

**Abstract**

Transnational academic mobility is considered the key element of the internationalization of higher education. One region that is often overlooked in such discussions is Central Eurasia. In this analysis, we propose that, unlike in other former Soviet republics, the internationalization of higher education in this region depends on a complex configuration of market forces, modernization, and ideology.

Juggling between Market, Modernization, and Ideology: Internationalization of Higher Education in Central Eurasia

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With a combined population of nearly 100 million (with over 60 percent under the age of twenty-five), the countries of Central Eurasia—Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan—provide a unique case for the internationalization of higher education (HE).

A Thorny Path

After breaking free from the Moscow-dominated Eastern Bloc in the early 1990s, these countries have approached their internationalization policies in different ways—some actively expanding university exchange programs with universities in the West (like Georgia and Kyrgyzstan), some expanding ties with Russian universities (such as Armenia and Tajikistan), and some halting such efforts altogether (like Turkmenistan).

Unlike the former Soviet Baltic republics of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, which joined the European Union in 2004 and integrated into its intraregional Bologna framework, the path toward integration with international educational systems has become thorny for the republics of South Caucasus and Central Asia. This process can be explained through a “triad” of market forces, modernization, and ideology.

Market Forces

As they look into strengthening ties and forming alliances with universities abroad to offer international exposure to their students and faculty, the new universities in the region are adopting development models similar to business institutions. Unlike conventional public universities, these institutions seek to improve their students’ hard, soft, and cross-cultural skills. For example, the TEAM University in Uzbekistan, founded by a group of local entrepreneurs in academic partnership with London South Bank University, promises to deliver practice-based, academically challenging, and socially relevant education. Another privately held institution, the Kazakh–British Technical University, founded in Almaty in collaboration with the University of London and the London School of Economics and Political Science, states that a world-class education makes its students competitive in the global markets, as reflected in their placements in multinational companies and the world’s top universities.

Another important push factor for encouraging links with prestigious universities abroad is to keep top talents at home and stop the brain drain. An example is Nazarbayev University and its partnerships with Cambridge University and the National University of Singapore. The national scholarship scheme, Bolashak, invests less in students going abroad and more in those studying at Nazarbayev University.

The region is witnessing a slow but steady growth of institutions, such as Alterbridge University and the European University in Georgia, seeking to position their countries as credible international knowledge economies and using the universities as a means of fulfilling nation-building objectives. What these universities have in common is an emerging strategy to prepare their students for future work in a fast-evolving, highly competitive international workplace. The focus on international higher education helps these universities to increase their value and economies of scale and bring in financial resources to support their future growth. Their recognition by local governments and among the population is an indication of a trend toward marketization of education in the region.

Normalizing?

Transparency and academic integrity are often taken for granted in the contexts of Western universities. These values are nurtured slowly, especially in the former Soviet countries. While corruption in higher education has many manifestations, in the Central Eurasian context it is often evidenced in the form of shady monetary transactions in exchange for academic benefits among some faculty, students, and administrators. Deeply rooted in the Soviet-style administrative malfunction, and coupled with a lack of financial resources to incentivize quality teaching and transparency, corruption continues its journey to the present day and is most prevalent in government-run universities.

What does corruption have to do with the internationalization of higher education? There is a growing realization among the region’s modernizers that decent faculty salaries or criminal charges against wrongdoers cannot alone discourage corruption, and that the problem should be addressed in new ways. One approach that governments appear to be taking is supporting the creation of foreign university branches. These are typically managed, or comanaged, by well-paid expatriates. Uzbekistan alone invited a dozen of universities to open satellite campuses, including the University of Westminster, Inha University,

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Webster University, Politecnico di Torino, Singapore Management University, and others. The long-term vision is to internalize the best practices related to academic integrity and transparency that these universities have in place, and use these lessons to eventually modernize the entire educational ecosystem. The internalization of best practices is further facilitated through regular faculty and student exchanges abroad. While some universities, such as the [Kazakh–American Free University](#), encourage open dialogue or take targeted action plans to eradicate corruption in higher education, the internalization approach taken by some governments—nurturing a culture of academic integrity—might be more effective in the long run.

Moving Along... Alone: Why Does Ukraine Matter?

Any discussion of a post-Soviet transformation, including in higher education, would be incomplete without a discussion of hegemony and ideology. Trade output aside, long after the demise of the Soviet Union, the Kremlin continues to wield its influence in the region by creating joint university campuses across Central Eurasia. Some examples include the [Russian–Tajik Slavonic University](#), the [Kyrgyz–Russian Slavic University](#), the [Russian–Armenian University](#), and the recently established branch of [MGIMO University](#) in Uzbekistan. Although these moves might technically represent [cases of internationalization](#), given that they are politically lubricated and aimed at cementing Russia’s political and ideological hegemony in the region, these projects will fall short of modernizing the region’s educational ecosystem or promoting international higher education.

In the context of the Russian aggression against Ukraine in 2022, and to a lesser, but not negligible extent, given the Belarus president’s [remarks](#) about the possible inclusion of Central Asian republics in the Russia–Belarus Union (i.e., a modern version of the USSR), the countries of the region will carefully weigh the long-term consequences of Russia-led “internationalization of education.” Partly understanding these dangers long before the 2022 invasion, and partly driven by the wider trends of democratization, pluralism, and market-led modernization, some governments are allowing the parallel establishment of Western-style institutions. What the examples of the [OSCE Academy in Bishkek](#), the [American University of Central Asia](#), the [Kazakh–American University](#), and the [Georgian–American University](#) signify is that the debates of internationalization in Central Eurasia cannot be detached from the recurring narratives of ideology and hegemony.

In sum, the future of international higher education in Central Eurasia appears to rest on a complex triad of influences—market forces, modernization, and ideology. Due to significant historical/political and socioeconomic similarities among Central Eurasian states, this three-fold proposition helps to understand the future directions of international higher education in the region. ▲