
TIRANA EHEA MINISTERIAL CONFERENCE: A POSTERIORY ANALYSIS OF GAINS & LOSSES



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Abstract. *The authors of the article analysed the outcomes of the Tirana EHEA Ministerial Conference on May 29-30, 2024. During the conference, the 25-year history of the Bologna Process was summarized, and the prospects for the development of the European Higher Education Area until 2030 were clarified. The list of fundamental values to be implemented has been expanded. The indicators and descriptors for the social dimension of higher education were approved. The intention to make an inclusive, innovative and interconnected EHEA a reality was confirmed. Ukraine and its higher education community were supported in their efforts to resist russia's full-scale military aggression. Meanwhile, the Tirana Conference removed from the Bologna Process agenda the challenge of achieving "competitiveness and attractiveness" of the EHEA on a global scale. This aim was specified in all previ-*

ous Bologna ministerial documents, starting with the Bologna Declaration (1999) and ending with the Rome Communiqué (2020), and constituted the essence of the second, external dimension of higher education development. The reduction of this dimension simplifies the Bologna Process and the EHEA to their first, internal dimension (“compatibility and comparability”). It is substantiated that without the implementation of the second dimension, it is impossible to fully realise the first dimension, and obstacles arise for global balanced mobility and synergistic cooperation. The conference left out the world experience of ranking of countries by the level of university development, without which it is impossible to minimise the gap between them in terms of higher education “competitiveness and attractiveness”. In 2024, more than half of the EHEA member states did not have world-class universities (top 500) according to the Shanghai Ranking criteria, while the remaining countries are highly differentiated in terms of the number and quality of such institutions. The absence of appropriate policies and strategies to align EHEA member states in terms of top-level university excellence (top levelling), as opposed to bottom alignment in terms of minimum acceptable quality, creates barriers to multilevel peer cooperation between universities. In Ukraine, the war unleashed by the Russian Federation is preventing this from happening. It is proposed to introduce a system of university leagues in the EHEA according to their level of excellence.

Keywords: Tirana EHEA Ministerial Conference; Bologna Process; European Higher Education Area; competitiveness and attractiveness; Shanghai Ranking; top levelling; bottom alignment; multilevel peer cooperation; Russian-Ukrainian war.

INTRODUCTION, PROBLEM STATEMENT

The Tirana EHEA Ministerial Conference (hereinafter referred to as the Tirana Conference) is a landmark event, which approved important responses to the current challenges of our time (European Higher Education Area, 2024). Therefore, its outcomes need to be comprehensively analysed.

At the conference (European Higher Education Area, 2024):

- *firstly*, the results of the 25-year implementation of the Bologna Process to create the European Higher Education Area (hereinafter — EHEA) were summarized;
- *secondly*, the progress made was assessed and further steps were agreed upon to implement the common vision of the EHEA by 2030, as defined by the Rome Ministerial Communiqué in 2020 (European Higher Education Area, 2020);
- *thirdly*, the commitments of the Bologna Process participants were clarified, and it is planned to review their implementation at the next Ministerial Conference in 2027;
- *fourthly*, it is noted that higher education as a public good and a transformative force for society plays an indispensable role in overcoming the challenges facing the world.

It is crucially important that, demonstrating European civilizational consistency and commitment to fundamental values, the conference supported Ukraine and its higher education community in their opposition to full-scale military Russian aggression and decided “to maintain the suspension of the rights of participation of the Russian Federation and Belarus in all structures and activities of the EHEA” (European Higher Education Area, 2024).

The Tirana Conference, like the previous conferences, considers the state and prospects of the EHEA development in the light of solving the fundamental problem of higher education quality assurance (European Higher Education Area, 2024; Lugovyi et al., 2022b).

Since the Bologna Process and the EHEA cover almost all of Europe, the question is whether the decisions taken at the Tirana Conference are in line with the original goals and objectives of the pan-European process under consideration in the context of global challenges.

In view of the above, it is important to note that after the Rome Conference, the authors of this article analysed “the Bologna process implementation in its two main dimensions in terms of “quality assurance” of higher education. It is found that significant progress has been made in ensuring minimum sufficient quality in the first (internal) dimension “compatibility and comparability”. In the second (external) dimension “competitiveness and attractiveness” the progress in achieving the most perfect quality is insignificant and is primarily associated not with the pan-European coordinated Bologna process, but with unique national initiatives

to create and support leading universities and their elite associations. It is shown that one of the reasons for the current situation is the Bologna process's inattention to rating mechanisms for evaluating and motivating university activities at higher levels of complexity and excellence, instead focusing on accreditation mechanisms and mass higher education". It is argued that the confirmation and aspiration to competitiveness and attractiveness of the EHEA in the third decade of the Bologna Process in the Rome Communiqué obliges to form a strong pan-European policy of real increase of the global competitiveness of the EHEA with the involvement / development of adequate ranking mechanisms and strategies for the development of university leadership (Luhovyi et al., 2022b, 128–129).

