

Enrollment Patterns of Internationally Mobile Students from Ukraine at Universities in Linguistically Similar EU Countries¹

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Enrollment Patterns of Internationally Mobile Students from Ukraine at Universities in Linguistically Similar EU Countries. In 2021, Ukrainians represented the third-largest group of international students in the EU. The number of Ukrainian students studying abroad grew notably from 2013-2014, with a significant rise after Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Since 2014, Ukrainian students have favored Slavic EU countries. We use multiple regression with university-level administrative data to analyze their choices with regard to geographic locations and fields of study in the three countries with the highest shares of Ukrainian students and a high level of linguistic similarity (Poland, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic). We observe higher shares of Ukrainian students at universities close to Ukraine's border or in capital cities. Limited proficiency in the language of study may explain the tendency to choose technical fields of study and avoid highly selective programs.

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Introduction

Since the 1990s, the topic of internationalization of higher education has become a significant area of interest in both research and public policy (Teichler 1999). In the public policy area, the process of unification of the European education system was initiated (Bologna Declaration 1999). The implementation of the Schengen Area and the introduction of a temporary visa-free regime for over 60 non-EU countries (European Council 2024) have resulted in a reduction in cross-border movement barriers. These changes, in conjunction with an overall growth in mobility, have contributed to an increase in the number of international students in Europe (Teichler 2012; Baláž et al. 2018). In 2022, the number of residence permits for tertiary students in OECD countries reached a new maximum representing an increase of 24% compared to 2019 and 61% compared to 2012 (OECD 2023a). In the period preceding the signing of the EU-Ukraine association agreement (2012-2013), there was a discernible increase in the number of Ukrainian students pursuing higher education in the EU. This trend was further reinforced by the signing of the Association Agree-

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ment and the introduction of visa-free travel for Ukrainian citizens to the EU in 2016. The Russian invasion of Ukraine represents a further significant event that has contributed to the overall trend.

Between 2013 and 2021, the number of Ukrainian students in the European Union more than doubled, while their numbers in Slavic-speaking EU countries increased almost 3.5-fold (UIS Statistics 2021). In 2021, after China and India, Ukrainians were the third-largest group of mobile students in the EU (UIS Statistics 2021). In our paper, we first identify linguistic proximity as the enabler of the steep increase of student mobility from Ukraine to European Union member states on the macro level. We then focus on degree mobility of Ukrainian citizens who pursue their entire tertiary study in a Slavic-speaking EU country. Our meso-level analysis includes all Ukrainian citizens enrolled at one of the universities in a Slavic-speaking EU country. We use administrative university-level data on the number of Ukrainian students in the most important Slavic-speaking EU destinations to seek for patterns how do the structurally constrained choices of higher education institutions relate to geographic locations and fields of study while pursuing a university degree in the EU. We ask whether the observed mobility patterns have been impacted by the Russian aggression.

Language proximity, place of study and international student mobility

The role of language proximity between the country of origin and the country of destination was first studied by academics in the field of labour migration (Belot – Hatton 2012; Belot – Ederveen 2012). Later, its importance was also noted in the context of international student mobility (Ovchinnikova 2022; Baláž 2010; Baláž et al. 2018).

When exploring the connection between language and migration, it is necessary to make a distinction between seeking language proximity and migration aimed at learning a new language. In the latter case, language is regarded as a form of capital that can be utilized for future career advancement (Beech 2017: 294-295; Pawar et al. 2019). English being the obvious example of a language the command of which serves as a form of capital (Baláž 2010; Murray 2020). Conversely, linguistic proximity is typically more relevant for explaining migration to non-English-speaking countries (Adsera – Pytlikova 2015; Ovchinnikova 2022). Studying in a country with a language close to the language spoken at home may also be the only option due to the fact that some countries do not offer many degree programmes in English and then it is essential to know the national language to master the studies (Weber – Van Mol 2023: 6). Therefore, understanding the national language is considered one of the key aspects for international students to enter universities in non-English

speaking countries (OECD 2023b, p32). In countries of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), universities require varying degrees of proficiency in the local language (López-Duarte et al. 2021).

Moreover, moving to a country where the language is similar to that spoken in the home country can be regarded as a strategy to reduce migration barriers (Belot – Ederveen 2012; Ovchinnikova 2022). Research results show that migration flows are significantly higher between countries with the same language than between countries with different languages (Abbott – Silles 2016). The closeness of languages between the source and the destination countries facilitates second language acquisition (Chiswick – Miller 2007) and reduces the psychological costs associated with adaptation to a university in a foreign country. Another advantage of studying in a country with a similar language can be lower costs. Several countries in Europe offer free university study in the national language also to foreign nationals.

