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Higher education actors' responses to the Ukraine-Russia conflict: an analysis of geopolitical spatial imaginaries

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ABSTRACT

The Russian invasion of Ukraine, on 24th February 2022, was met with widespread condemnation across Europe, with many universities and higher education-focussed national and regional organisations issuing their own public statements about the invasion and subsequent conflict and, in some cases, taking specific action in relation to one or both of the countries. This article draws on an analysis of 55 such statements to examine what they reveal about how higher education organisations conceptualise the European higher education space, and the position of Russia and Ukraine within it. Specifically, the article considers what spatial imaginaries – pertaining to higher education – are evident in the statements about the Ukraine conflict issued by higher education organisations across Europe, and the extent to which the statements provide evidence about the role of these organisations as normative policy actors.

Introduction

The Russian invasion of Ukraine, on 24th February 2022, was met with widespread condemnation across Europe. This was evident with respect to higher education (HE) as much as any other sector, with many universities and HE-focussed national and regional organisations issuing their own statements about the invasion and subsequent conflict and, in some cases, taking particular action in relation to one or both of the countries.

In this article, we analyse and compare these statements made by HE bodies. We believe that they provide an important lens through which to understand more fully how HE organisations conceptualise the European HE space, and the position of Russia and Ukraine within it. This is important in relation to broader debates about the 'Europeanisation' of HE across the continent, and the extent to which reforms – such as the Bologna Process and the creation of a European Higher Education Area, which have intended to promote the convergence of national HE systems – have resulted in shared European perspectives (or what we refer to in this paper as shared 'spatial

imaginaries'). Analysis of these statements also allows us to explore comparatively the role of different types of HE actor – universities, and national and regional bodies – in shaping understandings of European HE. These issues are captured in the two research questions that underpinned our enquiry: (i) what spatial imaginaries – pertaining to HE – are evident in the statements about the Ukraine conflict issued by HE actors across Europe? and (ii) what do these statements reveal about the role of HE actors as normative policy actors, shaping spatial imaginaries?

Ukraine has, historically, had a complex relationship with Europe. Writing with respect to how Ukraine locates itself, Kushnir (2021a, 2021b) has outlined the complexity of the nation's relationship to Europe, as manifest within its HE system. She argues that while becoming part of the Bologna Process and the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) led to some degree of change within Ukraine, it also facilitated the reproduction of some Soviet structures – for example, the preservation of centralised top-down control of the policy field, and the deployment of political propaganda to ensure public support for governmental decisions. Indeed, she argues 'The [Ukrainian] Ministry seems to have been pursuing Bologna to continue an outward-facing Europeanisation that tries to maintain the inward centrally-governed policy space stable and unchanged' (2016, p.163).

In relation to how Ukraine is viewed externally, some scholars have seen it as largely outside Europe: Zgaga (2003), for example, has contended that 'Europeanisation' is a process that occurs primarily within countries of the European Union. In contrast, others have argued that Europeanisation is concerned, foremost, with values rather than geographical location or political history, and thus can occur in any country, irrespective of its relationship to the European Union, as long as European values are embraced (see discussion below) (e.g. Börzel and Pamuk 2011). Kushnir (2021a) argues that, with respect to HE particularly, the Bologna Process has played a crucial role in changing understandings of the European space. By including countries located on the geographical periphery of Europe – such as Ukraine and Russia – within the Bologna Process and, subsequently, the EHEA, she contends that the borders of Europe have been expanded, illustrating the dynamic and constantly-under-construction nature of 'Europe'. Our analysis of HE actors' statements about Ukraine allows us to intervene in such debates about Europeanisation.

The article proceeds as follows: we begin by introducing two bodies of literature within which we situate our research – relating to the geopolitics of HE and spatial imaginaries. We then outline the research methods we used, before discussing our findings with respect to, first, the spatial framing of position statements and, second, the specific actions recommended or prescribed within these statements with regards to Russia. The final part of the article considers the implications of the research for our understandings of the European HE space and normative policy actors within it.

Conceptual framings

Geopolitics and HE

The analysis that we develop in this article contributes to the literature on the relationship between HE and geopolitical processes. We draw on Moscowitz and Sabzalieva's

(2023) definition of geopolitics as a 'process by which discourse, communication and the operationalisation of power and knowledge produce a spatialisation of international politics and the materialisation of hierarchies and structures of power therein' (p.150). Although Moscowitz and Sabzalieva (2023) argue that the word geopolitics 'has been applied rather superficially or even sensationally to HE studies and generally lacking an effective engagement with the geopolitics literature' (p.150), an emerging collection of HE-focussed scholarship has engaged either implicitly or explicitly with issues related to geopolitics.

