FREE NETWORK

POLICY BRIEF SERIES #AcademicsStandWithUkraine

Ellam Kulati, Centre for Economic Analysis
Michał Myck, Centre for Economic Analysis, Institute of Economics PAS
October 2026

Integrating the region's academic community: Poland's perspective on opportunities and challenges ahead

Geopolitical instability has highlighted the need to strengthen academic cooperation and research capacities in Central and Eastern Europe. On October 1, 2026, in Warsaw, the Institute of Economics of the Polish Academy of Sciences (IE PAS), together with the FREE Network, organized the conference Regional influence through academia: Poland's role in integrating the regional academic community. This brief summarizes the conference discussions on Poland's potential to enhance regional academic integration and the opportunities and challenges involved.

Introduction

Several years after the start of the brutal clampdown on the Belarusian opposition in 2020 and the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, countries in Central and Eastern Europe continue to grapple with their consequences, which, apart from the most tragic effects, include significant disruption to the region's academia. While numerous programs have been implemented at country and European levels to support displaced institutions and individuals, the continued brutalities and growing pressure on civic and academic freedoms prompt the question of whether more can be done to encourage stronger academic cooperation and deeper integration in the region.

The Warsaw conference, held immediately after the tragic Russian drone attacks on the main building of the National Academy of Sciences in Kyiv, sought to address this question. The loss of life, injuries, and physical destruction reminded participants of the urgency of developing a broader strategy to support regional academics and strengthen research capabilities, both in the current instability and to help build a more peaceful and stable future.

Poland as a research destination

The conference began by taking stock of Poland's standing as a research destination, including its performance in attracting and retaining international research talent and the institutional and structural challenges constraining its competitiveness as a research destination. Paweł Kaczmarczyk, professor at the Faculty of Economic Sciences of the University of Warsaw and Director of the Centre of Migration Research, presented the country as an emerging but institutionally constrained destination for international academic talent. He highlighted that foreign nationals constitute just 2.8 percent of the academic staff in Poland, compared with close to 32 percent in leading research destinations such as the United Kingdom or Switzerland. Poland's limited academic internationalization could be attributed to factors including relatively lengthy legalization processes, low academic salaries, language barriers, institutional bottlenecks, and other shortcomings in public services. Many of these factors also shape the destination choices of international students.

More fundamental factors than those usually raised in the literature on academic migration drove the arrival in Poland of numerous Ukrainian academics and students following the full-scale Russian invasion. The months following February 2022 showed how important non-financial support can be in facilitating academic integration in times of crisis.

Yet to become a centre of scientific excellence, Poland needs to be more than a temporary shelter for regional academics: it must attract researchers from the region and retain the best Polish scientists. Professor Natalia Letki, a sociologist and political scientist from the University of Warsaw, presented her findings on the factors shaping Polish researchers' decisions to pursue academic careers abroad. Her research is based on a survey of European Research Council (ERC) grant recipients with national or family ties to Poland who pursue their careers elsewhere in Europe (Letki et al., 2024). She emphasized that

attracting and retaining leading researchers requires an environment conducive to frontier research: strong institutional support, advanced research infrastructure, international collaborations, and a critical mass of excellent scientists. While Poland performs reasonably well in research output relative to its funding (Scopus-indexed publications per capita), it underperforms internationally in frontier research. Polish institutions have secured only 105 ERC grants to date, compared with nearly 1,300 awarded to their Spanish counterparts, despite comparable research and development expenditure. The attractiveness of Polish institutions is undermined by perceived academic inbreeding and resistance to external candidates. Restrictive career structures, particularly the habilitation requirement, limit academic independence and hinder career progression. These shortcomings are linked to a pattern of brain drain in which the emigration of leading and promising researchers is not adequately offset by an inflow of comparable international talent.

The initial interest of some survey respondents in returning to Poland, before being dissuaded by prevailing conditions, points to the country's untapped potential to attract research talent. Given that many Central and Eastern European countries face similar, if not more pronounced, institutional and administrative challenges, a competitive research hub in Poland could be a comparatively attractive destination for academics seeking to establish their careers in the region.

Academia in times of peace, unrest and war: The FREE Network experience

Support for academic development in the region can take different forms and formats. As noted in the opening remarks of Michał Myck, Director of the Centre for Economic Analysis (CenEA) and a professor at the IE PAS, the FREE Network exemplifies a long-term commitment to regional cooperation across diverse political and institutional conditions. Connecting research institutes in seven countries through a shared commitment to informing policy and effecting change, the Network strengthens research capacities, facilitates knowledge transfer and builds lasting academic partnerships among its members. Such cooperation – with important financial support – has played a vital role in preserving the Network's independent research in economics and political science and supporting academic communities afflicted by political instability and conflict.

