukraine's academic landscape that can be described as "universities-as-legal-shells." These are institutions that formally continue to exist, but either conduct no real educational activity or do so on a very limited scale. The circumstances of the Russian invasion and occupation in 2022 pushed a number of vulnerable private institutions into precisely such a condition. The growing number of such institutions in the national higher education system underscores the urgent need for a criteria-based framework for evaluating HEIs, strengthening transparency and accountability mechanisms, and warning prospective students about the risks associated with enrolling in such institutions.

3.4.2. Kherson region

Unlike the Zaporizhzhia region, where the strategy of intra-regional relocation prevailed, most universities of the Kherson region opted for extra-regional relocation, moving to Central, Southern, and Western Ukraine. This was primarily because in the spring of 2022, Kherson and Nova Kakhovka were already under Russian occupation, and no major cities in the Kherson region remained under Ukrainian control. The geography of relocations was exceptionally broad: in the Center – Vinnytsia, Khmelnytskyi, Kropyvnytskyi, and from 2024 also Kyiv; in the South – Odesa and Mykolaiv; in

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the West – Ivano-Frankivsk. In several cases, institutions established only administrative centers in host cities, while educational activities were conducted almost exclusively in an online format.

The main motive in choosing relocation sites, as in most other cases, was the presence of strong partnership ties connecting the institutions or their leaders with host universities. Accordingly, relocations took place where local institutions demonstrated readiness to welcome displaced HEIs, offering them maximum possible hospitality and support. Another motive, though realized less frequently, was the desire to move to regions with a large pool of potential students and limited competition in the higher education market.

The situation changed radically in autumn 2022 following the de-occupation of Kherson. The return of the regional center to Ukrainian control prompted attempts to resume educational activities using whatever infrastructure remained. However, security conditions did not allow this to be fully implemented. As a result, almost all relocated Kherson HEIs retained their administrative centers in their new locations, from which they continued to manage the educational process.

The only institution in the region that formally declared a complete return to Kherson was the Private Institution "Maritime Institute of Postgraduate Education named after Rear Admiral Fyodor F. Ushakov." Yet the available information on this institution provides grounds to classify it as a "university-as-legal-shell," raising serious doubts about the full deployment of its activities. Even more reason to consider the Private Higher Educational Institution "Nova Kakhovka Polytechnic Institute," formally relocated to Brovary, as both a "legal-shell university" and to question the reality of its relocation and functioning.

Overall, the strategy of Kherson universities demonstrates a tendency toward adopting *a dual-center model* of further development: maintaining a presence both in Kherson and in the current host location. Most of these institutions declare an intention to preserve such a model in the future, even after the end of hostilities and improvement of the security situation in Kherson.

3.4.3. New relocations of HEIs from Donetsk and Luhansk regions

In 2022, relocation also affected those institutions in the Donetsk region that had remained in their cities after the first phase of the war in 2014. Although cities such as Kramatorsk and Sloviansk were and remain under Ukrainian control, the security situation, regular shelling, and risks for students and staff compelled universities to move to safer regions. The Donbas State Engineering Academy, for example, relocated to Ternopil, while Donbas State Pedagogical University moved to Dnipro, together with its separate unit, the Horlivka Institute of Foreign Languages. Pryazovskyi State Technical University also relocated to Dnipro. Some relocations, such as in the case of Mariupol State University (relocated to Kyiv) and Donetsk State University of Management, coincided with merger processes that had begun before the full-scale invasion, but which acquired new urgency and dynamics under emergency conditions.