Nevertheless, imperfect language proficiency can also act as a handicap. Studies suggest that studying in a foreign language can be associated with lower grades. The lower the language skills, the larger the handicap in grades (Bernhofer – Tonin 2022). On the other hand, international migration creates additional costs connected to living in a new country. In this situation a combination of work and study can be the preferred option for international students. Working in a country with a language belonging to the same language group as one's native language can provide a smoother integration in the local labour market and higher earnings (Adserà – Chiswick 2007). Regardless of the language, lower living costs can provide an advantage for international students. From this perspective, the cost of living in Central European countries is below the European Union average (Eurostat 2023).

It has been shown that linguistic proximity reinforces the existing migration flows (Ovchinnikova 2022; Sprenger 2024), which typically exhibit a distinct regional character (Baláž et al. 2018). At the same time, geographic proximity does not substitute for the effect of linguistic proximity (Belot – Ederveen 2012). In other words, a preference for linguistically similar countries explains migration independently of spatial proximity. If we understand language proximity as a common factor influencing students' arrival in countries within the same language group, then the specific characteristics of a place can be seen as additional, independent attributes that affect university choice within these countries.

According to Netz et al. (2024), taking into account the characteristics of a place helps to understand student migration by connecting *why* it is important to migrate with *where* the expectations can be fulfilled by considering physical, imaginative and diverse inequalities associated with a place. Literature on the

importance of place of study of mobile students concentrates mainly on the “desired” characteristics of a place such as culturally rich lifestyle (Kosmaczewska – Jameson 2021; Varriale 2021), prestige of academic institutions (Glass – Cruz 2023; Schäfer – Walgenbach 2024), possibilities of extra-curricular activities (Shutaleva et al. 2022) or physical features of places as such.

Researchers argue that students weigh the pros and cons of major urban centers versus smaller cities and towns, suggesting that the unique characteristics of a place may matter more than the university itself or its reputation (Prazers et al. 2017). The research results mostly explain how students migrate to urban areas which offer more diverse sources of entertainment (Weber et al. 2023; Ma 2022). Alternative motivations attracting students to smaller cities are not so well researched. We expect smaller urban centers or towns to offer more affordable living costs (Shkoler – Rabenu 2023), less demanding school enrollment requirements and, overall, lower competition at universities outside traditional educational hubs (Kondakci et al. 2018). Areas geographically closer to home might be preferred for their closeness and overall accessibility (Nefedova 2021).

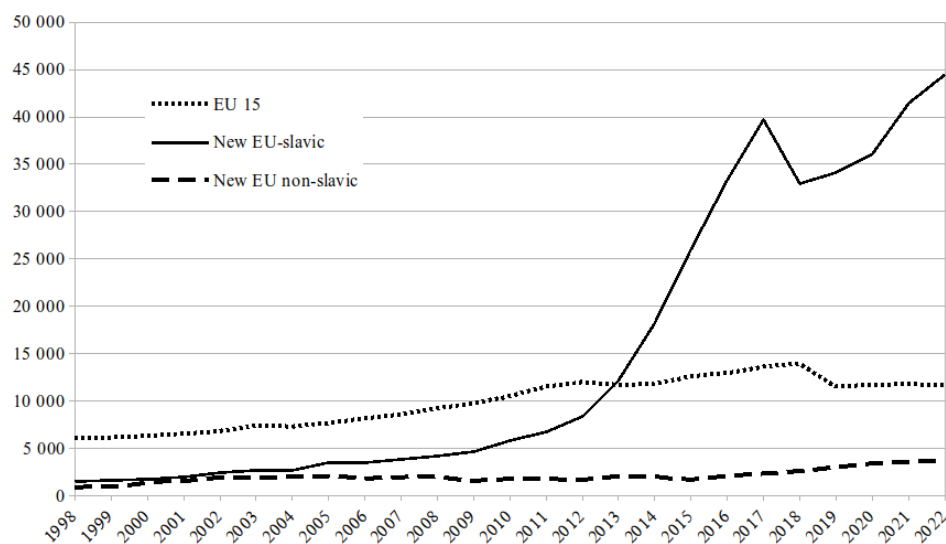
International student mobility from Ukraine

European Union is perceived positively by young people in Ukraine (Tkachenko 2020). Ukrainian students and workers consider it a place where they can pursue a better life based on the vision of economic wellbeing allowing for a good living standard for themselves (Brzozowska 2023; Mulska et al. 2021). At the same time, Ukrainians do not see European Union as a homogeneous unit, but differentiate between Central Europe as a more easily accessible place of first migration, a first stop in their migration journey and Western Europe as a group of countries with even more lucrative earnings and living standards (Brzozowska 2023).

As mentioned before, there has been a notable surge in the number of Ukrainian students in the European Union. Simultaneously, with the growth in number of Ukrainian students in the European Union we can observe an effort of Ukraine to gradually harmonize their national education system to the one in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) starting in 2005 with the introduction of the Bologna process on Ukraine. The most important policy changes in this process came in 2009 with a partial acceptance of the European credit system (NAESU 2020). In 2014, the same levels of higher education system as in EHEA were introduced (bachelor, master, PhD) and the credit system of evaluation was applied with all formal requirements as in the EHEA. Travel between Ukraine and the EU became easier in 2017, with the introduction of

the visa-free regime, allowing Ukrainians to visit European Union countries for up to 90 days with a biometric passport.

