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STUDYING IN THE SHADOW OF WAR: THE IMPACT OF THE RUSSIAN-UKRAINIAN WAR ON THE LEARNING HABITS OF STUDENTS IN TRANSCARPATHIA

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The research aims to investigate the imprint of the first year of the war on the learning habits, motivation and mental condition of our students, to get an insight into the way they felt, studied and coped with the hardship. The responses to the questionnaire completed by 194 students show that most respondents suffered from the impact of the war: felt changes in physical and mental condition, could not concentrate, felt annoyed, demotivated and stressed. The daily stress motivated some students to study even harder; learning helped them to distract attention from the difficulties.

Keywords: motivation; stress; hybrid learning; war; attitude; Transcarpathia; tertiary education; annoyance.

НАВЧАННЯ У ПЕРІОД ВІЙНИ: ВПЛИВ РОСІЙСЬКО-УКРАЇНСЬКОЇ ВІЙНИ НА НАВЧАЛЬНІ НАВИКИ ЗДОБУВАЧІВ ВИЩОЇ ОСВІТИ ЗАКАРПАТТЯ

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Упродовж майже двох років населення України живе, працює і навчається в незвичайних і досі небачених для сучасного покоління обставинах. Дослідження спрямоване на те, щоб зрозуміти, як перший рік війни вплинув на навчальні навички, мотивацію, почуття та психологічний стан здобувачів вищої освіти Закарпатського угорського інституту ім. Ференца Ракоці II., їхнє ставлення до навчання, а також на те, як вони намагалися впоратися з труднощами, з якими зіткнулися. Метою дослідження є зрозуміти не лише те, як студенти живуть, навчаються і почувають себе, але й надати їм підтримку, коли це необхідно. Було проведено кількісний аналіз отриманих відповідей на онлайн-анкету за п'ятибальною шкалою Лайкерта, яку заповнили 194 студенти. Результати показали, що більшість респондентів постраждали від впливу війни: вони відчували зміни у своєму фізичному та психологічному стані, не змогли зосередитися на навчанні таким чином, як до війни, відчували роздратованість, демотивацію, стрес і втому. Регулярні відключення світла перешкоджали систематичному навчанню. Велику допомогу забезпечили платформи Google Classrooms, створені для всіх навчальних дисциплін. Переважна більшість респондентів високо оцінила заохочення та допомогу викладачів. Незважаючи на перешкоди, спричинені війною, більше половини респондентів намагалися зробити все можливе, щоб пристосуватися до ситуації, однак визнали, що їм не завжди вдавалося успішно справлятися з проблемами. Одним із основних висновків дослідження стало те, що до навчання долучилася відносно велика кількість респондентів, оскільки саме навчальний процес відволікав їх від думок про труднощі. Хоча респондентів, які підтримали цю позицію було менше, вони стверджували що стрес, спричинений війною, ще більше мотивував їх до навчання, і цей стрес мав на них позитивний, стимулюючий вплив.

Ключові слова: мотивація; стрес; гібридне навчання; війна; світогляд; вища освіта; Закарпаття; роздратування.

With the outbreak of the war in 2022 the life of people in Ukraine has changed greatly and so did the way we work and study. Transcarpathia, being the westernmost part of the country and lying in the Carpathian Basin beyond the Carpathian Mountains, suffers no attacks though air-raid alarms have become regular. These alarms, the frequent, long blackouts, inner migration and the news about the difficulties the country and its people have to face make our life and work more complicated and more stressful. Despite all the hardships, people try to do their best and continue to work and study.

The educational process at the institutions in spring 2022 moved to the online space. The transition was sudden, but the experience gained during the lockdown made it easier than in 2020 [1]. What the region suffered from most was the regular power outages and the air-raid alarms when, according to the rule, people had to move to shelters. Feelings of uncertainty, uneasiness, sadness and fear ruled over people. These feelings affected the everyday life of families, students and educators. Since September 2022 education at most institutions of the region continued face-to-face. At Ferenc Rákóczi II Transcarpathian Hungarian College of Higher Education, where the research was conducted, the educational process for the daytime students went on in the traditional form. In contrast, for the correspondence students, the online form remained. Thus, the educational model at the institution was and is still hybrid.

