

Kerry Anne Longhurst

Collegium Civitas (Poland)

ORCID: 0000-0002-4710-2640

e-mail: Kerry.longhurst@civitas.edu.pl

Agnieszka Nitza-Makowska

Collegium Civitas (Poland)

ORCID: 0000-0002-1677-986X

e-mail: agnieszka.nitza@civitas.edu.pl

Katarzyna Skiert-Andrzejuk

Collegium Civitas (Poland)

ORCID: 0000-0003-4451-5092

e-mail: katarzyna.skiert@civitas.edu.pl

International Higher Education as Foreign Policy: Comparing the Strategies of the EU, China, and Russia Towards Central Asia

Abstract: The article sheds light on the nexus between higher education and foreign policy. International higher education has become an increasingly prominent element of some states' policies towards other countries as a flank to traditional foreign policy. It has occurred in Central Asia, where the European Union, China and Russia are all supporting teaching, research and capacity-building activities in the tertiary sectors of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. Although they employ similar tools and instruments, the assumptions and visions underpinning their respective strategies diverge. Russia's strategy is shaped by historically informed identity factors and the impulse to entrench predominance in the post-Soviet space, whilst China uses its support for higher education as a soft infrastructure for its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Meanwhile, the EU has integrated higher education into its strategy for the region, which aims at drawing Central Asia closer to its orbit through democratisation and the rule of law.

Keywords: *Central Asia, higher education, Russia, China, European Union, soft power*

Introduction

The past two decades have seen an expansion in ‘international higher education’ with states and organisations deploying higher education tools and activities as part of their broader foreign and development policies toward other countries and regions. Support for higher education often flanks the pursuit of ‘traditional’ foreign policy and strategic interests, such as energy, security and trade.

International higher education is defined as tertiary-level activities with teaching and learning, research, and capacity building carried out by one entity towards another country or region. At its most basic international higher education includes such activities as international staff and student exchanges between universities in different countries and collaborative international research projects. However, the scope and ambition of international higher education have vastly accelerated over the past twenty years or so to include, for example, large-scale capacity-building projects and research infrastructures, joint degree programmes, foreign sponsorship of Professorial Chairs and Fellowships, the setting-up of ‘branches’ of domestic universities in other countries, as well as the export of quality assurance standards and qualification frameworks aligned to those of the ‘producing’ entity.

This article will consider China, the European Union (EU)¹ and Russia as ‘producers’ of international higher education and Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan as ‘receivers’. Central Asia is generally characterised by states with poorly developed political and economic systems that are also vulnerable to externally provoked crises and environmental problems. Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan are useful objects of research for several reasons. First, they have different relative weights in the region owing to their diverging sizes. Second, they are composed of different ethnic groups. Third, they have different levels of economic development in terms of economic diversification, openness to regional and global economies, natural resources, and FDI levels. Levels of democracy also vary, as do the nature of their relations with the EU, Russia and China, which are, in part, determined by historical legacies which potentially shape the delivery and reception of higher education policies of the producing entities.

China, the EU, and Russia are significant ‘producers’ of international higher education in Central Asia and employ similar but unique methods, which reflect their historical roles in the region and their contemporary foreign policy interests. Chinese, Russian and EU international higher education strategies are fundamentally shaped, if not derivative of their respective internal characteristics. Both China and Russia are autocratic states with fully or partially centralised higher education sectors, which can arguably make it easier for governments to align their international higher education strategies with official foreign policy objectives. Meanwhile, though it is an international organisation made up of

¹ The article looks at the higher education policies of the EU as a single entity, rather than the policies of individual member states.

27 member states, each with its own individual higher education systems, at an aggregate level, the EU is itself a producer of international higher education. Like China and Russia, its footprint in Central Asia's higher education systems resembles its internal make-up.