Graph 1: Number of international students from Ukraine in EU countries



Source: UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS)

Together with the Bologna process in Ukraine, the numbers of Ukrainian students in Slavic-speaking EU countries started to grow significantly and the rise in numbers followed the pace of main legislative changes in implementation of EHEA characteristics in Ukraine. By 2014, the number of Ukrainian students in Slavic-EU countries surpassed the total number of Ukrainian students in the “old” EU 15 countries. Over the past decade the Slavic-speaking countries in the EU have emerged as the most popular destinations of Ukrainian students (Graph 1). In 2021, the three EU member states with the highest proportion of Ukrainian students were Slovakia (3.5 %), Poland (2.3 %) and Czechia (1.3 %). Relying on the measure of language proximity developed by Dyen et al. (1992), Slovak, Polish and Czech are also the three Slavic languages most closely related to the Ukrainian language. In 2021, 72% of all Ukrainian university students pursuing studies in the EU were enrolled in these three countries.

While the Slavic-speaking EU neighbours of Ukraine – Poland and Slovakia – were the two countries with the highest proportion of Ukrainian students in the EU, the non-Slavic-speaking EU neighbours of Ukraine had a notably lower share of Ukrainian students. While the share of Ukrainian students in

Hungary remained stable at 0.4% and was mostly due to ethnic Hungarians from Ukraine studying in Hungary (Szabo et al 2018), the share of Ukrainian students in non-Slavic speaking Romania was only 0.1 % in 2021.

On the other hand, the argument on why Ukrainian students choose Slavic-speaking EU countries is seemingly contradicted by the relatively high shares of Ukrainian students in the Baltic states, which range from 1% in Latvia to 0.7 % in Lithuania. Although these countries do not have an official language that belongs to the Slavic language family, in all these countries students can socialize in Russian language easily (Prazers et al. 2017; Urbanovič et al. 2016; Islam 2022). Latvia even provides the possibility to study in Russian (Chankseliani – Wells 2019). Therefore, while the native languages of the Baltic countries are not similar to Ukrainian (particularly in the case of Estonia, which belongs to the Finno-Ugric language group), the wide availability of Russian as an important minority language spoken by many in these countries is in line with our argument about the importance of language proximity in choosing a country of study in the EU among students from Ukraine. While the Slavic-speaking countries and the Baltic countries experienced dynamic increases in the number of Ukrainian students, other EU members saw stagnating interest. For example, in a situation where the overall numbers of Ukrainian students in the EU more than doubled, the figure for Ukrainian students in Germany, their largest western European destination, grew by a mere 21% between 2013 and 2021.

The overwhelming majority of Ukrainian students in the three major EU destinations (Poland, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic) pursue their studies in the local language. This allows Ukrainian students to study entirely for free at public universities in Czechia and Slovakia. In 2022 only 8% of Ukrainians paid for their university study in Slovakia and 22% did so in the Czech Republic (CVTI 2023b, MŠMT 2023). In the case of Poland, free university education is limited to students with Polish nationality (ID card or Polish card). The share of Ukrainian students with Polish ethnicity was 8% in 2021 (Statistics Poland 2021) so the majority of Ukrainians in Poland have to pay for university study in Poland. Study fees in Poland are on average 2 000 euros per year which makes the study still relatively affordable also for international students (NAWA 2024). Overall, 87 % of Ukrainian students in 2022 study in Polish (Radon 2022) making their situation with regard to the language of study similar to Slovakia and Czechia.

Despite imperfect command of the language, Ukrainian students in Czechia, Slovakia and Poland study mostly in the national language. Leontiyeva and Kopecká (2018) refer to Czech private and public subjects who organize preparatory courses for Ukrainian students. Their survey results report a relatively

high level of self-reported command of Czech by the Ukrainian students, except for students who are in Czechia for less than two years (Leontiyeva – Kopecká 2018: 36). On the other hand, research from Poland and Slovakia indicates that Ukrainian students face language barriers while studying in these countries (Gierko 2015; Dlugosz 2018; Knapková 2025). A study from Poland shows that despite the preparatory language courses introduced after the Russian Invasion of Ukraine, the language deficit among Ukrainian students persists (Jedryka 2024).

The Russian invasion of Ukraine is another major influence on student enrollment patterns from the country. The war-related disruption of higher education most likely widened the group of students who consider studies abroad. The literature in this regard considers psychological factors (Kovács et al. 2023) and the instability of economic and housing situations (Duszczyk et al. 2023). Army drafts and travel bans (ЗАКОН УКРАЇНИ 2024) targeting men are another factor which might impact the gender composition of post-2022 student mobility.

Observing the large influx of Ukrainian students to Slavic-speaking EU countries, this paper examines common patterns in their university choices and fields of study while they study in closely related but not fully intelligible Slavic languages in Poland, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic. The analysis will be guided by two main research questions: a) In comparison to all students in a country, which universities and study fields do Ukrainian students choose? b) Do pre-war enrollment patterns of student mobility from Ukraine to Slavic-speaking EU countries differ from mobility after 2021?

