

The politics of student mobility: Links between outbound student flows and the democratic development of post-Soviet Eurasia

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Abstract

The study offers new empirical material to link student mobility and the levels of attained democracy in the former Soviet countries. Theoretically-informed analysis of cross-sectional data shows that the former Soviet countries with higher proportions of students studying in Europe or the United States have achieved higher levels of democratic development. In contrast, countries with higher proportions of students studying in the most popular, authoritarian destination - Russia - have reached significantly lower levels of democratic development. The study uses ideas of democratic socialisation at universities as well as apprenticeships in democracy to advance the intellectual agenda of linking two fields - educational studies and political science.

Introduction

Global society is defined by mobility. The numbers of people moving across and within nations have never been as high as they are today. Crossing borders involves acquiring new knowledge, being exposed to new ideas and ways of thinking. Individuals move for a variety of reasons. Education is one of them. The bulk of the existing literature on international student mobility (ISM) explores micro aspects of individual decision-making or institutional strategies rather than the wider socio-economic, political, educational, and cultural contexts and implications that may be associated with such decisions. The literature that examines macro aspects of ISM is largely concerned with brain drain/gain/circulation (Beine, Noël, & Ragot, 2014; Chankseliani, 2016; Haupt, Krieger, & Lange, 2010; Kim, 2015; Kritz, 2013; J. J. Lee & Sehoole, 2015; Perna, Orosz, & Jumakulov, 2015; Welch & Hao, 2016). Such literature generally focuses on narrow economic benefits for individuals, universities, and governments, overshadowing other aspects which are simply referred to by economists as 'externalities' but which are essential to global well-being, such as the democratisation of societies, re-evaluation of what constitutes good citizenship, or the development of intercultural understanding. This paper takes a broader view of higher education and challenges the prevalence of market and economic imperatives of higher education internationalization by showing that outbound student mobility is correlated with home country's attained democracy.

Defining democracy/democratisation is no simple task. One entire discipline - political science - revolves around the question of which political regime prevails in which society and why. This paper uses the Economist Intelligence Unit (2015) measure for democracy that includes five sub-measures: electoral process and pluralism, civil liberties, the functioning of government, political participation, and political culture. The mainstream literature of democratic theory explains political transitions as either entirely conditioned by social structures (Almond & Verba, 1963; Diamond, 1992; Lipset, 1960) or as being largely

actor-driven (Di Palma, 1990; O'Donnell & Schmitter, 1986; Puryear, 1994). The principal difference between the two approaches is amongst those who theorise that socio-economic, institutional, and cultural conditions determine the outcomes of political transitions and those who argue that the agency, choices, and strategies of contentious actors are central for political regime change. Although this paper assumes that the role of foreign-educated individual actors has been decisive in political transitions in the former Soviet countries, it follows the argument developed by Wheatley (2016) that 'actors cannot be separated entirely from the context in which they operate.'

Being part of an educational context has implications not only for acquiring and analysing new information but in a great variety of ways for transforming how individuals think. While studying abroad, individuals may undergo changes in how they think about state systems and socio-political, cultural and economic developments around them, and their own role as citizen-contributors to their communities. Amongst other influences, mobility may be transformative for student migrants' civic consciousness (their critical awareness of wider society and their willingness to contribute to it) and their understanding of what democracy entails. Such 'apprenticeships in democracy' may be essential in facilitating democratic developments at home, when students finish their studies and return to their home countries.

In the context marked by serious concerns for democratic development of countries in post-Soviet Eurasia (Crotty, Hall, & Ljubownikow, 2014; Klein, 2016; Omelicheva, 2015; Ross, 2016) and increasing numbers of individuals from these countries choosing to study in Europe or the USA (Chankseliani & Hessel, 2016a; UNESCO, 2015b), the relationship between home countries' democratic development and student flows to Europe and America¹ is a worthwhile question to investigate. Building on the existing scarce evidence and theorization (Atkinson, 2010; Puryear, 1994; Spilimbergo, 2009), this paper uses cross-sectional data on the former Soviet countries to demonstrate that countries with higher proportions of students studying in Europe and America have achieved higher levels of democratic development. At the same time, lower proportions of students from these countries study in Russia, an authoritarian stronghold in the region. The study has also quantified the educational biographies of the top political leadership of the former Soviet countries in the post-independence period to show that those with higher levels of attained democracy seem to have had larger proportions of post-independence political leaders who have studied in Europe or USA than those countries that have lower levels of attained democracy. In contrast, countries with lower levels of attained democracy have had higher proportions of post-independence political leaders who have studied in Russia than those countries that have higher levels of attained democracy. Conceptually and empirically, this paper presents student mobility from the former Soviet countries to Russia as a contrasting force to the democratisation through mobility to Europe and America. The paper suggests that studying abroad can be viewed as a mode of socialization that is likely to induct students into the norms and rules of a host community, and that student mobility to Europe and America may offer the potential of facilitating democratic socialization for mobile students from the former Soviet countries. For the purposes of this paper, socialization is defined as 'the process of inserting newcomers into an existing order' (Biesta, 2007, p. 25).