Various scholars have shown, for example, how national HE sectors and individual higher education institutions (HEIs) are subject to geopolitical forces (Brøgger 2023; Guzmán-Valenzuela 2023; Jöns and Hoyer 2013; Koch 2014). In large part this is because of the ways in which such institutions are 'deeply embedded in the social fabric of individual states' and yet also play significant roles globally, making them particularly susceptible to changing geopolitical dynamics (Moscowitz and Sabzalieva 2023, 150). This has been perhaps most evident in research that has delineated the impact of colonialism, in both old and new forms. For example, Guzmán-Valenzuela (2023) has argued that across Latin America, universities have been profoundly affected by both old and new forms of colonialism. She contends that while old forms of colonialism 'are based on a matrix of race and labour divisions that universities have inherited, reproduced, and reinforced', new forms 'are attaching to global forces that promote a world class university model based on prestige, competition and international rankings' (p. 187). Moreover, scholars have discussed the ways in which a Eurocentric hegemony has strongly affected the practice of science across the world (e.g. Koch 2014). This has been exacerbated over recent decades by the 'scalar shift in the geopolitics and geoeconomics of HE from the national to the global' reflected in mechanisms such as international rankings of universities (Jöns and Hoyer 2013, 45). It is also the case that the changing geopolitical orientation of nation-states can have a direct and immediate impact on HE sectors. This is illustrated well in Brøgger's (2023) account of how the shift of the Danish government from internationalism to a 'new nationalism' – driven by fears of power being exerted from 'above' (by the European Union) and from 'below' (by the upward mobility of migrants) – had a direct impact on Danish universities, requiring them to reduce substantially their international activity including the enrolment of international students.

It is also important to recognise that HEIs can play active roles in geopolitical processes. Research has shown, for example, how they have been used by national governments to exert geopolitical influence. This is played out particularly clearly with respect to the 'soft power' believed, by many governments, to be exercised by international students, on their return to their home country (Gallarotti 2022), and the impact of establishing close HE partnerships with 'geopolitically strategic' countries (Brooks, Erdogan, and Sahin 2021). With respect to China, for example, Si and Lim (2023) have argued that HE partnerships with countries such as Brazil, Russia and India should be understood as 'geopolitical instruments that play a role in the country's projection of soft power in overseas regimes' (p.266) and, in particular, to restore China's historical position in trade and cultural relations in the Eurasian region. Moreover, they contend that transnational collaborations with high-ranking British and American universities have been pursued to 'demonstrate China's claim to be a new global status based on its

expanding economic and diplomatic relations with more advanced countries' (p.274). Assessing the broad swathe of recent Chinese policies in the area of HE and science and technology, Si and Lim (2023) assert that they have a key geopolitical orientation, intended to rejuvenate the country and establish it firmly as a leader on the world stage. HEIs have also been required to take on active roles in enacting other aspects of states' geopolitical positioning – for example, through monitoring the movements of incoming international students. Indeed, Brunner (2023) has shown how Canadian HEIs have been firmly entangled in 'border imperialism' – through the requirement made of them by government to act as 'migrant surveillance actors', while Yuval-Davis et al. (2019) have made similar arguments with respect to the UK, in their analysis of the processes of 'everyday bordering' HE staff are expected to enact.

A final body of work has indicated that HEIs can exert some influence of their own, geopolitically, beyond the remit of the state in which they are located. For example, in their research on the relationship between national migration policies and internationalisation practices within HE, Cerna and Chou (2023) show that the two are not always well-aligned. Indeed, they discuss cases where the state is keen to pursue a strongly internationalist agenda, and HEIs are not (for example, in Japan and the Czech Republic) – which leads, they argue, to limited internationalisation – and other cases where the roles are reversed (i.e. HEIs are keen to internationalise, but the state is less keen). In such instances, they suggest, internationalisation of the HE sector is possible but is typically uneven (citing the example of the US during Donald Trump's presidency and the UK under David Cameron's government). Bertelsen (2012) similarly distinguishes the 'university soft power' of private American-affiliated universities in the Middle East from the 'national soft power' of the US government, showing how the two often sit in tension in the backdrop to unpopular foreign policy and military interventions in the region. Furthermore, various scholars have argued that while HEIs can be conceived of as 'victims' of some of the geopolitical trends discussed previously, they can also be active agents in their reproduction (Moscowitz and Sabzalieva 2023) – most notably in the privileging of knowledge systems originating in particular parts of the world, and the entrenching of hegemonic ideas (for example, relating to the 'knowledge based economy') in local contexts (Moisio and Kangas 2016; Shahjahan and Morgan 2016). What these contributions critically highlight is the agency of HEIs in affecting geopolitics, challenging the larger body of scholarship on soft power in HE which all too often essentialises the relationship between universities and national governments, framing the former as merely carrying out the functions of the latter.

Spatial imaginaries

Returning to Moscowitz and Sabzalieva's (2023) definition of geopolitics as including the ways in which discourse and communication 'produce a spatialization of international politics'(p.150), in this article we interrogate the 'spatial imaginaries' of various higher education actors, as evidenced in their discourse and communication about the Ukraine conflict. We believe that such imaginaries can help us understand how various higher education actors position themselves (and others) geopolitically, but can also have material effects.

