

Chapter 11

International Student Recruitment in Russia: Heavy-handed Approach and Soft-Power Comeback

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Abstract

This chapter examines how the Russian federal government has been driving international student recruitment with attempts of forced modernisation of higher education and promotion of soft power interests. We provide an overview of Soviet policies related to international student mobility, scrutinize pendular and multi-rational educational transformations that have been taking place since the 1990s, and reflect on the implications for the future. We explain the rationales of higher education internationalisation in contemporary Russia and show that the government's reforms have been focused on the political rationale inherited from the Soviet times combined with the heavy-handed modernisation policy to fit in the context of global competition. This curious combination encourages higher education institutions to fixate on meeting government-led performance indicators, preserving the current structure of student mobility concentrated in a few institutions, and creating constraints for the development of academic excellence in Russian higher education.

Introduction

Immediately after the downing of a Russian warplane near the Syria-Turkey border on November 24, 2015, Russian officials proposed a reduction in the quota for international students from Turkey and recalled Russian participants of student exchange programmes in Turkey (Interfax, 2015). This decision, which was revisited as the relations between the two countries improved, may have its origins in the Soviet-style tradition of politicizing student mobility and using it as a tool to respond to or prevent actions of political foes and allies.

For most of the 20th century, Russia was part of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), a country that sent very few students abroad and up to the late 1960s received international students primarily from other socialist countries (Barnett & Wu, 1995). The USSR became a major global destination for international students from the late 1960s. The Russian Federation, the successor of the USSR, is among the top six biggest recipients of international students globally, hosting about 226,431 international students in 2015. The five countries ahead of the Russian Federation are the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, France, and Germany. In comparison, China is the seventh most popular destination in the world, hosting 123,127 students in 2015 (UNESCO, 2015).

In many Western countries, international student mobility is viewed as an important source of income and diversity on campus. This is a noticeable turn from the Cold War era when political

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interests used to have priority; since the mid-1990s, a gradual shift from political to economic rationale has been observed across countries all over the world (Chankseliani, 2017; Chankseliani & Hessel, 2016; de Wit, Hunter, Howard, & Egron-Polak, 2015; Kreber, 2009; Luijten-Lub, Wende, & Huisman, 2005). Russia and China do not seem to directly follow this global trend. This chapter shows that the political rationale remains prominent for explaining Russia's heavy-handed, centralized approach to expanding international student recruitment. Russia aspires to return to its former mission of exercising soft power through international educational expansion alongside other projects for strengthening its global positioning, such as hosting The Olympic Games or international sports championships. China has similar aspirations. China is trying to enhance the quality of education and to attract more international students by establishing world-class universities (Yang & Welch, 2011); simultaneously, it is strategically spreading Chinese language and promoting China's model to the world (Yang, 2010).

The Russian Federation, as a post-communist country entering a new global environment, embraced education reform policies designed to fit into a changing global context while maintaining steady legacies and state-centred governance. The rationales for the government-driven process of higher education (HE) internationalisation, where higher education institutions (HEIs) exercise limited agency, are incoherent and often contradictory. One thing is certain – the government aims at demonstrating immediate results of the state-driven policies rather than approaching HE internationalisation as a gradual process through the institutional development of HEIs and in the context of achieving academic excellence. In this chapter, we trace the evolution of continuity and change in the patterns of international student recruitment in Russia and try to use China as a reference case to discuss some features of the complex process of internationalisation.

Different conceptual lenses may be adopted when looking at international student mobility: state-centred, student-centred, and/or institution-centred. The existing literature has primarily focused on the micro aspects of individual decision-making rather than on the wider political, socio-economic, institutional, and cultural contexts that may be associated with such decisions (Findlay, 2011; Van Mol & Timmerman, 2013). Immigration is a natural consequence of broader social, political, and economic processes across international borders (Massey, 2003) (Massey, 2003) and these macro processes can serve as the push or pull factors for large numbers of young people to migrate. Empirical findings from two recent surveys on higher education (HE) internationalisation - one by the International Association of Universities and the other by the European Association for International Education - demonstrate that HE leaders and practitioners globally recognise international student mobility as a key focus in institutional internationalisation policies and consider national policies as core external drivers of institutional policy on internationalisation (de Wit et al., 2015). This chapter takes a state-centred approach to examine the case of Russia.