Assumptions, Relevance, and Core Questions

This paper is grounded in three assumptions. First, international higher education carries *values and norms* of both an academic and political nature, which can be efficiently transmitted into the 'receiving' states' own academic institutions through cooperative academic schemes, joint degree programmes, collaborative research and so on. Second, international higher education can play a role in *state-building*, especially when the 'receiving' countries are developing or transitioning with relatively weak and under-resourced institutions and higher education systems. Third, international higher education can have a wider 'transformative influence' in that local intellectual conditions can be shaped and favourable perceptions of the 'producing' state are created.

The relevance of this paper derives from the fact that Central Asia has once again become a terrain of economic competition between external powers and that higher education is becoming a significant element and vehicle for China, Russia and the EU to consolidate their respective roles and interests. Furthermore, these three powers' international higher education strategies are tightly linked to and expressions of their domestic systems and core ideologies. Bearing this in mind, there is an evident need for dedicated research to explore this complex and evolving situation to plug knowledge gaps and generate relevant avenues of enquiry. This article's working hypothesis under scrutiny is that a 'normative clash' between the three external actors in the realm of international higher education is on the ascent in Central Asia. Accordingly, the article is a 'scoping' exercise aimed at mapping the research terrain of international higher education in relation to China, Russia and the EU towards three Central Asian states. Another part of this scoping exercise is to consider the nature of the linkages between international higher education and the foreign policies of the producing states towards the region.

International higher education is a relatively under-researched sphere, especially in foreign policy; thus, a limited amount of related literature exists. Moreover, little attention has been paid to comparisons of international higher education strategies and the prospect of competition amongst external actors in regions of strategic interest, such as Central Asia. Consequently, there is no readily available analytical framework to execute the type of research envisaged in this paper.

Understanding international higher education and its effects necessitates an approach based on a constructivist-informed logic, which amongst other assumptions, sees that ideas and norms, and not just material factors, constitute and shape international relations (Finnemore & Sikkink, 2001). By applying this logic to the current subject matter, it can be ascertained that by supporting courses or research projects in Central Asian universities,

China, Russia, and the EU are extending their power and strengthening their respective channels to shape and improve the image of their country amongst citizens and elites in the 'receiving state' and export their domestic values. Moreover, the expectation is that this will positively affect and buttress other foreign policy interests and lead to gains in key spheres such as energy, trade and defence cooperation.

Understanding international higher education can also be approached using the concept of 'soft power', as elaborated by Joseph S. Nye. The essence of soft power is attraction and the capacity of a state or entity to forge common interests and cooperation without recourse to coercive means. Put another way, using cultural diplomacy to deploy soft power can get other states and foreign societies to want what they want without using force or hard power (Nye, 1990). It is not surprising that nascent literature has emerged linking soft power with international higher education (Johnsen & Rieker, 2015). Whilst this provides a promising basis for the current article, it has limits given that soft power is synonymous with western liberal democratic states and the ways and means through which they try to spread norms via non-coercive means and power of attraction. In other words, autocratic states, such as Russia and China, are not usually regarded as endowed with soft power capacities. Nevertheless, since Nye has claimed that soft power is neither good nor bad, Russia and China's international higher education strategies towards other countries and regions might also be considered and researched through the prism of soft power. However, that would necessitate considerable conceptual adjustments.

This article focuses on three interrelated questions. First, what are the drivers and objectives behind the international higher education strategies of the three producing actors in Central Asia, and what tools do they employ in the region? Second, what can be said of the nature of the relationship between international higher education strategies and the traditional foreign policies of China, Russia and the EU? Third, are there any factors that might indicate the emergence of the 'normative collision'?

The International Higher Education Strategies of External Actors towards Central Asia

The European Union

The EU has been engaged in developing higher education in Central Asian states since 1994, firstly via its TEMPUS programme, which supported cooperation between EU and non-EU partner universities in the form of consortia to build human and institutional capacity. Thus, from the very outset, the EU aimed at making structural changes to the higher education landscape in Central Asia based on the export of European standards and norms.