Spatial imaginaries are socially held stories that constitute particular ways of talking about places and spaces (Watkins 2015). They are typically collective in nature and can operate at a variety of scales – from the local to the national, regional and global. In his analysis of the way in which the concept of the spatial imaginary has been used within the social sciences, Watkins (2015) usefully distinguishes between three analytical categories. First, he notes that the concept has been used with reference to distinct places ('place imaginaries'), emphasising the uniqueness of the particular location and establishing boundaries between it and other places. Second, Watkins delineates 'idealised space imaginaries'. These are descriptions of *kinds* of places, which emphasise general stories about their universal characteristics, and can have either a positive or negative orientation. Third are what Watkins calls 'spatial transformational imaginaries'. These link particular places to broader fields of social relations through articulating narratives of how places 'have, should, or deterministically will evolve' (ibid., p.513) through generalised spatial processes such as globalisation and deindustrialisation. These stories are often bound up with ideas about inevitability, and frequently naturalised as incontrovertible 'truths'.

Spatial imaginaries are also often considered to have agency of their own, helping to shape material practices through producing, reproducing and changing social perceptions of places even among those who have never been to those specific locations themselves (Haughton and Allmendinger 2015). The stories that are told about places cause people to act in particular ways to and through this spatial imaginary; they are thus frequently held to be performative in nature, not merely representational (ibid.), often with an ideological orientation (Sykes 2018). Scholars have shown, for example, how particular spatial imaginaries have played a key role in particular policy initiatives. Hincks et al (2017) have contended that 'the process of creating and refining spatial imaginaries can . . . bring different actors together, allowing them to negotiate complex and contested issues and in doing so helping to secure agreement on ways of moving forward' (p.645). The productive role often played by *competing* spatial imaginaries has also been emphasised (Haughton and Allmendinger 2015), offering different ways of imagining the future (Hincks, Deas, and Haughton 2017).

Such perspectives have been applied to Europe, specifically, by some researchers. One European example is provided by Sykes (2018), in his delineation of the various spatial imaginaries – about Europe and the UK's place within it – that were evident during the 'Brexit' debate leading up to the 2016 UK referendum and subsequently. Moreover, drawing on their analysis of data practices across Europe, sociologists Ruppert and Scheel (2021) have argued that:

> Europe is not singular but multiple. To say this is not to be playful but to highlight that Europe is not given but variously brought into being by a complex of imaginaries, laws and governing practices. (p.4)

While the role of HE in the shaping of understandings of Europe is largely overlooked in this body of work, previous research, conducted by one of the authors, has demonstrated how such imaginaries differ quite considerably at the national level, with respect to HE, within Europe (Brooks 2021). For example, national policymakers in Denmark and England differed from their counterparts in Germany, Ireland, Poland and Spain in

resisting European spatial imaginaries – seemingly explained by their different internal politics (particularly the influence of Euroscepticism in Denmark and England) and their positioning within Europe (ibid.).

The current research builds on this by examining the spatial imaginaries purveyed by supranational policy actors – i.e. regional policy-making bodies and organisations that represent particular stakeholders across Europe and associations (or 'mission groups') of particular types of HEIs – as well as those of various national-level HE organisations and individual HEIs. We explore what spatial imaginaries are drawn upon in the statements, pertaining to the Ukrainian conflict, issued by these policy actors, and further, consider how their reproduction or contestation of such imaginaries positions stakeholder organisations as normative policy actors – a term which is contrasted in literature with other kinds of foreign policy actors which shape geopolitical space and spatial imaginaries through realist or interventionist means (Tocci 2008). While actors can be both, as exemplified by the European Commission (ibid.), our interest here is in how imaginaries across a range of governmental and non-governmental actors with respect to HE articulate with norms, values and positions in response to a conflict within Europe.

Methodology

This study draws theoretical and empirical links between spatial imaginaries, discourses on HE and public statements by HE actor organisations. In alignment with Watkins (2015), it understands spatial imaginaries as both representational and performative discourse which 'shape[s] material practices moulding geographies through their linguistic circulation and embodiment' (Gregory, 2004, cited in Watkins 2015, 509). Speech acts like public statements can be understood both as articulations of spatial imaginaries (representative) and as productive of new embodiments of human action (performative) which proffer policy positions and multiple, divergent imaginaries. In this study we examine public statements, specifically web pages, announcements and open letters from a broad sample of national and regional HE organisations responding to the outbreak of conflict between Russia and Ukraine in early 2022. These statements are not necessarily representative of the organisations in their entirety, nor of the spaces they govern or speak from. However, as policymaking and norm-setting actors with roles in shaping HE discourses, their articulations (of HE and of the European HE space) serve an important function in shaping, consolidating and in some cases challenging broadly held imaginaries of European HE. Comparing these performative statements also provides a window into how various actors articulate notions of Europe (its requisite values, for example) and of the HE space (its membership and liminality in particular), where others embrace global or more national framings.

The data used in this study are derived from a broad, purposive sample of HE actors across national and regional European organisational spaces – the former from six European countries: France, Germany, Hungary, Poland, Spain and the UK (specifically England). Countries were selected on the basis of their geopolitical positioning within Europe and their political affinities towards membership and/or commitment to notions of a European political community, ranging from European stalwarts to the more Eurosceptic (and in extremis, the UK as a former member,

albeit one participating in EUI alliances, associated to Horizon and part of the European continent, proximally linked by student/staff mobility and research collaborations). For these national actors, we sampled one statement from each country's rectors' conference or equivalent; national research funding body; government department responsible for HE; national students' union; national staff union; and organisation responsible for promoting student mobility. We further sampled statements from two HEIs in each country[1]: one from a high-ranking institution and one from a lower-profile or relatively new university. In the case of the HE organisations, most, but not all, were the exclusive representative bodies for their constitutive group. Where there were several national bodies, such as the staff unions, wherever possible we selected those with the largest membership which had issued a substantive statement. The sampled HEIs were not understood to be representative of their university groups, and a degree of convenience sampling (i.e. those with a single statement issued by the university rather than devolved faculties) was employed.