Table 1: Available administrative data

	Unit	Number of units	School years	Number and share of Ukrainian students		
				2021/22	2022/23	2023/24
Poland*	University	352	2020 - 2023	36011 (3.0 %)	48056 (3.8 %)	44827 (3.6 %)
Slovakia**	Faculty	128	2015 - 2023	5738 (4.2 %)	10198 (7.5 %)	10466 (7.5 %)
Czech Republic	Faculty	198	2015 - 2023	4403 (1.4 %)	6198 (2.0 %)	6780 (2.2 %)

Sources: Statistics Poland (2022a, 2022b), Ministry of Science and Higher Education in Poland (2015-2022), MŠMT (2023) CVTI (2023a, 2023b)

* The total numbers of Ukrainian students included in our analysis are 4 to 5% lower, as we lack information on the total number of students for some universities.

** About 1.5 % of Ukrainian students which were not assigned to an university faculty were excluded from our analysis.

Our first research question is explored by five hypotheses. Two formulate expectations regarding the role of place by contrasting universities in capital cities with universities in smaller cities or towns (hypothesis 1) and universities close to Ukraine with the more distant ones (hypothesis 2). Another two hypotheses center on university prestige contrasting leading national universities with the remaining universities in the country (hypothesis 3) and public and non-public universities (hypothesis 4). The fifth hypothesis related to the first research question contrasts preferences for STEM fields of study with other fields. The second research question is tackled by two hypotheses comparing the pre-2022 and post-2022 enrollment patterns (hypothesis 6) and the pre-war and wartime gender distribution of Ukrainian students (hypothesis 7).

Data and methods

Data

To investigate the study choices of Ukrainian students in the most popular Slavic-speaking EU countries, we rely on administrative data reflecting the share of Ukrainian students relative to the total number of students at each faculty or university. We assume that the choice of a university and the field of study is connected to the faculty's educational character and the professional direction connected to the job acquisition possibilities in the future as well as on the notion of how demanding the studies will be. Data about the number of Ukrainian students is available at the level of a university in Poland and at the level of a university's faculty in Slovakia and Czechia. The different level of data availability (university or faculty) is in part compensated by the differences in size of education system. While the larger Polish education system is represented in our sample by 352 universities, the two smaller counties provide national data about university students at both, university and faculty level. In the analysis, the Czech Republic is represented by 198 university faculties and the Slovak Republic by 128 university faculties (for an overview, see Table 1). For all three countries we are able to observe patterns both before and after the full-scale Russian invasion in February of 2022 which further reinforced the migration flows of Ukrainian students to countries of the European Union. For Slovakia and Czechia, the data in our analysis include the school years from 2015/2016 to 2023/2024. With regard to Poland, our analysis is confined to the school years 2020/2021, 2021/2022 and 2022/2023. The basic descriptive statistics of Ukrainian students in the analyzed countries can be found in Table 2.

Table 2: Descriptive statistics on the shares of Ukrainian students studying at certain types of universities or fields of studies, in %

Share of Ukr. students among all Ukr. students in the country studying	Poland			Slovakia			Czech Republic		
	2015-17	2018-21	2022-23	2015-17	2018-21	2022-23	2015-17	2018-21	2022-23
At universities in the capital city	27.8	25.6	26.8	17.8	18.3	22.7	63.9	64.7	57.6
At universities in regions bordering Ukraine	16.3	12.8	13.3	57.0	56.7	58.4	2.5	3.3	5.3
Engineering, manufacturing and construction	-	-	-	22.0	32.7	45.6	15.5	14.3	15.3
Education	-	-	-	6.5	6.2	2.2	2.4	1.7	1.7
At public universities	36.6	34.9	38.5	96.4	98.3	98.5	75.9	81.0	87.1
At the best ranked university	1.8	1.4	1.2	6.6	7.0	7.1	13.6	14.5	14.4

Sources: CVTI (2023b), MŠMT (2023), Ministry of Science and Higher Education in Poland (2023)

Variables

The dependent variable in our analyses is the share of Ukrainian students among the students at faculty/university between 2015 and 2023. In our analysis, we included students at all three levels of university education — bachelor's, master's, and doctoral — and employed multiple linear regression to model our dependent variable. To account for changes in observed patterns over time, our analysis defines three stages of international mobility of Ukrainian students: (a) the early arrival period in 2015-2017, (b) the period of coordinated massification in 2018-2021 and, (c) the war period (2022 onward). Subsequently, we proceed to model the share of Ukrainian students at university faculties in all three periods in Slovakia and Czechia (Tables 3 and 4) and in the latter two periods in Poland (Table 5). All models are estimated separately for Slovakia, Czechia and Poland. As our regression models include all faculties / universities in the respective countries and are therefore calculated for the entire population, we disregard the information on statistical significance, which is related to the hypothetical applicability of the results from sampled data to the entire population. Consequently, when interpreting the results, we also consider those coefficients that are not evaluated as statistically significant.