EU assistance operates on multiple levels (i) the state – to contribute to regulatory frameworks for higher education (ii) the institutional level – to modernise and internationalise universities, not least to enable them to participate in EU programmes (iii) the individual

level – establishing mobility programmes for students and academics. A further operating level also transpired in the form of EU support for intra-regional cooperation among Central Asian universities and national higher education bodies (European Union, 2011). To this end, EU assistance supported ‘CAREN’ – a high-capacity data communication network for universities and scientists and the Central Asia Education Platform (CAEP), intended to be a forum to facilitate EU-Central Asia cooperation. The most far-reaching EU objective was the creation of a Central Asia Higher Education Area (CAHEA), the structure of which was to mirror and ultimately align with the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and the Bologna Process (the EU’s common framework for the harmonisation of qualifications, standards and quality in higher education). CAHEA seems to be a work in progress. Moreover, it is not easy to gauge how far the harmonisation and fine ‘tuning’ efforts made in the context of the TEMPUS project ‘TuCAHEA’ (a consortium of EU and five Central Asian universities) created concrete regional integration in the Central Asian tertiary sectors. Meanwhile, in 2010 Kazakhstan joined the Bologna Process and whilst Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan remain reform-adverse, they are compliant with some elements of the Bologna Process and remain engaged in TuCAHEA.

In the context of ERASMUS+ International credit mobility for students and staff, data from 2015–2019 show that 1095 Uzbeks went to the EU to study or conduct research, and 474 staff/students from the EU went to Uzbekistan. Figures for Kyrgyzstan show 651 outgoing and 261 incoming staff and students, and for Kazakhstan, 2815 outgoing and 1300 incoming. In the framework of ERASMUS MUNDUS, joint degree schemes, two Uzbek and one Kyrgyz University were associate partners, whilst one Kazakh University was a full ‘degree awarding’ partner and an associate in a further eight programmes. In ERASMUS+ Capacity Building for Higher Education schemes (the successor to TEMPUS), Uzbekistan was involved in 22 projects between 2015–19: Kyrgyzstan 18 and Kazakhstan 50. In the framework of Jean Monnet projects for teaching and learning about EU integration, two projects were awarded to universities in Uzbekistan and nine in Kazakhstan (European Commission, 2020). Central Asian universities also participated in the EU’s Horizon 2020 research framework, with eight Kazakh, eight Kyrgyz and 4 Uzbek Universities participating in projects led by EU universities (European Commission, 2019a).

China

China’s international higher education strategy toward Central Asia involves three elements: recruiting international students (to Chinese domestic universities), Confucius Institutes (CIs) and establishing regional academic networks (Yang, 2015).

Growth in the number of foreign students studying at Chinese universities is evident, with 492,185 international students from 196 countries pursuing their studies in China in 2018. Of this, 11,784 came from Kazakhstan, 6,500 from Uzbekistan and 4,600 from Kyrgyzstan (Ministry of Education of the PRC, 2018a). Interestingly, in 2017 the number

of students from the 71 Belt Road Initiative (BRI) countries accounted for 64.85% of all international students in China, representing an increase of 12% from 2016 (Ministry of Education of the PRC, 2018b). This growth might be explained by the launch of Chinese Government Scholarships and the improved reputation and internationalisation of China's tertiary sector, as confirmed by the Times' Higher Education Asia University Ranking of 2020. The ranking placed Tsinghua University in the first place, Peking University in second place and the University of Science and Technology of China in tenth place.

China's Confucius Institutes (CIs) are China's single most important and visible educational initiative directed abroad (Wojciuk et al., 2015). CIs are joint ventures with local universities to promote language learning and culture within the tertiary sector. Therefore, CIs require the consent of local university leaders. In 2018, out of 548 CIs operating in over 140 countries, there are 13 in Central Asia, with Kazakhstan host to five, Kyrgyzstan four and Uzbekistan two. Compared to the pushback apparent in some parts of the US and Europe, which led to some closures, CIs remain relatively uncontroversial in the three Central Asian states and do not appear to be a threat².