This author's publication provides a framework for analysing the outcomes of the Tirana Conference through the prism of higher education quality at the current stage of EHEA development.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The article is based on the following publications.

Firstly, the materials of the Tirana Conference (European Higher Education Area, 2024).

Secondly, Bologna Declaration and Rome Communiqué (European Higher Education Area, 1999, 2020).

Thirdly, system data of Shanghai Ranking (ShR) 2004 i 2024 (ShanghaiRanking Consultancy, 2024), and also THE World University Rankings (THE) (Times Higher Education, 2024) and QS World University Rankings (QS) (TopUniversities, n.d.).

Fourthly, analytical and monographic papers, including the author's (based on the results of research within the science on universities), on the concept of quality of higher education, its assessment mechanisms, in particular, the use of ranking ones, global and regional processes of differentiation and integration of higher education, the post-war reconstruction of Ukraine and others (Carnegie Classifications of Institutions of Higher Education, n.d.; European Higher Education Area, 2007; Guild of European Research-Intensive Universities, n.d.; Kabinet Ministriv Ukrainy, 2018, 2022; Kalashnikova & Orzhel, 2022; Kremen et al., 2023; Kremen et al., 2024; League of European Research Universities, n.d.; Lugovyi et al., 2022a, 2022b, 2023a, 2023b, 2024; Lugovyi et al., 2023; Natsionalne ahentstvo zabezpechennia yakosti vyshchoi osvity, n.d.; Prezydent Ukrainy, 2022; Salmi, 2009; The Government of Ukraine, n. d.; UEFA, 2024; UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2012; Wächter et al., 2015; World Bank Group, n.d.).

References are noted in the main material presentation and conclusions.

METHODOLOGY

The authors analysed the materials of the Tirana Conference in terms of the main goals and objectives of the Bologna Process. First of all, the content of the Rome and Tirana Communiqués is compared in order to identify changes in the priorities and guidelines for the development of the EHEA. To assess the effectiveness of the Bologna process in the context of higher education quality, we compared the university ranking achievements of EHEA member states in 2004 and 2024, when the ranking methodology of the most objective ShR did not change. The negative impact of the Russian-Ukrainian war on the state of Ukraine's leading universities is assessed, in particular according to the world university rankings THE (Times Higher Education, 2024) and QS (TopUniversities, n.d.).

The characteristic of leading higher education was determined by the number of world-class universities (Salmi, 2009) and the level of the best university achievement. This highest achievement assessment is also used in other areas, for example, at the Olympic Games to rank countries by gold medals. If the ranking positions of universities were not determined accurately (two, three, or four institutions had the same ranking points, or the institutions

belonged to a broader group, for example, 101–150 or 201–300, etc.), their average places in the respective groups were calculated, which led to the appearance of fractional values. The universities that were compared but were outside the ranking in 2004 (1–502) were assigned the average value for the next hundredth group of 503–600, i.e. 551.5 (Lugovyi et al. 2024, p. 79).

For the purposes of the article, the following key concepts and their definitions are used in accordance with the position of universities in the ShR (Lugovyi et al., 2023b, p. 93):

- Extra-class university (ECU) — an institution that is in group 1–30 of the ShR;
- World-class university (WCU) — an institution in the group of 1–500 ShR;
- Subworld-class university (SWCU) — an institution in the group of 501–1000 ShR.

Besides, the article uses the following terms in their meanings (Lugovyi et al., 2023b, p. 93):

The university excellence is a measure of the institution’s compliance with its mission;

Complexity is the defining key characteristic of higher education according to the International Standard Classification of Education (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2012), as well as a characteristic of the quality of knowledge, as opposed to its quantity, in the concept of Open Science.

Complex activity (of universities) — activities related to the implementation of complex study programme and research and development, which is used in particular in the Carnegie Classification (Carnegie Classifications of Institutions of Higher Education, n.d.; Lugovyi et al., 2023b);

The university excellence and the complexity of its activities are closely *interconnected and interdependent*: a university is a priori imperfect without complex educational and research activities, and vice versa, the presence of complex activities is a sign of university excellence (compliance with the true university mission).

The terms “University” and “Higher education institution, HEI” are used synonymously.

In accordance with the decision of the Tirana Conference, the Russian Federation and Belarus were excluded from the analysis (European Higher Education Area, 2024).

MAIN RESULTS

The article introduces new author’s terms and their definitions:

- multilevel peer cooperation is a systematic cooperation of universities that unfolds at parity levels of excellence and the corresponding complexity of university activities;
- top levelling means reducing the level of differentiation in the ranking achievements of higher education institutions (study programmes) of the EHEA member states through the development of top institutions;
- bottom alignment means the elimination of higher education institutions (study programmes) that do not meet the requirements of minimum sufficient (threshold) quality (accreditation).

Table 1 compares the structure of the Rome and Tirana Communiqués.

Table 1 illustrates the content lines of the current development of the Bologna Process and the EHEA.