Our analyses include three groups of independent variables. The first group is concerned with the desirability of the university's location in terms of its geographical position (proximity to Ukraine) and the balance between the availability of employment opportunities and urban amenities (represented by the

capital city) and the more affordable costs outside of the most urbanized centers. The potential preferences for universities closer to home or located in the capital city are explored with two dummy variables:

Distance from the border with Ukraine. The regions that either share a border with Ukraine (Prešov region and Košice region in Slovakia and Lublin and Rzesow regions in Poland) or are geographically closer to Ukraine (Moravia-Silesia and Zlin regions in the Czech Republic) were compared to the rest of the territory of the analyzed countries.

Capital city. The faculties/universities situated in the main city of a country (Warsaw, Prague, Bratislava) are contrasted with other faculties/universities in the analyzed countries. Compared to other students in these countries, we expect Ukrainian students to choose more affordable locations outside the capital cities (Hypothesis 1) and seek universities that are geographically closer to Ukraine (Hypothesis 2).

The second group tries to measure the prestige of the university by two variables:

Top university in the country. Weber et al. (2024) assume that students from less developed countries would choose more prestigious universities and will be less concerned about the joy of a city due to their instrumental motivations to earn an education providing better work perspectives. However, we argue that students with an imperfect command of the local language will try to avoid the more demanding, selective and prestigious universities and rather look for the ones with lower prestige allowing them to learn the language of the country in their first year. We rely on the QS World University Ranking 2025 to identify the most prestigious universities in the country. These are the University of Warsaw in Poland, Charles University in Czechia and Comenius University in Slovakia. All three universities are located in the capital cities.

Public and non-public universities. In the Czech Republic and Slovakia, public university courses taught in the national language are provided free of charge to international students. In these countries, the command of the national language is evaluated by the universities if they have written or oral entrance examinations. In Poland, free education is available for international students who possess a Polish card (equivalent for ID card issued to international students with Polish ancestry and proficiency in the Polish language). Non-public universities in Slovakia and Czechia typically charge fees and are generally less popular than public ones. This way non-public universities tend to attract a specific group of students who, for various reasons, are more inclined to invest financial resources than time and effort in their studies. The decision to attend a public university rather than a non-public one may therefore indicate a willingness to invest more time and effort, avoid tuition fees and

may be perceived as a more prestigious choice, particularly in Slovakia and Czechia.

Given their imperfect command of the language of instruction, we anticipate that Ukrainian students will be less represented at the countries' leading national universities (Hypothesis 3) and will favor the less prestigious but more accessible non-public universities (Hypothesis 4), compared to the choices of other students in these countries.

The third group of independent variables is comprised of two dummy variables, which indicate the field of study.

Field of study. The International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) was employed for the purpose of categorizing the predominant field of study at university faculties in Slovakia and the Czech Republic. The field of study was then matched with the corresponding university or faculty manually, according to the name of the institution in question. In instances where a faculty name could be paired with multiple ISCED categories, the decision was made to select the category based on the name of the university. This was feasible for Slovakia and the Czech Republic where we have faculty-level data on Ukrainian students. In the analysis we use dummy variables to contrast two categories: a) engineering, manufacturing and construction, and b) education with other fields of study.

According to Weber et al. (2024) students from less developed countries choose STEM fields more often than others. These fields of study are considered more attractive at the labour market than education in the area of social sciences and humanities (Charles – Bradley 2009; Weber et al. 2024). Moreover, engineering and related STEM fields typically require proficiency in mathematics and may be perceived as less sensitive to the command of the local language. We therefore assume that STEM fields of study will be more preferred by the mobile students from Ukraine compared to all other university students (Hypothesis 5).

While Hypotheses 1 to 5 help us in answering the first research question, we formulate another two hypotheses to test if prewar patterns of student mobility from Ukraine to Slavic-speaking EU countries differ from wartime mobility patterns. In this regard, we expect that the established enrollment patterns of university/faculty choices will be disrupted by the war as students who would otherwise not apply to universities abroad become international students due to war-conditioned major disruptions in the tertiary education (Hypothesis 6). Based on the expectation that university studies might serve as a way to avoid compulsory military draft, we expect an increase in the share of male students when compared to the pre-war gender distribution (Hypothesis 7).

Results

Tables 3, 4, and 5 present the results of our regression analyses.

