

Ukraine in a Changing Europe: A New Research Centre at Charles University's Institute of International Studies

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 not only disrupted the lives of Ukraine's 40+ million inhabitants but also posed multiple challenges for adjacent states. The invasion called into question the very foundations of the existing European order and international order more broadly. The European public and scholarly circles came to recognise that this war, unequalled for decades on the European continent in terms of the scale of the military engagement and consequent destruction, is a historic event that has upended established geopolitical patterns and the paradigms of scholars of international relations. The resulting push to revise our epistemologies and practices requires the development of new knowledge based on nuanced analysis of developments on the ground in Ukraine and their reverberations elsewhere in the world.

Taking into account the steep rise in the demands for expertise on Ukraine of the state and the public in the Czech Republic and beyond, the Institute of International Studies has established a special unit that brings together scholars working on contemporary Ukraine. The goal is to consolidate their efforts and raise the profile of Ukrainian studies at Charles University, Prague, both domestically and internationally. The Centre opened in February 2023 at the time of the first anniversary of all-out war in Ukraine. Its research agenda is twofold. First, to put developments in contemporary Ukraine into their broader context and connect them to regional and global trends. This explains the centre's name, Ukraine in a Changing Europe. Second on the agenda is recentring East European Studies by delinking them from their traditional Russocentric focus and opening up a space for local voices and minor agencies.

The new Centre operates at the intersection of the humanities and the social sciences. It fosters an interdisciplinary perspective that is open to collaboration with various academic and civic institutions. It takes recent developments in and around Ukraine as a point of departure to examine the broader implications and repercussions of what became known as the "Ukraine crisis" and later escalated into a full-blown war. Russian invasion has caused a huge wave of migration, a looming threat of hunger in Africa, and an economic crisis in the EU and elsewhere – not to mention hundreds of thousands of human casualties and the destruction of towns, critical infrastructure, and cultural treasures. The underlying assumption is that Russia's ongoing war of aggression against Ukraine (and in Russian propaganda, against "the West" as well) is the ultimate disruption of the post-Cold War world. It is a conflict which resists containment and demands the revision of existing paradigms.¹ This epistemological and political challenge has already resulted in new academic trends (including the decolonisation of East European Studies) and new political projects (e.g., the European Political Community).

¹ See Valeria Korablyova, "Why is Ukraine important? Challenging the colonial and Cold War legacies in European social sciences," *Soziologie* 52, no. 3 (2023): 309–319.

The Centre's broadly conceived approach opens up a number of fruitful avenues for academic research. Interesting possibilities include – but are not limited to – the following topics:

- the 24/7 mediatization of the war around the globe with minimal delay and the role of effective political communication in garnering public support for the Ukrainian cause (the so-called 'Zelensky effect')²;
- Increasing confidence in democracy in wartime Ukraine and the conflation of national and democratic self-identification, in that democratic practices are increasingly perceived as a national heritage and a competitive advantage vis-à-vis Russian authoritarianism³;
- nationwide resistance to the invasion that not only enabled the country's survival from the very first days of the war but also exposed a complex social structure that exists beyond power verticals and state institutions.⁴

The interdisciplinary nature of the Centre's research interests invites the participation of academics engaged not only with the history and politics of East Central Europe but also specialists in social and political theory, European studies, theories of democracy, media studies, peace and conflict studies, ethics, and more.

The conceptual foci of the centre include:

- decolonisation of East European studies and their re-centralisation around multiple agencies and indigenous perspectives;
- Ukraine's idiosyncrasy – the peculiarity of its history and contemporary political and societal makeup;
- grassroots democracy – Ukraine's contribution to democratic theory and practice;
- the transformation of symbolic geography and emergent new readings of Central/Eastern Europe provoked by the Russian war;
- Ukraine as a (Central) European nation and its prospects for EU membership;
- Russia's invasion of Ukraine as a challenge and an opportunity for the European project;
- post-war recovery and its potential pitfalls;
- visions for the future of the world after the "end of history";
- the pillars of new global security, economic, and political orders.

