“Twice displaced, but unconquered: The experience of reviving a Ukrainian university during the war”

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Abstract
A new wave of relocation of universities from the war zone has resulted from the negative consequences of the hostilities and the temporary occupation of the territories of Ukraine by the Russian Federation. The challenges of today have a multidirectional impact, especially on universities that have been displaced twice. The relocation of each university is a unique experience, and academic management is the object of modern scientific research. Therefore, the paper aims to highlight the experience of gaining resilience and developing the sustainability of Volodymyr Dahl East Ukrainian National University (hereinafter V. Dahl EUNU) during the evacuation in 2014 from the city of Luhansk to the town of Severodonetsk, and in 2022 along the entire movement path to the city of Kyiv. It is determined that the main resources are human and social capital, which allow not only countering the challenges of martial law, but also ensuring the restoration of the system and its further development. The introduction of digitalization of the educational process, and work on the development of values and reputation are identified as the main tools for survival in dangerous war conditions. According to the results of the study, it was proved that in the conditions of martial law, the university acquired new qualities and developed the capacity for resilience. The ability of V. Dahl EUNU to use its strengths to overcome dangers and obstacles and to choose strong strategies focused on recovery and development was considered.

Keywords
occupation, relocation of the university, teachers, students, digitization, distance learning, martial law, Ukraine

JEL Classification
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INTRODUCTION

Human capital is the most important capital of every country, and its preservation, development and effective management requires strategic decisions, the value and complexity of which increases in the face of uncertainty and instability. In the context of martial law, national security and defense issues are of priority importance; in postwar conditions, the speed and quality of recovery will depend not only on the country’s financial support, but also on the available human capital, its growth opportunities, and the education system that will facilitate the formation and development of human capital. The higher education system in Ukraine, offering various programs by term, industry and specialty, is acquiring new values for society, and needs support and assistance in overcoming resource constraints, risks, and dangers, challenges to ensure uninterrupted full-fledged activities, on the one hand, and on the other hand, it must demonstrate resilience and develop it.

Being able to overcome obstacles, adapt quickly to changing operating conditions, and recover is essential for all institutions, organizations,
and businesses. The presence of this resilience is indicative of a system’s resilience, its ability to use its strengths to overcome hazards and obstacles and to choose strong strategies that focus on recovery and development rather than reduction strategies.

The highest danger for any society is war, which brings losses, destruction, mutilated human destinies, uncertainty, constant threat to life. Losing all property, stability, everything that was created and multiplied for many years once is a tragedy and a significant blow for any organization, the V. Dahl EUNU has experienced this twice in eight years.

The paper aims to highlight the experience of surviving and recovering the activities of the Volodymyr Dahl East Ukrainian National University after the evacuation in 2014 and 2022.

1. RESULTS

Volodymyr Dahl East Ukrainian National University was founded in 1920 in Luhansk to train personnel for machine-building enterprises in Donbas. The university was evacuated for the first time during the World War II and moved to Omsk. The resumption of activities in Luhansk and the implementation of development strategies allowed it to become a leading university in Ukraine. Before the evacuation in 2014, the university had a powerful material and technical, laboratory and scientific base, which included 57 educational and laboratory buildings and structures located on an area of about 230 thousand square meters. The university has created an extensive network of 9 branches in the Autonomous Republic of Crimea, Luhansk and Kherson regions, 110 branches of departments in production, 40 research laboratories, 18 training complexes. More than 2,000 teachers taught more than 30,000 students, including 1,500 foreign students.

1.1. Evacuation in 2014

In 2014, the beginning of the war in the East of Ukraine was the reason for the temporary evacuation of the university to the city of Sievierodonetsk, Luhansk region, until its end. All branches in the cities of Luhansk, Antratsyt, Krasnodon, Stakhanov and the Autonomous Republic of Crimea were seized by the occupiers. About 70 percent of the students and 50 percent of the university teachers stayed in Luhansk, where they continued their studies and work at the Volodymyr Dahl Lugansk State University of the Luhansk People’s Republic. Colleagues who remained in the occupied territory and continued to work for the occupiers tried various dishonest methods to keep the students who wanted to leave for the unoccupied territory of Ukraine, seized the personal property, documents and offices of the evacuated teachers.