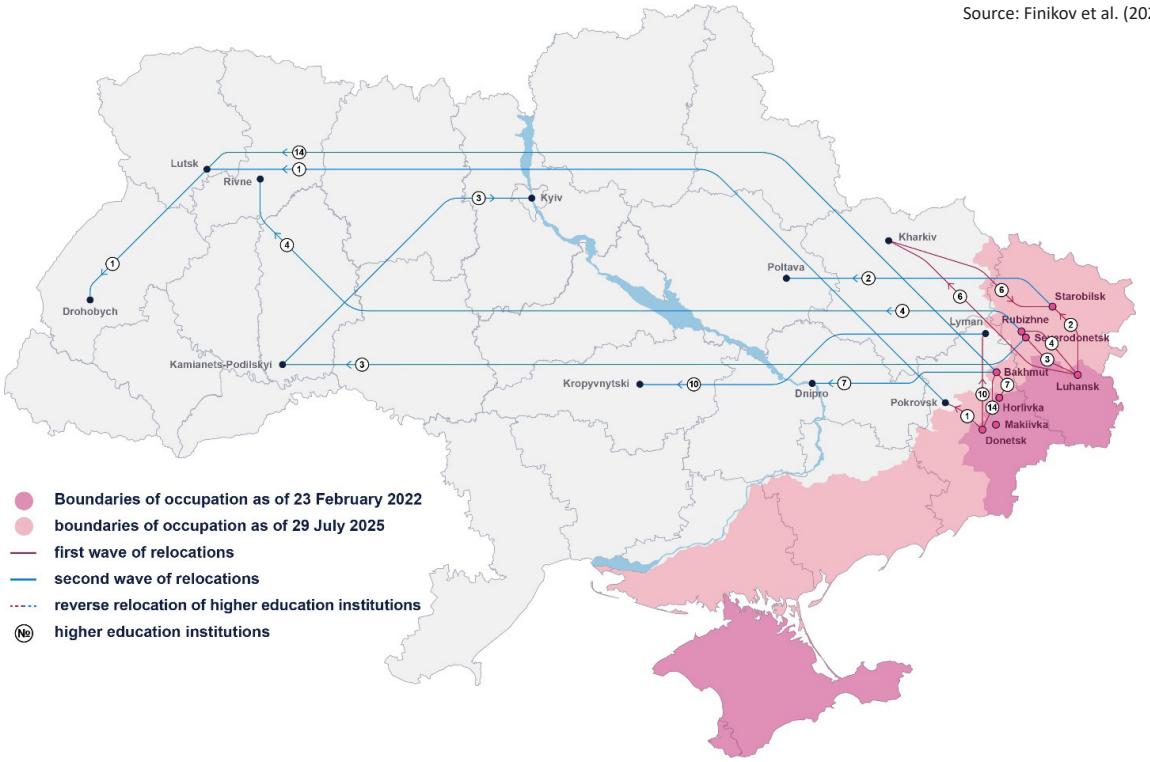
Of particular note is the case of Technical University *Metinvest Polytechnic*, founded in 2020 in Mariupol, but which admitted its first cohort of students during the full-scale war. Its actual relocation had a unique corporate character: while officially the university was relocated solely to Zaporizhzhia, in practice its activities were carried out on facilities owned by the *Metinvest Corporation* in several cities (Zaporizhzhia, Kamianske, Kryvyi Rih, Dnipro, and Kyiv). This allowed the university to function through a distributed model with elements of network organization. Such an approach demonstrates the potential for flexible restoration of educational processes in the private sector even under highly unstable conditions.

By contrast, in the Luhansk region, no HEIs relocated for the first time in 2022: all of them had already undergone displacement during the first wave.

3.5. Twice- and multiple-relocated universities and the loss of autonomy

A distinct group among relocated HEIs consists of universities that were forced to move not once, but two or even four times (Figure 4). Most often, these

Source: Finikov et al. (2025).



Note: This map is a partial enlargement of Figure 1. An extended version with the full list of universities is available at https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17012150.

Figure 4. Trajectories of universities relocated two or more times

were institutions that had already undergone relocation during the first wave in 2014 within their regions, and with the onset of the full-scale war in 2022, were displaced again – this time mainly to central or western Ukraine. For some of them, this meant not only a change of geographical location but also profound institutional transformation: repeated loss of facilities, new management teams, and the further fragmentation of their academic communities. Institutions such as Volodymyr Dahl East Ukrainian National University and Luhansk Taras Shevchenko National University became true "universities on the move," changing their locations three or more times in an effort to adapt to new conditions.