Table 1 shows that the Rome Communiqué’s fundamental value of “Academic freedom” is complemented in the Tirana Communiqué by five others: “Academic integrity”, “Institutional autonomy”, “Participation of students and staff in higher education governance”, “Public responsibility for higher education”, “Public responsibility of higher education”. In addition, the key characteristics of the EHEA’s vision for 2030 were confirmed, namely: Inclusive, Innovative, Interconnected.

Table 2 compares the fragments of the EHEA vision statement in the aspect of Interconnected according to the Rome and Tirana Communiqués related to the second (external) dimension of higher education development.

Table 1. Comparison of the structure of the Rome and Tirana Communiques

N	Rome Communique (2020)	Tirana Communique (2024)
1	2	3
1	Our Vision	
1.1	Inclusive	
1.2	Innovative	
1.3	Interconnected	
2	Fundamental Values	Fundamental Values
2.1	Academic freedom	Academic freedom
2.2		Academic integrity
2.3		Institutional autonomy
2.4		Participation of students and staff in higher education governance
2.5		Public responsibility for higher education
2.6		Public responsibility of higher education
3	Building the Future	Key commitments
3.1	An inclusive EHEA	An inclusive EHEA
3.2	An innovative EHEA	An innovative EHEA
3.3	An interconnected EHEA	An interconnected EHEA
4	Implementation	
5	The EHEA in a global setting	Outlook
6	Conclusion	Tirana Commitments
7	Annexes	Annexes
7.1	Annex I. Statement on Academic Freedom	Annex 1: Fundamental Values – Statements
7.2	Annex II. Principles and Guidelines to Strengthen the Social Dimension of Higher Education in the EHEA	Annex 2: “Rules of Procedure for the EHEA”
7.3	Annex III. Recommendations to National Authorities for the Enhancement of Higher Education Learning and Teaching in the EHEA	

Source: Compiled by authors based on European Higher Education Area, 2020, 2024.

Table 2 illustrates that the Tirana Communique, unlike the Rome Communique, does not see the EHEA in 2030 as “competitive and attractive”. This is a serious departure from the original goals and objectives of the Bologna Process to achieve both “compatibility and comparability” and “competitiveness and attractiveness” of the EHEA (European Higher Education Area, 1999, 2020; Lugovyi et al., 2022b).

It is noteworthy that according to the Rome Communique (see Table 2), mobility and cooperation should contribute to “competitiveness and attractiveness”. In fact, there is an inverse relationship here also: “competitiveness and attractiveness” influence the state of mobility and cooperation.

Indeed, as shown in (Lugovyi et al., 2022a, 2023a), regional higher education areas are stratified by levels of university achievement and university cooperation tends to unfold within a certain stratum on a parity basis as the most synergistically effective. Thus, in gen-

Table 2. Comparison of characteristic fragments of the Rome and Tirana Communiques in Interconnected aspect

<i>N</i>	<i>Rome Communique (2020)</i>	<i>Tirana Communique (2024)</i>	<i>Note</i>
1	2	3	4
1	<p>“Cooperation and mobility connect our systems and foster the development of intercultural and linguistic competences, broader knowledge and understanding of our world. Direct contacts and synergies among our diverse cultures and higher education systems through mobility of staff and students contribute to the excellence and relevance of higher education in the EHEA, making it attractive and competitive on the global scale. We acknowledge the importance and the benefits of physical mobility for students, doctoral candidates and staff. Notwithstanding the current difficulties related to the COVID-19 pandemic, we reaffirm our target that at least 20% of those graduating in the EHEA should have experienced a study or training period abroad, and further commit to enabling all learners to acquire international and intercultural competences through internationalisation of the curricula or participation in innovative international environments in their home institutions, and to experience some form of mobility, whether in physical, digitally enhanced (virtual) or blended formats”.</p> <p>“Deeper cooperation between higher education institutions will help to address the above objectives through joint teaching and research. We will strive to eliminate obstacles to cooperation at national levels and to enable all higher education institutions in the EHEA to benefit from it. The alliances formed under the European Universities Initiative constitute one important way of exploring deeper, larger scale systemic cooperation, which can prove helpful for detecting and overcoming the obstacles to closer transnational cooperation by higher education institutions in the future”.</p>	<p>“We reaffirm our commitment to enabling all learners to acquire international and intercultural competencies. As the hallmark of an interconnected EHEA is seamless mobility of students and staff, we will reinforce our efforts to identify and remove barriers and promote physical mobility, to achieve the benchmark of at least 20% of mobile students. We mandate the BFUG to prepare an action plan to stimulate mobility and internationalisation of higher education and to support measures for achieving a greener, more inclusive, and more balanced mobility”.</p> <p>“We commit to supporting transnational cooperation, including for joint programmes and joint degrees, through better implementation of the key commitments and by removing undue administrative and legal barriers. In this regard, we welcome the deepening and institutionalising of transnational cooperation, supported by the Erasmus+ programme, underpinned by and with respect for the Bologna tools and commitments. Initiatives on various levels, including the European Universities alliances, create new opportunities for our academic communities, and should include participation of students and staff in all decision-making processes. We take note of the European Commission’s Communication on a blueprint for a European Degree and look forward to exploring synergies with the EHEA”.</p>	<p>Characteristic “competitiveness and attractiveness” on EHEA lacking in the Tirana Communique</p>

Note: The words “attractive and competitive” are emphasized by the authors.