All except four post-Soviet countries (Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan) and all European Union (EU) countries are members of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). One of the main rationales and expected outcomes of EHEA has been the creation of an enabling environment for international student mobility (Papatsiba,

¹ The USA and America, as well as the EU and Europe, are used interchangeably in this paper.

2006). EHEA has been promoting the use of learner-centred methods of teaching as well as democratic social objectives (Marquand, 2018). Specifically, three of the four main aims of universities operating in EHEA relate to the competence of critical understanding of the world: 'preparing students for life as active citizens in a democratic society; preparing students for their future careers and enabling their personal development; creating and maintaining a broad, advanced knowledge base; and stimulating research and innovation' (Leuven Communiqué, 2009; London Communiqué, 2007). Despite these aims being firmly established, it has been indicated that the development of higher education in Europe has been going in the economic rather than cultural and political directions (Chankseliani, 2017b; Sin, 2015; Tomusk, 2004). This paper shifts the focus from European higher education internationalization's contribution to increasing competitiveness, generating more income and innovation (Suter & Jandl, 2008; Vught, 2009) to it being associated with democratic transitions of less/non-democratic societies.

There exists a small body of literature on the links between short-term study abroad courses and development of good / global citizenship (Kubota, 2016; Streitwieser & Light, 2009; Tarrant, Rubin, & Stoner, 2014) and how university students may be encouraged to engage in cross-cultural dialogue and become more involved with global issues (Caruana, 2014; Lehtomäki, Moate, & Posti-Ahokas, 2015). There is also some evidence on the implications of short-term mobility - such as the Erasmus programme - for developing European citizenship/identity (Fligstein, 2008; Ieracitano, 2014; Mitchell, 2012; Papatsiba, 2006; Sigalas, 2010; Wilson, 2011). This fits with one of the main rationales and expected outcomes of the EHEA - the creation of enabling environment for student mobility (Papatsiba, 2006).

Countries included in the analysis were part of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) at the time of its dissolution. Repressive measures that the USSR had in place did not allow its citizens to travel internationally which resulted in very small numbers of students studying abroad. In the last quarter of a century, the former Soviet countries have undergone a natural experiment. The dissolution of the USSR disrupted the period of isolation from world markets, with the citizens of the former Soviet countries facing fewer constraints on travel and migration (Chankseliani, 2016; Heyneman, 1998). The end of the Cold War has been recognized as a pivotal event in global migration as it ended the period when world emigration rates were held low (Massey, 2003). At that point in history, these countries were at a similar level of democratic development. Subsequently, they chose heterogeneous pathways of political, economic, and social development that led to the increase in the volume of migration, with more students seeking study abroad opportunities (Chankseliani & Hessel, 2016b). However, the diverse pathways of development that these countries chose led to different patterns of student mobility and democratic development.

Quantitative Data, Variables, and the Unit of Analysis

This study uses secondary datasets to establish associations between outbound student mobility to democratic vs authoritarian countries and levels of democratic development. Definitions of democracy differ, as 'democracy is about plurality and difference, not identity and sameness' (Biesta, 2015, p. 120). Some view democracy as political liberalization, others follow Immanuel Kant's individualistic conception of democracy; yet others adopt John Dewey's social conception of democracy whereby 'a democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, a conjoint communicated experience' (1916, p. 87). Depending on the definition, interpretations of levels of attained democracy can be divergent. For example, the Kazakhstani government calls the country

‘the land of democracy’ (Marat, 2009), while the measure adopted for the present study categorises it as an authoritarian country. To be clear, this paper does not assume democracy is the ‘holy grail’ but takes democracy for what it is - a state system that can be measured. Hence, the dependent variable used in this study is the overall political democracy index.

There exist various democracy indices: Freedom House, Polity, the Economist Intelligence Unit, and the Bertelsmann Democracy Index. The analysis of the indices from each of these sources for the former Soviet countries shows very high correlations between 0.89 and 0.98 ($p=.000$). The index used in this study was sourced from the Economist Intelligence Unit (2015). The index ranges from 0 to 10 globally and measures the following five categories: electoral process and pluralism, civil liberties, the functioning of government, political participation, and political culture (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2015, p. 45). The democracy index ranges from 1.8 to 7.9 for the countries of the former Soviet Union.

Based on their scores on a number of indicators within the five categories, each country is classified by the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) as a full democracy; a flawed democracy; a hybrid regime; or an authoritarian regime. According to this classification, not a single former Soviet state is currently considered to be a full democracy (i.e. a state that follows a set of practices and principles that institutionalize and thus ultimately protect freedom). According to the Economist Intelligence Unit (2015), there are four flawed democracies (Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia, and Moldova), four hybrid democracies (Georgia, Ukraine, Kyrgyzstan, and Armenia), and seven authoritarian regimes (Belarus, Russia, Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan) in this region (Figure 1). The present study uses democracy as a continuous and not a categorical variable.