Not all universities withstood the pressure of repeated relocations. Some were integrated into other HEIs, losing their autonomy. Certain mergers had begun before the full-scale invasion but were completed under wartime conditions. This included the incorporation of Donetsk State University of Management into Mariupol State University, and of Luhansk National Agrarian University into Volodymyr Dahl East Ukrainian National University.

After several years of struggle to preserve independent status, the sharp decline in student enrollment led in 2024 to the start of the merger of Donbas National Academy of Civil Engineering and Architecture with Ivano-Frankivsk National Technical University of Oil and Gas, and of Donetsk National University of Economics and Trade named after Mykhailo Tuhan-Baranovskyi with Kryvyi Rih National University.

It is noteworthy that in some cases of merger, the absorbed relocated HEIs retained a significant degree of autonomy (including the status of a separate unit, non-interference in ongoing international projects, preservation of internal regulations, and their own model of educational process organization). In other cases, however, they were effectively dissolved into the host university, accompanied by a complete loss of institutional identity.

Thus, repeated relocations and mergers became a test of institutional flexibility and resilience. Some institutions managed to adapt and preserve autonomy; others lost their identity as independent academic entities. The second displacement un-

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derscored the importance of relocating to places where security risks were at least potentially lower, where competition with local HEIs was not overwhelming, and where adequate infrastructure for accommodation was available. While the only motive for repeated relocations in the first half of 2022 was the outbreak of the full-scale invasion, later relocations were driven by other factors. The dominant ones included: fear of losing independent status and the search for a location that would safeguard institutional uniqueness; mismatch between the size of the university and the capacity of the host city; and difficulties in relations with local HEIs.

3.6. Polyphony of relocation

Spatio-temporal mapping of Ukraine's relocated universities makes it possible not only to record the scale and directions of academic displacement but also to draw a number of analytical observations.

Despite the external uniformity of the terms *"relocated university"* or *"displaced university,"* empirical data reveal the extraordinary complexity and diversity of relocation scenarios, allowing us to distinguish between different types of displaced HEIs. The picture cannot be reduced to a single format of relocation, but rather forms a spectrum of institutional adaptation strategies that depend on numerous variables: time, geographic location, shifts in the frontline, ownership type, sources of funding, capacity for autonomous governance, infrastructure resources, and the presence of network partnerships, among others.

These can be conditionally grouped into several scenarios. The most common is the classical relocation from an occupied territory – a full transfer of the institution to a territory under Ukrainian control, regardless of the prevailing security situation.

A more complex form is multi-stage relocation, when a university changes locations several times, adapting to new threats or challenges (occupational, military, logistical, staffing, social, etc.).

Another type is the multi-campus relocation model, where a university establishes an educational presence simultaneously in several cities, forming a "dispersed" institution. This also includes cases of relocation from frontline but not occupied territories, where HEIs maintain a base infrastructure at the new site while simultaneously creating a new administrative center further from the frontline. This model also applies to universities that resumed activity in de-occupied territories while continuing to operate from new host locations. Such an approach reduces the risk of dependence on a single site, particularly under unstable security conditions, and allows institutions to retain student cohorts dispersed across regions due to the war. While it requires complex logistics, staffing flexibility, and new managerial thinking, multi-campus structures have proven effective as a temporary and, in some cases, even strategic model.

An increasingly frequent pattern is merger (institutional integration), where a relocated HEI loses its independence and becomes part of another university. In the best-case scenario, this creates synergy with partial preservation of programs and autonomy. In other cases, however, it results in the erosion of identity: the university dissolves into the structure of the host institution, losing its academic tradition, branding, and professional culture. Such cases require particular analysis in terms of governance models, institutional memory, and strategies for preserving continuity.

There are also more complex or marginal forms of relocation: formally relocated universities that declared displacement but conduct little or no real educational activity (so-called *"universities-as-legal-shells"*); informally relocated universities that operate from a new location without a formal relocation act by the founder/competent authority; and those institutions that have fully returned to de-occupied territories.