Inviting the reader to ponder the question of whether international student recruitment is becoming more a matter of foreign policy or for that matter economic policy rather than education policy in Russia, we analyse the origins as well as selected mechanisms of HE internationalisation. We use the construct of soft power, the term first introduced and further developed by Joseph Nye (1990), who described soft power as a means of seduction which rested on the ability to shape the preferences of others through co-optation rather than threats or force. We dedicate a separate section to the examination of the links between the Soviet and contemporary practices of the government's heavy-handed approach to international student recruitment. This is followed by an analysis of some recent state-led initiatives aimed at increasing the global competitiveness and attractiveness of selected Russian universities. We argue that the top-down enforcement of HE internationalisation under the name of modernisation reproduces Soviet legacy, reduces institutional incentives to engage in competition for achieving genuine excellence, and leads to the structural rigidity of inbound flows.

Why do international students choose to study in Russia?

Five different factors may explain why international students choose to study in Russia: the relative quality of HE, availability of state-funded scholarships, the low cost of education and living expenses, languages of instruction, and colonial and diaspora linkages. University rankings are becoming increasingly important globally and determine student choices of HEIs (Hazelkorn, 2008). Thirteen Russian universities are on the list of the top 800 in the Times Higher Education ranking (THE, 2015b).

Living costs in Russia are not very high. According to the calculations issued by FAIRFX currency exchange in 2015, Russia is the second cheapest (after India) among those countries that have a top 200 THE university. The average annual cost of tuition and living is approximately £4,450 for a UK student (THE, 2015a). Furthermore, the Russian government funds scholarships for international students. There are 15,000 students funded by the federal government annually (Government of RF, 2017).

Languages of instruction (Russian and English) are another significant factor for Russia being an attractive global destination for tertiary students, in particular, those originating from post-Soviet countries.

Russia is the most popular destination country in the post-Soviet context. Russia's central position in the region may stem from its political and economic role in the Russian empire and the USSR (Chankseliani, 2016). Relational ties stemming from durable colonial linkages are important when it comes to understanding international student mobility (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 dependent nations (Kell & Vogl, 2008). Although post-communism has been overlooked in Western postcolonial studies (Kołodziejczyk & Şandru, 2012; Moore, 2006), literature has recognised the Russian empire and the USSR that succeeded it as comparable to other European colonial empires.³ 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 selected individuals in the colonial capital to develop human resources that would serve the colony in the future (Chankseliani, 2016).

As for the diaspora linkages, there is a new wave of students who are descendants of emigrants from the USSR and the Russian Federation to Israel, Germany, Canada, Australia, and the United States. Many ethnically Russian students from the Baltic countries, Ukraine, and Central Asia choose to study in the Russian Federation (Arefiev & Sheregi, 2014). Migration literature talks about the 'family and friends' effect of immigrant concentration in certain areas that helps to channel and incorporate new arrivals to the same area; networks expand and self-perpetuate, supporting and sustaining additional movement of people, according to the theories of cumulative causation and social capital (Massey, 2003). The diaspora effect has been recognised as one of the central effects that may outweigh the importance of colonial links when it comes to student mobility as it can translate into 40 percent to 55 percent lower living costs for international students (Beine, Noël, & Ragot, 2014).

The analysis below shows how the federal government is using a heavy-handed approach in recruiting international students through Rossotrudnichestvo and implementing HE excellence initiatives in order to promote five aspects of the attractiveness of the Russian HE sector, and thus expand the Russian soft power.

³ See, e.g., Ferro (1997); Kappeler (2001); Carey and Raciborski (2004); Moore (2006); Khalid (2007); Lazarus (2012)

The supremacy of the political rationale behind HE internationalisation: the origins

Higher education internationalisation is driven by four categories of rationales: political, economic, academic, and socio-cultural (Chankseliani, 2017; Chankseliani & Hessel, 2016; de Wit et al., 2015; Knight, 2012; Knight & de Wit, 1995). The four rationales adopt different shapes and meanings in different global contexts when applied to the domain of international student mobility. Nation-states and/or HEIs may view international students as cash cows (financial rationale), a potential labour force (economic rationale), contributors to the local economy as consumers (economic), ambassadors for the recipient country (political and socio-cultural rationales), contributors to the recipient country's innovation capacity (economic), and contributors to the improvement of educational and research experiences of local students and academics translating into global university ranking positions (academic rationale). This section argues that international student recruitment in Russia had been largely driven by the political rationale.

The politicization of Russian HE dates back to the Cold War years when intra-bloc education programmes became remarkably important. The main targets were the emerging communist regimes in Central and Eastern Europe, where HE was 'made subservient to the political and economic interests of the State [...]. Universities were among the chosen and most prestigious instruments for transforming human minds' (Kallen, 1991, p. 17). Communist bloc countries went through demanding selection procedures to ensure that the young people sent to the USSR were committed to communism. This meant that applicants' class background and political track record were weighed as much as their academic performance (Tromly, 2014). The first cohorts of European students were commonly experienced in party service and were on average older than their peers in the USSR, thus promising a degree of ideological maturity. Citizens of other capitalist countries were similarly members of their national communist parties.