In the current study we describe our investigation examining the impact the war with all its consequences had on both daytime and correspondence students studying at our college,

how it affected them mentally and physically, how they handled the situation, and whether it influenced their learning habits in general or not.

Lavrysh, Lytovchenko, Lukianenko and Golub highlight the impact of war on education, educational institutions, educators and students. They mention psychological traumas caused by war, such as fear, stress and low motivation to study as factors that can hinder learning and underline the importance of “teaching and supporting students, communicating core values and outlining new perspectives even during the war” [2, p. 1]. In an investigation carried out among teachers of the Igor Sikorsky Kyiv Polytechnic Institute in Ukraine, it has been found that in the first months of the war both teachers and students needed psychological help. Nevertheless, the teachers maintained social relations with their students and supported, motivated them. At the same time, they also felt that “students are the main motivators for a lecturer to keep teaching” [2, p. 5]. Therefore, the process of motivation was mutual.

O’Malley [3] enlisting the factors disrupting and undermining the quality of education, mentions that fear and stress can affect attention.

The experience gained during the emergency remote teaching (ERT) proved to be useful for educators of Ukraine two years later. It was in 2020 when terms like ERT, blended learning, online learning, e-learning, m-learning, hybrid learning, remote learning, face-to-face learning, synchronous and asynchronous learning became widespread. They seem to stay with us with all their strengths and weaknesses and, though they cannot replace traditional education, we can always turn to them in case of emergencies, epidemics, times of conflicts and even in everyday life in case we want to participate in a national or international event thus saving time and money on travelling. Nikolaiev, Riy and Shemelynets highlight that “...the ability of the Ukrainian HEIs [higher educational institutions] to adapt their education process to quarantine restrictions has provided them with the useful experience to resume studies even in these extremely difficult conditions” after February 24, 2022 when online learning began again [4, p. 27]. Having conducted an empirical study after the pandemic, Zaytseva, Vysotchenko, Liahina and Malynovska [6] point out that the opinion of Ukrainian students studying in four different higher educational establishments in Kyiv is that online learning does not have the same value as classroom training. The difficulties they faced during the ERT were “...a lot of independent work, a lack of skills in self-study work, a lack of digital opportunities” [6, p. 74]. In addition, a lot of students faced a lack of interest and attention. However, with the development of digital skills, the experience gained in online learning since 2020, the extension of e-learning – learning via computers, mobile devices and the Internet – in tertiary education most of these difficulties have either already been or are being overcome. Tymoshuk [5], having carried out research on e-learning at a tertiary educational establishment in Vinnytsa, came to the conclusion that e-learning is a both valuable and practical learning tool, during the ERT it increased students’ motivation and made the teaching process student-oriented.

The only possible way to collect data in wartime was an online questionnaire. It was designed in autumn 2022 and the empirical data was collected between February and April 2023 with the help of the Google Forms. Fifty-four 5-point Likert-scale statements followed the questions asking for personal data. The questionnaire consisted of three blocks. The first block referred to the feelings of the participants about the war, the second to their general learning experiences in this unusual period, and the third dealt with the way the respondents

learnt languages in the given period. The present article deals with the questions of the second block, i.e. how the students coped with their academic tasks in this unusually stressful period, how the situation influenced their motivation and attitude to learning, whether they could concentrate on their studies or not, what the difficulties they faced were and what helped them to cope with these difficulties. The answers have been analyzed quantitatively and the descriptive statistics have been counted.

The questionnaire was completed by 194 students aged mainly between 17 and 24 years (87.1%) or above (12.9%) majoring in English Language and Literature, Ukrainian Language and Literature, Hungarian Language and Literature, German Language and Literature, Accounting and Taxation, Finance, Biology, Geography, Mathematics and IT, Chemistry, History, Tourism, Pre-school Education and Primary School Teacher Education. Most respondents (58.7%) were day-time students, 33% were correspondence students, and 8.3% studied in both forms at two different departments. Among the respondents 24.2% were male and 75.8% were female.

