

## Central Asian Students between Russia and the West

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 317

April 2014

Doug Blum

*Providence College*

Rising xenophobia and declining educational standards are making Central Asians think twice about going to Russia for school. At the same time, and partly as a consequence, the prospect of studying in the West has become increasingly attractive. Yet many students who wish to attend university in the United States face daunting challenges that limit their ability to do so. At the present moment, therefore, an important opportunity exists to facilitate such access for Central Asian youth. Taking such steps would promote the transfer of invaluable knowledge, and would foster international network formation leading to future collaboration, while at the same time pressuring Russia to undertake much-needed educational and social reforms.

Central Asian students have long flocked to Russian universities, both during the Soviet period and after. And by any reckoning there are still large numbers of international students all across Russia today (precise estimates range from about 130,000 to 160,000). According to the government statistical agency, during 2011-2012, the last year for which data are available, the number of foreign students enrolled in Russian higher educational establishments included 28,300 from Kazakhstan (an indeterminate number of whom are ethnic Kazakhs), 10,700 from Uzbekistan, 9,900 from Turkmenistan, 6,500 from Tajikistan, and 2,800 from Kyrgyzstan. Yet this situation seems to be on the verge of significant change.

In the past, Russian higher education was considered to carry the stamp of excellence, and to provide guaranteed entry into privileged positions at home as well as privileged networks abroad. In recent years, however, these long-held views have been cast into considerable doubt, as Central Asian students have increasingly encountered a range of problems in their pursuit of a Russian university degree. Such problems include xenophobia – much of which is directed specifically at Central Asians – as well as the flagging quality of education on offer at Russian establishments.

With regard to the issue of quality, Russian pedagogy – with its traditional emphasis on didacticism rather than independent critical thought—is now widely considered inferior. The Times World University Rankings for 2013-2014, which lists the top 400 establishments based on criteria including teaching, research, and facilities, included only one Russian institution (Lomonosov Moscow State University, in the 226-260 grouping). Moreover, Russia's previously vaunted technical expertise is now generally viewed as less than cutting-edge. The combined result, according to one recent analysis, is that the reputation of many once prestigious Russian universities is undergoing considerable decline.

The other major source of concern, xenophobia, manifests itself in a variety of ways including everyday racism, occasional instructor bias, and common police harassment. In order to appreciate the social context within which this occurs, it is necessary to understand the tremendous impact that migration has had in Russia over the past two decades. According to published approximations, at this point there are somewhere in the neighborhood of 13-14 million migrants in the country. The overwhelming majority are citizens of former Soviet states, which is greatly facilitated by the fact that they can legally enter Russia visa-free and stay for up to three months. Of this 13-14 million total, the Russian Federal Migration Service estimates that about two and a half million are from Uzbekistan, over one million from Tajikistan, and 550,000 from Kyrgyzstan. Many experts consider these figures to be low. Regardless of the exact number, however, the key point is clear: Central Asian migrants are plentiful, and this fact is obvious on the streets of major Russian cities.

One predictable result is the resentment meted out to migrants everywhere in the world, especially when they are viewed as competing for scarce jobs. This factor is compounded in the Russian case by longstanding suspicion of outsiders, recent worries about terrorism, and anxiety over the loss of Russian cultural identity due to globalization. The past number of years has seen a sharp rise in racist attacks by skinhead extremists. Yet hostile attitudes are also prevalent among the population at large. Opinion data brings the point home: in a state-sponsored poll conducted in June 2013, 35 percent of respondents (the highest percentage for any factor) considered immigration to be a top threat to Russian national security. Furthermore, when Russians were asked in a recent survey about their attitudes regarding the hypernationalist slogan, "Russia for Russians," 20 percent indicated strong agreement, while almost 70 percent expressed negative feelings toward other ethnicities.

Naturally such opinions carry over to the social environment encountered by foreign students. Alas, bigotry is not limited to Russian students; there have been plentiful allegations of discriminatory treatment on the part of teachers as well. Nor can migrants count on support from authorities. Numerous complaints have been lodged against the police for abusive treatment of migrants. This is true of visiting students as well, since police frequently assume that male students are migrant laborers. Unfortunately, there

seems to be little prospect of amelioration in the short term, inasmuch as xenophobic sentiments are often stoked by politicians. A case in point is Moscow Mayor Sergei Sobyenin, who—as part of his bid for re-election—has blamed migrants for a spike in crime and stated that “Moscow is a Russian city and it should remain that way. It is not Chinese, Tajik, or Uzbek... People who speak Russian badly and who have a different culture are better off living in their own country.”