As the anti-colonial voices and movements spread across Africa, Asia, and Latin America in the 1950s and 1960s, the USSR saw these new political developments as an opportunity to extend its activity from Eastern Europe to developing countries. The foundation of Patrice Lumumba University in 1961 was a milestone in this respect (Wilson, 2015). The university was established as the People's Friendship University in 1960 and was named after the Congolese independence leader Patrice Lumumba in the subsequent year. The selection of students was conducted via the embassies and consulates of the USSR in collaboration with foreign governments. To ensure the smooth implementation of politically sensitive tasks, the Soviet government granted the university some financial exemptions and the status of a 'superior institution.' The university was made directly accountable to the central authorities.

Education became an essential element of neo-colonial relations because of the expansion of market and trading mechanisms and technology transfer, particularly for countries undergoing industrialisation (Morales, 1992). The prevalence of students from Asia, Africa, Latin America, and Eastern Europe was conditioned by their close economic cooperation with the USSR and the extensive use of Soviet machinery and equipment that required sufficiently trained national cadres.

Recognising the important role higher education played in the development of political and diplomatic elites, since the early 1970s, the Soviet machine for international student recruitment expanded its pool of targeted countries. International students in the USSR used to be treated as honourable representatives of their nations, enjoyed priority service at university medical clinics, attended international student buffets, and had privileged access to sanatoria and resorts during their holidays (Tromly, 2014). The Head of the Palestinian National Authority Mahmoud Abbas, President of Angola Jose Eduardo dos Santos, the President of Romania Ion Iliescu, the President of Mongolia Natsagiin Bagabandi, the President of Honduras Porfirio Lobo are all alumni of the Soviet or post-Soviet higher education systems.

International students were considered advocates of the communist ideology, promoters of the Soviet model of HE, and key people to spread the word about the mighty Union of Soviet Socialist Republics across the globe. International student mobility was a tool of the ideological

and political struggle to implement Lenin's plan for the Communist conquest of the world through the global revolution.

Global sovietization, i.e. an aspiration to set 'Sovietism in education' globally (Kuraev, 2014), was spreading as a contradistinction project to the dominant Western model of HE and was supposed to develop into the leading and the only existing academic model in the world. The USSR supported developing countries in adopting the Soviet model. Western humanistic values and focus on the individual were replaced in the Soviet HE model with a pragmatist approach to meeting the immediate needs of the state and treating students purely as human resources (Kuraev, 2014).

China adopted the Soviet HE system in the 1950s (Bernstein & Li, 2010). The First National Conference on Higher Education (1950) declared specialisation, unification, and centralisation at the core of the education reform (Pepper, 1996). During the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), the Chinese education system became even more politicised securing the strong role of the political rationale in Chinese HE internationalisation (Wang, 2014).

Similar to China at least until the Open Door Policy of 1978-84, international student recruitment within the Soviet bloc used to be neither open nor competitive. The USSR Ministry of Higher Education was responsible for all aspects of international academic cooperation. HEIs were not allowed to conduct international communication independently with all applications from abroad being streamed to the USSR's International Department of the Ministry of Higher Education. The applicant files were then sent to relevant HEIs (Voilenko, 1978). International students were considered as agents of Sovietization and were treated with special respect and enjoyed wider benefits than local students (see Tromly, 2014).

The state-driven policies of international student recruitment served the expansionist intentions of the USSR that viewed the inbound mobility as a critical instrument for gaining superiority over its Cold War enemies. The political rationale seems to be alive and well to date, serving as a key driver for Russian HE internationalisation. The next section examines some of the features of the Soviet system that have been revived at the structural and discursive levels in contemporary Russia.

Soft power discourse: Linking the present with the past

The 2002 Concept Paper on Training of Personnel for Foreign Countries identifies international student recruitment as an important part of the Russian foreign economic policy with a special focus on attracting students from the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS)⁴ (Government of RF, 2002). The concept paper emphasises the increasing role of education in the new knowledge economy, the processes of global integration and HE internationalisation, and the need for the rapid improvement of global competitiveness of Russian universities. In addition, the concept paper stresses the importance of expanding the export of Russian HE in order to attract additional financial resources for the development of the national education system (Government of RF, 2002). Ten years later, the economic interests related to the successful operation of Russian HEIs in the global market, described in the Concept Paper, were replaced by rhetoric on public diplomacy that reproduces rationales for geopolitical positioning predominant in the Soviet times.