Source: European Higher Education Area, 2020; European Higher Education Area, 2024.

eral, the EHEA de facto affirms multilevel peer cooperation, which has so far remained outside the scope of ministerial conferences. As a result, some countries without WCUs, despite persistent calls for cooperation, are deprived of optimistic prospects for leadership university cooperation within the EHEA. An obstacle is the difference in motivation and opportunities for universities of different classes (Guild of European Research-Intensive Universities, n. d.; League of European Research Universities, n.d.).

This objective reality actualises the ranking mechanisms for measuring the top excellence of universities, primarily the ShR, and the classification of university activities by complexity, similar to the Carnegie Classification (Carnegie Classifications of Institutions of Higher Education, n.d.; Lugovyi et al., 2023b; ShanghaiRanking Consultancy, 2024; Times Higher Education, 2024; TopUniversities, n.d.).

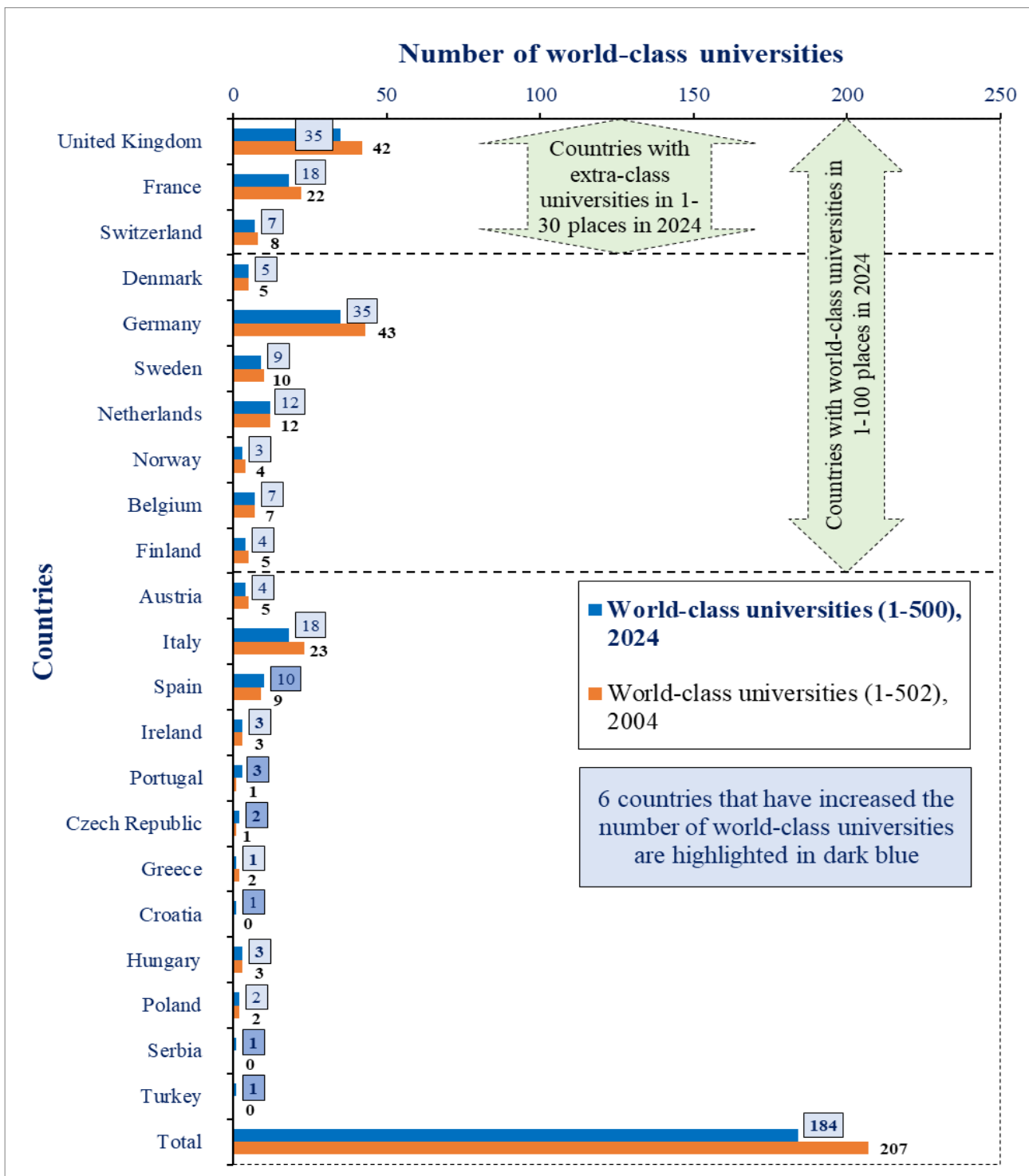


Figure 1. Changes of the number of world-class universities (ranked 1-500/502) in EHEA countries by the Shanghai Ranking in 2024 compared with 2004

Note: Excluding the Russian Federation.