In September 2014, the university resumed the educational process based on its separate structural subdivision (Sievierodonetsk Institute of Technology) for bachelors in 61 specialties, specialists in 92 specialties, and masters in 93 specialties. After the evacuation of the university to Sievierodonetsk, the number of teachers decreased by almost 6 times to 350 people, including 51 doctors of sciences and 210 candidates of sciences. The number of students decreased by 5 times and reached about 6 thousand people.

During the evacuation, the University intensified its efforts to implement distance learning. The number of distance learning courses increased from 1,000 to 4,000 in 2014–2015. The forced start of distance learning in 2014 with the lost scientific, methodological, logistical support, unrecoverable databases, and staff with the status of internally displaced persons (IDPs) contributed to the acquisition of skills in working with students scattered throughout Ukraine and those who remained in the occupied territory and on the contact line. The developed algorithms of actions in the conditions of distance work, advanced training of all teaching staff in the development of distance courses in the Moodle system, certification of e-Tutor teachers, the experience of grant activities and long-term cooperation with international organizations providing assistance in the educational sphere have increased the sustainability and resilience of the displaced university.
From 2014 to 2022, the university submitted and approved more than 50 international, national and regional projects, which resulted in 16 new laboratories and multifunctional lighting spaces (GreenLab, BlueLab, FabLab, etc.).

In 2018, Volodymyr Dahl East Ukrainian National University merged with Donbas State Technical University, and in 2021, the process of reorganizing Luhansk National Agrarian University began.

1.2. Evacuation in 2022

The military aggression of the Russian Federation against Ukraine in 2022 led to the evacuation of the university to Kamianets-Podilskyi and Dnipro. Within a month of the beginning of the war, almost 90% of the university staff was evacuated. Students were evacuated with their parents, and teachers with all their family members. The actions were coordinated through various social media groups that continue to exist today for volunteering, including raising funds to help the Armed Forces of Ukraine and all those members of the university community who lost their relatives or health during the shelling. The support of international organizations and volunteers played an important role in the evacuation process. The university representatives participated in the coordination of the evacuation of the residents of Sievierodonetsk and Lysychansk, which resulted in the rescue of more than 8 thousand people.

The locations in Kamianets-Podilskyi and Dnipro became temporary shelters, while the lives of students and teachers were being saved. The dormitories offered by Oles Honchar Dnipro National University and Podilskyi State University needed household appliances, dishes, and bedding for the displaced students. All evacuated students, teachers and their families had a minimum number of belongings with them and needed emotional and material assistance, housing and all necessary household items. Students who lived in a dormitory in the city of Sievierodonetsk were constantly sheltering in the basement in the last weeks before the evacuation. The teachers organized a fundraiser to bring them food. At that time, only a few shops in the whole town continued to sell bread and other foodstuffs under constant fire. It was very dangerous to leave the shelter and the bravest teachers of the university delivered food to the students. Students were the first to be evacuated, and so that more people could fit on the buses, everyone took only small backpacks with them. The teachers, who were able to be evacuated only a month after the start of the war, were in a shelter for a long time and volunteers took them from there without their belongings and documents. Active humanitarian assistance was provided by non-government organizations (NGOs) established by students and teachers of the university, such as the Women’s Initiative Foundation, the Prostir Foundation, the Luhansk Region Development Laboratory, the Luhansk Association of Organizations of Persons with Disabilities, the Impact Center East.UA, and international organizations: UNHCR, USAID, UNDP, Red Cross Society in Ukraine and others.

At the beginning of the 2022–2023 academic year, 651 employees continued to work at new locations, including 314 teachers, 79 percent of whom had a degree. That is, more than 10 percent of teachers refused to evacuate or found a new job after the evacuation. Among the 337 non-teaching staff, about 50 percent did not leave the occupied territory and their employment was suspended.