The concept of soft power overlaps with the notion of public diplomacy, which is a readily accessible term in Russian, and is regularly invoked by members of the Kremlin elite, including the President. Vladimir Putin, previously concise on the topic, addressed Russia's soft power ambition in a 2012 election campaign article in *Moskovskie Novosti*, describing the Kremlin's

⁴ This is a regional organisation 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.

nanced endorsement of the politicisation of HE internationalisation (Wilson, 2015). The doctrine of soft power is formulated in *The Foreign Policy Programme of the Government of the Russian Federation* (2014) and is also set out in formal decrees. Government initiatives designed to support the soft power interests of the Russian Federation have been placed under the supervision of a restructured Rossotrudnichestvo, the Federal Agency for the Affairs of the Commonwealth of Independent States, Compatriots Living Abroad, and International Humanitarian Cooperation. The latter was founded in 2008 as the central authority in Russian public diplomacy. Among the so-called May decrees which established Putin's long-term agenda in 2012 on the first day of his presidency, there was *The Decree on the Implementation of the Russian Federation's Foreign Policy* (Presidential Decree, 2012b). The latter expanded the role of Rossotrudnichestvo to become the main driver of Russian soft power. According to popular media discourse, Rossotrudnichestvo was to transform into an organisation similar to the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) that was expelled from Russia in 2012 (Chernenko, 2013).

Russian policies regarding international student recruitment resemble those of China in that both aim to expand the host country's international political influence and to promote their HE model globally (Gil, 2009; Pan, 2013). Both China and Russia prioritise the popularisation of their language and cultural studies internationally and use a centralized organisational body for this purpose. China established a network of Confucius Institutes, and their affiliates, Confucius Classrooms, subordinated to the Ministry of Education. In the case of Russia, language, cultural and education promotion is driven by Russian Centres of Science and Culture (RCSC). These are external offices of Rossotrudnichestvo, under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Rossotrudnichestvo is in charge of recruiting students to study in the Russian Federation at a public expense within a pre-determined quota. International students need to apply to Rossotrudnichestvo's local office or their local Russian Embassy. After completing required tests in selected subjects, successful applicants are asked to list six Russian universities in their order of preference. Russian HEIs need to provide to the Ministry of Education the number of seats they keep open for international students. Following the approval of HEI international enrolment quotas by the government, HEIs are sent the documents of international applicants. If the first priority university refuses to accept the applicant, the application is forwarded to the next university on the applicant's list. The process continues until applicants are allocated to universities. This is quite similar to the process of international admissions that operated in the Soviet Union, where the Division for International Affairs of the Communist Party Central Committee dictated how many students from different countries of origin would have been recruited. The process was administered via Soviet embassies and Soviet Cultural Centres abroad.

The number of Russian-government-funded international students is increasing annually. The higher the numbers, the more extensive can be the impact that Russian-educated graduates may have in terms of public diplomacy. In 2013, the Ministry of Education and Science raised the annual quota for federal scholarships for international students from 10,000 to 15,000 annually. In April 2015, Rossotrudnichestvo requested that the government increase the number of federal scholarships to 20,000 (Kiseleva & Chernykh, 2015).

The ambition is not only to increase the number of international students financed by the federal government but also to expand the geography of international student recruitment to Asia, Africa, and the Middle East in order to 'improve the efficiency of Russia's soft power'. Rossotrudnichestvo sees the education of international students in the Russian Federation as a process of 'formation of the pro-Russian national elites' who will 'promote Russian interests, including long-term ones' in their home countries (Kiseleva & Chernykh, 2015).

The absolute majority of international students in Russia come from the CIS countries (Arafiev & Sherengi, 2014). The promotion of Russian interests is of particular importance in the former territories of influence and Russia would not like to lose influence in post-Soviet Eurasia. Russia's President Vladimir Putin described the collapse of the USSR as 'the greatest geopolitical

catastrophe' of the 20th century (BBC, 2005). The Ministry of Education establishes the priority list of applicants for state-funded scholarships to pursue HE in Russia and applicants from the CIS, the Baltic States, Abkhazia and South Ossetia are at the top of that list (Ministry of Education and Science, 2015a). The focus on educating students from the CIS, the Baltic States, and the breakaway regions of Georgia is another illustration of the significance of the political rationale in post-Soviet Russia.

Unlike Russia, China focuses on spreading its influence more widely and on creating multiple linkages, launching exchange programmes and entering cooperation agreements in the region and globally. There are a variety of targeted scholarships to attract students from the United States (US), the European Union (EU), Southeast Asia, and the Pacific islands (Study in China, 2016). The US is expected to become the main source of international students to China following a bilateral agreement between the two countries and due to the strong interest in China that exists in the US (Wilson, 2015). Chinese inbound mobility programmes are operated at the national level by the China Scholarship Council (CSC), a non-profit institution affiliated with the Ministry of Education.