Table 3: Share of Ukrainian students at Slovak university faculties, OLS regression

	2015 - 17		2018 - 21		2022 - 23	
	Beta	Sig.	Beta	Sig.	Beta	Sig.
Capital city	0.003	0.972	0.006	0.953	0.098	0.269
Regions bordering Ukraine	0.455	0.000	0.472	0.000	0.502	0.000
Engineering, manufacturing and construction	0.037	0.644	0.137	0.084	0.261	0.000
Education	-0.086	0.283	-0.043	0.578	-0.079	0.271
Public university	0.144	0.100	0.158	0.066	0.191	0.016
Best ranked university	-0.073	0.422	-0.048	0.587	-0.063	0.442
R ²	0.274		0.316		0.405	
N	127		126		128	

Sources: CVTI (2023b), MŠMT (2023), Ministry of Science and Higher Education in Poland (2023)

The first group of independent variables, relating to faculty or university *location* seems to indicate two strategies of Ukrainian students when selecting universities. In the case of countries that share a border with Ukraine (Slovakia and Poland), Ukrainian students tended to choose universities located in regions closer to their home country. This indicates that in Slovakia and Poland, universities in regions bordering Ukraine are more preferred by Ukrainian students than universities in the capital cities which are further away from Ukraine. In two out of the three analyzed countries, geographical closeness and higher affordability (which we assume in regions outside of the capital cities) seem to be more important for the choices of the students than employment and leisure time activities available in the capital cities. Conversely, when mobility is directed towards a country that does not have a direct border with Ukraine – such as the Czech Republic – the capital city is preferred over the Czech regions closest to Ukraine. These patterns hold throughout the period of our analysis (2015-2023) and do not seem to change with the outbreak of war in 2022. In Slovakia, the choice of the border regions is the most pronounced and we even see a gradual strengthening of this tendency over the analyzed period (from 0.455 to 0.502). Overall, the preference for universities in the border regions of Poland and Slovakia, as well as the choice of faculties in the Czech capital, are the strongest predictors in our models.

Table 4: **Share of Ukrainian students at Czech university faculties, OLS regression**

	2015 - 17		2018 - 21		2022 - 23	
	Beta	Sig.	Beta	Sig.	Beta	Sig.
Capital city	0.370	0.000	0.368	0.000	0.422	0.000
Regions closest to Ukraine	-0.158	0.017	-0.157	0.019	-0.138	0.047
Engineering, manufacturing and construction	0.081	0.207	0.034	0.596	0.104	0.123
Education	-0.070	0.271	-0.122	0.059	-0.166	0.014
Public university	-0.269	0.000	-0.226	0.001	-0.041	0.567
Best ranked university	-0.133	0.056	-0.131	0.064	-0.196	0.008
R ²	0.326		0.317		0.275	
N	180		179		175	

Sources: CVTI (2023b), MŠMT (2023), Ministry of Science and Higher Education in Poland (2023)

The second group of our independent variables focuses on the *prestige* of the chosen university. As expected, we observe a universal tendency to avoid the highest ranked university of the country throughout the period 2015-2023. In all three countries, Ukrainian students are underrepresented at the national top university. The absence of Ukrainian students at the top university in the country is the most pronounced in the Czech Republic in the latest analyzed period, while it is rather weak in Slovakia and almost negligible in Poland during the whole period. We see less universal patterns regarding the preference (or lack thereof) for public universities. As already mentioned, private universities in Czechia and Slovakia charge fees, even for students studying in the national language, while in Poland all universities charge fees for non-nationals. From this perspective, the choice of non-public universities in Poland supports our expectation of a preference for universities with lower entry requirements or less demanding entrance exams. The explanation for the moderate and increasing preference for public universities in Slovakia and the preference for non-public universities in the Czech Republic until 2022 is less straightforward. One possible explanation could be that there are many public universities in Slovakia that do not require entrance exams, allowing Ukrainian students to study without paying tuition fees. On the other hand, less accessible programs with entrance exams and stricter language requirements at public universities push Ukrainian students to the more expensive, but more accessible private universities in the Czech Republic. Over time, we observe a similar tendency in all countries towards a stronger preference for public universities (a change from 0.144 to 0.191 in Slovakia) or a weakening of the tendency to choose non-public universities in Poland (from -0.170 to -0.126) and in

Czechia (from -0.269 to -0.041). This tendency is most pronounced after the outbreak of the war in 2022. It might indicate that the increasing shares of Ukrainian students, along with their growing experience studying in these countries, is related to improved navigation of the local university systems, a reduced willingness or ability to pay tuition fees after 2022, or a more welcoming atmosphere at universities due to sympathy for students from a country suffering under Russian aggression.

Table 5: Share of Ukrainian students at Polish universities, OLS regression

	2020 - 21		2022	
	Beta	Sig.	Beta	Sig.
Capital city	0.047	0.381	0.054	0.321
Regions bordering Ukraine	0.209	0.000	0.184	0.001
Public university	-0.171	0.001	-0.126	0.019
Best ranked university	-0.006	0.916	-0.008	0.888
R ²	0.070		0.049	
N	345		341	

Sources: CVTI (2023b), MŠMT (2023), Ministry of Science and Higher Education in Poland (2023)