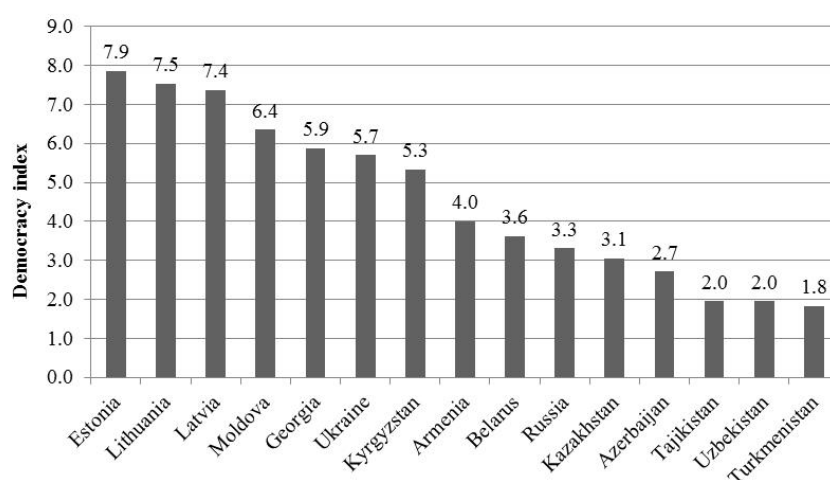


Figure 1. Democracy indices of the former Soviet countries

Source: own analysis using Economist Intelligence Unit (2015) data

The following two variables are used to measure student mobility from these countries: the EU-bound degree mobile students as a share of all mobile students and Russia-bound degree mobile students as a share of all mobile students. These are country-level measures using statistics on outbound student mobility. There is a strong negative correlation between these two variables (Figure 2).

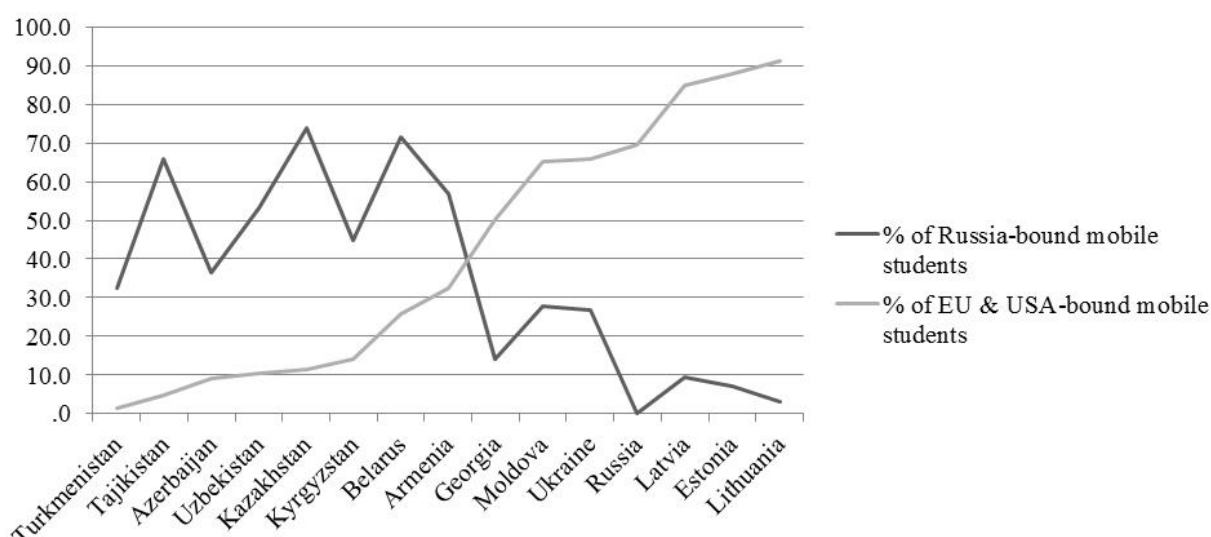


Figure 2. EU-bound vs Russia-bound degree mobile students as a share of all mobile students, by country or origin

Source: own analysis using UNESCO (2015a) data

The statistics on the EU-bound mobile students refer to the students from all 15 former Soviet countries studying in 27 EU member states, including Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. The statistics on Russia-bound mobile students refer to the students from 14 former Soviet countries studying in Russia. The Baltic States are senders (as former Soviet countries) and also recipients (as EU countries). For example, when Estonia is included in the analysis, the statistic on the EU-bound mobile students for Estonia indicates the proportion of all mobile students from Estonia studying in 26 EU destinations, including Latvia and Lithuania, but excluding Estonia as mobility by definition involves leaving the borders of one's own country.

Further, the study quantified the educational biographies of the top political leadership of the former Soviet countries in the post-independence period. For the purposes of this study, top political leadership includes presidents and prime ministers. The analysis adopted a broad definition of 'studying abroad', including short-term (professional development courses, visiting studentships, and internships) as well as long-term mobility. The former Soviet countries had different numbers of political leaders since 1991 and the proportions of those who have studied in the EU/USA, Russia, or elsewhere differ considerably by country (Table 1).