Notwithstanding obvious differences, Jeanne Wilson (2015) explains the similarities between China and Russia:

The Kremlin and Beijing share a convergent approach to soft power in several fundamental aspects that reflect their joint status as authoritarian regimes with a Marxist-Leninist heritage. In the first instance, both leaderships share the assumption that the state plays the dominant role in developing a soft power programme that seeks to mobilise resources and develop programmes in the quest to exert a positive influence on an external audience. (p.1175)

At the same time, higher education systems in both countries are viewed as outliers in the global system dominated by the Western academic model. While adopting some characteristics of the dominant model, China and Russia intend to draw some political benefits from HE internationalisation and establish themselves as reviving centres of power.

The state's heavy-handed initiatives of HE internationalisation in Russia include measures for active recruitment of international students to support the broader geopolitical aspirations of the country. It is therefore not coincidental that the introduction of government policies for attracting international students has been accompanied with an intensified spread of the soft power discourse. Public diplomacy discourses and instruments utilised in contemporary Russia follow the Soviet experience, (re)emphasising the reestablishment of Soviet-style friendship associations and cultural exchange programmes. This includes the re-establishment of a House of Friendship with the Peoples of Foreign Countries in Moscow and the organisation of the International Youth Festival in Moscow in 2017, modelled after the events held in the Soviet Union in 1957 and 1985.

Rossotrudnichestvo is the successor to a number of organisations which were responsible for public diplomacy in the USSR, such as the All-Union Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries (VOKS), operating in 1925-1958; the Union of Soviet Societies for Friendship and Cultural Contacts (SSOD), operating in 1958-1992; the Russian Centre for International Scientific and Cultural Cooperation by the Russian government (Roszarubezhcentr), operating in 1994-2002; and the Russian Centre for International Scientific and Cultural Cooperation by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, operating in 2002-2008. Russian soft power policy rests on the aspiration to revive and expand Russian cultural centres, a structural inheritance of the Soviet Union, relying upon Rossotrudnichestvo, which can be identified as the revival of the SSODs. According to 2014 report by Rossotrudnichestvo, they plan and organise Soviet-style events, such as exhibitions, conferences, contests, and festivals to celebrate patriotism, distribute awards and recognise achievements (Rossotrudnichestvo, 2014).

The quota system of allocating international students to Russian HEIs is not a purely competitive mechanism for internationalisation, similar to the Soviet model of international student distribution. HEIs do not communicate with students directly and have to negotiate with the state gatekeepers who make decisions on the numbers of state-funded students for each sending country. Moreover, HEIs that are participants in various federal programmes administered by the Ministry of Education and Science are given a preferential treatment in the process of international student recruitment.

The soft power discourse is increasingly becoming based on the construct of confrontation similar to the Soviet times. In his public addresses and interviews, Konstantin Kosachev who used to be the leader of Rossotrudnichestvo in 2012-2014 consistently emphasised the need for an active opposition to the hegemony of the Western powers and viewed HE internationalisation as a tool of public diplomacy and geopolitical competition. A relevant feature of Kosachev's discourse was the exploitation of ideas to resist the geopolitical domination of Western models and threat to state sovereignty and independence. In one of the interviews, Kosachev referred to China as a model of upholding independent actions and position: 'China is perceived as immutable, so no one tries to dissuade the Chinese leaders. Everyone cooperates with China, without trying to change it' (Kosachev, 2012). In this context, the role of organisations such as Rossotrudnichestvo is to counter forces intentionally discrediting Russia's image in the world as a tool of geopolitical competition, promoting multipolarity and other, non-dominant social and political models:

The main problem of Russia's image abroad is that it is a matter of purposeful defamation and this is related exclusively to geopolitics. The image of Russia depends on ... how our country is defined by the countries that were engaged in the Cold War with the Soviet Union, but after its collapse felt like winners. Since then, they are trying to preserve a situation where there is only one 'correct' political-economic system, only one centre of power. (Kosachev, 2014)

This thinking is aligned with the Kremlin's official foreign policy discourse that during Vladimir Putin presidency has been based on the declared necessity to respond to the post-Cold War geopolitical confrontation with the West.

