

# 91 European Spatial Imaginaries or Geopolitics? Higher Education Actors' Responses to the Ukraine-Russia Conflict

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## Research Domains

International contexts and perspectives (ICP)

## Abstract

The Russian invasion of Ukraine, on 24th February 2022, was met with widespread condemnation across Europe, with a large number of universities and higher education-focussed national and supranational organisations all issuing their own statements about the invasion and subsequent conflict and, in some cases, taking specific action in relation to one or both of the nations. This article draws on an analysis of 55 such statements to examine what they reveal about how higher education organisations conceptualise the European HE space, and the position of Russia and Ukraine within it. Specifically, the article considers what spatial imaginaries – pertaining to higher education – are evident in the statements about the Ukraine conflict issued by higher education organisations across Europe, and the extent to which the statements provide evidence about the role of these organisations as normative policy actors.

## Full paper

### Introduction

The Russian invasion of Ukraine, on 24th February 2022, was met with widespread condemnation across Europe. This was evident with respect to higher education (HE) as much as any other sector, with many universities and HE-focussed national and supranational organisations issuing their own statements about the invasion and subsequent conflict and, in some cases, taking specific action in relation to one or both nations.

In this paper, we analyse these statements as they provide an important lens through which to understand more fully how HE organisations conceptualise the European HE space, and the position of Russia and Ukraine within it. This is important in relation to broader debates about the 'Europeanisation' of HE across the continent, and the extent to which reforms have resulted in shared European perspectives (or what we refer to in this paper as shared 'spatial imaginaries'). We answer two specific research questions: (i) what spatial imaginaries are evident in the statements about the Ukraine conflict issued by HE actors across Europe? and (ii) what do these statements reveal about the role of HE actors as normative policy actors, shaping spatial imaginaries?

### Methodology

We draw on 55 public statements, specifically web pages, announcements or open letters from a broad sample of national and regional HE organisations responding to the outbreak of conflict between Russia and Ukraine in early 2022. The statements are derived from a broad, non-representative sample of HE actors across national and regional European organisational spaces. These include national actors and universities from six European nations selected on the basis of their geopolitical positioning within Europe and the relative weight of their HE systems: France, Germany, Hungary, Poland, Spain and UK. We also sampled statements from cross-European organisations with either a regional remit for HE, or that are umbrella organisations, or networks of European universities.

### Findings: European Spatial Imaginaries as Geopolitical Act?

First, in relation to spatial imaginaries, our evidence suggests strongly that it is only organisations with a specifically European remit that drew on explicitly European spatial imaginaries in their statements about Russia and Ukraine. For national organisations, the war is not seen as a threat to Europe specifically but, rather, bilateral relationships or international norms and/or the global academic community. In some cases, the same values were seen as under threat by both European and national organisations, but these were typically framed as 'European' only by the cross-

European actors. These data suggest, then, that below the discourse of Europe and a European (HE) space circulated by regional bodies, is a traditional framework of a bilateral, nationalist 'we' standing with 'them'. There is very little sense, from these statements, of a collective 'we' under attack. This national focus is broadly in line with previous work that has shown, for example, how various European HE initiatives have often been used for largely national purposes; and how European 'spatial imaginaries' have been taken up, by HE actors across Europe in a very piecemeal fashion, with national perspectives often retaining a strong hold. Thus, the evidence presented above can perhaps be seen more accurately – not as evidence of a recent retreat into a national frame of reference – but as a manifestation of the underlying national orientations of an incomplete Europeanisation process.

Second, in relation to HE actors' roles as agential, normative policy actors shaping spatial imaginaries, the discursive strategies mobilised in actors' statements varied widely, from vociferous and explicit to passive and pithy, and in limited cases absent entirely. Material strategies, such as enacting or calling for specific, targeted policies also varied, from calls to eject Russia from the European Higher Education Area and discontinue academic and research collaboration to more nuanced positions distinguishing existing partnerships or Russian students and staff as distinct from the interests and aims of the Russian government. One on hand, the findings conformed with what we might anticipate based on national actors' geographical and relational position within the European Union and the European regionalisation project, with France and Germany issuing the sharpest criticism and targeted responses, Hungary and Poland more muted and at times self-preserving stances, and Spain and UK somewhere in between these groupings. On the other, however, we see evidence of heterogeneous positions among the variously sampled national actors, pointing to the agency of organisational actors in discursively and materially shaping geopolitical positions which are not necessarily harmonious with the positions of national governments.

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