The questions dealt with the emotional aftermath of the air raids and blackouts caused by the war, the way the respondents were affected by the current situation and its impact on their attitude to learning. With the first statement, alleging that the student cannot concentrate enough on his or her studies due to the situation, 20% of the respondents strongly agreed, 24% agreed and 30% could not decide. Only eight percent completely disagreed and 18% disagreed, so not more than 26% of the respondents felt that they were able to concentrate and study despite the difficult circumstances (M (mean) = 3.29, SD (standard deviation) = 1.01). Annoyance was felt for the reason of not being able to concentrate on their studies by 57% of the respondents (35% strongly agreed, 22% agreed), 25% could not decide and 18% were not annoyed, among them only 5% agreed strongly claiming that they were able to concentrate (M = 3.67, SD = 1.06). No matter how difficult the learning conditions were, 57% of the respondents alleged in the answers to a question on this topic that they tried to concentrate on their studies under all circumstances while 14% denied trying to do their best whatever happens. Twenty-eight percent were reluctant to definitely answer the question. (M = 3.65, SD = 0.9). As we see, the coefficients of the descriptive statistics are close in all three answers connected with the question of concentration on studies in an unusually difficult period.

Forty-nine percent of the respondents blamed the power cuts for not being able to complete their assignment on time (26% strongly agreed, 23% agreed). Twenty-nine percent did not consider it a problem: 11% disagreed and 18% completely disagreed with the statement, so the blackouts did not prevent them from completing the assignments on time. The ratio of the hesitant answers was 22% (M = 3.27, SD = 1.19). The answers given for the next question showed a similar tendency to the answers for the previous one. The power cuts proved to be annoying for 50% of the participants of the study with 29% strongly agreeing and 21% agreeing with the third statement. Twenty-three percent hesitated, while the blackouts did not annoy 27% of the respondents; they either disagreed or strongly disagreed (M = 3.30, S = 1.01).

Stress can have both negative and positive effects on people. The mental effect of the daily stress caused by the war hindered 36% of the students from learning. The number of those who strongly agreed and agreed is equal: 18%. Here we can notice the highest ratio of hesitant answers (32%). The same percentage (32%) of the respondents alleged that stress did not hamper their learning (M = 3.11, SD = 1.01). Nevertheless, the number of those who

admitted feeling burnt out due to constant stress and having no energy and desire to study was much higher (52%) with 31% strongly agreeing with the statement. The second lowest number of hesitant answers can be found here (19%), and only 29% denied the statement with 16% strongly disagreeing as they still had enough energy and the necessary inclination to study ($M = 3.35$, $SD = 1.27$). For the next question we obtained similar results. The same number of students claimed to feel constant tiredness (altogether 52%: 31% strongly agreed, 21% agreed) as in the previous question, i.e. those who felt burnout. The number of those who strongly disagreed equals to those strongly disagreeing with the previous statement (16%) as they did not feel tired at all; eight percent disagreed, so they felt some kind of tiredness. The ratio of hesitant answers was 24% ($M = 3.40$, $SD = 1.21$).

Two more statements were connected with stress from a positive point of view: something that can motivate and encourage learning. The statement that the everyday stress of war motivates some learners to study even more than before proved to be supported only by 28% of the respondents (13% strongly agreed, 15% agreed) and denied by 46% (22% strongly disagreed, 24% agreed). Twenty-six percent were uncertain about the motivating effect of the stress on them ($M = 2.74$, $SD = 1.11$). Stress had a positive effect on 17% of the respondents who found it an incentive (6% strongly agreed), 61% refuted the allegation and 22% were unconfident ($M = 2.22$, $SD = 1.11$).