We also sampled statements from regional organisations driving European HE initiatives, umbrella organisations, and networks of European universities. These included actors with executive governance and steering roles in European HE (e.g. the European Commission Directorate General for Education, Culture and Sport, and the EHEA Bologna Follow-up Group (BFUG)); collectives of constituent national bodies (e.g. European Universities Association, European Students Union); university associations (e.g. The Guild, Coimbra, and the European Association of Institutions in HE (EURASHE)); and European Universities Initiative (EUI) alliances (e.g. CIVICA, EU-CONEXUS, and Young Universities for Europe (YUFE)), and their collective forum representing 41 alliances (FOREU1/FOREU2).

In total, 55 statements from national and regional actors were collected in June 2022 (see Supplemental Material table for a full list of actors and statements; those cited in this article are in square brackets). Where organisations issued more than one statement, the more recent statement was sampled. Statements were analysed using a charting framework (Ritchie and Spencer 1994) which organised them by country[2] and actor type, applying to each a common set of descriptors, summaries and analytical notes aligned to the research questions. Data produced through charting were then synthesised across actor groups and countries to identify any key positions, framings, and differences within and between groups. Particular attention was given to discursive presences and absences, noting which actors used their statements to identify and characterise the source of conflict (e.g. 'Russian aggression') and which actors further called for policy responses from within their own membership or from other actors. These presences were then analysed in relation to actor type, noting the discursive choices made by different actor groups (e.g. referencing European versus global values). The findings enabled a comparison between countries, actor types, and ultimately between national and regional actors. These findings are presented in the next section, looking first at how actors' statements differed in their spatial framings, and in the subsequent section, their discursive and material responses to the conflict and positionings within them. Both sections look at European regional and national actors separately to foreground their key differences.

Spatial framing of position statements

European regional actors

Our analysis of the statements about the Ukraine-Russia conflict by regional European actors revealed that, typically, these were couched in strongly European terms, with a dominant European frame of reference. The following example, from the EUI alliance YUFE, is illustrative:

> In recent years, Ukraine has embraced European values and is taking steps towards ever closer co-operation and integration with the European institutions. It is these choices, freely made, that have led to indefensible invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Government.

> . . . . Today, the people of Ukraine are defending not only the sovereignty of their country, but also the values of every European citizen, and academic values of truth, fairness, respect and responsibility. It is cruel and unfair that those who are only aspiring to be a part of the European family are dying for this cause as a result of Russian Government aggression. [YUFE, 2022]

Only three of the thirteen regional organisations in our sample did not frame their statement in such terms: the European Research Council (likely because its statement was extremely short); EURASHE (it mentions shared values, but does not label these as explicitly European); and Coimbra (because of the primary focus of its statement on international students, it is as concerned about the impact of the conflict on non-Europeans as on their European counterparts).

It is notable that, within the ten statements that *do* draw on a European framing, Ukraine is positioned as European and 'one of us'. While this reflects what has been found in other recent analyses of the current conflict (Bosse 2022), as we explained in the introduction, Ukraine's position vis-à-vis Europe has not always been so clear-cut (Kushnir 2021a).

The statements of the majority of regional organisations were significant, not only for the prevalence of European frames of reference, but also for their foregrounding of values and, in particular, what were claimed to be specifically *European* values. Indeed, seven of the 13 organisations discuss explicitly European values – illustrated in this excerpt from the Academic Co-operation Association (ACA):

> These terrible developments gravely threaten fundamental European values – the rule of law, non-violence, and academic freedom – all core principles for ACA, its member organisations and the wider European higher education sector. [ACA, 2022, p.1]

The frequency with which 'European values' are referred to in such statements is perhaps unsurprising. Indeed, there is now a large literature on the importance of such values to European identity-building, and their explicit promotion by the European Union and other European actors (Triandafyllidou and Gropas 2022). Meijen (2020), for example, has argued that the promulgation of a set of common 'European values' – often underpinned by ideas relating to liberal democracy and diversity – has been used by the European Union, in particular, to obscure historical differences between member states. They have been promoted through a variety of channels, including cultural policy, as a key means, Meijen suggests, of forging a common EU identity. Similar arguments have been made with respect to HE, specifically. Indeed, an explicit set of values have been

held to underpin the EHEA (for example, BFUG statement in Supplemental Material table). However, Kushnir (2021a) notes that not all EHEA members had, historically, foregrounded such values, referring to Russia specifically.