Table 1. Political leaders of former Soviet countries who have studied abroad

Country	Proportion of political leaders educated in EU/USA	Proportion of political leaders educated in Russia	Proportion of political leaders educated elsewhere (abroad)	Proportion of political leaders educated only in their home country	Overall number of Presidents and Prime Ministers since 1991
Georgia	40%	20%	15%	25%	20

Kazakhstan	20%	40%	10%	30%	10
Lithuania	17%	22%	0%	61%	18
Estonia	15%	0%	8%	77%	13
Latvia	11%	6%	6%	78%	18
Moldova	11%	22%	11%	56%	18
Armenia	6%	24%	6%	65%	17
Kyrgyzstan	4%	63%	0%	33%	24
Azerbaijan	0%	36%	0%	64%	11
Belarus	0%	63%	0%	38%	8
Russia	0%	n/a	0%	100%	12
Tajikistan	0%	73%	18%	9%	11
Turkmenistan	0%	67%	0%	33%	3
Ukraine	0%	16%	0%	84%	19
Uzbekistan	0%	33%	0%	67%	6

This study uses countries as units of analysis. On the one hand, a focus on countries is considered to be a questionable starting point in studying spatial movements of people (Favell, 2008). On the other hand, such an approach is useful, as most of the ISM studies are methodologically individualistic. Because the country-level variables are only averages and discount the intra-country variation, all conclusions deriving from the macro analysis are related to the average differences between countries. The development of individual students' civic consciousness and its influence on democratic transition are complex processes that are by no means reflected in the country averages.

Findings

The number of degree-mobile students from the former Soviet countries to Europe and America has been increasing consistently since the 1990s. According to the latest data, there were 118,836 degree mobile students from this region pursuing their education in Europe and 12,463 students in the USA (UNESCO, 2015b). The popularity of these destinations differs by students' country of origin (Figure 3). Eighty-five to ninety per cent of all mobile students from the Baltic States study in other EU member states or the USA. More than three in five mobile students from Russia, Ukraine, and Moldova choose to study in Europe or the USA. Half of the mobile students from Georgia and one-third to one-fourth from Armenia and Belarus, respectively, choose European or American universities (Figure 3).

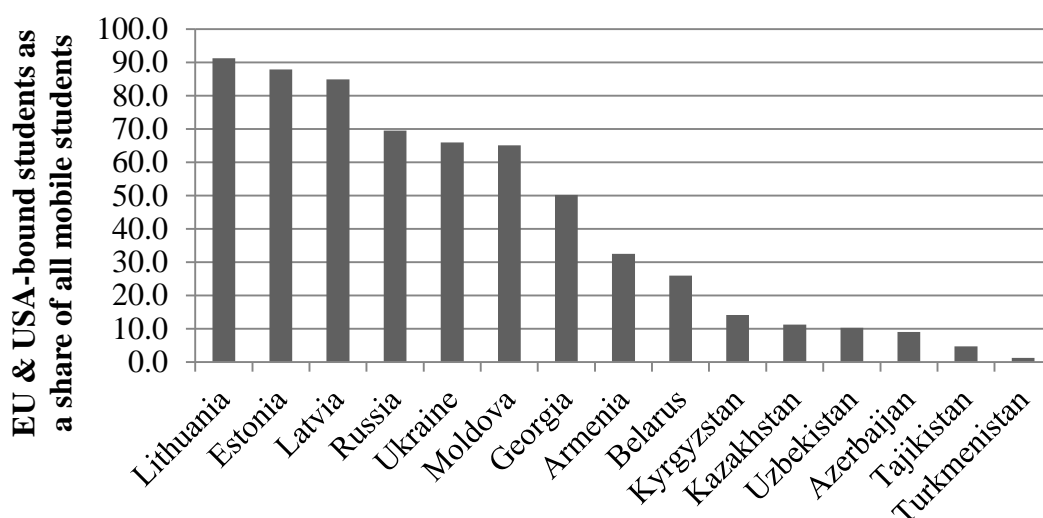


Figure 3. EU & USA-bound degree-mobile students as a share of all mobile students (%), by country of origin

Source: own analysis using UNESCO (2015a) data

European and American destinations are less popular in Central Asia and Azerbaijan. Approximately, one in ten mobile students from Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Azerbaijan pursues a degree in Europe or America. Tajikistan and Turkmenistan have very small proportions of students choosing these destinations (Figure 3). The four Central Asian countries (Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan) that are not part of the Bologna process are on the right-hand side of the figure. Those closer to Western Europe were the first to join in 1999 and amongst these were the Baltic States. Kazakhstan that is geographically farther away joined only in 2010.

In contrast, European integration has been a powerful driver for education reforms in the Baltic States as ‘being left out wasn’t politically acceptable’ (Valk, 2008, p. 3). European integration has also been a strategic component for their HE reforms with Estonia being one of the first countries to sign the Bologna Declaration in 1999. The Bologna process provided an opportunity for integrating local HE systems with the European Higher Education Area by introducing the three cycle system (bachelor/master/doctorate), developing quality assurance, and simplifying recognition of qualifications and periods of study.

Correlational analysis of the data sets on outbound student mobility and the democratic development reveals that there is a very strong, positive, and statistically significant correlation between the proportion of degree mobile students from the former Soviet countries that are enrolled at European and American universities (as a % of all mobile students from each country) and these countries’ ($n=15$) democratic development index ($r=.86$, $p=.000$). As seen in Figure 4, the former Soviet countries currently sending higher proportions of degree mobile students to universities in Europe or the USA tend to have achieved a much higher level of democratic development than those that have lower proportions of students pursuing degrees at European or American universities.