The number of students who continued their education at the Volodymyr Dahl East Ukrainian National University after the evacuation was more than 3.6 thousand, of whom 49% were on a state-funded basis and 51% on a contract basis; 86.4% of students studied at the bachelor’s degree program (full-time – 66.6%, part-time 33.4%); 13.6% at the master’s degree program (full-time – 52%, part-time – 48%). Since July 2022, about 550 students of Luhansk National Agrarian University have been transferred to Volodymyr Dahl East Ukrainian National University after the final merger of the universities.

3 weeks after the outbreak of war – On March 14, 2022, Volodymyr Dahl East Ukrainian National University has already resumed its educational activities in a distance form. Teachers who went abroad in search of safety have become active participants in international projects, participated in academic mobility, attracted and are attracting foreign specialists and scholars to give guest lectures at their home university. Students who have left the country continue their distance learning at Volodymyr Dahl East Ukrainian National
University, while applying to universities abroad and gaining experience in their first job in other countries. The resumption of the university’s activities was an important step towards maintaining trust, reputation and strengthening its position in the educational services market. The university is transforming the limitations and risks of today into opportunities and the development of new areas and forms of activity.

Restrictions caused by the destruction of power plants during rocket attacks on Ukrainian territory by the Russian Federation make it impossible to ensure synchronized remote work in full due to power and internet outages. This makes the development of video tutorials and the creation of modern educational video and audio content more urgent. Uncertainty about the duration of the hostilities and the extent of further damage to critical infrastructure and the time required to restore it necessitates further development of the education system’s adaptive capabilities and the development of strategic recovery plans and anti-crisis strategies based on strengthening resilience and turning constraints into opportunities.

Active hostilities in the city of Sievierodonetsk, Luhansk region, led to the complete loss of the academic building and heavy damage to the laboratory building. The entire material and technical base in the occupied territory is under the control of the occupiers. The server part, the electronic repository of scientific works and the library have been lost.

### 1.3. One year after the 2022 evacuation

_A year after the university was evacuated_ – As of the end of February 2023, the number of employees was 476, including 301 teachers and 175 support staff. That is, the total staff reduction is 26.9%, including 4% of teachers.

The number of students at the end of February 2023 is 4,157, a year ago their number was 3,604, and taking into account the transferred contingent from Luhansk National Agrarian University (LNAU) in the amount of 550 people, the increase for the year is 3 people. Comparing the figures for a certain period – March 2022 and 2023 – an increase of 553 people was achieved due to the merger of V. Dahl EUNU and LNAU, enrollment of applicants and voluntary withdrawal, non-payment of financial debts and graduation. In the summer, a successful admission campaign helped to attract 1,539 applicants to the university, which allowed us to cover the withdrawals of applicants mainly due to the completion of studies and obtaining diplomas in the amount of 1,304 applicants. The demand for postgraduate studies on a contract basis has increased significantly. The number of contract postgraduate students increased 2.4 times, with a total increase in the number of postgraduate students of 78%.

Challenges of today have a multidirectional impact on the desire of applicants to enter the university. On the one hand, uncertainty about the future, unstable incomes, and rising unemployment negatively affect the demand for educational services and the desire to enter higher education institutions; on the other hand, the desire to acquire new skills in a new profession after losing a job or getting a deferral in military service makes people think about obtaining several master’s or doctoral degrees.

Tough competitive conditions in Dnipro and Kamianets-Podilskyi and the possibility of takeover by the universities that sheltered the university in the first days after the war led to the search for a new location, which became Kyiv. This is a new stage in the resumption of the university’s work and penetration into the educational services market in Kyiv and the Kyiv region, associated with the acquisition of material and technical resources and preparation for offline education.