When we interrogate the statements of the regional organisations in more detail, it is notable that while there is some degree of consensus about the nature of these putative European values, there are also some key points of difference.[3] Democracy, respect for the rule of law, and protection of human rights are all mentioned several times. However, the European Union and EURASHE discuss freedom and respect without labelling them as explicitly European, and there is some significant variation between actors in the values that are defined as European. For example, 'non-violence' is identified as such a value by only the ACA; 'peace' by only The Guild and FOREU1/2; and 'openness to diversity' by only EU-CONNEXUS. Similarly, five of the 13 regional organisations identify what they deem to be European *higher education* values. Again, however, there is little consensus about what these values are: YUFE, for example, mentions 'the academic values of truth, fairness, respect and responsibility' [YUFE, 2022], while The Guild contends that European universities 'stand for democracy, for human rights, and for the right to critical enquiry and the pursuit of knowledge' [The Guild, 2022].

The lack of consensus about whether such values are European or more global or universal in nature reflects some of the debate about 'national' values – for example, critiques of the promotion, through education, of 'fundamental British values' (ostensibly democracy, individual liberty, the rule of law, and respect for people of different backgrounds and religions) by the UK government (e.g. Farrell and Lander 2019). Moreover, the lack of consensus about what European values are speaks to the wider literature that has highlighted the ambiguity around and contestation of such values. Mos (2020), for example, contends that, while the European Union has foregrounded 'European values' as part of its identity-building project, these values have been highly ambiguous (as well as practically unenforceable) and have allowed politicians to interpret them in their own ways. Indeed, he cites the case of Hungarian prime minister, Viktor Orbán, who used 'the plasticity of EU values' to style himself as a pro-European statesman – valuing democracy and defending a European way of life against migrants (p.280). A similar argument is advanced by Furedi (2018), who maintains that the EU has tended to avoid discussion of moral questions (and the associated values) because of their divisiveness across the continent. Furthermore, he asserts that 'instead of forging an authority based on the values of Europe's tradition, the founders of the EU looked to expert and technocratic authority for gaining legitimacy' (p.23) – and that the EU has found it difficult to develop a mechanism for reconciling different versions or interpretations of European values.

Overall, then, the data from the regional European organisations, reported above, broadly reflects the extant literature – from political science as well as HE studies – with respect to, first, the importance of 'European values' in the wider European project and, second, the ambiguity around some of these values. The data also, however, speak to debates about spatial imaginaries (Morgan 2008; Watkins 2015), and suggest that Europe is a key means of framing what is happening in Ukraine for most of these regional actors. This is significant in relation to debates, outlined in the introduction, about whether or not Ukraine should be considered as part of 'Europe' and processes of 'Europeanisation'. However, as we will go on to show, this spatial imaginary was not shared by all.

National actors

When we turn to the *national* actors in our sample, a different picture emerges. Indeed, the European framing discussed above was largely absent from the statements about the war in Ukraine from this second group of actors. Of the 42 statements from national organisations that we analysed, only eight made any reference to Europe. Moreover, these were evident in only three of the six countries – there were no references to Europe at all in the 20 statements from Hungary, Poland and the UK. The following excerpts are examples of the eight exceptions:

> For years, Russia and Belarus have failed to meet the fundamental goals and values of the Bologna Process. With Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine and the support of it by the Lukashenka regime, the tolerable limit has been far exceeded. [German students' union (FZS), 2022]

> European institutions must do everything possible to try to contain this situation criticism and facilitate a peaceful solution to the conflict. [Spanish staff union, 2022]

Here, European initiatives (such as the Bologna Process and the EHEA) and institutions are referenced, while the statement from the French HEI assumes a commonality of perspective within universities across Europe.

It is perhaps unsurprising that the limited instances where Europe is referenced come from France, Germany and Spain rather than Hungary, Poland and the UK. France and Germany have clearly occupied a central role within the 'European project' for a long period of time, while Spain has often positioned itself, within public statements and policies, as close to European initiatives – as a means, some have argued, of distancing itself from any perception that it may occupy a peripheral position within Europe (Bonal and Tarabini 2013). Equally, the absence of any references to Europe in the other three countries can be explained by, *inter alia*, longstanding Euroscepticism on the part of the UK (Gifford 2014), and the recently antagonistic relationship with the European Union in both Poland and Hungary (Furedi 2018).

On examining the wider range of statements, the majority of which do not reference Europe at all, it is notable that, in a few cases, the same values are identified as those discussed in the section above with respect to 'European values', but are not framed as such. For example, the statement from the Spanish rectors' conference [2022] describes 'the Russian aggression as an attack against the values of freedom and democracy'; calls out the aggressor explicitly – 'during this dramatic, unjustified situation – a situation caused by the Russian invasion of Ukrainian territory'; and then identifies the fundamental values of freedom and democracy that it asserts are under attack – 'cornerstones of the freedom of research and of opportunities for international academic cooperation'. Similarly, Wrocław University of Science and Technology (Poland) [2022] underlines the importance of respecting human rights, democracy and state sovereignty – without linking these to Europe at all. Moreover, the Polish international mobility organisation [2022] notes the 'respect for fundamental humanitarian rights' that underpins the academic community but which, it argues, is absent in Russia's case. In this instance, it is implied that this respect should underpin all scientific endeavour, and that there is nothing specifically 'European' about it.