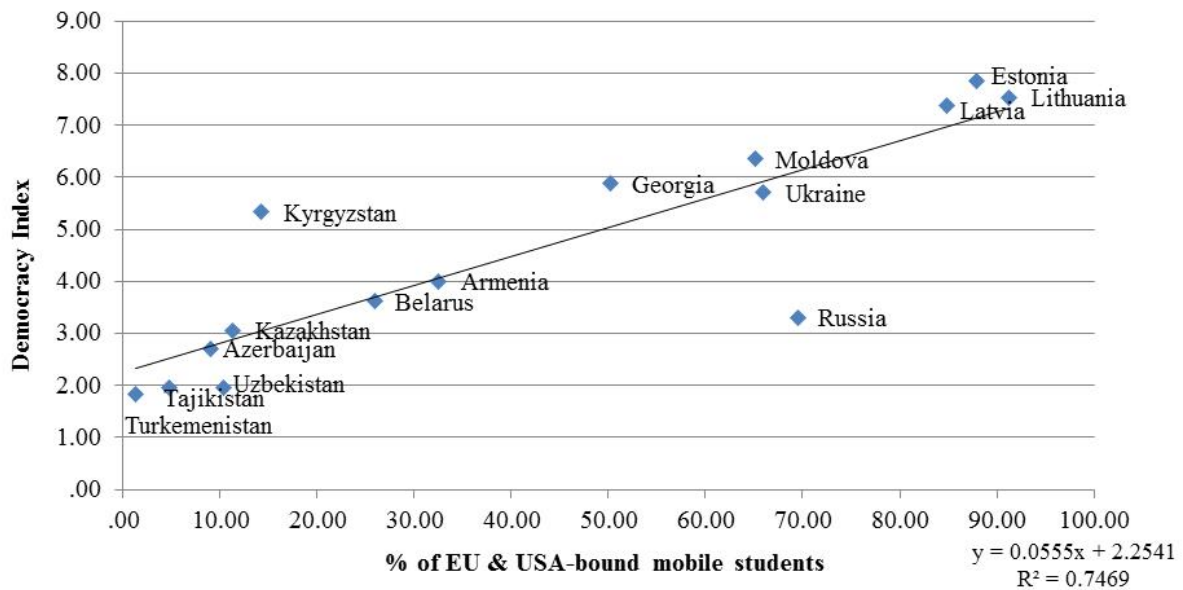


Figure 4. Correlation between the EU & USA bound mobility (as a share of all mobile students) and attained democracy, by country or origin

Source: own analysis using Economist Intelligence Unit (2015) and UNESCO (2015a)

Further, countries with higher levels of attained democracy seem to have had larger proportions of post-independence political leaders (presidents and prime ministers) who have studied in Europe or USA than those countries that have lower levels of attained democracy ($r = .51, p = .05$).

Many more students from the former Soviet countries study in Russia than in Europe and the USA taken together (UNESCO, 2015b). Russia remains by far the most popular destination for degree-mobile students from the region and one of the first scholars who drew attention to this trend were Stephen Heyneman & Benjamin Skinner (2014). There are 150,327 students from the former Soviet countries enrolled at Russian higher education institutions. This is more than three times the number of students from the same countries enrolled at German, French, the UK, and Italian universities taken together. The present figure of 150,327 represents a more than three-fold increase from the year 2000 statistic of 41,210 students (UNESCO, 2015b). Russian Federation is the legal successor of the USSR, a country that sent few students abroad and until the late 1960s received international students primarily from other socialist countries (Barnett & Wu, 1995). Russia is among the top five biggest recipients of international students globally, hosting 213,347 mobile students (UNESCO, 2015b).

Russia's popularity amongst students from the former Soviet countries can be explained by Russia's past political and economic role in the Russian empire and the USSR. Russia is large, wealthy, compatible language-wise, and accommodating because of the diaspora effect. Russia also offers the best-quality higher education across the post-Soviet space, as measured by the Shanghai Ranking (ARWU, 2016). Relational ties stemming from durable colonial linkages are important when it comes to understanding ISM (K. H. Lee & Tan, 1984; Perkins & Neumayer, 2013). Former colonial powers often attempt to retain their hegemonic position by using their connections to attract students from their dependencies (Kell & Vogl, 2008). The USSR, to which the Russian Federation is a successor and the legal heir, expanded its political influence by implementing a number of Russification policies. These included imposing the Russian language as the lingua franca and educating

the selected individuals in the colonial capital to develop human resources that would serve the colony in the future (Chankseliani, 2016).² Most importantly, Russia offers generous state-funded scholarships to students from post-Soviet countries to study at universities in the former colonial centre; these scholarships cover university tuition as well as living expenses (Malinovskiy & Chankseliani, 2018; Ministry of Education and Science, 2015).