The air-raid alarms and the regulation about moving to the shelter at the lectures affected badly 28% of the respondents (16% strongly agreed, 12% agreed) who claimed that they were held back in their studies. Almost half of the respondents (46%) did not feel hindered with quite a high rate (26%) of those who strongly disagreed with the assertion. The same number (26%) was unconfident ($M = 2.72$, $SD = 1.18$). Another statement connected with the air raids claims the opposite: they did not affect the learning habits of the students. The answers show a similar tendency to the answer given above, i.e. 50% claim not to be affected, but 29% do feel so. A hesitant answer was given by 21% of the respondents ($M = 2.61$, $SD = 1.22$).

Lack of interest and indolence were marked as characteristics of the learners in that period by 38% of the respondents (22% strongly agreed, 16% agreed), but a bit more (40%) of the participants disagreed (23% strongly disagreed, 17% disagreed) with the statement about being not interested in doing anything, not feeling like doing anything. The number of those who were not sure about a lack of interest present in their life in that period was 22% ($M = 2.96$, $SD = 1.23$).

In the present situation, teachers try to understand the difficulties that students face and 64% of the respondents feel the support and compassion of their teachers; 37% strongly agree with the statement, and 27% agree. Here we have one of the lowest indicators; only 11% do not feel so with 4% strongly agreeing and 7% agreeing. Uncertain answer was given by 25% of the students ($M = 3.86$, $SD = 0.9$). Google Classroom proved to be a useful tool for learning. Seventy-six percent of the respondents found Google Classroom assigned to subjects helpful as they made it easy for the students to follow the material with 54% strongly agreeing with the statement. Seven percent seemed to be able to cope without the Classrooms, 5% of the respondents disagreed and only 2% strongly disagreed with the statement that the Classrooms help them a lot in learning. The number of hesitant answers amounted to 16% ($M = 4.21$, $SD = 0.84$).

Unusual circumstances usually have an impact on our physical and mental condition.

The utterance stating that the participants noticed no change in their physical or mental condition due to the situation was supported by 11% of the respondents (4% strongly agreed, 7% agreed), 65% noticed changes in their condition during the wartime (43% strongly disagreed, 22% disagreed), and 24% were uncertain ($M = 2.07$, $SD = 0.95$). Nearly the same results have been obtained from the answers to the next question: 11% of the respondents felt that they handled the situation well and it had no effect on them in contrast to those who were not capable of handling it, altogether 65% of the respondents. Correspondingly, 24% were undetermined ($M = 2.10$, $SD = 0.94$). Despite this, 54% claimed to do their best to adapt to the situation (27% strongly agreed, 27% agreed), whereas 11% made no (1%), or no great (10%) effort. At the same time, 35% either could not decide about the given statement or wished to give a neutral answer ($M = 3.67$, $SD = 0.88$).

The following statement declared that it was learning that helped to get through the war situation because it distracted students from the difficulties. The answers suggested that studying diverted the attention of 26% of the surveyed and helped in coping with the problems. The majority, constituting 45%, however, did not feel so. The unsure answer was marked by 29% of the respondents ($M = 2.66$, $SD = 1.08$). The final statement alleged that the student was not affected by the situation from a learning point of view. This assertion was supported by 15% of the surveyed (6% strongly agreed, 9% agreed) and refuted by 56% (33% strongly disagreed, 23% disagreed), who felt that their learning was affected by the situation. Similarly to the previous statement, 29% gave a hesitant answer ($M = 2.32$, $SD = 1.03$).

Being able to concentrate plays an important role in understanding, memorizing, retaining and recalling the information obtained, in using it for problem solving. Three items of the questionnaire dealt with the issue of concentration examining if the students were able to concentrate properly on their studies in the present situation, the way they felt about it, i.e. whether they were annoyed or not, and if they tried to concentrate on their studies under all circumstances. The responses to the first two questions showed that the number of those who could not concentrate properly and felt annoyed for this reason prevailed over those whose attention was not distracted. A minority of participants felt sure about their ability to focus on their studies and even fewer did not feel annoyed at all. Even those who did not feel sure about it alleged that they had tried to concentrate on learning under all circumstances.