In pursuit of global excellence: heavy-handed modernisation and soft power

The state-led revival of the Soviet patterns of international student recruitment constitutes an inherent characteristic of HE internationalisation in Russia. The process of revival started with the deconstruction of the Soviet legacy, the expansion of the HE sector, and the implementation of market-driven HE policies, followed by the re-emergence of heavy-handed state intervention and politicization. An unprecedented transformation of the higher education sector started in the 1990s and involved the deconstruction of fundamental features of the Soviet model: state-centred governance, self-absorption, uniformity, and non-competitiveness. It was believed that limiting the role of the state would help Russia's development into a global knowledge economy. A number of structural and legislative reforms were aimed at education sector liberalisation; these reforms included the abolition of the mandatory work placement scheme for university graduates, legislative and policy support for the marketization of education institutions including the establishment of private institutions, adoption the Bologna process principles, development of regulations for the recognition of qualifications.

Underresourced HEIs were expected to engage in what Simon Marginson (2004) would call glonacal (global + national + local) competition for students and resources. Contrary to prior expectations, a very small minority of HEIs developed direct contacts with international academic communities to set up joint education programmes and/or research collaborations. Austerity pushed HEIs to compete for incoming students predominantly for economic reasons and led to

some increase in international student numbers following a big drop at the time of the collapse of the USSR. The overall number of international students increased from 40,000 in 1992 to 61,400 in 2001 (Arefiev, 2005). Thus, the long Soviet tradition of viewing inbound student mobility as a political instrument to expand the scope of positively disposed individuals and countries gave way to the state-supported practices of selling educational services to international students. However, the period of the limited state intervention in the HE sector did not last long. As the number of HEIs increased dramatically (Carnoy, Loyalka, & Dobryakova, 2013), and the quality of provision was considered dubious, the federal government became increasingly dissatisfied with the development of the HE sector under the free market model.

Government recurrence to the intervention approach was marked by the introduction of diverse new initiatives in the HE sector. One such initiative was the creation of the pivot points where most of the public resources allocated to HE would be concentrated. The 'pivot point' (точки роста) became a key concept of government discourse in the last decade to denote those universities that are expected to play the critical role in driving the Russian HE system development. Another such initiative was the establishment of a network of federal universities across the country starting from the mid-2000s. The federal universities in different regions of Russia are expected to become flagship institutions in respective federal districts to improve the quality of higher education provision across the country.

Furthermore, in 2008, the government launched a programme of establishing national research universities (NRUs) to promote innovation, technology and incorporation into the global knowledge economy (Government of RF, 2009). Yet another initiative - the 5-100 Programme - was focused on developing world-class universities in Russia. The May 2012 Decree №599 of the President of the Russian Federation and the State Programme for the Development of Education stated that Russia would have at least five universities in the world's top 100 by 2020 (Presidential Decree, 2012a). Moreover, the 5-100 Programme sets a target of increasing the proportion of international students to 15 percent in these universities, and the proportion of international academic staff to 10 percent by 2020. Thus, promoting HE internationalisation became one of the aims of new government policies oriented on the improvement of the HE quality in Russia.

As part of the implementation of these various federal initiatives, participants of such programmes, selected on a competitive basis, received considerable financial support from the government to evolve into national champions and globally recognised research and education institutions.

Russia appears to have been following the same path that China chose more than sixty years ago. China identified 11 universities in 1956 as the focus of HE excellence initiatives and increased the number of universities to 88 by 1978. At present, 106 HEIs in China (6 percent of all institutions) receive special government funding. Some authors link this initiative with the increase in the number of Chinese HEIs in global rankings (Balzer & Askonas, 2016). Shall Russia expect the same favourable results?

To a certain extent, the Russian experience of HE internationalisation represents a combination of the ambition for a globally competitive HE system and the nostalgia for the powerful role of the state. HE policies targeted at improving the effectiveness of individual institutions are more state-led and politically motivated than they used to be in the early years after the dissolution of the USSR. This current combination of the state-driven modernisation and simultaneous reinforcement of the soft power discourse places constraints and contradicts the rationales of internationalisation at the institutional level, thus decreasing the involvement of HEIs as the main drivers of the process.

An example of the state's heavy-handed approach is the HEI performance evaluation framework that was launched in 2012 to improve the efficiency of public spending. The framework is based on a number of indicators measuring academic performance, research, faculty, infrastructure, finance, labour market outcomes of graduates, as well as the extent of

internationalisation (Ministry of Education and Science, 2015b). In this respect, boosting the number of international students is recognised as an important factor for advancing the competitiveness of the Russian HE system. Those HEIs that do not meet performance evaluation indicators established by the Ministry of Education and Science are labelled as ‘ineffective’ and face the threat of being fully restructured or losing accreditation. This new framework uses the same indicators to measure all HEIs. Ignoring the context-specific characteristics such as programme diversity, differentiation of financial sources, and regional heterogeneity, the federal monitoring system applies the extraneous inputs-outputs approach, using a ranking methodology. Some of the indicators in this framework seem to be directly copied from such projects as European ‘U-Map’ without any significant adjustment to the local context.