While references to Europe were rare amongst the statements from national organisations, other geographical links were, in contrast, much more common. In several statements, reference was made to an international or global community, rather than a European one. Universities UK [2022], for example, bypasses Europe in linking British research to the global scale, noting that 'scientific collaboration and research are a vital global endeavour'. Jagiellonian University (Poland) also makes reference to the global scale, but in terms of more general agreements rather than scientific endeavour: 'Russia's armed invasion of Ukraine, [is] an unprecedented breach of international agreements and cooperation standards', with the rector noting, 'I express my firm opposition to actions that should not take place in the modern world'.

The most common geographical framing was, however, in relation to bilateral links between the country in question and Ukraine or Russia. This is evident in the following statement from the German rectors' conference, which provides considerable detail about the strong relationships between its universities and those in Ukraine:

> It is also foreseeable that these developments will cause serious damage to German-Russian academic relations. We will have to examine the relevant consequences in detail . . . . The war is also hitting Germany's and Ukraine's links in higher education: Ukraine is an important country of origin among international students in Germany. . . . . The universities of both countries are also linked institutionally in many ways: there are currently 257 partnerships with Ukraine involving 113 German and 89 Ukrainian higher education institutions [German rectors' conference, 2022]

Similar bilateral framings were evident from all five of the other countries in the sample.

In a small number of cases, the emphasis was very much on the individual organisation, rather than broader national, regional or global entities. For example, the University of Suffolk (UK) uses its statement to promote its own credentials, noting: '[The University...] is a diverse and inclusive University, which welcomes both students and staff from across the globe'. Again, references to Europe are notable by their absence.

HE actor responses to Russian aggression

Further to our analysis of the spatial framing of actors' position statements, we consider the discursive and material strategies employed in each statement responding to Russian aggression specifically. Statements were used variously as opportunities to articulate political positions (typically condemning Russian state aggression and expressing solidarity with Ukrainian counterparts), to announce or demand particular measures (discontinuing relationships with Russian counterparts or extending support to Ukrainian individuals), or in limited cases provide information on urgent support for refugee students and scholars. While our methodology limits the depth of what can be said about any one actor or their intended audiences, our analysis of these statements illustrates both the geopolitical forces shaping HE as well as the policymaking and norm-setting functions increasingly attached to universities and related actors within a geopolitical frame (Moscovitz and Zahavi 2019). The very act of universities and HE organisations issuing public statements on international political situations is consistent with Moscowitz and Sabzalieva's (2023) definition of geopolitics, particularly where discourses and communications reinscribe hierarchies and structures of power. There

is an analytical difference, however, between universities as geopolitical instruments of the nation-state (Brøgger 2023; Moscowitz and Sabzalieva 2023) and as agential organisations within geopolitics, often, but not in all cases, aligning with national policy (e.g. Cerna and Chou 2023). This section considers the latter, examining how organisational actors in the European HE space responded to the conflict, and what can be understood from the continuities and divergences between actor groups or countries in our sample. In this section we draw on actors' statements to examine their rhetorical approaches and explicitness of political positions, their actions or demands for discontinuing HE partnerships with Russia, and their scope for nuanced positions on Russian individuals (e.g. scholars and students).

European regional actors

In concert with our findings above, European regional actors were consistent and often explicit in their condemnation of the Russian government and analogous actors. These actors' characterisations of Russia's invasion of Ukraine were mainly articulated in terms of their own organisational purposes, positioning Russia outside of the regional space as a result of its actions. The European Commission, for example, calls out Russian actions as a violation of international law and 'an attack on elementary values of freedom, democracy and self-determination, on which cultural expression, academic and scientific freedom and scientific cooperation are based,' while the ACA similarly argues that the invasion violates European values which are principles of the ACA, member organisations and European HE sector itself.

While this discursive strategy is consistent with scholarship on European values being used to promote a common identity and values (Meijen 2020), the specific punitive responses called for in statements varied, with only four regional actors urging or taking materially consequential actions with regards to HE cooperation. These actions too were grounded in the language of shared European values, understanding and trust that were violated by Russian aggression. The European Commission announced in its statement the suspension of new and existing cooperation projects with Russian research organisations and payments under Horizon Europe. Similarly, the joint signatories of the BFUG called for suspension of Russia's rights of representation in all BFUG activities, a measure also voiced by EURASHE further to its recommendation to its members to cease all academic cooperation with Russian institutions. The European Universities Association (EUA) was more cautious, only recommending its member universities and leaders in the national rectors' conferences 'to verify and ensure that they only engage in new collaborations with organisations from Russia where these are clearly based on shared European values' [EUA, 2022]. These differences, including in statements from other regional actors expressing only condemnation or solidarity, highlight the differential power between HE organisations operating as normative actors (the member associations especially) and those with materially consequential powers to bar or defund cooperation (mainly the European Commission). Statements from many of the normative actors 'calling for' discontinuations with Russia or support for Ukrainian counterparts highlight the boundary between discourse (drawing on a shared set of regional values) and material action (most depending on national agencies to implement, with the

exception of the Commission), showing how strategies within the geopolitics of HE operate simultaneously at multiple scales (as per Moscowitz and Sabzalieva 2023).