Source: Compiled by authors based on: ShanghaiRanking Consultancy, 2024.

Figures 1, 2 characterise the change in the competitiveness and attractiveness of the EHEA in 2004–2024.

Figure 1 shows that, although the number of countries with WCUs (in the top 502/500) has slightly increased from 19 in 2004 to 22 in 2024 (Croatia, Serbia, and Turkey were added), most of the EHEA member states still do not have such institutions. In this case, only 6 countries (including Croatia, Serbia, and Turkey) increased the number of WCUs, while 16

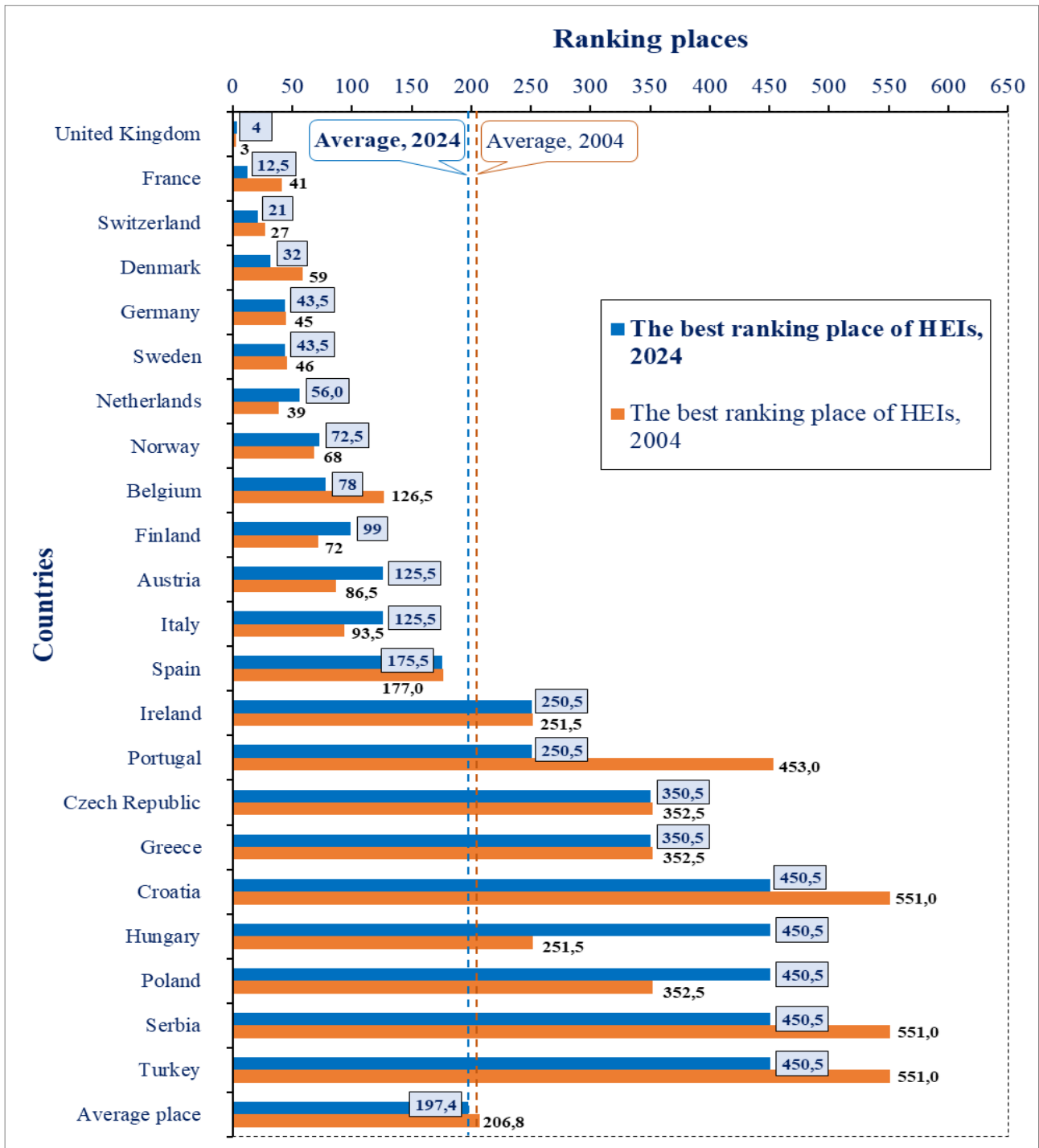


Figure 2. Changes of the best achievements of world-class universities (ranked 1-500/502) in EHEA countries by the Shanghai Ranking in 2024 compared with 2004

Notes: 1. To compare Croatia, Serbia, and Turkey, which in 2004 were not included in the ranking (1-502 places), place 551,0 was assigned.

