

ІНСТИТУЦІОНАЛІЗАЦІЯ ЯК ЕЛЕМЕНТ ГАРМОНІЗАЦІЇ ПОЛІТИКИ УКРАЇНИ У СФЕРІ ВИЩОЇ ОСВІТИ У ПРОЦЕСІ ЄВРОПЕЙСЬКОЇ ІНТЕГРАЦІЇ

INSTITUTIONALIZATION AS AN ELEMENT OF UKRAINE'S HIGHER EDUCATION POLICY HARMONIZATION IN THE PROCESS OF EUROPEAN INTEGRATION

Serhiy Danylenko

Doctor of Political Sciences, Professor, Head of the Department of International Media Communications and Communication Technologies, Educational and Scientific Institute of International Relations, Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv

e-mail: danylenko@knu.ua

ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3435-2146>

Kseniia Babkina

Master of International Relations, Social Communications and Regional Studies, Educational and Scientific Institute of International Relations, Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv

e-mail: kseniabbkn@gmail.com

ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0007-6052-0226>

Даниленко Сергій Іванович

Доктор політичних наук, професор, завідувач кафедри міжнародних медіакомунікацій та комунікативних технологій Навчально-наукового інституту міжнародних відносин Київського національного університету імені Тараса Шевченка

e-mail: danylenko@knu.ua

ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3435-2146>

Бабкіна Ксенія Андріївна

Магістр за спеціальністю «Міжнародні відносини, суспільні комунікації та регіональні студії», Навчально-науковий інститут міжнародних відносин Київського національного університету імені Тараса Шевченка

e-mail: kseniabbkn@gmail.com

ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0007-6052-0226>

Abstract. *This article systematizes the stages of transformation of Ukraine's higher education system after 2014 and the institutionalization of European standards within it, and also examines the significance of this process as a component of European integration. The study focuses on the institutionalization of European norms within Ukraine's higher education system, tracing its alignment with the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and the democratization of Ukrainian higher education as part of broader European Union integration dynamics. Using qualitative document analysis, the study examines Ukrainian education legislation (including the Laws on Higher Education of 2014 and on Education of 2017), EU-Ukraine Association Agreement frameworks, NAQA reports, Erasmus+ mobility data, and Horizon Europe participation documents. Education is treated as an element of soft power for shaping international image. The findings demonstrate significant institutional restructuring in the areas of democratization of university governance, external quality assurance (the role of the National Agency for Higher Education Quality Assurance), and integration of Ukrainian universities into the EHEA and EU research networks. However, implementation remains uneven due to institutional capacity gaps, academic integrity challenges in the context of generative AI, legacy administrative practices inherited from the Soviet model, and the severe consequences of the full-scale Russian-Ukrainian war. The article concludes that higher education policy harmonization and the implementation of competency-based learning outcomes aligned with the European Qualifications Framework are key preconditions for Ukraine's long-term integration into the European educational, scientific, and socio-political space.*

Key words: *democratization of Ukrainian higher education, institutionalization, European Higher Education Area, Bologna Process, European Union, European integration of Ukraine.*

Анотація. *У статті концептуально систематизовано етапи трансформації системи вищої освіти України після 2014 року та інституціоналізації в ній європейських стандартів,*

а також досліджено значення цього процесу як складової євроінтеграції. На основі якісного аналізу документів: законодавства України у сфері освіти (зокрема законів «Про вищу освіту» 2014 року та «Про освіту» 2017 року), рамок Угоди про асоціацію між Україною та ЄС, звітів НАЗЯВО, даних про академічну мобільність у рамках Erasmus+ та документів щодо участі в програмі Horizon Europe, визначено ключові зміни в системі вищої освіти. Освіта розглядається як елемент «м'якої сили» у формуванні міжнародного іміджу держави та її академічного авторитету. Результати дослідження свідчать про суттєву інституційну перебудову у сфері демократизації університетського врядування, зовнішнього забезпечення якості та інтеграції українських університетів до Європейського простору вищої освіти (ЕНЕА) і дослідницьких мереж ЄС. Водночас реалізація реформ залишається нерівномірною через відмінності в інституційній спроможності закладів вищої освіти, успадковані радянські адміністративні практики, виклики академічної доброчесності в умовах поширення штучного інтелекту, а також наслідки повномасштабної російсько-української війни. Автори аналізують реформи крізь призму теорії інституційного нашарування, показуючи співіснування нових правил із застарілими управлінськими практиками. Додатково досліджено роль транскордонних освітніх та наукових мереж (зокрема Erasmus+ та Horizon Europe) як інструментів публічної дипломатії, що посилюють суб'єктність України на міжнародній арені та її стійкість в гуманітарній сфері. Зроблено висновок, що гармонізація вищої освіти з європейськими стандартами через впровадження компетентнісного підходу та узгодження Національної рамки кваліфікацій із Європейською рамкою кваліфікацій є необхідною передумовою успішної довгострокової інтеграції України до європейського освітнього, наукового та соціально-політичного простору.