Unfortunately, it is a difficult task to implement without grant support from international donors, as since May 2022, the budget allocation has been reduced by 6% of the planned amount for 2022 (by UAH 7 million) (Academic Council of the Volodymyr Dahl East Ukrainian National University, 2023a). The filling of the special fund decreased as a result of a 30% increase in financial arrears for tuition of contract students (by more than UAH 11.00 million per year) (Academic Council of the Volodymyr Dahl East Ukrainian National University, 2023b). Despite the reduction in funding for the university, salaries to faculty and staff were and are paid in full on time, except for those who remained in the temporarily occupied territories and with whom communication was lost.
During the year after the evacuation, the educational process is carried out through the e-campus system on the Moodle platform, and the document flow is carried out using the electronic system “Megapolis. DocNet, thanks to the Fulbright Program in Ukraine and the financial support of the Press, Education and Culture Section of the US Embassy in Ukraine. The university continues to operate centers for youth development, security, career development, soft competencies, and others.

Having gained adaptive abilities and experience after the evacuation in 2014 and implementing new methods of work and interaction in the covid period, the university shortened the period of adaptation to new changes and accelerated all recovery processes with almost zero material and technical base, thanks to the preserved human capital of the university.

The stress and losses suffered by university professors negatively affected their creative potential, resulting in a decline in scientific activity in the year after the evacuation in many respects: in 2022, one doctoral dissertation was defended against 20 in 2021, and no dissertations were defended against 11 in the previous period for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy; the number of received titles of protection for intellectual property objects more than halved and the number of research works under economic agreements tripled. Publication activity has also decreased significantly compared to the pre-war period: the number of textbooks and articles published has halved, and monographs have decreased fivefold compared to the previous year.

Some of the achievements include the university’s entry into the top ten best educational institutions in terms of inventive activity for the period from 2018 to 2022 and an increase in the ranking in the SCOPUS Scientific and Metric Database (SMDB) to 45th place among higher education institutions of Ukraine (against 48th in 2021) and 1st place among institutions of the Luhansk region (Academic Council of the Volodymyr Dahl East Ukrainian National University, 2023a).

In 2022, compared to 2014, the involvement of each university representative in volunteer activities increased significantly, which today includes everyone’s participation in raising funds to help the Armed Forces of Ukraine and assisting in the work of humanitarian headquarters. At the stage of defense of the native land, students and teachers enlisted in the territorial defense, at the stage of evacuation, they assisted in the settlement of those who had just arrived at the location after the evacuation, helped in the evacuation of colleagues and their families, and evacuated the university’s property and documents. At the stage of integration into the host community, volunteer activities include participation in public works to clean up the park in the communities that have received the university’s teachers and students, planting trees and helping to pack boxes of humanitarian aid. The mobilized teachers and students, like every citizen of Ukraine, are defending the country from the enemy in the Armed Forces of Ukraine.

During the year of working under martial law, the university labor team adapted to resource limitations and danger and became more cohesive. The work on digitalization of all processes at the university, which began in the pre-war period, has been completed, including the educational process – conducting classes and consultations online, taking exams, filling out and signing statements and protocols with subsequent transfer to deans’ offices; electronic document flow between structural units; and organization of the work of the admission committee during the submission and passing of entrance exams by applicants. Internal and external communications have been updated and restored. Never before in the life of the university have there been so many internal communication channels for different locations, professional issues, interests in social networks and chats. Everyone constantly feels support, care, finds help, even shares recipes for desserts from products received as humanitarian aid. This made it possible to speed up the dissemination of information, involve teachers in decision-making, and strengthen the sense of team unity. The teachers pay increased attention to finding partners at the new location for internships for applicants, further development of dual education, joint scientific and research works, scientific and calculation works commissioned by business representatives, state and municipal institutions and organizations.

Key changes in the university’s management include the growing role of informal relations and communications, which is manifested in minimizing bureaucratic procedures and transferring information and setting tasks without additional “paper”
approvals and orders, only through online correspondence and communication. The management system is based on leadership, is flexible and adaptive, and decision-making time has been reduced and their effectiveness has increased due to democratic management and high team involvement. The number of tasks for managers has changed, and most of them go beyond their job responsibilities.

