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Attacked at the War's Start, Ukrainian U. Relocates, Perseveres—for the Second Time

By Theresa Defino

The university in the eastern Ukrainian city of Severodonetsk was shelled Feb. 24—the first day Russian forces invaded. The attack destroyed most of the research enterprise of Volodymyr Dahl East Ukrainian National University's home campus, which was relocated and rebuilt following a previous Russian bombardment just eight years earlier.

But, under the direction of Rector Olga Porkuian, who also lost her house in the recent invasion, the university has continued to hold classes online and in a trio of cities to which it evacuated some thousands of staff, students and residents—a massive and dangerous undertaking.

As Porkuian explained during a recent meeting of the Federal Demonstration Partnership, Volodymyr Dahl East Ukrainian National University was founded in 1920 in Luhansk, the center of the easternmost region of Ukraine.^[1] Following the meeting, Porkuian provided RRC additional information via email about the academic and living situation facing university staff and students during this crisis.

They are not safe.

After escaping from Severodonetsk to Kamianets-Podilskyi, Dnipro and Kyiv, those cities remain under attack or are occupied. "Yesterday, October 10, it was very dangerous here and in Dnipro city," Porkuian wrote to RRC from Kyiv, where she said "most of the leaders of the university are located. Fortunately, none of my colleagues were hurt. Today the situation is quieter but it is still not good." Kamenetz-Podolsky, she said that day, was "much safer" but also had a smaller number of evacuees.

They are suffering.

"Truly speaking it is a really very difficult time for our university now. We are forced to rent premises for work, and buy computers and other equipment. It all happened as a result of war actions, because our campus is destroyed, the city is occupied, and laboratories were looted," Porkuian told RRC. "Most of our students are residents of the occupied territories and, therefore, are also in a difficult financial situation. [Those who] left, like all university staff, [left] with a minimum of things. They and their parents are deprived of their usual sources of income as only a very small part of the business was evacuated and continue to survive on safe territories."

They are carrying on.

"We all continue to work, although it is difficult in the face of daily shelling," Porkuian said in an email, adding, "I am also in touch with rectors of other universities."

Now the fall period with online courses and students has begun. "If there are problems with communication, we reschedule classes for another time, but we try to conduct them on the time according to the timetable. Most of the lecturers and professors are now in Kyiv," Porkuian said.

“Professors and other teachers are not required to go to the front, they are in the military reserve. But they can, by virtue of their convictions, voluntarily join the armed forces and defend Ukraine with weapons in their hands,” she added. “There are such people, probably, in all higher educational institutions. We are very proud of them, as well as our Ukrainian army.”

In September, she estimated enrollment had declined about 10%. When the war began in February, the university had approximately 7,000 students and 500 faculty.

Just eight years ago, the numbers were three times higher.

To understand the university’s history—and the cumulative harm from war that ripples out still today—it is necessary to go back to Russia’s first attack on the campus in 2014. This tale of relocation and rededication also explains how the university came to be in Severodonetsk, and the fresh sense of loss and grief Porkuian and others felt leaving it.

First Attack Was in Summer 2014

“In 2014, there were in Ukraine 17 such displaced universities,” she said. “And now in 2022, this number has increased significantly: about 30 universities, 40 colleges and 65 educational institutions [have been] forced to move to new places.”

Prior to the Russian invasion in 2014, the university’s “main areas of research and educational activity were technical sciences, economics, psychology, philology, sociology, law and others,” said Porkuian during her presentation. The university was “one of the largest educational institutions in the country in terms of the number of students, the number of teaching staff, with a powerful material and technical, laboratory and scientific base located in 57 educational and laboratory buildings.”

She added that there was an “extensive network of 10 branches located in Crimea, Luhansk and Kherson regions,” with “more than 2,000 teachers [and] more than 30,000 students, including 1,500 foreign students.”

Prior to the first invasion, “the university had 110 branches of departments in production [and] 40 research laboratories,” Porkuian said, and “always held leading positions in the national rankings of scientific and educational activities of Ukraine. The university community was focused on development, research and social activity.”

In the summer of 2014, “the premises of the base university in Luhansk were seized by the occupiers and looted. Anti-aircraft guns were installed in the courtyard of the student dormitories,” she said at the meeting. “Also, all branches were seized, except for one—in the city of Severodonetsk.”

So that was where the “university staff, most of the teachers and students, were transferred,” she said. This left many employees “in a very difficult psychological state, due to the fact that they lost all their property, their housing,” Porkuian said. “Many elderly or sick parents could not leave; they remained in the occupied territory.”

A University ‘Is Not About Buildings’

The lesson that all absorbed in 2014 was that the university “is not about buildings, walls and equipment, but, first of all, it is people, human potential,” she said. “For many, the university became that nucleus around which one could rally, and which motivated one to think about the future, plan something in a new place, reevaluate one’s life and priorities.”