Ключові слова: демократизація вищої освіти України, інституціоналізація, Європейський простір вищої освіти, Болонський процес, Європейський союз, європейська інтеграція України.

Introduction. The harmonization of Ukraine's higher education policy with European standards became one of the important directions of reform after the signing of the Association Agreement between Ukraine and the European Union in 2014 (*Association Agreement, 2014*).

At the same time, this process involves more than legal approximation or the formal adoption of European regulations. It also affects the internal organization of universities with gradual transition toward greater autonomy, institutional diversification, research integration, flexible learning pathways, and embedding in the EHEA. (*Kahanec et al., 2022*). However institutions implement European standards differently, depending on their capacity. While Ukraine has adopted key European instruments, such as the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System, the Diploma Supplement, national qualifications frameworks, external accreditation mechanisms, their practical implementation remains uneven.

Therefore, the article examines whether Ukraine's higher education system has substantially moved closer to European standards and why this process matters in the broader context of European integration as higher education reform continues to function as an important indicator of institutional development and long-term European orientation.

Literature review. The concept of Europeanization of Ukraine's higher education has been the subject of academic studies providing a foundational lens for understanding higher education transformation.

Zakharchuk N. (*Zakharchuk, 2020*) emphasizes that Ukrainian higher education reform must be understood as a dual process shaped by European regionalization through the Bologna Process and persistent institutional legacies inherited from the Soviet governance model. This duality produces a hybrid institutional environment in which new rules coexist with older administrative logics. From this perspective, harmonization is not substitution but layering – new governance structures are embedded into existing institutional configurations without fully replacing them.

Oleksiyenko A. (*Oleksiyenko, 2023*) extends this analysis by focusing on epistemic and cultural dimensions of reform. He argues that European concepts such as academic freedom, institutional autonomy, and quality assurance require not only procedural adoption but cognitive reinterpretation within academic communities. This implies that harmonization is fundamentally a process of

conceptual translation, where imported governance models must be integrated into local academic cultures that may not historically align with them.

Historical institutionalist approaches explain why reforms produce uneven outcomes. Hladchenko, Dobbins, and Jungblut (*Hladchenko et al., 2020*) argue that higher education systems characterized by informal governance practices and weak enforcement mechanisms tend to reproduce stability even under formal reform pressure.

This creates a structural gap between policy adoption and operational change. Universities may comply with formal requirements while maintaining internal practices that diverge from European governance expectations. As a result, reform outcomes depend not only on legislation but also on institutional incentives, administrative capacity, and governance culture.

Kahanec, Leu-Severynenko, Novosad and Stadnyi (*Kahanec et al., 2022*) situate higher education reform within Ukraine's wartime reconstruction agenda, arguing that the war both disrupted the education system and increased the strategic importance of European integration as a long-term rebuilding framework, with international academic partnerships serving as mechanisms of institutional continuity under wartime conditions.

Despite substantial existing research, there remains limited integration between three analytical dimensions: governance transformation, institutional implementation capacity, and external reputational effects. This study addresses this gap by analyzing higher education harmonization as a multi-level institutional process rather than a single policy domain.

The purpose of the study. The purpose of the article is to assess the harmonization of Ukraine's higher education policy with European standards after 2014 and to explain why this alignment matters for European integration, institutional modernization and external credibility.

The study employs qualitative document analysis as the primary methodological approach. Document analysis is appropriate because higher education harmonization is expressed through legislation, institutional decisions, programme participation and official reports. The empirical corpus includes: Ukrainian laws on higher education, the Association Agreement, documents of the European Higher Education Area, NAQA materials, EU-Ukraine cooperation documents, and information on Erasmus+, Eurydice and Horizon Europe.

The analysis is structured around the following interpretive layers: 1. normative alignment (formal policy convergence); 2. institutional implementation (operational practices); 3. integration outcomes (mobility, research cooperation, external recognition). This layered approach allows identification of asymmetries between policy design and institutional reality, assessing institutional convergence and discussing reputational significance as an indirect consequence of credible alignment.