Finally, we assess Ukrainian students' preferences for particular *fields of study* in relation to their expectations regarding the required level of proficiency in the local language, comparing the more mathematically and numerically oriented technical sciences with the heavily language-based field of education. These variables were tested in Slovakia and in the Czech Republic with the field of study at the faculty level. In Slovakia, we see a continuous growth of interest in technical fields of study between 2015 and 2023 (a change from 0.037 to 0.261). The choice of technical faculties in the Czech Republic is significantly less pronounced and becomes a more relevant predictor only in the last period of our analysis (0.104). With regard to the (dis)preference for studying education – we observe a relatively weak effect in the expected direction in Slovakia and a growing medium-sized connection in the case of the Czech Republic. Compared to the observed preference for technical fields of study, the tendency to avoid education as a field of study is far less pronounced among the Ukrainian students, but we still observe a negative relationship with the dependent variable throughout the period covered by our analysis in both countries. Overall, the lack of Ukrainian students in the field of education is more pronounced at the Czech universities. Although we are not able to study the choice of Ukrainian students for a particular university faculty and field of

study in Poland in a similar way as in Czechia and Slovakia, we do have data on the field of study of Ukrainian students in 2022 at Polish universities which support the findings from the countries of the former Czechoslovakia regarding the non-preference for educational fields of study, but do not confirm a higher preference for engineering and related fields of study, which was observed in Slovakia and in the Czech Republic.⁴ The reasons for this difference may be related to a different situation with regard to the accessibility and availability of engineering study in Poland.

Overall, our models in Tables 3 and 4 explain between 27 to 40 % of the variation in the shares of Ukrainian students at university faculties. The university-level models for Poland (Table 5) are much less successful, explaining only about 5 to 7% of the variation. This is most likely due to the absence of the field of study variables and the lower granularity of the data.

Table 6: Share of men among Ukrainian students in Slovakia, Czechia and Poland between 2015 and 2023, in %

	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Slovakia	50.2	52.8	50.7	51.2	51.3	50.7	48.7	59.8	54.1
Czechia	40.5	40.3	39.7	39.3	38.7	41.7	43.7	44.7	44.7
Poland	44.6	45.3	45.1	44.2	46.3	44.4	42.8	53.5	-

Sources: CVTI (2023b), MŠMT (2023), Ministry of Science and Higher Education in Poland (2023)

Our regression analyses also provide some insights into our second research question on the differences between the pre-war and wartime mobility of Ukrainian students to the three analyzed countries. Comparing the pre-war period (2018 – 2021) with student mobility during the period of Russian aggression in Ukraine, we observe a shift toward the choice of engineering, manufacturing and construction fields. This is most likely related to the increasing share of male students leaving Ukraine after the start of the war (see Table 6). The simplest explanation for this phenomenon is that studying abroad became a way for young Ukrainian men to avoid the risk of being drafted into the army after 2022. This shift is also the most likely explanation for the decrease in the similarity of the year-to-year correlations between the shares of Ukrainian students at universities and university faculties in Poland, Slovakia and the Czech Republic. The similarity between the distributions of Ukrainian students at universities in the three countries between 2021 and 2022 is the lowest since 2016 (see Table 7).

⁴ The analysis is available upon request from the authors.

Table 7: Year-to-year similarity between annual shares of Ukrainian students at universities and faculties in Slovakia, Czechia and Poland, Spearman correlation

	Slovakia	Czechia	Poland
2015 - 2016	0.858	0.833	
2016 - 2017	0.875	0.879	
2017- 2018	0.911	0.919	
2018 - 2019	0.888	0.939	
2019 - 2020	0.946	0.931	
2020 - 2021	0.957	0.959	0.956
2021 - 2022	0.874	0.771	0.877
2022 - 2023	0.910	0.954	

Sources: CVTI (2023b), MŠMT (2023), Ministry of Science and Higher Education in Poland (2023)

Discussion and conclusion

Our study provides a comprehensive analysis of the recent phenomenon of student mobility from Ukraine to the Slavic-speaking EU countries. In the decade preceding the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the EU observed a nearly fourfold increase in the number of internationally mobile students from Ukraine. In contrast to previous student mobility from Ukraine, this growth was almost exclusively directed to the Slavic countries that joined the EU in 2004 or later. The three EU countries with the most similar languages to Ukrainian (the Czech Republic, Poland and Slovakia) also have the highest proportion of Ukrainian students at their universities. In 2021, almost three-quarters of international students from Ukraine in the EU were studying in these three countries. A further increase in Ukrainian students followed after the Russian invasion in 2022. The majority of students from Ukraine in the analyzed countries study in the local language, which we expect to have an impact on their study choices as the command of the local language has been identified as a significant challenge for many students (OECD 2023c).

We argue that in the territory of Central Europe a new regional hub has been created as a result of the influx of students from Ukraine. Kondakci et. al. (2018) identify new regional hubs which emerge by attracting students as a consequence of political and economic circumstances in nearby countries, offering a higher degree of political stability, geographical proximity, historical relationships creating networks and the presence of a smaller number of prestigious academic institutions. They are competing with more conventional destinations for international students by being more accessible and less aca-

demically demanding. In our analysis we examine the role of locality, university prestige, and field of study as factors describing choices of the university. While their choices might be constrained by a limited command of the local language, our results show that Ukrainian students clearly differentiate between universities and faculties in the studied countries.