The need for strong centres of academic excellence also resonated in the welcoming remarks of Professor Andrzej Szablewski, Chair of the Academic Council at the IE PAS. The Institute's role in supporting Poland's socio-economic transition and government policies during more recent crises exemplifies the importance of such centres beyond strictly academic discoveries.

The Stockholm School of Economics (SSE) in Riga is another example of such centres in the Baltic States. Anders Paalzow, Rector of SSE Riga, drew on his extensive experience in the region to argue that autonomous *islands of excellence* can generate

significant positive externalities for socio-economic development through research and education. Citing BEROC, which relocated from Belarus to Lithuania due to political repression, he also illustrated the importance of international cooperation and support, and highlighted the potential for Poland to serve as a regional hub, especially for such displaced research institutions.

Victoria Sereda, a sociologist at the Kyiv School of Economics (KSE) and coordinator of the Virtual Ukraine Institute for Advanced Study (VUIAS) at the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin, focused on academic resilience in times of war and the role of academic institutions beyond their standard responsibilities. She showcased how KSE has not only sustained its activities but expanded despite the raging war, increasing enrolment, introducing new programs, and fostering greater international partnerships. It supports Ukraine's war effort by providing technical expertise and training in areas ranging from agriculture to military preparedness, promotes entrepreneurship and start-ups, and develops technologies for wartime needs. Despite continued Russian efforts to undermine Ukrainian academia, Viktoria Sereda's account reflected Ukrainian academics' determination to continue their work, with the aim of ending the war and supporting post-war recovery.

Poland as a regional centre of academic excellence: Panel discussion

The final session featured a panel discussion with Sweden's Ambassador to Poland, Martina Quick, Torbjörn Becker (Stockholm Institute of Transition Economics), Jerzy Duszyński (Polish Academy of Sciences), Michał Goszczyński (Ministry of Science and Higher Education), Natalia Letki and Victoria Sereda. Moderated by Michał Myck, the discussion explored what is needed to establish Poland as a regional centre for academic excellence. The panel also addressed Poland's handling of past academic crises, government initiatives to strengthen academic cooperation, and the institutional reforms needed to attract and retain leading researchers.

Professor Duszyński reflected on programs supporting Ukrainian academics, some of which, he noted, have been successful although limited in scale and duration. Michał Goszczyński stated that the Polish government remains committed to providing as much assistance to Ukrainian researchers as possible, and that Poland's continued access to European structural funding could help finance initiatives such as an international research hub in the country. He pointed to SOLARIS – the national synchrotron radiation centre – as a demonstration of the country's capacity to develop research infrastructure that serves a broader scientific community. Natalia Letki advocated for the creation of '*islands of excellence*', arguing that the reforms needed to attract and retain leading researchers may require dedicated support, as reforming established institutions has repeatedly encountered significant friction, with little sign of this diminishing. She stressed that such support could provide both the necessary resources and valuable institutional legitimacy.

Torbjorn Becker shifted the discussion toward a more specific proposal: establishing a university in Poland to attract outstanding Polish, regional and international academics. Polish and Swedish

government representatives agreed that funding was unlikely to be the fundamental challenge. Michał Goszczyński identified the difficulty of attracting a critical mass of excellent researchers from established institutions, and anticipated resistance from these institutions, as more significant challenges. Ambassador Quick indicated that a compelling proposal with a clear purpose and the potential for lasting impact could attract support from the Swedish government, which has other long-standing initiatives in the region. Natalia Letki was optimistic, arguing that by offering secure employment, academic independence and a competitive research environment, the venture would be especially attractive to younger researchers. She recommended starting small and growing gradually, drawing parallels with the *Catalan Institution for Research and Advanced Studies (ICREA)*. Ambassador Quick also took the pragmatic view that networks of institutions and researchers could achieve similar objectives without a traditional university. Viktoria Sereda pointed to VUIAS as a different institutional format, whose combination of virtual and in-person collaboration has kept researchers across borders connected to Ukrainian institutions.

The panel was cautiously optimistic about Poland's potential to develop into a regional centre of academic excellence, particularly given its comparative advantage within the region and geographic proximity to Belarus and Ukraine. Administrative and institutional barriers, rather than financial constraints, were identified as the key obstacles to establishing and sustaining such a centre.