By this year, the “dedicated work of employees” had launched “educational and scientific activities, create[d]

new sites and laboratories” and the university had “significantly improved its national rankings,” Porkuian said. “Just [in] the last eight years, the university has implemented more than 50 international and national projects, created 16 new laboratories and modern multifunctional educational spaces with the help of our international partners and sponsors.”

She added special thanks to “the participation and support of the American people,” via the U.S. Agency for International Development, for support after the 2014 attack. Porkuian said new offers of help would be welcomed and that a foundation had been created to accept them. She can be reached directly via her email for more information.

Porkuian also spoke fondly of Severodonetsk, a city she called “cozy and compact.” The area included approximately 150,000 residents and “research institutions and knowledge-intensive industries functioned in it, cooperation with which greatly contributed to the organization of high-quality education for students of technical specialties after the loss of the research base.”

Labs, Partnerships Are Gone

Then came Feb. 24. Russian military attacks completely or partially destroyed many university buildings and its labs. University officials “with the support of volunteers” undertook the task of evacuation, “under shelling” and without “humanitarian corridors.” This meant “official authorities could not ensure the safe removal of people, take responsibility for their lives,” Porkuian recalled.

People, she said “walked through the whole city, under fire, to the hostel, where buses were waiting for them to take them out of the city.” The evacuation took three weeks; some 5,000 residents of the region were relocated.

Porkuian specifically mentioned the university’s permanent partnership with “the research and production enterprise Impuls, a leading Ukrainian manufacturer of highly reliable control systems for nuclear energy and railways”—a type of relationship that many U.S. research institutions strive to establish on their own campuses.

“The company’s products [are] used in many countries and, of course, in Ukraine, and in particular, at the Zaporizhia nuclear power plant occupied by the Russian army,” she said. At Impuls “our students underwent practical training and internships.” The Russian military destroyed Implus’ research and production base, Porkuian said, adding “the rest of the university’s partner enterprises are in a similar situation.”

As of her talk in September, Porkuian said there was no “complete data on the destruction and loss of the scientific and educational infrastructure of Ukraine as a result of the war.” But data at that time indicated “90 of the 213 scientific institutions of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine are damaged, 20 universities and colleges were destroyed, and 140 were damaged.”

But the damage doesn’t end with the bricks and mortar, Porkuian said, noting the “difficult psychological state of teachers, scientists and students due to the loss of loved ones, housing, property, constant danger and uncertainty.”

‘Serious Crisis’ in the Scientific Field

Another challenge is that the “dispersion of scientific personnel throughout the country and abroad may lead to the collapse of scientific schools,” she added. “A certain number of participants in the educational process remained in the occupied territories, unable to leave, unable to study or work due to lack of connection with these territories.”

According to survey data, few Ukrainian researchers and students were able to relocate to Poland, other

neighboring countries or even the United States through programs with American universities and temporary changes in immigration rules, Porkuian said.

Forty-seven percent of scientists surveyed were still in Ukraine and had not changed their residence because of the war, 38% were still in Ukraine but had moved as a result and approximately 15% “were abroad,” she said.

The lack of financial support is also fueling the “serious crisis...in the scientific field as a result of the war,” Porkuian said.

In the same survey, nearly 30% of scientists “who worked on certain projects, noted that their project was stopped because of the war. This is primarily due to the deprivation of funding from the National Research Fund. As of today, Ukraine has not yet held a single competition for financing scientific research,” she pointed out. “For all of us, the main priority is to support the armed forces of Ukraine.”

There is also worry about the “loss of traditional customers of scientific developments and scientific and technical services by universities in connection with the closing of industrial enterprises, their destruction or the impossibility of evacuating business from the occupied territories,” Porkuian said.

‘We Will Rebuild Our Cities’

Data also show further disruptions. When asked whether it is “possible to engage in scientific activity to the same extent as in pre-war times,” Porkuian reported that “only a partial third of the respondents gave a positive answer. Among the reasons that do not allow the rest to work fully, psychological ones prevail: ‘I do not feel safe, which prevents me from working’ and ‘lack of interest, apathy.’”

Turning back to her university, Porkuian told RRC officials had “approved a new strategy for the university [and] created an anti-crisis committee.” She also expressed confidence in Ukraine’s victory and stressed that the war is about more than democracy in Ukraine.

“Until the liberation of the...region and the restoration of our campus in Luhansk, we will work in Kyiv. After liberation, we will rebuild our cities and return to Luhansk,” she said. “The most important thing for all Ukrainians is international support for our country in this war. No matter how dramatic it may sound, we believe that this is not just a war for the independence and integrity of our country, but for justice, freedom and the future of all human civilization.”

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1 Olga Porkuian, “The Ukrainian Crisis and its Effect on the Research Enterprise,” Federal Demonstration Partnership September 2022 meeting, <https://bit.ly/3DqLxXN>.

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