The location of universities was the strongest predictor in our models. When choosing a place to study, characteristics of the place can play a stronger role than academic characteristics (such as prestige, or field of study) of the university as was previously confirmed also among bachelor international students (Weber et al. 2023). At the same time, this is in line with the finding that migration flows to linguistically close countries tend to have a specific regional character (Baláž et al. 2018). In our analyses, we observe a preference for universities located either in the regions bordering Ukraine (Poland and Slovakia), or, in countries that do not share a border with Ukraine, a preference for universities in the capital city (Czech Republic). Current research assumes that the choice of places of study outside of the capital city is connected to the fulfillment of instrumental goals while the choice to study in the capital city is usually made by students from more developed countries who come to enjoy intrinsic values of the preferred city (Weber et al. 2024).

The preference for places of study in the border regions could be explained by various strategies involving cross-border short-distance commuting. When this is not available, as in the case of the Czech Republic, the capital city is preferred, most likely due to more opportunities for work and leisure. This is consistent with previous research showing that international students tend to prefer universities in larger cities (Weber et al. 2024). An alternative explanation would be that the higher concentration of Ukrainian students at universities in Prague is related to the prominent role of the Czech capital in the reception of Ukrainian migrants in the Czech Republic (Šimon et al. 2020).

The imperfect command of the local language places Ukrainians at a disadvantage relative to students with advanced linguistic skills. This is confirmed by research primarily from Poland (Długosz 2018; Jedryka 2024), but also by researchers in Slovakia (Knapková 2025) and, to some extent, in the Czech Republic (Leontiyeva – Kopecká 2018). Previous research in Poland indicates that Ukrainian students are aware of their imperfect linguistic proficiency and feel stressed about the idea of continuing their education in Polish (Rębisz – Grygiel 2017). As a consequence of imperfect linguistic proficiency, Ukrainian students may feel constrained in their choices and opt for less academically demanding studies.

As our research demonstrates, Ukrainian students are underrepresented at the highest-ranked universities in all three countries, although this tendency is negligible in Poland and relatively weak in Slovakia. In the case of Slovakia

and the Czech Republic, in the latest analyzed period, there is a discernible inclination towards pursuing studies at technical faculties, which rely on mathematical and technical competencies and may be perceived as less linguistically demanding and more attractive at the labor market. Similarly, in Slovakia and in the Czech Republic, the results show a moderate non-preference of Ukrainian students for the field of education, which is inextricably linked to the local language environment.

Another variable that is related to the prestige of the university and language skills is the choice between private and public universities. In Poland and the Czech Republic, we observe a weakening preference over time among Ukrainian students for private universities. This aligns with a strategy of seeking less demanding studies, likely due to imperfect language skills. In Slovakia, however, public universities are the increasingly preferred option. This might be related to the less competitive education space at public universities specifically in the Slovak Republic caused by shrinking demography and out-mobility of domestic students to universities abroad. Nevertheless, over time, there has been a gradual decline in interest in non-public universities and an increase in choosing public universities across all three countries. This may be related to the growing confidence of Ukrainian students, who may rely more and more on the experiences of their older compatriots studying at the same schools, or to a gradually more welcoming environment in which universities learn to cope with Ukrainian students. As a result, the more accessible, but more expensive and/or less prestigious non-public universities lose their appeal.

Our analysis also focused on the post-2022 strategies of Ukrainian students. We find significant differences when comparing year-to-year choices of faculties and universities in the three countries, where we see a significant decrease in the similarity of choices between 2021 and 2022. This could be due to a significant increase in the share of Ukrainian male students. While typically female-dominated, the share of Ukrainian male students in Poland and Slovakia increased by approximately 10 p.p. in 2022, suggesting that these two countries bordering Ukraine attracted a significant number of young Ukrainian men who were seeking to avoid military conscription. On the other hand, in the pre-war period, we observe a growing similarity of university choices between Ukrainian students over time indicating a stabilization of mobility patterns in the *new regional hubs*.

Overall, while most research on ISM focuses either on individual students or on entire host countries (Weber et al. 2024), our study offers a meso-level analysis by examining study choices based on ISM data at the university level in the main EU destination countries of Ukrainian students. Our analytical options were somewhat limited by a shorter time frame and the unavailability of faculty level data in the case of Polish universities. A fruitful avenue for

future research would be to expand the range of destination countries to include some of the important destinations of Ukrainian students in the old EU (Germany, France). This would allow for a comparison of the choices of Ukrainian students observed when studying in a linguistically similar and more accessible university environment with choices when the language of study requires prior training and the university environment is generally less accessible due to high living costs and distance from the home country. Another important blind spot of our paper is the lack of information about the mobile students. For example, information about the region in Ukraine where they come from could help to understand the preference for universities bordering Ukraine.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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