Alongside CIs, China-led bilateral and multilateral university networks in Central Asia have also expanded. A prominent example is the University Alliance of the Silk Road (UASR), established in 2015 and, according to the UASR website, has 20 member universities from Central Asia alongside over 150 universities from Asia and Europe, the U.S. and New Zealand. According to the UASR's founding document, the Xi'an Consensus of 2015, the Alliance's goals include joint training and cooperative education, fostering exchanges and mutual learning and supporting multitiered and cooperative research (Xi'an Consensus, 2015). Additionally, the Alliance of International Science Organization (ANSO) was inaugurated in 2018 to strengthen cooperation in science, technology and innovation between Belt and Road Initiative countries. Out of the 37 ANSO members, the National Academy of Sciences of the Republic of Kazakhstan joined the Organisation's Governing Board and higher education institutions from Kyrgyzstan (National Academy of Sciences) and Uzbekistan (Academy of Sciences) became founding members. Recently, ANSO played a bridging role by introducing the Chinese Academy of Sciences-developed COVID-19 vaccine to Uzbekistan's market and organised over 20 online workshops gathering scientists, pharmacists and government officials from, amongst others, China, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan (ANSO, 2021).

Russia

Russia's international higher education strategy is linked to the concept of the 'Russian World', a normative idea underpinning Russian foreign policy, especially across the post-

² Since 2018 several Centres have closed in the United States and in Europe where opposition arose claiming that they challenged academic freedoms and are extensions of the Chinese government (Jakhar, 2019).

Soviet space, to promote ‘Russianness’ and common civilisation amongst ethnic-Russian/Russian-speaking people. One tool through which the ‘Russian World’ objectives are channelled is the *Rossotrudnichestvo* (Federal Agency for CIS Affairs, Compatriots Living Abroad and International Humanitarian Cooperation), established in 2008 as an integral part of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Among its official aims, *Rossotrudnichestvo* seeks to further Russia’s international humanitarian cooperation and development assistance and promote an ‘objective’ image of Russia abroad. One of the most tangible links between the promotion of the Russian World and higher education is the Russian Centres for Science and Culture (RCSCs), which are in more than 60 countries worldwide, including one in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan and two in Kyrgyzstan.

Russia has also established branches of Russian universities in Central Asia. There are seven Russian branch campuses in Kazakhstan (St. Petersburg Humanitarian University of Trade Unions, Lomonosov Moscow State University, the University of Economics in Ust-Kamenogorsk, Chelyabinsk State University, Moscow Aviation Institute, the Academy of Labour and Social Relations and Tyumen State University of Oil and Gas), six in Kyrgyzstan (Moscow State Social University, International Slavonic Institute, Kazan National Research Technological University, Plekhanov Russian University of Economics and Moscow Institute of Entrepreneurship and Law), and four in Uzbekistan (Lomonosov Moscow State University, Gubkin Russian State University of Oil and Gas and Plekhanov Russian University of Economics) (Chankseliani, 2020).

The Russian international higher education strategy also involves the delivery of joint university courses or degrees, for example, between L.N. Gumilyov Eurasian National University in Nur-Sultan and Tomsk State University, All-Russian Research Institute of Plant Protection in St. Petersburg, and Bashkir State Pedagogical University in Ufa. By creating branch universities and joint academic programmes, Russian universities can extend Russian qualification frameworks, teaching techniques and institutional partnerships.

Russia’s involvement in higher education in Central Asia is also framed within the Commonwealth of Independent States’ (CIS) Network University of 38 universities. The CIS network university established joint educational programmes and diplomas and positioned itself as analogous to the EU’s Erasmus Mundus scheme. Student mobility between universities in the network is funded, in part, by scholarships from *Rossotrudnichestvo*.