² Olga Onuch and Henry E. Hale, *The Zelensky Effect* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023).

³ Mykola Riabchuk, "Rallying Around the Flag: War Challenges and Civic Mobilization in Ukraine," (Working paper, Liechtenstein Institute on Self-Determination, Princeton University, May 2023); Olga Onuch, "Why Ukrainians Are Rallying Around Democracy," *Journal of Democracy* 33, no. 4 (October 2022): 37–46.

⁴ See Mychailo Wynnnyckyj, *Ukraine's Maidan, Russia's War: A Chronicle and Analysis of the Revolution of Dignity* (Stuttgart: Ibidem Verlag, 2019); Serhiy Kudelia, "The Ukrainian State under Russian Aggression: Resilience and Resistance," *Current History* 121, no. 837 (October 2022): 251–257, doi: 10.1525/curh.2022.121.837.251.

The Centre is led by Dr Valeria Korablyova, Assistant Professor at the Department of Russian and East European Studies. Dr Korablyova holds a Doctor of Science degree in social philosophy from Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv (2015). She has conducted research and taught special courses on Ukraine at a number of leading institutions in Europe and North America including Stanford University, the University of Basel, Justus Liebig University Giessen, and the Institute for Human Sciences in Vienna. Her research delves into the post-Soviet transformation of Ukraine and the region, with a special focus on mass protests, grassroots nation-building, and performative politics.

The other distinguished members of the Centre are Professor Ota Konrád, whose broad expertise in modern European history focuses on wars as turning points in the trajectories of different polities; Dr Ondřej Klípa, who specializes in migration processes and ethnic conflicts and who is a member of the expert group for Ukraine created by the Faculty of Social Sciences last year; and Dr Martin Laryš, who studies political violence and military conflicts in the post-Soviet space and who has conducted extensive fieldwork in Ukraine since 2014.

In the winter semester of 2023/24, the Centre will host Dr Olga Oleinikova, who is a Senior Lecturer and Director of the Social Impact Technologies and Democracy Research Hub (SITADHub) of the School of Communication at the University of Technology (Sydney, Australia). Dr Oleinikova is among Forbes' Top 40 Global Ukrainians, Forbes 30 Under 30 in Asia, and is a finalist for the Australia Council of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences Future Leader Award. At the Centre, Dr Oleinikova will conduct research on new migration trends in Eastern Europe, building upon her recently published book, *New Eastern European Migration to Australia: From Ukraine, Czech Republic and Hungary to Sydney and Beyond* (Palgrave, 2023).

The Centre opened to the public with a lecture, "Ukrainian IDPs and War Refugees: Resilience and New Civic Activism" by Dr Viktoria Sereda, director of the research group PRISMA UKRAJINA: War, Migration and Memory at the Forum Transregionale Studien in Berlin, and head of the recently established Virtual Ukraine Institute for Advanced Studies. Later, the Centre hosted two panel discussions with leading experts that tackled the two most burning Ukrainian issues: the wartime migration of Ukrainians to the EU instigated by the war and the challenges related to it (Dr Sereda and Dr Yana Leontiyeva, Czech Academy of Sciences) and problems of doing research fieldwork in war zones (Dr Jan Šír, Institute of International Studies, and Dr Anna Osypchuk, National University of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy).

The opening of the Centre and its research projects were funded by grants from the rectorate of Charles University, 4EU+/UA/F2, part of the 4EU+ Alliance project.