The absolute majority of international students in Russia come from the former Soviet countries constituting the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS)³ (Arafiev & Sherengi, 2014). The promotion of Russian interests in the former territories of influence is of particular importance to the Russian Federation. The Ministry of Education establishes the priority list of applicants for state-funded scholarships to pursue higher education in Russia. Applicants from the CIS, the Baltic States, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia are at the top of that list (Ministry of Education and Science, 2015). The focus on educating students from the CIS, the Baltic States, and the two breakaway regions of Georgia is another illustration of the supremacy of the political rationale of a country whose President Vladimir Putin described the collapse of the USSR as ‘the greatest geopolitical catastrophe’ of the 20th century (BBC, 2005).

The popularity of Russian higher education differs by students’ country of origin and is clearly linked with the status of political relations between each of these countries with Russia. More than 70% of all mobile students from Kazakhstan and Belarus choose to study in Russia (Figure 5). Two biggest former Soviet senders of students to Russia - Kazakhstan and Belarus - have held this position since 2000. These two countries have been consistently sending more than 70% of all mobile students to Russian higher education institutions. Belarus and Kazakhstan have extremely close political and economic bonds with Russia. In 2014, these three countries established the Eurasian Customs Union that *The Economist* (2014) called ‘a political show rather than economically significant.’

² Chankseliani (2016) overviews existing sources to argue that although Western postcolonial studies have overlooked post-communism, the Russian empire and the Soviet Union that succeeded it can be viewed as comparable to other colonial empires (Carey & Raciborski, 2004; Ferro, 1997; Kappeler, 2001; Khalid, 2007; Kołodziejczyk & Şandru, 2012; Layton, 1994; Lazarus, 2012; Moore, 2006; Schimmelpenninck van der Oye, 2010). For example, Carey & Raciborski (2004) show that the Russo-Soviet policies were consistent with those of the European powers in terms of economic exploitation, limited or absent political rights, encouragement of colonial settlement, colonizer's denial of crimes against humanity, among others. Moore (2006) adds to these restrictions on travel, lack of convertible money, military occupation, and forced utilisation of the coloniser's language at educational institutions. The USSR allowed no free speech, assembly or opposition which made it worse than any other colonial empire except the Nazi one. Imposition of highly centralised rule brought immense economic disruptions to post-Soviet countries following their independence (Carey & Raciborski, 2004).

³ The Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) is a regional organization that was established during the breakup of the USSR. Nine out of the 15 former Soviet Republics are member states, and two are associate members (Ukraine and Turkmenistan). The Baltic States never joined and Georgia withdrew its membership in 2008.

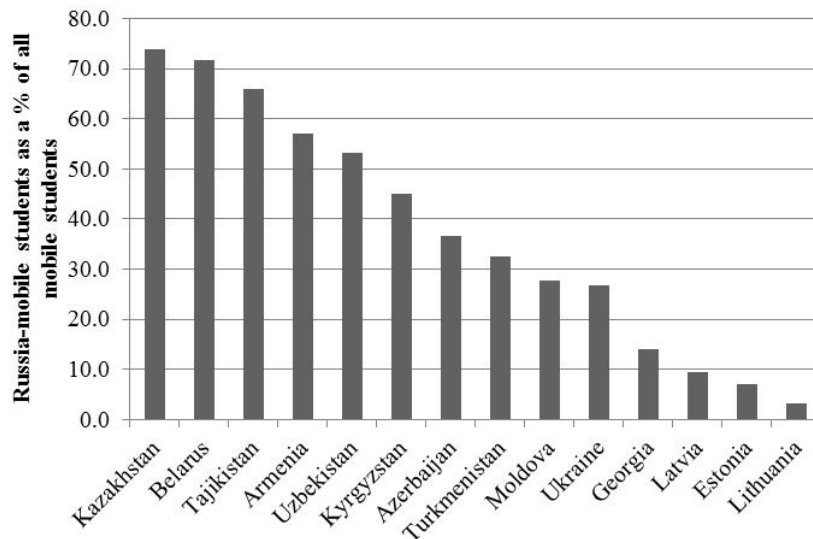


Figure 5 Russia-bound degree-mobile students as a share of all mobile students (%), by country of origin

Source: own analysis using UNESCO (2015a) data

Russian higher education is very popular amongst students from Central Asia (Figure 5). Russian universities have put in place rigorous mechanisms to recruit students from Central Asia, using educational fairs, providing generous scholarships, reserving quota places at Russian universities for students from selected countries, arranging admissions tests in source countries long in advance of local university entrance examinations, painting an attractive picture of the Russian labour market in contrast to graduate employment opportunities at home, and promising a more liberal lifestyle (Asia-Plus, 2012; Eurasianet, 2016; IWPR, 2012; Ministry of Education and Science, 2015).

Russia is the least popular destination in the Baltic States and Georgia, followed by Ukraine and Moldova (Figure 5). These countries have openly demonstrated their allegiance to the EU and the USA, and have had tense political relations with Russia (Cenusa, Emerson, Kovziridze, & Movchan, 2014; Dunn & Bobick, 2014; Way, 2015). Correlational analysis of the data sets on outbound student mobility and the democratic development reveals a very strong, negative, and statistically significant correlation between the proportion of degree mobile students from the former Soviet countries that are enrolled at Russian universities (as a % of all mobile students from each country) and these countries' (n=14) democratic development index ($r = -.64$, $p = .010$). As seen in Figure 6, the former Soviet countries currently sending larger proportions of degree mobile students to Russia tend to be at a much lower level of democratic development than those who have smaller proportions of students pursuing degrees at Russian universities.