Russia remains the main overseas study destination for Central Asian students. According to UNESCO, over 243,752 foreign students studied in Russia, over a third of which came from Central Asia: 69,895 from Kazakhstan, 19,893 from Uzbekistan and 5,700 from Kyrgyzstan (UNESCO, 2019).

Comparing Strategies in International Higher Education

Upon first inspection Chinese, Russian, and EU Higher Education strategies towards Central Asia might seem comparable; each ‘producer’ facilitates and funds student mobility,

institutional partnerships, technical assistance, and invests in physical and intellectual education infrastructures. The EU, China, and Russia incorporate network-building within their international higher education strategies and have created consortia of universities between their own institutions and those in Central Asia. There is also arguably some mimicry going on. Both Russian and Chinese strategies exhibit similarities with the EU's long-standing Erasmus+ formula. In fact, in the context of developing its higher education networks across the CIS and Eurasian Economic Union, the EU's Erasmus Mundus scheme is explicitly referred to as a model (Eurasian Economic Commission, 2021).

All three producers are also engaged in recruiting students from Central Asia. In the cases of China and Russia, this is straightforward and involves recruiting students from Central Asia to study full-time in Chinese and Russian universities. In contrast, from the side of the EU (at the aggregate level, as opposed to individual member states), it is about short-term mobility and exchange opportunities for students. Finally, each producer uses higher education support as a vehicle to foster understanding and a positive appreciation of their respective political systems and values, whether that be via the promotion of language learning and culture as in the cases of Russia and China, or EU-funded Jean Monnet activities to encourage capacity building in EU studies.

Such comparisons aside, crucial differences concerning the norms, goals and fundamental approaches are apparent in China, the EU, and Russia's international higher education strategies. The ultimate consequences of these differences and the possibility of a 'normative collision' are not yet visible, but as noted at the start of this article, it can be hypothesised that the higher education landscape in Central Asia could become a competitive space for influence amongst the external actors. Whilst on-the-ground research is needed to gauge the extent and nature of this collision, the following observations regarding diverging strategies can already be made.

The EU's higher education strategy towards Central Asia is characterised by a region-building approach and encouraging local actors to pool their sovereignty by adopting EU-style common rules and harmonising national norms into supranational ones. EU actions towards Central Asia are ultimately about recasting the higher education landscape into a mirror image of the EU's own transnational higher education area. A further defining feature, which sets the EU apart significantly, is how initiatives have, over time, come to resemble partnerships, as opposed to a 'mother ship' approach, which tends to characterise China and Russia's approaches. Confirming this is the fact that within ERASMUS+ and EU research programmes, Central Asian universities can increasingly participate in ways more or less on a par with EU universities. Another point is that exchange and mobility between the three Central Asian states and EU universities are conceived and practised as a two-way street, with the mobility of students and university staff flowing in both directions. Finally, as a result of it being an International Organisation as opposed to a unitary state, EU higher education actions are 'facilitating' since it is up to individual universities and academics to respond to opportunities and apply for funding, normally in the form of consortia. It

suggests that the EU's normative agenda is also characterised by a 'diffused' method and not the more centrally driven *modus operandi* of China and Russia.

Pinpointing the normative underpinnings of China's international higher education strategy is not as straightforward as might be assumed. Similar to the EU and Russia China's strategies aim to anchor states close to its economic and political sphere to create interdependencies, connectedness and a positive appreciation of domestic culture. Expanding China's international higher education strategies is an integral part of the government's objective to promote China as a soft power to rival 'traditional' western soft powers.

China's higher education strategies reflect the Chinese state's autocratic and highly centralised nature. Government authorities define the parameters and the schemes that universities employ when collaborating with overseas universities. Moreover, authorities, rather than universities, provide and determine where, when, and to whom grants and fellowships are given. Second, Chinese international higher education strategies are embedded within and express China's rise as a global player and the drive to extend its global presence and economic interests. It is evidenced in Beijing's use of the Belt and Road Initiative as a channel to extend higher education cooperation with overseas partners. Third, China's strategy is led by norms to do with international image and the desire to be perceived as a credible counterpoint and pole of attraction for academic and scientific quality. Such norms have been pursued by raising levels of investment in Chinese universities to heighten standards of research and scientific excellence, which international markers have verified.