The introduction of the performance evaluation system was a top-down initiative and found some resistance from the Russian Academy of Sciences, small HEIs, and specialised HEIs. The critics discuss the performance evaluation system in the context of academic imperialism and performance indicator culture introduced from outside; they argue that the initiative forms a part of the western package of reforms that also includes a variety of other decisions such as joining the Bologna Process. They explain that the existing structure and traditions of the Russian academia should be considered in the process of developing an authentic Russian model of higher education. Small HEIs, branches of larger universities, and specialised HEIs deem it unfair to measure HEI performance by the same performance evaluation indicators that are used for larger institutions. Specialised HEIs, such as Agriculture Universities or Transport Universities emphasise their strong links with relevant industries which necessitate different institutional structures and needs (Kapustin, 2007; Telegina & Schwengel, 2012).

Thus, the federal government leads the drive for global competitiveness by imposing international benchmarks. However, this policy may not be sensitive to the legacies of the HEI network structure mostly preserved from the Soviet times and the recent proliferation of small private HEIs. Such assessments can lead to unfair outcomes for all except the largest and already well-resourced universities. The concentration of government support within a range of favourites is another attempt to overcome the structural rigidity of the Russian higher education landscape.

In this context, international students are consolidated in a limited number of HEIs located in selected geographic areas. The HEIs participating in special government programmes - NRUs, federal universities, and the 5/100 programme - host a growing share of international students. In 2014, 39 universities that participated in these three programmes hosted 18 percent of all international students in Russia. A year later, the proportion of international students at these universities increased to 23 percent.⁵ There has been limited or no change in the level of internationalisation in more than 1200 remaining higher education institutions.

Only one-third of all HEIs in Russia enrol international students, and many of them admit no more than one or two international students (Ministry of Education and Science, 2014). International students are highly concentrated in the selected HEIs, with 20 percent of universities enrolling 90 percent of international students. The level of concentration has been becoming stronger over past three years.⁶ More than half of international students are hosted by only six regions: Moscow, Saint-Petersburg, Omsk, Tomsk, Novosibirsk, and Tatarstan (Gromov, 2016). Interestingly, this is very similar to the Chinese situation, where despite the efforts of internationalisation, international students seem to be concentrated in selected HEIs and the relative share of HEIs enrolling international students has not increased considerably (Huang, 2007; Jokila, 2015).

Finally, the public diplomacy-oriented recruitment from former Soviet countries reinforces the structure of inbound flows. The main source of international students to Russia is the CIS; the share of students from the CIS went up from 37 percent of all international students in 2003 to 54

⁵ own calculations, using the data from the Education Information System of the Ministry of Education and Science.

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percent in 2014 (Arefiev & Sheregi, 2014). The share of those from former USSR republics compared with the overall number of international students by the beginning of the 2015/2016 academic year was 79 percent (Gromov, 2016). The Russian Federation is the number one student destination for ten post-Soviet countries (Chankseliani, 2016). As shown in Table 1, nine out of ten countries of origin for international students enrolled at Russian HEIs are all post-Soviet countries.

Table 1. Country of origin for international students studying in Russia

Country of origin	Number of students studying in Russia
Kazakhstan	59,295
Ukraine	21,817
Belarus	18,804
Turkmenistan	16,332
Uzbekistan	16,162
Azerbaijan	14,083
Tajikistan	10,825
China	9,785
Republic of Moldova	5,834
Armenia	4,446

Source: UNESCO (2016)

The Russian government views the international mobility indicators as one of the key mechanisms to help HEIs climb the ladder of world-class universities. The majority of the (NRUs successfully meet the requirements for performance monitoring and excellence initiative programmes by enrolling students from post-Soviet countries. Substantial flows of students from post-Soviet countries provide few incentives to these top-tier institutions to develop broader strategies for internationalisation and attract students from other parts of the world.

HEIs that are not pivot points may have advantageously used factors that attract students to Russia at the expense of the academic merit of incoming students. These pull factors include but are not limited to the relative quality of HE, cost of studies, the language of instruction, and colonial and diaspora linkages. The efforts of these HEIs have resulted in a heavy focus on recruiting tuition-paying students from the CIS. Another source of income is the group of students pursuing part-time and /or distance education programmes. Approximately half of all international students are enrolled in part-time programmes at Russian HEIs. Such programmes are offered at a significantly lower cost for HEIs than full-time programmes (Arefiev & Sheregi, 2014). These programmes are notorious in Russia for low-quality provision as contact hours are limited to one to two sessions per week. Among part-timers, the share of students from CIS is more than 80 percent.⁷ Thus, although Russian HEIs do attract large numbers of students from neighbouring countries of high political interest, HE internationalisation may not be bringing about as much diversity, talent, and richness of the flows of ideas as in other international contexts where international student recruitment is more meritocratic and inbound flows are more diversified.