Concentration and stress are closely connected. On the one hand, when a person is in a state of mental tension caused by a difficult situation, it is harder to concentrate. As we see from the data, stress made more than half of the respondents feel burnt out and tired. This number was higher than the percentage of those who felt that the daily stress of war was preventing them from learning. At the same time, the ratio of those who were unsure about the effect of the daily stress the war caused was the second highest. Finally, a little more of the respondents did not feel stressed by the war than did not feel burnt out in general. It means that the war is not the only source of stress though it had a negative impact on a considerable number of the polled, but not everyone could estimate the effect of the war on his or her learning. On the other hand, stress can be a positive force motivating to overcome challenges, to fight. In our sample scarce was the number of those who felt that stress was an incentive for them. However, a slightly higher percentage felt that they were motivated to study even harder than before the war, for them stress acted as an incentive. Nevertheless, the majority of the respondents refuted the statements about the positive effect of stress on them.

As a result of the regular blackouts, half of the respondents neither could prepare for

the lessons regularly nor could they complete their assignments on time, all of them feeling annoyed for this reason. Somewhat higher was the number of those who were annoyed as they were not able to concentrate on their studies. Consequently, the lack of annoyance felt during the time of the blackouts by a certain number of the polled might have been due to the tolerance the students expected and experienced from the college teachers and the cognizance of the fact that their fellow students and teachers faced similar hardship. As we can see from the results obtained, except for a few respondents, the vast majority felt the support and empathy of the teachers in this burdensome period.

The air-raid alarms and learning in a shelter hinder the educational process to some extent, but most respondents affirmed that they could cope with this inconvenience. The descriptive statistics of the two items connected with the air raid alarms are quite close. Half of the respondents were not affected or hindered in learning by the alarms. At the same time, a bit smaller was the number of those who did not feel indifference or indolence, they were able not to lose interest despite the hardships caused by the war. Some of them must have the feeling of tiredness, as higher was the percentage of the respondents complaining of constant weariness and lack of energy. A high number of students admitted changes in their physical or mental conditions and equal was the percentage of those accepting that they did not handle the situation well. Google Classrooms, having become part and parcel of the educational process since 2020, proved to be extremely helpful in supporting the learners and helping them to follow the material.

Learning distracts from difficulties and helps to get through the situation in some cases, but the majority did not feel so. They admitted being affected from a learning point of view, though the learning of a relatively small number of the surveyed had not been influenced by the war. Nevertheless, the overall response of the polled to the question about trying to do their utmost to adapt to the situation was mainly positive (See Table 1.)

Table 1

Descriptive statistics of research findings

		1 completely disagree	2 disagree	3 neither disagree, nor agree	4 agree	5 completely agree	Descriptive Statistics
1	I can't concentrate enough on my studies because of the situation.	16 (8%)	35 (18%)	58 (30%)	46 (24%)	39 (20%)	Means: 3.29 SD: 1.01
2	Because of the power cuts, I cannot prepare for my lessons with the usual regularity.	35 (18%)	22 (11%)	43 (22%)	44 (23%)	50 (26%)	Means: 3.27 SD: 1.19
3	I am annoyed that I cannot complete my assignments on time because of the power cuts.	38 (20%)	15 (7%)	44 (23%)	41 (21%)	56 (29%)	Means: 3.30 SD: 1.01
4	I am annoyed that I cannot concentrate properly on my studies.	11 (5%)	25 (13%)	48 (25%)	43 (22%)	67 (35%)	Means: 3.67 SD: 1.06
5	The daily stress of war is preventing me from learning.	22 (11%)	40 (21%)	62 (31%)	35 (18%)	35 (18%)	Means: 3.11 SD: 1.01
6	The stress makes me feel burnt out, I have no energy or desire to study.	32 (16%)	26 (13%)	36 (19%)	40 (21%)	60 (31%)	Means: 3.35 SD: 1.27