Russia attempts to use regional bodies, such as the Eurasian Economic Union, as frameworks for creating a Russia-led common higher education area. Parallels with China can be found in how Russia's international higher education policies are part of Moscow's attempts to shore up Russian soft power in the face of western influence in the post-Soviet area. Attracting Central Asian students to study in Russia following a double degree programme with a Russian university or pursuing language and culture studies at Russian cultural centres in the region presents opportunities for channelling influence. Moscow has a strong foothold since it remains the main destination for those students from Central Asia who opt to study abroad, as already noted. Russian remains the language of diplomacy, high culture and business across the post-Soviet area. Thus, by studying in Russia or the Russian language, young people are likely to gain a positive disposition towards Russia and pursue careers within sectors aligned to the Russian world.

Crucially, the chief normative underpinnings of Russia's international higher education strategies towards Central Asia are derivative of identity factors. It is overtly expressed in how Russian (public) universities form transnational networks and directly transmit national academic norms and practices to other countries on a 'top-down' model. But perhaps the most salient aspect of Russia's approach, which is markedly different to that of both China and the EU, is its reliance on the notion of 'historical community' amongst Russian and Russian speakers to bolster compatriotism.

Proximity to Wider Foreign Policy Interests

Central Asia constitutes Russia and China's direct neighbourhood; consequently, cultural, ethnic and linguistic ties continue to shape contemporary relations. Moreover, Central Asia's trade and energy importance is far weightier for China and Russia than for the EU. Crucially, from a foreign policy perspective, China's 'rise' and Russia's regional hegemony directly depend on their successes in Central Asia, which is not the case with the EU.

In relation to China, the link between its international higher education strategies and foreign policy interests is palpable, with BRI providing a global physical infrastructure, as noted above. China's support for higher education aims to buttress its economic investments, particularly dense in Central Asia. It works by building up a 'soft infrastructure' of 'human' connectivity incorporating institutions, well-disposed elites and an amenable workforce to help reinforce BRI's embeddedness (Peters, 2020). The purposeful coupling of higher education to foreign policy is also evident in how it forms part of Beijing's drive to promote China's reputation and attractiveness as a soft power, as noted earlier.

Russia's international higher education strategies toward Central Asia are also tightly linked to its foreign policies. Support for higher education is a means to create amenable human and intellectual infrastructures, which, in turn, aim to sustain a cadre of local pro-Russia elites capable of facilitating Russian political and economic interests in the region. In turn, this serves a higher strategic interest, assuring Russian hegemony and power structures in the post-Soviet space. Similarly to China, higher education support is integral to Russia's soft power ambitions.

The EU's higher education approach to Central Asia is also proximate to its foreign policy interests, despite the distances involved. Like its counterparts, the EU uses higher education activities to mould local contexts, rendering them compatible and open to European initiatives. The 2019 strategy 'The European Union – Central Asia: New Opportunities for a Stronger Partnership' shows how higher education is organically coupled with traditional foreign policy interests (European Commission, 2019b). The strategy envisages an intensification of EU engagement in the region, including actions in higher education, as part of resilience building, prosperity and connectivity, alongside trade and energy. The EU's approach also foresees support for higher education as part of a transformative agenda to promote the rule of law, human rights, democracy, and liberal market economic reforms in Central Asia.

On the question of whether the international higher education strategies of China, Russia and the EU are linked to their respective foreign policy interests, the answer is affirmative. It is probably more accurate to say that their higher education strategies are increasingly *integral* elements of their respective foreign policies towards Central Asia and explicitly serve ideological, political and economic interests. Each external actor is cognisant that education carries values and that building intellectual and physical infrastructures, as well as offering exchanges and scholarships, improves the chances of creating a 'favourable' image and an openness to investment and cooperation.

