

Rector's Address to the EUA Board and the Union of Rectors of Higher Education Institutions of Ukraine

29 January, 2026

Distinguished Colleagues,

Esteemed Rectors,

Dear Partners,

It is a great honour to address the Members of the EUA Board and the Union of Rectors of Ukraine at a defining moment for our country, when the resilience of our higher education system is being tested under the most extreme conditions. As of January 2026, the humanitarian situation in Ukraine has entered its fifth year of full-scale war. What we are witnessing today is not a single crisis, but a crisis within a crisis – a prolonged humanitarian emergency compounded by a deep and systematic **energy collapse**. The beginning of this year has been marked by a dramatic escalation of targeted attacks on critical energy infrastructure, carried out during extreme winter conditions. These attacks have multiplied the humanitarian consequences of the war and affected every sector of society – healthcare, transportation, public administration – and inevitably, education and research.

Energy today is no longer merely an infrastructural issue. It has become a deliberate instrument of pressure. Its disruption shapes daily life, institutional stability, and the very resilience of Ukrainian society. In this context, higher education must be understood not as a separate sector, but as an integral part of Ukraine's humanitarian and critical infrastructure.

Universities, like hospitals and schools, operate under these conditions not occasionally, but continuously. Blackouts, unstable heating, disrupted water supply, and constant air-raid alerts have become part of everyday reality. Teaching continues during power outages, examinations take place between air-raid alarms, research adapts to interrupted access to laboratories and data, and academic staff balance their professional duties with displacement, volunteering, and care for their families.

Within this national reality, higher education in Ukraine does not exist apart from society. Ukrainian universities are **embedded in the humanitarian landscape** of the country. They serve as shelters, coordination hubs, digital lifelines, and centers of stability for students, staff, and local communities. They have not withdrawn from their mission – they have expanded it. **Today, Ukrainian universities are anchors of humanitarian stability, ensuring educational continuity and providing psychosocial support in an environment where everyday life is repeatedly disrupted.**

At the same time, the sector is facing a series of **structural challenges** that threaten its long-term sustainability. Approximately twenty percent of research and teaching staff are currently working abroad. This brain drain creates serious capacity gaps – in teaching, in research supervision, and in institutional leadership. While international experience is invaluable, the prolonged absence of academic staff weakens departments, disrupts continuity, and places additional pressure on those who remain.

The **physical infrastructure of Universities has also been severely affected**. Since 2022, more than three thousand seven hundred educational institutions across Ukraine have been damaged or destroyed as a result of hostilities. For universities, this means the loss of classrooms, laboratories, libraries, and student housing. It limits our ability to provide safe, inclusive, and fully equipped learning and research environments, particularly for students with special needs and for disciplines dependent on experimental facilities.

Equally alarming is the **psychological dimension** of this crisis. Surveys conducted in 2026 indicate high levels of academic burnout among both students and staff. Prolonged exposure to air-raid alerts, blackouts, displacement, and chronic uncertainty has led to deep psychological stress and trauma. This strain directly affects academic performance, research productivity, and the long-term retention of talent within the higher education system. Universities are increasingly required to act not only as educational institutions, but also as spaces of psychological support and resilience.

The **energy crisis** adds another critical layer. The full-scale invasion has been accompanied by systematic attacks on Ukraine's energy infrastructure, turning energy into a central front of hybrid warfare. In early January 2026 alone, more than 240 drones and 36 missiles targeted power facilities during sub-zero temperatures. Kyiv received only around half of its required electricity. Hundreds of thousands of residents experienced blackouts, and after the strike of January 9, approximately six thousand apartment buildings were left without heating. On January 14, **President Volodymyr Zelensky declared a national state of emergency in the energy sector, underscoring the severity of the situation for civilian life and for critical institutions, including universities.**

Analytical estimates show that in 2024 electricity restrictions lasted more than 1,950 hours – over one fifth of the year. For universities, outages of ten to twelve hours per day became routine, and in some regions, continuous. As of January 2026, Ukraine faces a critical electricity deficit of approximately 4.5 gigawatts, with multi-day outages in major academic centers. A persistent shortage of generators and backup power systems severely constrains universities' ability to maintain continuity of teaching, research, and digital services. Laboratories, data centers, dormitories, and

inclusive facilities are disproportionately affected. For higher education, this is not an operational inconvenience. It is a systemic threat.

The **humanitarian dimension of this crisis is deeply human**. Winter temperatures falling to minus twenty degrees Celsius forced the closure of many educational facilities, further delaying learning after years of disruption. Universities have taken on expanded psychosocial responsibilities – providing routine where chaos dominates, community where isolation grows, and support where exhaustion accumulates. For thousands of students, especially internally displaced persons, universities are often the last accessible public institution preserving life plans, professional identity, and hope for the future.

The experience of **Volodymyr Dahl East Ukrainian National University** is emblematic. After multiple relocations due to occupation and active combat, its facilities in Kyiv were severely damaged by a blast wave in January 2026. Despite shattered windows and freezing conditions, the university continues to operate. This is not symbolic resilience. It is humanitarian resilience.

Reforming Higher Education under Wartime Conditions

Alongside survival and adaptation, Ukraine continues to pursue ambitious reforms in higher education, many of which are aligned with European integration objectives. These reforms reflect a strategic commitment to quality, transparency, and long-term development.