European actors' recognition and exemption of individual Russian scholars, students and dissidents similarly directs our attention beyond the national scale to understand how HE actors operate. In our data, only the EUA firmly called upon its members to recognise the risks taken by dissident Russian academics and 'ensure on a case-by-case basis that the continuation of existing collaborations is appropriate at this time' [EUA, 2022]; other regional actors including the BFUG, European Research Council, EURASHE, the Guild, and YUFE, made gestures to 'honour and recognise the academic communities in Russia that are speaking out against this violence' [The Guild, 2022] but stopped short of advocating for exemptions to the punitive measures against Russian organisations and governmental bodies. The absence of nuanced positions from other European actors with respect to Russian individuals, especially the European Commission, European Students Union, and the ACA, is notable.

National actors

National actors' statements showed greater variation in both their content and political positions. With the exception of Hungary, statements from the rectors' conferences of the other five countries chastened or condemned the Russian government (and in two statements the Belarussian government), expressing 'unequivocal condemnation' (Poland) at the 'profoundly disturbing action' (UK) and specifically, 'astonishment' (France) with the Russian rectors' conference for their public statement supporting the invasion. National funding bodies across the five countries were equally vocal. Some actors framed their position more obliquely:

> The Polish academic and scientific community must remain in solidarity with its neighbours. The development of science is only possible with respect for fundamental humanitarian rights. Russia's hostilities clearly make this impossible. [NAWA, 2022]

The near total absence of a geopolitical position within Hungarian HE actors' statements stands in sharp relief to actors from other European countries sampled. With sympathies exclusively focused on Ukrainians and Transcarpathian Hungarians, their rationale is distinctly one of self-interest: 'Since the war in Ukraine has a direct effect on Hungary and on Hungarian higher education, we believe it is necessary to stand united and find ways to provide aid in this situation' [Hungarian rectors' conference]. The clear reluctance to name the aggressor or allude to the cause of the 'situation' in statements aligns with the Orbán government's cautious geostrategic positioning of Hungary between Europe and Russia and its scepticism about a shared European identity or values (Furedi 2018; Mos 2020).

The four Western European countries' national agencies with roles in governing or funding HE all announced punitive measures freezing scientific and research cooperation with Russia, substituting collective regional identities and rationales for distinctly bilateral or global ones:

> The government has taken the decision to suspend publicly funded research and innovation collaborations with Russia, including universities and companies. Our aim is to introduce measures that will negatively impact the Russian state, and individuals and organisations

with strong links to the Kremlin. [UK Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, 2022]

Rectors' conferences from France, Spain and the UK took similarly activist stances prescribing suspension of any ongoing cooperation with their Russian counterparts or members. In sharp contrast, none of the statements from Polish and Hungarian HE actors, both governmental and non-governmental, called for any discontinuations or sanctions. While several Polish organisations took discursive positions on the conflict and Russia's aggression specifically [rectors' conference, student union, and Wrocław University of Science and Technology], none suggested measures as those announced by the government agencies in the other four countries or in two universities (in Germany and France respectively). The relatively peripheral positions of Hungary and Poland within Europe and closer cooperation with Russian HE institutions again might explain the disinclination to enact particular material measures; however, our analysis found limited intervention in a range of actors across the six countries (especially student and staff unions[4] and international mobility organisations), distinguishing the primarily norm-setting organisations which called on others to take action from those with materially consequential power.

National actors' recognition and exemption of Russian individuals appeared to fall into three groups of countries, with some variation between actors in each country. First, the German national funding body and the French government department for HE both advocated supporting and protecting Russian and Belarussian dissidents and refugees through the same mechanisms offered to Ukrainian counterparts. French and German staff unions and sampled HEIs similarly, albeit to varying degrees, expressed their support for Russian scientists opposed to the invasion. Meanwhile, the German student union and the French international mobility organisation specifically targeted their statements at domestic policies: 'Campus France also reminds that Russian students are still welcome in France' and 'student residence status of Russian foreign students in Germany should not become the subject of sanction mechanisms'.

Second, in contrast to French and German actors, counterparts in UK and Spain, while equally outspoken, took up contradictory positions within the nation-state. The UK rectors' conference, for example, called for a nuanced position in defence of Russian individuals opposing the invasion:

> Many Russian students, academics and researchers, at great personal peril, have publicly criticised this invasion. We believe that scientific collaboration and research are a vital global endeavour, therefore we would not support a blanket suspension of academic links. [Universities UK]

The UK national funding body [UKRI] and government department [Minister of State for Higher Education], on the other hand, both emphasised the need for alignment with the UK government's position and compliance with sanctions placed on Russian individuals and institutions. Similarly, the Spanish rectors' conference and the national funding body acknowledged outspoken dissident Russian scientists and the impact that the freeze in scientific cooperation would have on them, but stopped short of calling for targeted exemptions. The third group, Poland and Hungary, stood out here for their silence on the matter, with the exception of one Hungarian university [Óbuda

University] reassuring its own students from Russia that they will not face discrimination from the institution.

These variations both across countries and between national actor groups reflect the geopolitical dynamics variously influencing political discourses in each context and playing out in HE spaces, including the scope of agency and positioning within HE actors' statements. The occasional unevenness across national actors is consistent with previous studies highlighting these (geo)politics of internationalisation and migration (Cerna and Chou 2023), in our case set within an international conflict on the periphery of a contested regional space.