Conclusions and Considerations

International higher education is an important yet relatively under-researched field. Thus, the research terrain has yet to be properly mapped. The dearth of comparative studies is particularly noteworthy, and as this article has demonstrated, it is a relevant research field of academic and policy relevance.

The discussion and preliminary findings presented in this article suggest that the significance of China, Russia and the EU's engagement in higher education in Central Asia is likely to grow, at the very least, as a flanking element of competition over energy, trade, and political influence. The likelihood of a collision, normative or otherwise, has been reinforced by Russia's intervention in Kazakhstan in January 2022 and the current war in Ukraine. Above all else, Russian action demonstrates that the Kremlin intends to retain a firm grip on its traditional sphere of influence.

The article showed that whilst the three actors might have similar approaches, their strategies' underlying norms and visions differ. It enhances the potential for a normative collision, with each actor actively seeking to gain a foothold for influence in the region. Russia stresses historical, ethnic, and cultural-linguistic closeness to reify its position. China sees its role as a player able and willing to offer a considerable economic cushion without expectations of internal regime change. Meanwhile, though an outlier geographically, the EU invests heavily and wants westwards-leaning reforms in the region. The interim findings strongly suggest that these three distinct approaches, the norms that underpin them and the prescriptions for change/non-change that they imply for Central Asia are not at all compatible.

This article posits that the effects and outcomes of a normative collision have yet to become fully visible. Fieldwork in Central Asia will be needed to pinpoint the emerging manifestations and consequences of the proposed collision, chiefly by eliciting the views and perspectives of the intended key users and beneficiaries of Chinese, Russian and EU policies, namely students and academics in Central Asia. Research is also needed to capture the extent and nature of the linkages between academic collaboration and subsequent instances of enhanced economic cooperation, trade or other forms of sectoral collaboration. For example, is there any detectable spill-over from academic exchanges and common research projects into enhanced trade deals? What are students' motivations regarding whether to study in Russia or China or to take advantage of EU mobility opportunities, and whether the positive appreciation of the 'producer' necessarily follows from this experience? Are universities opting to follow EU, Russian or Chinese qualification and quality assurance frameworks, or are they combining all three?

The extent to which China, Russia and the EU prevail is, of course, determined by conditions and reception on the ground, how convincing and attractive the 'offers' are relative to the others and how far external interventions align with the interests of local elites. Central Asia is far from homogeneous, and Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan each have their

own histories and relationships with the EU, Russia and China. Moreover, Kazakhstan is richer, more open, and a regional power. All three Central Asian states are members of BRI, though only Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan are members of the Eurasian Economic Union. Meanwhile, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan are on the cusp of signing enhanced partnerships with the EU (which Kazakhstan already has). It means that a future research agenda must take complete account of the domestic conditions in each receiving state and create variables that allow such factors to be analysed.

As this article has shown, there is already sufficient evidence to confirm the robustness of the assumptions laid out at the start of this paper. Namely, the international higher education strategies of external actors towards other countries can be efficient channels for transferring norms and values and producing states can contribute to state-building and the creation of favourable local and regional contexts. In addition, the discussion strongly suggests that higher education has been sewn into the fabric of foreign policy and is well-aligned to the traditional trade, energy and security interests of China, Russia and the EU. Such claims do, however, need further research to establish with more precision the effects on the ground and the extent to which China, Russia and the EU are having modifying effects on local higher education environments, job markets and so on.

Central Asia is a region where Chinese, Russian/Soviet and European powers have historically clashed. Old and new factors characterise today's incarnation of this competition. International higher education strategies deployed by China, Russia and the EU are relatively new and novel elements in this context. However, at the same time, their objectives are intimately tied to 'traditional' foreign policies to exert influence and maximise interests.

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