Finally, there is the unique case of relocation involving a newly established university that had not yet admitted students or developed its material base (having only laid the foundation for its main building). This refers to Technical University *Metinvest Polytechnic*, which enrolled its first students in the summer of 2022.

Thus, the concept of *"university relocation"* in the Ukrainian context encompasses not only physical movement but also an entire spectrum of organizational trajectories, strategic decisions, and adaptive

Table 2. Tentative typology of relocated universities in Ukraine by relocation scenario

Relocation type	Brief description
Full relocation	Relocation of the entire institution from occupied territory to a new city with an official change of address
Repeated relocation	Multiple waves of displacement involving several successive locations
Multi-campus model	Simultaneous presence in several locations, forming a dispersed institution
Integration (merger)	Incorporation into another HEI, with full or partial loss of autonomy
University-as-legal-shell	Formally relocated HEI that in practice conducts little or no educational activity
Informal relocation	De facto relocation without a change of legal address
Full return to the de-occupied area	HEIs that ceased activities at the new location and attempt to resume at their original site
Newly established conditionally relocated HEI	Institutions that, prior to relocation, had neither student cohorts nor established infrastructure

practices that shape a new social geography of higher education. It also highlights the need for a more precise typology and understanding of relocation as a polyphonic process rather than a one-time event.

Table 2 offers an analytical typology of relocation scenarios, based on empirical mapping and case analysis. These types are not rigid classifications but rather reflect dynamic models of institutional adaptation to wartime conditions. Some HEIs transition from one model to another or combine several strategies. For instance, a university may initially undergo full relocation, later expand into a multi-campus presence, or eventually become part of an integration process. This typology is preliminary and requires refinement in future research, particularly regarding governance effectiveness and the continuity of academic traditions.

It is worth noting that, at the beginning of the full-scale war, there were proposals for collective relocation of universities – joint displacement within a region or the formation of academic hubs. Such approaches had proven successful in other countries, where higher education was supported through centralized platforms. In Ukraine, however, none of these initiatives materialized. The main reasons were fears of losing autonomy, competition for resources, ambitions of management teams, and the absence of mechanisms for shared governance. For many universities, the prospect of "merger" meant the risk of dissolution rather than partnership. This points to a deficit of trust and a lack of tools for networked cooperation within the higher education system.

This underscores relocation as a polyphonic process, not a single event. The aim here is not to assess the efficiency or success of each model but to trace the dynamics and diversity of displacement. A full understanding of their consequences requires separate research. At the same time, some observations – not directly evident from cartographic analysis but identified during in-depth interviews and site visits – merit preliminary discussion.

3.7. Flexibility as a condition of survival: educational formats and digital models

The widespread assumption that a university is primarily tied to a specific physical location no longer holds in conditions of war and displacement. A number of relocated HEIs have successfully demonstrated that flexible learning formats – distance, blended, asynchronous – became the key to retaining student and faculty communities scattered across the world. A significant group of institutions now operates in hybrid or fully digital modes. These include HEIs that, lacking stable infrastructure, had no alternative but to switch entirely to online formats to maximize access to education.

It should be emphasized that hybrid or fully online models during wartime have become typical not only for relocated HEIs but also for most universities in frontline regions. Instability, destruction of infrastructure, and the dispersal of academic communities force institutions to radically rethink their educational formats, not just their geographic anchoring.

3.8. Resilience of relocated universities: a survival framework

A common problem for all relocated HEIs – with one exception – was the complete absence of preparedness for evacuation: except for the Tavriski

http://dx.doi.org/10.21511/kpm.09(2).2025.11

Christian Institute, no university had a relocation plan or basic emergency protocols. State authorities also failed to provide standardized procedures for relocation, leaving most moves to the initiative of university management, or, in cases of leadership collaboration or withdrawal, to new leaders from among faculty. This not only increased risks but also prevented centralized evacuation of staff and students (with partial exceptions for international students), as well as the evacuation of material assets. The situation underscored the critical importance of planning for extraordinary events. Universities can be threatened not only by war but also by natural disasters, epidemics, or cyberattacks – generating both a national and global demand for an architecture of educational security.