The Centre's mission is to create a meeting point for scholars and experts from different localities who are working on Ukraine. It also serves to connect Czech and Ukrainian academics with those in other national academic institutions and with practitioners in diplomacy and civil society. To that end, the Centre is seeking out and establishing various partnerships. Its strategic partners in Ukraine are the National University of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy and the Ukrainian Catholic University in Lviv. In the EU, it cooperates

with Justus Liebig University Giessen in Germany, the Research Centre for the History of Transformations (RECET) at the University of Vienna, and the European Humanities University in Vilnius, Lithuania. In the Czech Republic, it has teamed up with the French Research Centre for Humanities and Social Sciences (CEFRES) in connection with its non-residential fellowships for Ukrainian scholars and its RETHINK Seminar, “Objects, Models, and Methods in Humanities and Social Sciences Since the Invasion of Ukraine”. The Centre also cooperates with the Czexpats for Ukraine initiative and the Czech Academy of Sciences in the project “Ukrainian Cinematography: On the Path to Its Own Identity” (part of the Academy’s Strategy AV21, The Anatomy of European Society). Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty and the Prague Civil Society Centre are partners who are helping the Centre to escape the academic bubble and reach out to a broader audience.

These partnerships have resulted in various events for academics and the general public. The Centre has hosted several workshops and lectures, including a public lecture by Professor Martin Schulze Wessel from Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich, “Imperial Legacies in Russia’s War Against Ukraine” and a guest lecture by Sonya Koshkina, a renowned Ukrainian journalist from lb.ua, “How Do Ukrainian Media Work During the War?” (delivered as part of Dr Korablyova’s course entitled The Zelensky Phenomenon: The Rise of Audience Democracy and Performative Politics in Ukraine).

In the academic year 2023–24, the Centre plans to organise several international events in cooperation with its partners. On 28–30 September 2023, the conference “Decolonization of Education and Science in Belarus and Ukraine: Theoretical Challenges and Practical Tasks” will be held at the European Humanities University in Vilnius in cooperation with the Ukrainian Catholic University with the financial support of the Carnegie Corporation of New York. The conference will bring together scholars and practitioners who are working towards the “decolonization of minds” in what used to be known as the “post-Soviet region”.

On 18–20 October 2023, the conference “600 Days of All-Out War: Fighting for Freedom, Fighting for Democracy”, co-organised with the Research Centre for the History of Transformations at the University of Vienna and financially supported by the Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom, will be held in both Prague and Vienna. This event aims to discuss the broader effects of the Russian war against Ukraine on neighbouring polities, the EU project, democratic imaginaries, and the future security order.

On 8–10 March 2024, the conference “Re-Thinking Post-Socialist War(s): Comparative Dimensions of the War in Ukraine (2014–2024)” will be held at Justus Liebig University Giessen as part of the project “(Un)Disciplined: Pluralizing Ukrainian Studies – Understanding the War in Ukraine” (UNDIPUS) sponsored by the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research. This conference will compare the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian war with other military conflicts in the post-socialist area (broadly understood) and track narratives, patterns, and the war’s effect on self-identification in the polities concerned and among the actors within them.

In 2023, the Centre began awarding a certificate, “Ukraine: Contemporary History, Politics, and Society”, from the Institute’s anglophone Master’s degree program, Balkan,

Eurasian, and Central European Studies. Students who wish to gain special expertise on Ukraine are invited to participate in an internship at the Centre to get first-hand exposure to cutting-edge knowledge production related to Ukraine and the region. They prepare and attend conferences, workshops, guest lectures, and other events organised by the Centre and its partners. They are also expected to take special courses taught at the Institute and at partner institutions in Ukraine. Their choices range from contemporary politics and modern history to migration studies and postcolonial studies.

The establishment of the Ukraine in a Changing Europe research centre responds to current and anticipated future interest in deepening scholarly research about Ukraine and further separation of the academic field from the largely Russocentric East European/Slavic studies. It is conceived as a platform for open dialogue between scholars from various national academies. Inside and outside perspectives on Ukraine will complement and enrich each other to create a more nuanced and multi-faceted view of multiple burning issues. Apart from supporting high-quality research on Ukraine and related matters, the Centre's team is motivated to raise a generation of students with deep regional expertise, which they can bring to their future employment in diplomatic institutions, international corporations, and non-governmental organisations. The Centre is actively searching for new partners and fruitful collaborations, and it hopes to inspire the creation of similar academic structures in other EU states and beyond.

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