Main results of the research. The post-2014 reform cycle introduced a structured shift in the governance architecture of Ukrainian higher education. The Law on Higher Education (2014) and subsequent legislative acts established a framework that formally redefined the relationship between the state and universities (*Law of Ukraine No. 1556-VII, 2014*). However, this transformation is better understood as partial decentralization under continued regulatory supervision, rather than full institutional autonomy in the European sense (*Hladchenko et al., 2020*). Universities gained expanded managerial rights, but strategic and financial dependencies on the state remain significant, particularly in budgetary allocation and staffing structures.

The Law on Education (2017) extended this framework by embedding competency-based learning outcomes as the foundational logic for qualification design (*Law of Ukraine No. 2145-VIII, 2017*). Simultaneously, the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) operationalized this logic by structuring qualifications through eight levels of learning outcomes directly comparable to the European Qualifications Framework (EQF). This alignment reduces informational barriers for Ukrainian graduates seeking recognition in European academic and professional markets, and signals the depth of normative convergence beyond purely legislative compliance.

Ukraine's inclusion in the Eurydice network in 2024 extends this institutional integration into the domain of comparative education data (*Eurydice Ukraine, 2024*). Eurydice provides standardized descriptions of national education systems for European audiences; Ukraine's participation means its system is increasingly represented alongside EU member states rather than classified separately as an external partner. While this does not constitute full convergence, it marks a qualitative shift in how

Ukraine's higher education system is positioned within European comparative frameworks.

Across all three instruments – the Law on Higher Education, the NQF, and Eurydice inclusion – a consistent pattern is visible: governance reform creates the conditions for recognition, but recognition itself depends on the operational credibility of the instruments in practice. This creates a hybrid governance model in which autonomy is formally recognized but functionally constrained.

The establishment of the National Agency for Higher Education Quality Assurance (NAQA) represents one of the most structurally significant reforms in Ukrainian higher education governance. From an institutional perspective, NAQA introduces a shift from administrative control logic toward external evaluative governance, where quality is assessed through peer review mechanisms and standardized European criteria.

NAQA's integration into European quality networks followed a staged trajectory. In 2020, the agency received affiliate status with the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) and became a full member of the Central and Eastern European Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (CEENQA) (*NAQA, 2020a; NAQA, 2020b*). These steps signal institutional recognition within the European quality architecture. NAQA is currently advancing toward full ENQA membership and inclusion in the European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR) – a milestone that would make Ukrainian accreditation decisions formally recognized across the entire EHEA (*NAQA, 2025*). EQAR inclusion would directly reduce the recognition barriers that Ukrainian graduates and academics currently face when seeking to study, work, or collaborate in Europe.

However, this shift does not automatically produce uniform compliance across institutions. Instead, it generates differentiated adaptation patterns: leading universities internalize quality assurance as a development tool; mid-tier institutions treat it as procedural compliance; weaker institutions often struggle with capacity requirements. The scale of accreditation activity as approximately 1,300 programmes processed in 2024 alone (*Annual report of the National Agency for Higher Education Quality Assurance for 2024*) demonstrates institutional penetration of external evaluation mechanisms, but does not resolve structural disparities in implementation quality.

Thus, quality assurance in Ukraine functions simultaneously as a governance modernization instrument and a mechanism of institutional differentiation. The next stage of reform should therefore focus on strengthening implementation quality and consistency, rather than expanding the formal scope of accreditation procedures.

Erasmus+ operates as one of the most effective mechanisms of European integration in Ukrainian higher education, but its impact is structurally uneven. Available data confirm the scale of this engagement: since 2014, Ukrainian institutions have participated in 1,889 cooperation projects involving 227 universities, producing 17,006 student and staff mobilities (*EEAS, 2023*). In the 2023 call alone, Ukrainian organisations were selected for 2,425 new mobility projects – the highest figure among all 144 partner countries in the programme (*EEAS, 2023*). This positions Ukraine not as a peripheral beneficiary but as one of the most engaged partner systems within Erasmus+, reflecting the administrative capacity and European partnerships that Ukrainian universities have developed since 2014.

However, the distribution of participation reveals clear asymmetries. Universities with stronger administrative capacity and international offices accumulate disproportionately higher engagement levels. This produces a stratified internationalization system, where European exposure becomes institutionally concentrated rather than system-wide. Beyond mobility statistics, Erasmus+ generates three long-term institutional effects: curricular adaptation toward European learning outcomes; administrative learning in project-based governance; and norm diffusion regarding academic standards and collaboration practices.

After 2022, mobility also acquired a resilience dimension. It became a mechanism for maintaining institutional continuity under wartime disruption, reinforcing its role beyond traditional academic exchange (*Kahanec et al., 2022*). European support for Ukrainian students and researchers became an additional channel of institutional connection, primarily humanitarian in immediate purpose, but with long-term structural consequences for academic integration.