Despite the widespread perception of relocated universities as temporary entities, and skepticism about their long-term viability (a so-called five-year "life cycle"), empirical evidence suggests the opposite. A significant number of HEIs displaced in 2014 continue to function in 2025, having modernized infrastructure, expanded academic offerings, and strengthened international ties. While repeated relocations almost always entail further losses of resources and personnel, they do not necessarily lead to institutional decline; in some cases, they have instead triggered transformation, the formation of new teams and hubs, and greater adaptability.

It is important to highlight the divergent trajectories of public and private HEIs. As spatio-temporal mapping shows, public institutions – with some degree of state support – demonstrated relatively high resilience overall. By contrast, most private HEIs, lacking such support, proved largely unable to function under conditions of relocation and crisis. The relative success of a few exceptions, such as Technical University *Metinvest Polytechnic* and the Tavriski Christian Institute, is explained by their ability to rely on external resource bases – the parent corporation in the first case, and support from the global Protestant community in the second.

Finally, the issue of record-keeping remains unresolved. To this day, there is no comprehensive, inter-agency official register of relocated HEIs with regular updates. This significantly complicates efforts to form an accurate picture of the relocated university network, including for policymakers. It also hampers strategic planning and creates risks of misuse. Maintaining an open (with appropriate wartime limitations), dynamic register of relocated HEIs is not only a matter of transparency but also the foundation for designing effective support policies in crisis conditions.

3.9. Implications: What to do with this knowledge

The experience of relocating Ukrainian universities as a result of war carries not only local significance but also shapes a new global field of knowledge about the university in crisis. This is not merely about adaptation to extraordinary circumstances, but about rethinking the very phenomenon of the university as a mobile, flexible, yet resilient institution. In this respect, Ukraine is not only learning but also setting the framework for a global conversation on academic preparedness, endurance, and responsibility.

The first lesson is the necessity of establishing clear national mechanisms for crisis planning in higher education institutions: with a regulatory framework, operational algorithms, logistical scenarios, and contingency reserves. Such instruments should include both a universal component and tailored provisions for different types of threats – not only military ones.

The second key lesson is the need to develop a policy for preserving the identity of relocated universities: their brands, programs, teams, and institutional memory. Without this, even a successful relocation becomes a profound loss. Flexible partnership models and mutual trust between actors are critically important here, along with diverse mechanisms of resource support.

The third lesson is that effective governance of the higher education system is impossible without an open register of relocated universities – one that records not only their legal status but also actual activities, locations, working formats, and other key dimensions. This is the minimum

requirement for sound management, public accountability, and the prevention of abuses.

The fourth lesson is the importance of officially recognizing new models of university existence: multi-location, distance-based, and networked formats. Systems of licensing, accreditation, and funding must learn to accept and work with the idea of the *"university without walls."*

Finally, the fifth lesson is that international organizations, donors, and partners must rethink their approaches to supporting universities in crisis zones. This means focusing not only on the "rescue" of institutions, but also on building systems that support their self-recovery, sustainable development, and participation in global academic exchange.

CONCLUSIONS

This study aimed to focus, within the broader exploration of the phenomenon of displaced universities, on spatio-temporal mapping, identification of typical adaptation models, and the formulation of lessons derived from empirical data. The research draws on the analysis of 35 higher education institutions that constitute the core of Ukraine's network of relocated HEIs.

The results made it possible to construct the spatio-temporal map of relocations, to outline two major waves of displacement (2014–2016 and 2022–2025), to trace the specific geography of both sending regions and host territories, and to record a wide spectrum of adaptation models – from full physical relocation to hybrid, multi-site, and digital formats.