2. Excluding the Russian Federation.

Source: Compiled by authors based on: ShanghaiRanking Consultancy, 2024.

countries decreased or did not change. Overall, the number of WCUs in the EHEA decreased from 207 to 184, or by 11%.

Figure 2 shows that the EHEA has slightly improved its competitiveness and attractiveness in general. However, the average ranking of the best university places in the 22 countries compared changed slightly from 206.8 to 197.4. The change in the best university

achievements varies greatly across countries. There are 10 countries that have actually increased their university achievements, which weakly compensate for the stagnation and weakening of the remaining 12 countries on this indicator.

Also, the number of countries represented by HEIs in the group 1–100 has decreased from 11 in 2004 to 10 in 2024. Belgium has been added to the list of such countries, while Austria and Italy have dropped out. Currently, 135 (73%) EHEA WCUs are concentrated in the 10 countries with HEIs in the top 100. This is lower than in 2004, when there were 158 (76 %) WCUs.

Austrian and Italian WCUs, traditionally powerful, have reduced their competitive potential. In addition to losing positions in the top 100, there are now significantly fewer of them (19 instead of 28 institutions).

Some WCUs in countries that have ECUs (in the top 30) failed to withstand global competition. The number of WCUs in these countries decreased from 72 (35 %) to 60 (33 %). Although exclusively, due to national efforts, France entered the group of countries with ECUs (1–30) (Lugovyi et al., 2023a), the best European University of Cambridge moved from the 3rd position to the 4th (see Fig. 2).

Taking into account the data of this article and the publication (Lugovyi et al., 2022b), it can be argued that in general, the competitiveness and attractiveness of the EHEA during 2004–2024 is rather stagnating than improving.

As for Ukraine, there are no WCUs in the country for both the ShR and the less objective THE and QS, which are recognised by the Ukrainian Government (Kabinet Ministriv Ukrainy, 2018; ShanghaiRanking Consultancy, 2024; Times Higher Education, 2024; TopUniversities, n.d.) (see Figures 3, 4).

In 2024, Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv received the SWCU status according to the ShR and entered the ranking group 901–1000. At the same time, taking into account the latest data from THE and QS world rankings, the position of Ukrainian universities continues to deteriorate (see Figures 3, 4). This is primarily due to the full-scale Russian military aggression against Ukraine in 2022–2024, which primarily affected Kharkiv and Sumy universities, which suffered significant shelling and destruction, as well as losses of human and material resources (Kremen et al., 2023; Lugovyi et al., 2023). Other negative factors include the dispersion and fragmentation of the national network of HEIs (Kremen et al., 2024).

The described pattern of EHEA competitiveness stagnation is obviously related to the lack of appropriate strong policies and strategies for the development of higher education, narrowing of quality assurance to procedures of a predominantly accreditation nature, inattention to ranking mechanisms for monitoring and motivating the improvement of university activities, and, finally, the removal of achieving the “competitiveness and attractiveness” of the EHEA from the Bologna Process agenda by the Tirana Conference (Kabinet Ministriv Ukrainy, 2022; Lugovyi et al., 2022a, 2022b, 2023a, 2023b; Luhgovyi et al., 2023; Natsionalne ahentstvo zabezpechennia yakosti vyshchoi osvity, n. d.; Wächter et al., 2015; World Bank Group, n.d.).

At the same time, given the strong analogy in the development of top universities and top football league clubs (Lugovyi et al., 2023a; UEFA, 2024), it is advisable to use the experience of the functioning and development of European and national leagues of competitive rise of football clubs to the top of excellence to support the competitiveness and attractiveness of the EHEA. It is important to introduce such ranking and classification university leagues in the EHEA.

CONCLUSIONS

The following conclusions follow from the above.