Ukraine's participation in Horizon Europe represents a deeper form of institutional integration because it requires compliance with complex research governance standards. Unlike mobility

programmes, Horizon Europe engagement is conditional on financial accountability systems, research ethics compliance, consortium-based project management, open science requirements, and competitive peer review structures. This creates what can be described as governance transfer through research participation.

Available data confirm accelerating integration. Funding to Ukrainian entities doubled between 2022 and 2023, rising from €13 million to €20.3 million (*Science|Business*, 2024). By 2024, total net contributions reached approximately €50 million across 172 projects – the highest cumulative total for Ukraine in any EU framework research programme to date (*Science|Business*, 2025). The opening of the Horizon Europe Office in Kyiv in December 2023 further institutionalized this relationship, signaling Ukraine's transition from programme participant to recognized research partner requiring dedicated coordination infrastructure (*European Commission*, 2023).

Importantly, participation remains uneven. Institutions with established research infrastructure integrate more effectively, while others remain marginal participants. This reinforces systemic stratification within Ukrainian academia, mirroring the asymmetry observed in Erasmus+ engagement.

The full-scale war has not interrupted Europeanization processes but has fundamentally altered their conditions of implementation. Three structural effects are evident: infrastructure disruption, which has reduced institutional capacity in affected regions; digital acceleration, which enabled continuity but also exposed inequalities in technological readiness; and increased external dependency, through which international partnerships have become essential for institutional survival, particularly in research and mobility.

Thus, war acts simultaneously as a constraint on institutional capacity and a catalyst for international integration. This dual effect reinforces asymmetry rather than eliminating it – institutions already better integrated into European networks have proven more resilient, while those with weaker international connections face compounding disadvantages.

The findings indicate that Europeanization in Ukrainian higher education does not produce uniform systemic change. Instead, it generates a stratified structure in which institutions adapt at different speeds and depths. This confirms that harmonization is not a binary outcome (aligned / not aligned), but a gradient process of institutional convergence. The broader AA implementation data support this assessment: according to the Report on the Implementation of the Association Agreement for 2023, the Ukrainian Cabinet of Ministers fulfilled 86% of AA-mandated tasks, representing a five percentage point increase over the previous year (*Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine*, 2024). Education and research consistently appeared among the highest-performing implementation clusters, indicating that sectoral convergence is traceable through measurable governance outputs.

A key analytical insight is the existence of a persistent translation gap between formal adoption of European standards and their operational implementation. This gap is not accidental but structurally embedded in governance conditions characterized by administrative legacy systems, uneven institutional capacity, and limited enforcement mechanisms. As a result, European standards are often reinterpreted rather than fully replicated. Closing this gap requires not only continued legislative alignment but sustained investment in institutional capacity and governance culture.

From a soft power perspective, higher education reform contributes to external perception formation, but only indirectly. Institutional credibility emerges through cumulative signals: participation in Erasmus+, integration into Horizon Europe, and external accreditation recognition through the NAQA–ENQA/EQAR trajectory. As Lami & Myrta (*Lami, Myrta, 2021*) demonstrate, the value diffusion generated through academic mobility operates independently of formal policy declarations, accumulating through individual interactions and institutional relationships rather than top-down signaling. However, these effects function over long time horizons and depend on perceived consistency between formal alignment and practical governance behavior.

The analysis supports the interpretation that Europeanization in higher education is best understood as institutional learning rather than policy transfer. Learning occurs through repeated participation in European programmes, adaptation to external evaluation systems, and incremental internalization of governance norms. This process is neither linear nor complete, but cumulative – and its depth is determined less by legislative frameworks than by the organizational conditions under which institutions engage with European expectations.

Conclusions. The study demonstrates that Ukraine's higher education system has undergone significant transformation since 2014, characterized by increasing alignment with European governance, quality assurance, and research frameworks. However, this alignment is uneven and structurally differentiated. While formal regulatory convergence is substantial and reflected in legislative reform, NQF development, NAQA's integration into European quality networks, Eurydice inclusion, and growing participation in Erasmus+ and Horizon Europe, implementation varies across institutions depending on capacity, resources, and administrative maturity. Harmonization is therefore institutional rather than merely legal, as European standards become embedded through governance practices rather than legislative adoption alone. Europeanization is also structurally stratified: integration outcomes differ significantly across institutions, producing a multi-speed higher education system in which external credibility is indirect and cumulative, arising from sustained institutional participation in European frameworks rather than from formal policy declarations.