Conclusion: European spatial imaginaries as geopolitical act?

We return to our research questions, addressing first the evidence of spatial imaginaries within HE actors' position statements on the Ukraine conflict. The evidence presented in our spatial framing section above suggests strongly – with only a handful of exceptions – that it is only organisations with an explicitly European remit that drew on explicitly European spatial imaginaries in their statements about Russia and Ukraine. For national organisations, the war does not seem to threaten Europe specifically but, rather, bilateral relationships or, when a more expansive view is taken, international norms and/or the global academic community. In some cases, the same values were seen as under threat by both European and national organisations, but these were typically framed as 'European' only by the former group.

These data suggest, then, that below the discourse of Europe and a European (HE) space circulated by regional bodies, is a traditional framework of a bilateral, nationalist 'we' standing with 'them'. There is very little sense, from these statements, of a collective 'we' under attack. Extant research within HE studies has argued that recent years have witnessed a re-assertion of national priorities, and a concomitant shift from international-ism to nationalism (e.g. Brøgger 2023). The national focus in the statements we have analysed may have been influenced by such factors. However, it is also broadly in line with previous work that has shown, for example, how various European HE initiatives have often been used for largely national purposes (e.g. Capano and Piattoni 2011); and how European 'spatial imaginaries' have been taken up, by HE actors across Europe in a very piecemeal fashion (Brooks 2021), with national perspectives often retaining a strong hold (Brooks 2020). Thus, the evidence presented above can perhaps be seen more accurately – not as evidence of a recent retreat into a national frame of reference – but as a manifestation of the underlying national orientations of an incomplete Europeanisation process.

Our second question explored what the statements analysed in this study reveal about HE actors' roles as agential, normative policy actors shaping spatial imagin-aries. The discursive strategies mobilised in actors' statements varied widely, from vociferous and explicit to passive and pithy and, in limited cases, absent entirely. Material strategies, such as enacting or calling for specific, targeted policies also varied, from calls to eject Russia from the EHEA and discontinue academic and research collaboration to more nuanced positions distinguishing existing partnerships or Russian students and staff as distinct from the interests and aims of the Russian government. On one hand, the findings conformed with what we might anticipate

based on national actors' geographical and relational position within the European Union and the European regionalisation project, with France and Germany issuing the sharpest criticism and targeted responses, Hungary and Poland more muted and at times self-preserving stances, and Spain and UK somewhere in between these groupings. On the other, however, we see evidence of heterogeneous positions among the variously sampled national actors, pointing to the agency of organisational actors in discursively and materially shaping geopolitical positions which are not necessarily harmonious with the positions of national governments.

This unevenness, evidenced elsewhere as tensions between national government policy and autonomous HE organisations (Cerna and Chou 2023), unsettles some of the existing literature on the state-university nexus in the context of geopolitics, where the interests of the state are typically identified in the operations of international HE, through 'university soft power' (Bertelsen 2012), 'knowledge diplomacy (Knight 2018), or other political characterisations of international academic collaborations. Our findings, rather, foreground the agency of HE organisational actors, including universities, in realising geopolitical positions through words and actions which are not consistently reflecting government positions. The degree of agency enjoyed by these actors varies, the measurement of which, as well as their degree of power to influence geopolitics, is outside of the scope of this study. However, this focus on agency provides necessary nuance to debates on geopolitics of HE which tend to essentialise the relationship between national governments and national HE actors.

Specifically in the context of the European HE space, the agency of HE actors is pertinent to the contestation of the space itself. How actors frame and articulate European spatial imaginaries in public statements is essentially a geopolitical act – who is in and out, which (and whose) values represent Europe, and what HE's role in the European project should be are all articulations of the space, and have been shown elsewhere to be in tension in HE discourses (Brooks 2021; Brooks and Rensimer 2023). The contestation over spatial imaginaries is also seen here playing out in HE actors' positional statements on the Ukraine-Russia conflict, particularly in how European HE should respond and what values it should uphold in doing so. These discursive strategies may not necessarily influence broadly held spatial imaginaries, but we argue their articulation in statements is a reflection of existing imaginaries, and that the varying positions within them affirm the contested nature of the European HE space. Using the conflict as a lens extends the purchase of this argument, drawing out the geopolitical nature of the debate and the role of HE organisations in shaping it. Illustrating the fuller scope of HE actors' agency and the particular applications of their normative and material power in geopolitical contexts would be a welcomed direction for further research.

Notes

1. Both UK HEIs in our sample were from England specifically, which may have implications for findings given Scotland's political opposition to the Brexit process, although HEIs represented only two of eight statements from UK.
2. including a separate row for regional actors.

3. We believe that the values organisations choose to highlight in such public documents (and those that remain absent) are significant. Thus, while there is obviously no explicit debate about specific values in the texts we analysed, we consider it reasonable to speak of a 'consensus' (or, equally, a lack of one).
4. With the exception of the German national student union, which made a number of demands, including the immediate suspension of Russia and Belarus from the EHEA and suspension of research cooperation with their universities.

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