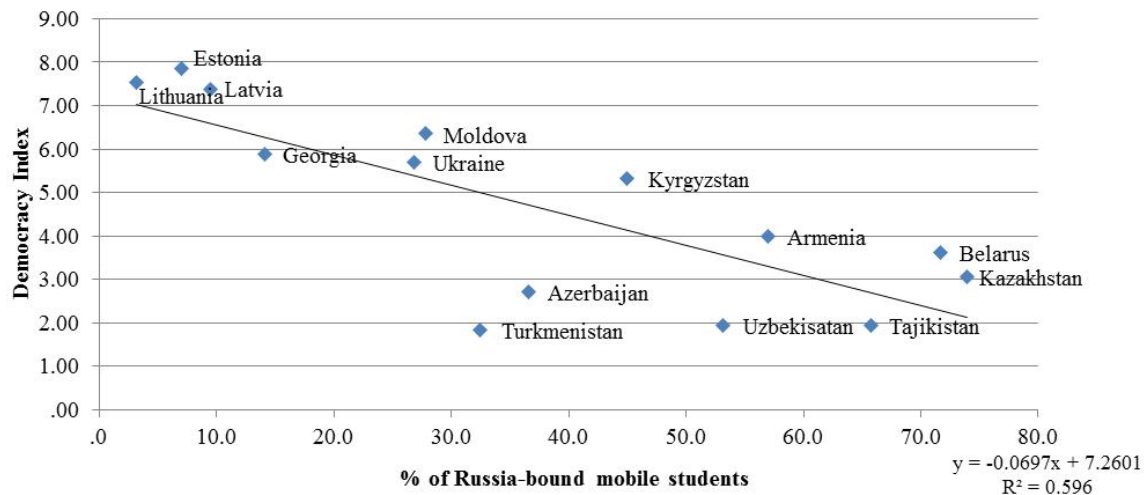


Figure 6. Correlation between Russia-bound mobility (as a share of all mobile students) and attained democracy, by country or origin

Source: own analysis using Economist Intelligence Unit (2015) and UNESCO (2015a)

Further, countries with lower levels of attained democracy have had larger proportions of post-independence political leaders (presidents and prime ministers) who have studied in Russia than those countries that have higher levels of attained democracy ($r = -.73, p = .003$).

Discussion of findings

A change of political culture is a complex process that is often determined by a variety of social, cultural, political, and economic factors. Estimating the possible association between student mobility and attained democracy in the former Soviet countries is a task that requires continued effort in a number of different directions, both empirically and conceptually. This paper has been inspired by the idea that 'it is better to deal imperfectly with what is important than to attain virtuoso skill in the treatment of what does not matter' (Baran, 1957, p. 22). Building on the existing scarce data and theorisation (Atkinson, 2010; Puryear, 1994; Spilimbergo, 2009), the paper examined possible links between student mobility and democratic transitions of their home countries, thus adding to the limited comparative and international education literature on the former Soviet countries (Chankseliani, 2017a). The idea that student mobility to Europe and the USA may be associated with the democratisation of less democratic countries in the European neighbourhood appears to be empirically verifiable at the macro level. At the same time, student mobility to Russia is linked with lower levels of democratic development of the former Soviet countries. Empirically, the directionality of the relationship is yet unclear. One interpretation is that countries with higher levels of attained democracy may have larger proportions of individuals who choose to study in Europe or the USA and may provide more extensive schemes to support such mobility; and countries with lower levels of attained democracy may have higher proportions of individuals who choose to study in Russia and may offer more extensive schemes to support such mobility. The converse explanation, and the one that this paper develops conceptually, is that studying in countries with high levels of attained democracy may be linked with the democratic socialization of individuals and the development of their civic consciousness; these may directly or indirectly influence different aspects of democracy that form part of the EIU measure used in this study: electoral process and pluralism, civil liberties, the functioning of government, political participation, and political culture. Based on the existing literature and theorization

on potential contributions that migrants can make to the democratic development of their home countries and domestic politics (Barsbai, Rapoport, Steinmayr, & Trebesch, 2016; Careja & Emmenegger, 2012; Lodigiani & Salomone, 2015; Pérez-Armendáriz & Crow, 2010), this final section discusses potential ways in which outbound student mobility can influence democratic transitions.

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, post-Soviet countries have faced simultaneous demands of political and economic transitions to move away from the socialist past. Education has been both a driver and a reflection of such transitions, playing a central role in the discussions of policy futures associated with democratisation, Europeanisation, and market-oriented globalisation. At the same time, national education systems and practices have retained substantial path dependence, with teachers continuing to teach and leaders continuing to lead the same way they used to do in the Soviet times (Chankseliani & Silova, forthcoming).

