



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.

1. 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 et al., 2014; Chankseliani, 2016; Haupt et al., 2010; Kim, 2015; Kritz, 2013; Lee and Schoole, 2015; Perna et al., 2015; Welch and 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 and Verba, 1963; Diamond, 1992; Lipset, 1960) or as being largely actor-driven (Di Palma, 1990; O’Donnell and 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

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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 et al., 2014; Klein, 2016; Omelicheva, 2015; Ross, 2016) and increasing numbers of individuals from these countries choosing to study in Europe or the USA (Chankseliani and 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, 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 and Jandl, 2008; van 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 and Light, 2009; Tarrant et al., 2014)

and how university students may be encouraged to engage in cross-cultural dialogue and become more involved with global issues (Caruana, 2014; Lehtomäki et al., 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 and Hessel, 2016b). However, the diverse pathways of development that these countries chose led to different patterns of student mobility and democratic development.

2. 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. 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 is a continuous variable that 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

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

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