Concluding remarks

The conference offered a solid foundation for considering Poland as a centre of academic excellence, for both Polish academics and the wider Central and Eastern European community. Poland clearly has considerable potential to strengthen regional academic cooperation by developing research capacities, and important advantages such as its geographical location and access to EU funding programs. Participants also stressed that – like other countries that have become significant research hubs – Poland stands to benefit from such regional and international cooperation. While realizing this potential will require overcoming several long-standing barriers, the chance to become a centre of excellence is Poland's to take.

List of Conference Speakers and Panellists

Torbjörn Becker: director of SITE at the Stockholm School of Economics since 2006 coordinating the work of the FREE Network and serving on the boards of several of its institutions, including the Kyiv School of Economics; leading expert on the economies of Russia and Eastern Europe.

Jerzy Duszyński: professor of biological sciences and full member of the Polish Academy of Sciences; served as President of the Academy from 2015 to 2022; biochemist at the Nencki Institute of Experimental Biology.

Michał Goszczyński: Director at the International Cooperation Department of the Polish Ministry of Science and Higher Education; oversees Poland's

participation in large research infrastructures and in major EU programs such as Horizon Europe.

Paweł Kaczmarczyk: professor at the Faculty of Economic Sciences at the University of Warsaw and Director of the Centre of Migration Research, specializing in labour migration, high-skilled mobility, and migration policy.

Natalia Letki: professor at the Faculty of Political Science and International Studies at the University of Warsaw; recipient of an ERC Starting Grant in 2009; specializing in the areas of public goods, social trust and attitudes to migration.

Michał Myck: director of Centre for Economic Analysis and professor at Institute of Economics PAS; specializing in labour economics, fiscal policy and welfare analysis.

Anders Paalzow: professor of economics specializing in public and financial economics; since 1999 Rector at the Stockholm School of Economics in Riga, chairing the board of the Baltic International Centre for Economic Policy Studies (BICEPS); recently appointed as interim director of the Belarusian Economic Research and Outreach Centre.

Martina Quick: Sweden's Ambassador to Poland since September 2025, having specialized on Central and Eastern Europe in her international career; earlier: Ambassador to Georgia and Armenia, Deputy Director for Eastern Europe and Central Asia at the Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs and Minister Counsellor at the Swedish Embassy in Kyiv.

Viktoriya Sereda: professor of sociology at the Kyiv School of Economics, coordinating the Virtual Ukraine Institute for Advanced Studies at the Wissenschaftskolleg in Berlin; specializing in migration, memory and identity.

Andrzej Szablewski: professor of economics and Chair of the Academic Council at the Institute of Economics PAS, serving earlier as the Institute's Director; specializing in energy economics and regulatory frameworks of the energy sector.

References

Letki, N., Nowotny, M., & Sankowski, P. (2024). *„To be where the frontier science happens"*. Open Science Framework. https://doi.org/10.31219/osf.io/7ryt2



Ellam Kulati

Centre for Economic Analysis (CenEA)
ekulati@cenea.org.pl
www.cenea.org.pl

Ellam is a postdoctoral researcher at CenEA. He holds a Bachelors in Economics from the University of Nairobi and an M.A. and Ph.D. in Economics from the University of Warsaw. His research interests include the economics of ageing, household and labour economics.



Michał Myck

Centre for Economic Analysis (CenEA) and Institute of Economics, Polish Academy of Sciences
mmyck@cenea.org.pl
www.cenea.org.pl

Michał Myck is the director of CenEA and professor at the Institute of Economics, Polish Academy of Sciences. He previously worked at the Institute for Fiscal Studies in London and at the DIW-Berlin. He received his B.A. and M.Phil. degrees at the University of Oxford, Ph.D. degree at the University of Warsaw (2006) and completed his habilitation at the Free University Berlin (2015). His work focuses on labour and health economics and applied micro-econometrics.

freepolicybriefs.org

The Forum for Research on Eastern Europe and Emerging Economies is a network of academic experts on economic issues in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union at AUA (Yerevan), BEROC (Vilnius), BICEPS (Riga), CenEA (Szczecin), ISET-PI (Tbilisi), KSE (Kyiv) and SITE (Stockholm). The weekly FREE Network Policy Brief Series provides research-based analyses of economic policy issues relevant to Eastern Europe and emerging markets. Opinions expressed in policy briefs and other publications are those of the authors; they do not necessarily reflect those of the FREE Network and its research institutes. AI tools may have been used in the preparation of this brief. Where used, they were applied responsibly and in accordance with appropriate scientific and ethical standards. The authors and editor remain fully responsible for their respective contributions

FREE NETWORK