Final thoughts

Thus, in its efforts to internationalise its higher education, Russia appears to be focused on strengthening of the state through public diplomacy and promoting soft power interests in its

⁷ own calculations, using data from the Education Information System of the Ministry of Education and Science.

immediate geopolitical neighbourhood. Universities are incentivized to pick the low-hanging fruit by recruiting students who are attracted by accessible state-funded scholarships or relatively affordable and less selective programmes of study. In this context, HEIs do not engage strategically with diverse internationalisation initiatives that can bring global talent to Russia and enrich the intellectual environment at Russian universities. The current centralized system provides limited incentives to Russian HEIs for 'genuine' internationalisation that would involve promoting cultural diversity, competing for the best students internationally, and creating a globally competitive academic climate at higher education institutions.

Higher education internationalisation is defined as 'the intentional process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions and delivery of post-secondary education, in order to enhance the quality of education and research for all students and staff, and to make a meaningful contribution to society' (de Wit et al., 2015, p. 29). This definition may not be easily applicable to the Russian case. The heavy-handed excellence initiatives that revolve around HE internationalisation target selected institutions instead of aiming at increasing the global competitiveness of the entire HE sector. It has been argued that competition enhances vertical differentiation between research-intensive universities and the rest of the HEIs, and that competition is powered by an elite/mass dualism (Marginson, 2006). The problem with Russia is that the majority of HEIs do not follow the model set by the sector leaders nominated by the state. The excellence initiatives have resulted in an unequal distribution of international students amongst Russian HEIs and may not support the expansion of internationalisation to a broader range of institutions. These inequalities are expected to widen in the future if the government continues to direct large proportions of public resources to the selected HEIs only. Furthermore, will these pivot points be able to sustain their performance without the continued government support in a purely competitive environment? Would it be more effective to release the stringent control through performance indicators and heavy support for selected universities, and allow for a more competitive environment to emerge in the Russian HE sector?

The soft power rationale and heavy-handed policies of continuous modernisation reproduce some patterns of the Soviet model with centralized governance and the politicization of international student recruitment. Russian HEIs continue to rely on the low hanging fruit and through centrally-administered programmes HEIs host mostly students from post-Soviet countries. This helps them to adapt to government performance requirements and at the same time to contribute to the strategic project of retaining the Russian influence in the region and pursuing soft power interests. In the long run, this may not be the optimal approach to the diversification of the student body and contributing to the improvement of the educational and research experiences of local students and academics that can ultimately translate into the global university ranking positions.

Thus, HE internationalisation in Russia in a recent decade represents a curious configuration of the state-driven modernisation policy centred in selected universities and soft power interests focused on selected range of countries. Paradoxically this combination shaped by the global competition discourse and embedded in the Soviet legacy restrains institutional agency in internationalisation. Moreover, selected aspects of global education policy discourse (excellence initiatives, student mobility, performance evaluation, university rankings) appear to be deployed by public policy in order to sustain the status quo soft power interests. Most recently the Russian government announced the launch of the so-called *Priority Programme for the Development of Russian Education* (Government of RF, 2017). The programme aims at expanding the share of non-oil exports by increasing the attractiveness of Russian education. This will be achieved by offering extracurricular/additional education to school pupils from foreign countries, developing Russia-based Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), and most importantly, tripling the international student numbers by 2025. It remains unclear how the programme will be implemented but it is indicated in the annotation that the core activities will include changing the regulatory framework, putting in place marketing campaigns, and improving the provision of

foreign student services at Russian HEIs. These measures reinforce the key role of the state in leading the Russian HE internationalisation process. One important aspect of this new programme is that it appears to manifest the economic rationale for internationalisation and the role of education as a highly profitable export good; there are plans to increase revenues from education exports five times by 2025. It remains to be seen how this adds to the complex policy configurations or helps to reinvent education system modernisation.

This chapter used China, another post-Communist country, as a reference point. China's HE internationalisation policy directions have been changing from the increasing awareness of the new global context in the 1980s to the expanding economic rationale and competition in the 1990s and more recently to the enhancement of international status and power role (Wang, 2014). Like Russia, China is among the top-seven global destinations for international students. Both countries intend to further expand their geopolitical influence through education diplomacy. In this context, future investigations will need to examine how and in what ways selected institutions in these countries manage to adapt to or go against the government's heavy-handed approach to remain genuinely competitive in the contemporary global academic environment.

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