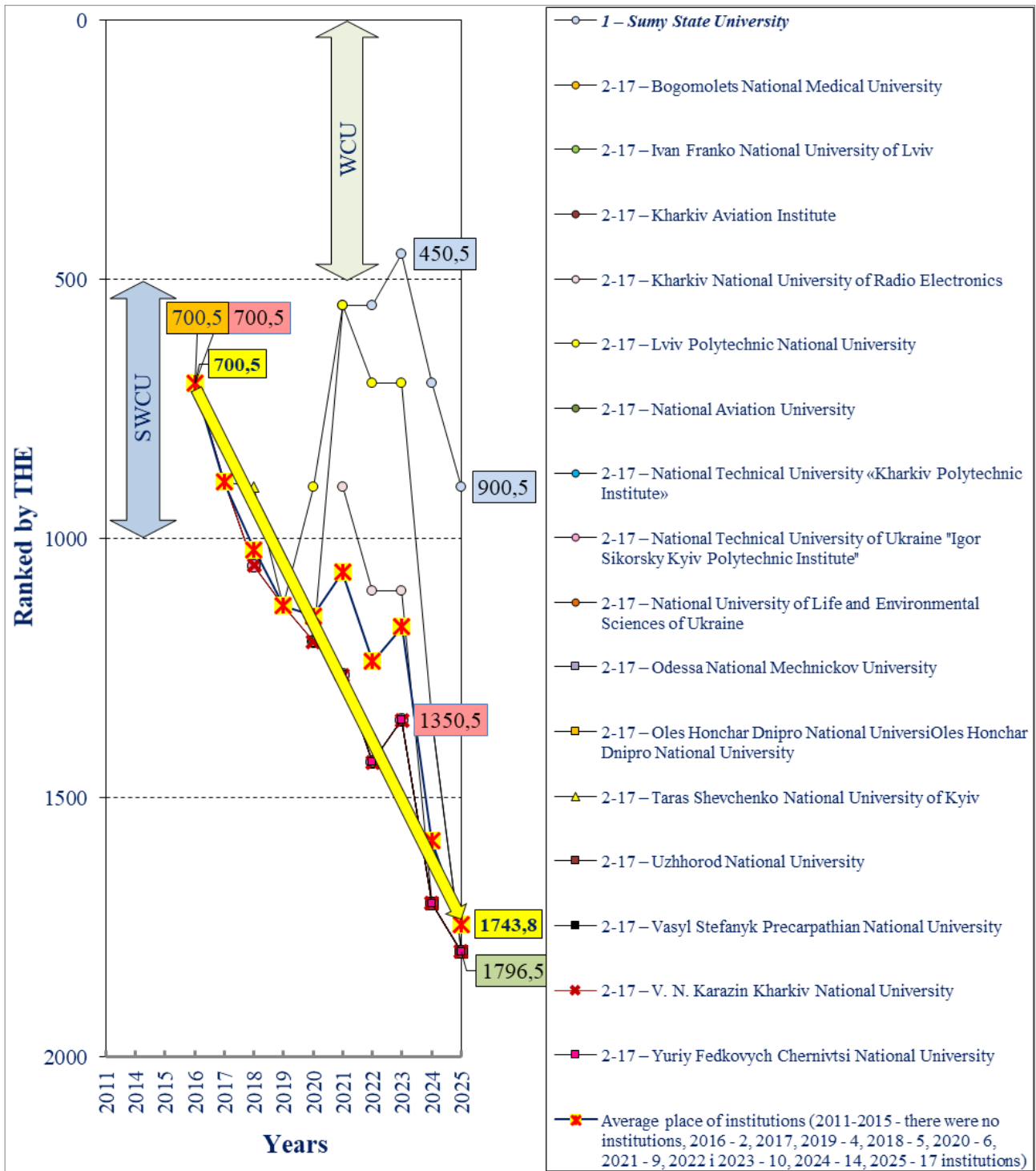


Figure 3. Dynamics of achievements of Ukrainian universities by THE World University Rankings

Source: Compiled by authors based on: Times Higher Education, 2024

1. The outcomes of the Tirana EHEA Ministerial Conference on 29–30 May 2024 are to some extent controversial.

2. The conference summarised the 25-year history of the Bologna Process, clarified the prospects for the development of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) until 2030, as defined by the Rome Communiqué on 19 November 2020. Compared to the previous conference, the number of fundamental values to be implemented “as a coherent whole” has been expanded to six. The Principles and Guidelines to Strengthen the Social Dimension of Higher