However, the pace, scope, and limited consultation surrounding several ongoing reforms have generated deep and growing concern within the university community. Implemented under conditions of full-scale war and severe energy instability, these changes directly affect universities' ability to plan strategically, retain academic staff, and safeguard their core academic mission at a time of unprecedented pressure.

1. University Financing

One of the most alarming issues relates to the reform of **university financing**. New funding models are being introduced without transparent methodologies, predictable timelines, or a clear assessment of their long-term impact on institutional sustainability.

For universities operating under constant security threats, prolonged blackouts, and infrastructural damage, such uncertainty translates directly into institutional vulnerability. Without clarity and stability, the risk of fragmentation, inequality between institutions, and irreversible loss of academic capacity increases significantly.

2. Governance and Leadership

Serious concern is also caused by experimental changes to university governance, including new models for rector appointment and the establishment of supervisory boards.

At present, universities lack sufficient clarity regarding decision-making procedures, accountability mechanisms, and safeguards for institutional autonomy and academic freedom. In the absence of clear rules and shared understanding, these experiments risk destabilizing governance structures precisely at a moment when institutional coherence is essential for survival and resilience.

3. Admission to Master's and PhD Programmes

Additional concern arises from the increasing centralization of admission procedures to Master's and PhD programmes through standardized external examinations.

While quality assurance is a shared and legitimate objective, excessive regulation risks weakening universities' role as academic actors, limiting their capacity to develop research schools, and unintentionally excluding talented candidates whose educational trajectories have been disrupted by war, displacement, or prolonged interruptions to study.

A Call to Our European Partners

Taken together, these reforms – when implemented under conditions of war, humanitarian strain, and energy instability, and without sustained dialogue – create a high level of systemic risk for the higher education sector.

In this context, we turn to our European and international partners with a sincere and urgent appeal for **expert support and joint engagement**. We propose to unite efforts and engage in structured cooperation, drawing on the experience of the European Higher Education Area in order to:

- support the development of crisis-resilient and predictable university funding frameworks;
- contribute expert insight to governance reforms that strengthen, rather than weaken, institutional autonomy;
- foster meaningful and continuous dialogue between policymakers and academic communities;
- safeguard academic freedom and institutional trust during periods of emergency reform.

We firmly believe that higher education reforms in Ukraine should not be developed in isolation. They must be co-shaped with the European academic community, particularly at this critical historical moment.

For Ukraine today, this is not only a reform agenda. It is a shared responsibility – for resilience, for trust, and for the future of European higher education as a common intellectual space.

Dear Colleagues,

The challenges facing Ukrainian higher education have not ended. The humanitarian and energy crisis continues, and its impact is systemic. Today, universities are not simply responding to emergency situations – they are striving for **sustainable continuity** of education, research, and academic life under conditions of prolonged crisis.

At this stage, the key question is no longer how to survive the next blackout or the next semester. It is how to ensure that *Ukrainian students and staff can continue learning, teaching, and conducting research in ways that are reliable, structured, and resilient.*

Urgent and Short-Term Academic Options.

First, opening **access to academic databases, digital libraries, repositories, and online training resources** is essential.

Second, **short-term mobility programmes** offer Ukrainian students.

Third, we need **virtual visiting professorships and short-term academic visits.**

Fourth, **targeted mini-grants for professors and academic staff remaining in Ukraine** help them maintain teaching, supervision, and research under extremely difficult conditions.

Fifth, **joint tutorship for graduate students.** Joint Ph.D Programmes (Kottutelles).

And importantly, we must scale up **Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) and Blended Intensive Programmes (BIP).** These modern, flexible formats allow Ukrainian students and staff to engage in joint teaching, research, and learning with international partners, preserving academic ties and global collaboration despite the ongoing crisis.

Looking further ahead, medium- and long-term interventions are also crucial.

1. Elaboration of **joint programs and degrees** to help save the home degree from UA with access to pass the accreditation in foreign higher education assessment authorities.
2. **Support for quality assurance** in higher education will ensure that standards are maintained during and after the crisis.

3. Creation of strategic alliances (partnership) between UA universities and partner universities for further restoration and development of Ukrainian higher education system (capacity building projects).
4. Capacity building projects and/or trainings and expert support within the process of obtaining an **Associate Partner status in Erasmus+ program** that will lead to the creating of National Erasmus Agency.
5. Creation of the **restoration fund to help rebuild the universities after the war**, fund for technical support.
6. And **investments in research resources, laboratories, and digital infrastructure** are essential to sustain teaching and research continuity.

Throughout this process, Ukrainian universities remain committed to the values of **internationalization, student well-being, and academic integrity**.

Colleagues, barbarians may destroy walls and books – but they **cannot destroy knowledge, hope, or the future**. Ukrainian universities continue to teach, to research, and to serve society.

We are not passive victims of crisis; **We are active defenders of knowledge, democratic values, and hope**.

We invite our European partners to walk this path with us – to share expertise, co-create solutions, and ensure that higher education remains resilient, autonomous, and committed to freedom, quality, and solidarity.

Even in the darkest times, the **light of knowledge does not go out**. Together, we can ensure that it shines stronger than ever.