7	I feel tired all the time.	32 (16%)	16 (8%)	47 (24%)	40 (21%)	59 (31%)	Means: 3.40 SD: 1.21
8	I don't feel like doing anything, I'm not interested in anything.	45 (23%)	34 (17%)	42 (22%)	31 (16%)	42 (22%)	Means: 2.96 SD: 1.23
9	I am held back in my studies by air raids. It's bad for me to go to the shelter because of the air raids.	50 (26%)	39 (20%)	50 (26%)	23 (12%)	32 (16%)	Means: 2.72 SD: 1.18
10	Classrooms assigned to subjects help me a lot in my learning, so I always know where I am.	4 (2%)	10 (5%)	32 (17%)	43 (22%)	105 (54%)	Means: 4.21 SD: 0.84
11	I feel the support and compassion of my teachers.	8 (4%)	14 (7%)	48 (25%)	53 (27%)	71 (37%)	Means: 3.86 SD: 0.91
12	I try to concentrate on my studies under all circumstances.	7 (3,6%)	20 (10%)	56 (29%)	61 (31%)	50 (26%)	Means: 3.65 SD: 0.90
13	The everyday stress of war motivates me to learn even more than before.	42 (22%)	46 (24%)	51 (26%)	30 (15%)	25 (13%)	Means: 2.74 SD: 1.11
14	Stress is an incentive for me.	74 (38%)	44 (23%)	43 (22%)	21 (11%)	12 (6%)	Means: 2.74 SD: 1.11
15	I don't notice any change in my physical or mental condition because of the situation.	83 (43%)	43 (22%)	46 (24%)	14 (7%)	8 (4%)	Means: 2.07 SD: 0.95
16	I handle the situation well, it has no effect on me.	79 (41%)	47 (24%)	47 (24%)	11 (6%)	10 (5%)	Means: 2.10 SD: 0.94
17	I do my best to adapt to the situation.	3 (1,5%)	19 (10%)	68 (35%)	52 (27%)	52 (27%)	Means: 3.67 SD: 0.88
18	I feel that learning is what helps me to get through the situation because it distracts me from the difficulties.	47 (24%)	40 (21%)	56 (29%)	33 (17%)	18 (9%)	Means: 2.66 SD: 1.08
19	I am not affected by the situation from a learning point of view.	65 (33%)	44 (23%)	56 (29%)	17 (9%)	12 (6%)	Means: 2.32 SD: 1.03
20	The air raids have no effect on my learning habits.	58 (30%)	40 (20,6%)	40 (21%)	29 (15%)	27 (14%)	Means: 2.61 SD: 1.22

The war diverted the attention of a great number of students from their studies; most respondents were not able to concentrate on them in the same way as before and were annoyed for this reason. On the contrary, others were strong enough in their minds and the situation did not hinder them though this group of students was much smaller. However hard the circumstances were and are, most students try to concentrate on their studies. The majority of the polled felt stressed or burnt out with the war remaining the main though not the only source of stress, whereas others either felt no or little stress. Only a small percentage of the respondents felt that the stress caused by the war motivated them to study even harder acting as an incentive. Regular blackouts worried the respondents as they inhibited systematic learning, while the air-raid alarms disturbed them less. The difficulties led to a loss of interest and indolence in some cases and to a permanent feeling of tiredness. The war affected the learning of more than half of the respondents, low was the number of those, whose learning was not influenced by the situation they had to study in. A vast majority admitted changes in both physical and mental condition but a few students could handle the situation well. Google Classrooms were found extremely helpful in controlling the process of learning. Some

students were able to immerse themselves in studying and it diverted their attention from the armed conflict while the majority was not. Nevertheless, the greater part tried to adapt to the situation. A vast number of the respondents appreciated the support from the teachers.

Students faced cognitive and emotional challenges during the first year of the war. Demotivation and burnout were traced; however, students did their utmost to cope with the situation. To better understand the impact of war on student performance, we intend to investigate the achievements of students through the official grades at exam sessions. As a further research direction, we are planning to survey educators how they experienced the educational process at wartime in Ukraine.

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