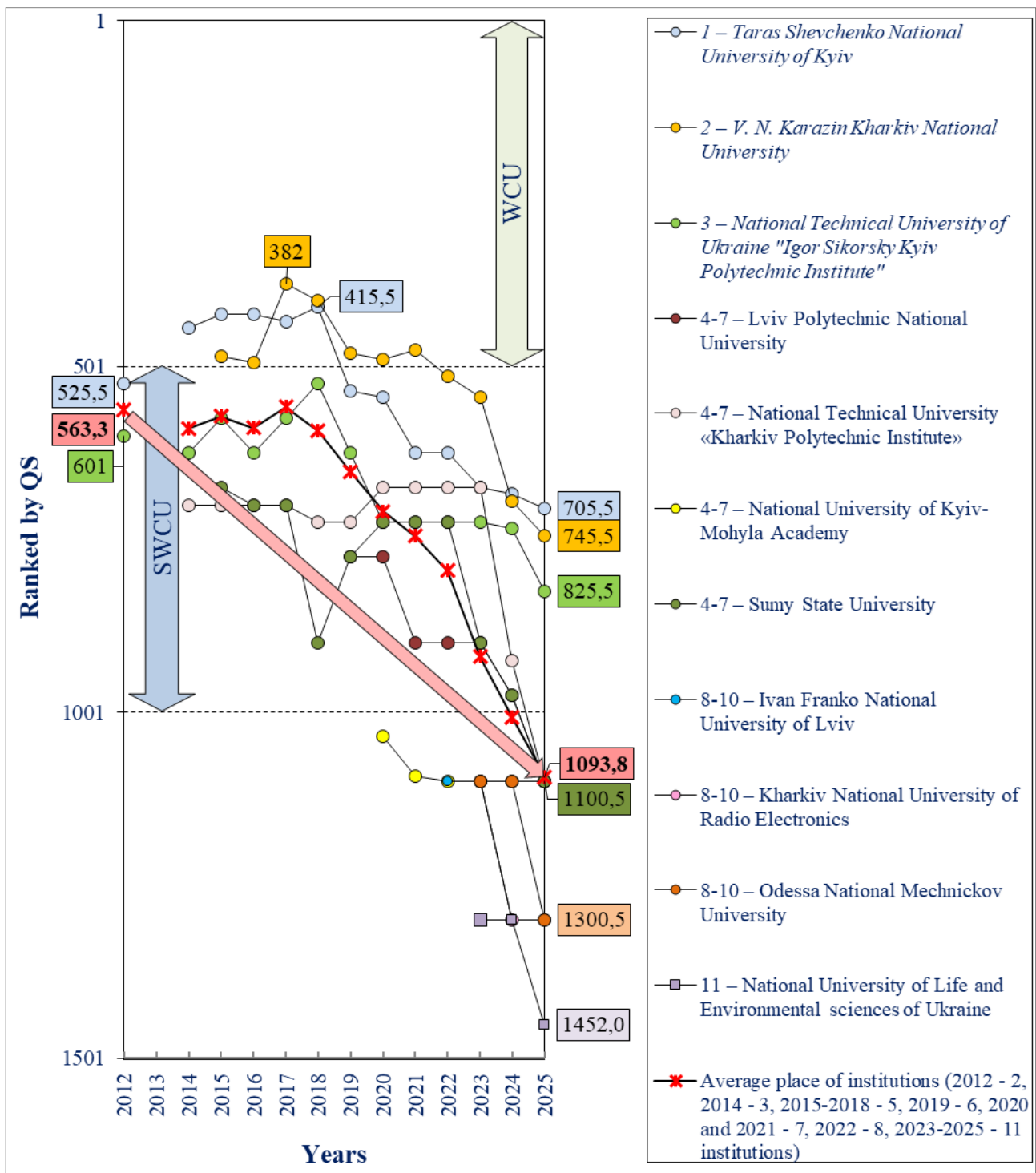


Figure 4. Dynamics of achievements of Ukrainian universities by QS World University Rankings

Source: Compiled by the authors based on: TopUniversities, n. d.

Education in EHEA, which were previously adopted by the Rome Communique, were improved. Relevant indicators and descriptors for the social dimension were approved. The intention to make an “inclusive, innovative and interconnected EHEA”, the vision of which was outlined at the Ministerial Conference in Rome, a reality by 2030, was confirmed. Ukraine and its higher education community were supported in their opposition to the full-scale russian military aggression and it was decided “to maintain the suspension of the rights

of participation of the Russian Federation and Belarus in all structures and activities of the EHEA” (European Higher Education Area, 2024).

3. At the same time, the Tirana Conference removed from the Bologna Process agenda the challenge of achieving the “competitiveness and attractiveness” of the EHEA on a global scale. This important goal was mentioned in all previous Bologna documents, starting with the Bologna Declaration (1999) and ending with the Rome Communiqué (2020), and constituted the essence of the so-called second, external dimension (and the corresponding strategy-2) of higher education development (European Higher Education Area, 2007; Lugovyi et al., 2022b). The reduction of this dimension simplifies the Bologna Process and the EHEA to their first, internal dimension (“compatibility and comparability”). However, without the implementation of the second dimension, it is impossible to fully implement the first dimension, it becomes significantly difficult to ensure the innovativeness and international interconnectedness of the EHEA, administrative and organisationally insurmountable obstacles to global balanced mobility and synergistic cooperation arise, and inter-university interaction becomes non-equivalent.

4. In addition, while calling for innovation in higher education, the Tirana Conference left out the world’s 20-year innovative experience of using ranking mechanisms to monitor and motivate the highest excellence, measure and define the characteristics of leading universities, and rank countries by the level of university development in order to further minimise the gap between them in terms of higher education “competitiveness and attractiveness”. In 2024, more than half of the EHEA member states did not have world-class universities according to the Shanghai Ranking criteria, while the remaining countries were highly differentiated by the number and quality of such institutions. The lack of appropriate policies and strategies to align EHEA member states in terms of top levelling university excellence, as opposed to bottom alignment in terms of minimum acceptable quality, creates barriers to multilevel peer cooperation between universities. The challenge of top levelling is much more difficult to respond to effectively than bottom alignment, as it relates to higher education of top excellence and the complexity involved, and its overcoming requires coordinated and consistent European and national efforts. In Ukraine, this is hampered by the war unleashed by the Russian Federation. It is proposed to introduce a system of university leagues in the EHEA based on the level of excellence, similar to European and national football leagues. In Ukraine, this will contribute to the country’s innovative post-war recovery and its successful integration into the EU as a strong European state.

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