These findings have direct implications for policy. Strengthening institutional capacity beyond leading universities is essential to reducing the systemic asymmetry that currently concentrates European programme participation among a small group of institutions. In parallel, NAQA's trajectory toward full ENQA membership and EQAR inclusion should be treated as a strategic priority rather than a technical procedure, given that degree recognition across the EHEA depends directly on this milestone. More broadly, improving the implementation consistency of quality assurance mechanisms requires shifting emphasis from procedural compliance toward governance culture – a change that cannot be achieved through regulation alone but demands sustained investment in institutional development. Regional universities with limited administrative infrastructure require targeted support to expand their access to European programmes equitably. Underpinning all of these directions is the need to reinforce governance autonomy alongside robust accountability systems, so that universities can act as genuine agents of European integration rather than passive recipients of externally imposed standards. Ultimately, higher education harmonization in Ukraine should be understood as a long-term institutional adaptation process shaped by both European integration dynamics and domestic structural constraints. Its significance lies not in formal convergence alone, but in the cumulative depth of institutional change that makes Ukraine's European orientation operationally real.

Funding: *no external funding.*

Conflict of Interest: *the authors declare no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.*

Data Availability Statement: *not applicable*

References:

- Association Agreement between Ukraine and the European Union. (2014). Official Journal of the European Union, L 161, 3–2137. https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=uriserv:OJ.L_.2014.161.01.0003.01.ENG
- Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine. (2024). Report on the implementation of the Association Agreement between Ukraine and the European Union for 2023. <https://www.kmu.gov.ua/>
- European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA). (2015). Standards and guidelines for quality assurance in the European Higher Education Area. ENQA. <https://www.enqa.eu/>
- European Commission. (2021). Erasmus+ annual report 2020. Publications Office of the European Union. <https://op.europa.eu/>

European Commission. (2023). Ukraine: Horizon Europe office in Kyiv. Publications Office of the European Union. <https://op.europa.eu/>

European External Action Service (EEAS). (2023). Ukrainian universities won over 2,400 new International Mobility projects within EU's Erasmus+ Programme [Press release]. <https://www.eeas.europa.eu/>

Eurydice Ukraine. (2024). National Unit of Eurydice in Ukraine. <https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/eurypedia/ukraine>

Hladchenko, M., Dobbins, M., & Jungblut, J. (2020). Exploring change and stability in Ukrainian higher education and research. *Higher Education Policy*, 33(1), 111–133. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41307-018-0119-x>

Kahanec, M., Leu-Severynenko, S., Novosad, A., & Stadnyi, Y. (2022). Education reforms during and after the war. In Y. Gorodnichenko & I. Sologoub (Eds.), *Rebuilding Ukraine: Principles and policies* (pp. 115–130). CEPR Press. <https://cepr.org/>

Lami, B., & Myrta, R. (2021). Erasmus programme as an instrument of EU public diplomacy. *Jus & Justicia*, 15(1), 51–67. <https://doi.org/10.58944/bcak4193>

Law of Ukraine No. 1556-VII on Higher Education. (2014). Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine. <https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/1556-18>

Law of Ukraine No. 2145-VIII on Education. (2017). Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine. <https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/2145-19>

NAQA. (2020a). NAQA was granted the affiliate status with ENQA. <https://en.naqa.gov.ua/?p=779>

NAQA. (2020b). NAQA became a full member of CEENQA. <https://en.naqa.gov.ua/?p=817>

NAQA. (2025). Annual report of the National Agency for Higher Education Quality Assurance for 2024. <https://naqa.gov.ua/>

Oleksiienko, A. (2023). From the revolution of dignity to a revolution of academic excellence? In M. Mason (Ed.), *Handbook of education policy* (pp. 201–215). Edward Elgar Publishing. <https://www.e-elgar.com/>

Science|Business. (2024). Horizon Europe: 2023 winners and losers revealed. <https://sciencebusiness.net/news/horizon-europe-2023-winners-and-losers-revealed>

Science|Business. (2025). Ukraine participation in Horizon Europe rising amidst war, data shows. <https://sciencebusiness.net/news/ukraine-participation-horizon-europe-rising-amidst-war-data-shows>

Zakharchuk, N. (2020). Contextualizing the development of Ukrainian higher education: Between Soviet legacies and European regionalization. *East/West: Journal of Ukrainian Studies*, 7(2), 173–199. <https://doi.org/10.15421/ewjus2020.722>

Received: 20.01.26 / Revised: 14.02.26 / Accepted: 18.03.26 / Published: 30.06.26