Today, the university is participating in the project “Revitalizing Displaced Universities: Strengthening Competitiveness, Supporting Communities” (REDU, EU), the concept of which is to increase the university’s capacity for strategic management and includes trainings and education to improve and update the University Strategy. The updated strategic goals of the university, which provide a guideline for further actions and development directions, are defined in the Development Strategy of the Volodymyr Dahl East Ukrainian National University under Evacuation – 2.0 (2022–2023) – the resumption of the educational process and educational activities, preservation and development of scientific potential, development of the values of the Dahl community; support for existing and formation of new sustainable relationships with partners; expansion and deepening of cooperation with foreign universities and international organizations (Volodymyr Dahl East Ukrainian National University, 2022).

2. SUGGESTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Summarizing the experience of the university gained during the evacuation of 2014 and 2022, recommendations for minimizing and preventing losses relate primarily to improving existing and developing new internal policies and strategies, considering martial law and ways of post-war recovery.

1. At the institutional level, it is necessary to:

- include in the Development Strategies of higher education institutions of Ukraine strategic directions and measures for risk management, which provides for the possibility of rapid response to the negative consequences of shelling and the spread of hostilities (including relocation);
- heads of higher education institutions to provide for a reserve of financial and other resources in case of relocation and other emergencies;
- establish a “Crisis Center” within the management structure of higher education institutions of Ukraine and the Ministry of Education and Science to coordinate actions in emergency situations;
- heads of higher education institutions, heads of all structural units to ensure archiving and storage of all information necessary for work in their areas of expertise on remote servers and regular updating of this database.

2. At the national level, it is necessary to:

- develop at the national level and implement at the university level a Security Plan (Crisis Management Plan; Evacuation Plan) for the evacuation of educational institutions, which should clearly define the place of relocation and a set of measures for evacuation and resumption of activities;
- develop and implement the National Program of Support for Displaced Universities, which provides for measures at the state level to preserve the scientific and educational potential of displaced universities, measures to restore (or conditions for temporary joint use of) the material and technical base, sources of funding for these measures, etc;
- amend the Budget Code and other regulations to increase the flexibility of financial resource management (or the formation of reserve funds) and public procurement by state-owned higher education institutions in case of emergency, financial support for relocation and restoration.

3. At the international level, it is necessary to:

- establish a joint international fund for accumulating financial and other resources to support education in Ukraine and its recovery after the victory;
• foster sustainable connections between scientific and educational institutions in Ukraine and the world to conduct joint research in the fields of security and defense capability, and more;

• implement exchange programs with leading universities around the world to develop and implement internal security policies.

CONCLUSIONS

The reflection on the experience of gaining resilience at Volodymyr Dahl East Ukrainian National University during the evacuations of 2014 and 2022 made it possible to identify the main resources of resistance and develop the ability to overcome challenges.

These resources include human and social capital, which not only ensure resilience in times of war, but also contribute to the restoration and further development of the system. Social cohesion based on shared experiences, common values, and democratic governance is a significant motivation tool for staff, providing a sense of belonging to the community and leading to increased involvement in all processes related to improving the educational and scientific environment, as well as volunteering and civic activities.

The main instruments for ensuring the resilience of the university have been digitalization and strategic planning. The experience of working online since 2014, the implementation of electronic document circulation, the professional development of teachers in creating modern distance courses and remote learning, the improvement of both synchronous and asynchronous forms of work, and the digitization of the entire educational process have ensured survival not only in the COVID-19 period, but also in times of war. Improving the strategic management skills of leaders at all levels and updating the university’s strategy with modern challenges in mind have led to systemic decisions aimed not only at overcoming current problems but also at strengthening competitive positions and further development.

Based on the experience of several university evacuations, ways of preventing significant losses and ensuring achievements and victories, recommendations have been developed to increase the resilience of higher education institutions, which relate to improving policies and strategies at various levels.

Further research will be dedicated to identifying and systematizing risks during the recovery stage of the university in the post-war period, as well as developing a system of measures aimed at preventing them.

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