The development of civic consciousness is assumed to happen through socialization at educational institutions, with family/friends, and through mass media. Participatory experiences and engaged learning rather than acquiring specific knowledge may be most useful in developing civic consciousness (Benjamin-Alvarado, 2015; Cheung, Lee, Chan, Liu, & Leung, 2004; Ichilov, 2013; Shechtman, 1993). It would not, therefore, be unexpected that an authoritarian country like Russia that does not respect basic human rights and where the government has almost full control of mass media may not offer the best environment for developing democratic consciousness in students from former Soviet countries.

In the Humboldtian tradition, universities in democratic settings have a critical function in the formation and development of democratic societies. Universities can serve as key institutions for the transmission of democratic values and may be viewed as ‘core social institution[s] shaping democratic development’ (Plantan, 2002, p. 6). It has been argued that universities have the potential of creating environments for ‘learning that equips every human being to participate fully in a healthy democracy’ (IDEA, 2011) and that ‘in many countries, universities have incubated advanced participatory democratic forms’ (Marginson, 2018, p. 16). The development of democratic governance depends not only on the formation of institutions but also on the development of individuals’ understanding on how these institutions function (Atkinson, 2010). Therefore, such ‘apprenticeships in democracy’ may be transformative for those who come from less democratic settings as ‘the most powerful meaning of democracy is formed [...] in the details of everyday life’ (Apple & Beane, 1995, p. 103).

Mobile students represent a group of migrants. Civic consciousness develops differently for individuals when they become immigrants and depart from the familiar to the unknown; their immediate communities change. Relatedness, similarities, and sameness become pronounced. Immigrants need to learn about unfamiliar realities and adjust by creating and sometimes reinventing their identities. ‘Within conditions of disequilibrium in which student subjects manage their lives reflexively, fashioning their own changing identities’ (Marginson, 2014, p. 6), individuals may absorb novel knowledge and familiarize themselves with political practices which they can transmit to their home countries. Although the statistics on returnees to the former Soviet countries are not readily available, eight out of the fifteen countries operate government scholarship programmes and scholarship recipients are normally required to return home after completing their studies abroad (Todua, 2017). Migrant returnees as agents of democratic diffusion may import new political values, knowledge on the day-to-day functioning of democratic institutions, and

expectations on how governments and citizens operate in the contexts of democratic culture. To quote Jeffrey Puryear (1994), who demonstrates the extraordinary role played by foreign-educated individuals in Chile's shift from authoritarian to democratic rule, they may 'produce ideologies, bringing the broad world of ideas and critical attitude to bear on their surroundings' (p. 8). In his book *Thinking Politics*, Puryear (1994) refers to these individuals as intellectuals and argues that the majority were social scientists educated at the graduate level in the USA and Europe. Foreign-educated intellectuals, in the words of O'Donnell & Schmitter (1986) who Puryear cites, contributed to the 'resurrection of civil society' that preceded the democratic transition.

'There is nothing more difficult to execute, nor more dubious of success, nor more dangerous to administer than to introduce a new system of things: for he who introduces it has all those who profit from the old system as his enemies and he has only lukewarm allies in all those who might profit from the new system' (Machiavelli, 2005, p. 22). In the face of immense social, political and economic pressures, a number of Western-educated individuals such as Toomas Hendrik Ilves (Estonia), Mikheil Saakashvili (Georgia) and Valdas Adamkus (Lithuania) led democratic transitions in the region (Casimir Pulaski Foundation, 2015). While selected foreign-educated individuals have been leading transitions, many others supported them by working in the public service. In her recent paper published in this journal, Anne Campbell (2017) offers rich qualitative insights on how Georgian and Moldovan individuals who studied abroad give back to their countries. The study showed that alumni see their employment, mostly by serving in the government, as their contribution to their home countries socio-economic development.

Inbound student mobility has been broadly viewed as an important source of income and diversity on campus. This is a noticeable turn from the Cold War era when political interests used to be uppermost; since the mid-1990s, a gradual shift from political to economic rationale has been observed all over the world (Chankseliani, 2017b; Chankseliani & Hessel, 2016b; de Wit, Hunter, Howard, & Egron-Polak, 2015; Kreber, 2009; Luijten-Lub, Wende, & Huisman, 2005). In Russia, the political rationale remains paramount for explaining the country's extensive efforts of international student recruitment. Russia aspires to return to its former mission of exercising soft power through international educational expansion, especially in the former Soviet countries (Malinovskiy & Chankseliani, forthcoming). The Bologna Process and EHEA, it has been argued, is a similar soft power mechanism that European democracies use to 'export democratic values' (Marquand, 2018).

In this context, not only can European and American higher education internationalization support the development of competitiveness and the generation of more income and innovation (Suter & Jandl, 2008; Vught, 2009), it may also be linked with the democratic transitions of less/non-democratic societies by facilitating the potential transformation of civic consciousness of mobile students. Recognizing that democratic socialisation can be one imaginable outcome of studying abroad, future research will need to improve our knowledge on how student sojourners who come from less/non-democratic contexts rediscover, remake and reorganize the idea of political democracy while studying at universities abroad and how they utilise these new ideas after finishing their studies. Such research will advance our empirical and conceptual understanding of the democratic socialization potential of higher education.

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