The findings of this study allow several conclusions relevant both for national policy and for international comparative analysis:

- *First*, university relocation is not merely a change of geography but a stress test for all levels of governance, encompassing challenges to staffing stability, the quality of educational programs, communication capacity, institutional identity, and the trust of both students and other key stakeholders.
- *Second*, the inconsistency and fragmentation of state responses pose risks for the recovery and long-term sustainability of these institutions. The absence of a comprehensive, inter-agency official register of relocated HEIs – regularly updated to reflect their current status – leaves a number of such universities insufficiently visible for national education policy support.
- *Third*, relocation has not only led to disintegration but also given rise to new educational configurations in the form of networked, distributed, and multi-format universities. This requires a rethinking of the regulatory framework, which still tends to view the university as a stable institution with a fixed location.
- *Finally*, the history of relocations of Ukrainian HEIs constitutes a unique source of experience that deserves systematization, preservation, and analysis. This experience may be of value not only for Ukraine but also for other countries facing wartime or humanitarian crises.

Future research should focus on a deeper analysis of institutional strategies, the impact of communication policies of displaced institutions, and their integration both into the global higher education system and into the local contexts of their new locations. This cannot be fully achieved without the development of open databases. Such research would enhance the visibility of relocated institutions in the public sphere and support the formation of long-term policies aimed not only at survival but also at development.

http://dx.doi.org/10.21511/kpm.09(2).2025.11

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors sincerely thank all those who supported this research within the framework of the project "Institutional capacity building of relocated universities: monitoring study and recommendations for improvement in national scale". The authors would like to thank Tetiana Zaporozhets, Maksym Folomieiev, Viktoriia Rudyk, Serhii Melnyk, Dariia Ivashchenko, and Olena Tupakhina for their valuable support in data collection, expert evaluation, and insightful discussions.

We are also grateful for the partial support of the research conducted by Yana Sychikova and Ihor Lyman, provided in the framework of a state budget project "Ukrainian universities in new realities: the impact of the war and mechanisms for preserving the scientific and personnel potential of training specialists in high-tech industries".

Finally, the authors would like to express their deepest gratitude to all Ukrainian defenders, whose courage and resilience made it possible to complete and publish this work.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare no relevant conflicts of interest.

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APPENDIX A

Table A1. Relocated universities of Ukraine

No.	Universities
1	State Higher Education Establishment «Donetsk National Technical University»
2	State Institution «Luhansk Taras Shevchenko National University»
3	Volodymyr Dahl East Ukrainian National University
4	State Establishment «Luhansk State Medical University»
5	Donetsk National University of Economics and Trade named after Mykhailo Tuhan-Baranovskyi
6	Luhansk National Agrarian University
7	Horlivka Institute for Foreign Languages of the State Higher Educational Institution “Donbas State Pedagogical University”
8	Vasyl’ Stus Donetsk National University
9	Luhansk State Academy of Culture and Arts
10	Donetsk National Medical University
11	Donbas National Academy of Civil Engineering and Architecture
12	V. I. Vernadsky Taurida National University
13	Donetsk State University of Management
14	Private Higher Education Establishment «Donetsk University of Economics and Law»
15	State Higher Education Institution “Pryazovskyi State Technical University”
16	Mariupol State University
17	State Higher Educational Institution «Donbas State Pedagogical University»
18	Melitopol Institute of Public and Municipal Administration of the «Classic Private University»
19	Kherson State Agrarian and Economic University
20	Kherson State University
21	Kherson State Maritime Academy
22	Dmytro Motornyi Tavria State Agrotechnological University
23	Berdyansk State Pedagogical University
24	Kherson National Technical University
25	Donbass State Engineering Academy
26	Bogdan Khmelnitsky Melitopol State Pedagogical University
27	International University of Business and Law
28	Religious Organization Higher Theological Educational Establishment “Tavriski Christian Institute”
29	Energodar Institute of State and Municipal Government of R. G. Khenokh «Classical Private University»
30	Private High Educational Establishment Nova Kakhovka Polytechnic Institute
31	Berdiansk State and Municipal Management Institute of Private Classical University
32	Private Institution «Maritime Institute of Postgraduate Education named after Rear Admiral Fyodor F. Ushakov»
33	Technical University «Metinvest Polytechnic» LLC
34	Private Higher Educational Institution «Kherson Economics and Law Institute»
35	Berdyansk University of Management and Business Limited Liability Company

http://dx.doi.org/10.21511/kpm.09(2).2025.11