The upshot is that the idea of attending university in Russia appears to be losing some of its luster for Central Asian youth. In addition, the negative aspects of studying in Russia are accentuated by the existence of alternative options, the most attractive of which are universities located in the United States, Western Europe, and Turkey. Indeed, the United States and Europe appear to be moving to the front as a result of growing concern on the part of Central Asian authorities (especially in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan), who worry about radical Islamism among returning students from Muslim-majority countries, including Turkey. For all of these reasons, studying in the United States is viewed more and more as a top choice by aspiring applicants from Central Asia, and according to the Institute of International Education (IIE) there has been a sizeable increase in Central Asia students since 2000. Yet the actual numbers remain rather paltry. IIE data reveals that that there were 3,188 students from Central Asia in the United States in 2012-2013, of whom 1,969 were from Kazakhstan, 445 from Uzbekistan, 312 from Tajikistan, 261 from Kyrgyzstan, and 178 from Turkmenistan.

Unfortunately, many well-qualified young Central Asians have difficulty realizing their dreams of studying at U.S. universities. One issue is visa restrictions, which unnecessarily complicate the ability of many students to enter or remain in the country long enough to pursue their educational and professional goals. Foreign students may be denied a visa on the basis of perceived “dual intent.” Lengthy security checks for students from Muslim majority countries may also cause serious complications.

The other (often insurmountable) obstacle is financial constraints. The Central Asian states do provide some funding, but competition is fierce, and winners often come from well-connected backgrounds. This in turn means that many qualified applicants depend on outside aid. Yet this is often inadequate, due both to truncated U.S. government programs and to the fact that schools often have limited resources of their own. The Fulbright and Muskie government-sponsored grants offer only a small number of scholarships, all at the post-graduate level. Global UGRAD is available to very few students (roughly 125 from Central Asia each year). Many colleges and universities offer their own scholarships or serve as conduits for aid provided by other donors. But maximizing one's chances of receiving such grants requires applying for a large number, which is logistically overwhelming, while applying to numerous colleges is expensive in its own right.

An additional obstacle for would-be applicants is a lack of knowledge about available options. Many private funders exist, such as the Aga Khan Foundation or (for graduate work) OFID. But most are little-known, and it is unrealistic to expect that applicants from Central Asia will learn about them on their own. A handful of educational resource centers have been established in major cities (including “Education USA” advising centers), yet these tend to be poorly utilized and, in any case, are accessible only to a small minority of urban dwellers. Nor are the published guides adequate. The U.S. State Department sponsors an “Education USA” website, but this is simply a clearinghouse for a vast number of bewildering—and often highly specific—funding opportunities. Likewise the IIE has a book, *Funding for United States Study 2014*, which it sells online for \$39.95. Yet it suffers from the same dizzying complexity, and is available only in a print edition.

As a result of these obstacles, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan have taken steps to promote “internationalized education” within their own countries, both by attracting foreign specialists and providing privileged support to select institutions (KIMEP in Almaty, AUCA in Bishkek, and the International Business School (IBS) in Tashkent). These efforts are funded in part by the U.S. Central Asia Education Foundation and are certainly far better than nothing. But two critical problems remain: the quality of the education tends to be lower than what is available at U.S. institutions, and the sociocultural experience is a far cry from that on offer in the United States.

This situation constitutes an important opportunity for the U.S. government to offer substantially greater and more readily accessible funding to Central Asian students. The benefits of doing so would be multiple. First, it would foster mutually beneficial economic connections as well as other forms of transnational network ties. This in turn might well contribute to these countries' integration into the global economy, including diversification away from reliance on natural resources. Such speculation seems reasonably well-founded given the prominent positions attained by many foreign graduates upon their return, in a wide range of fields. Second, it would yield important cultural benefits, inasmuch as students who attend U.S. universities tend to be greatly attracted by key American values and institutions, including democracy, rule of law, and social equality. Such value transmission would not only promote desirable trajectories of cultural and institutional change, but would also enhance the United States' image in the countries concerned. Third, it would increase pressure on Russian authorities to combat xenophobia and promote higher educational standards. There are already clear signs that the Russian government has begun trying to (re)attract foreign students, but so far this has taken place mainly through higher levels of funding—which is unlikely to have an appreciable effect on the underlying problems.

A fourth benefit has to do with geopolitical opportunities specific to U.S.-Central Asian relations. All of the Central Asian states, each in their own way, have responded to pressure from Russia and China by seeking a balanced foreign policy—including at least

some degree of opening to the West. And yet the latter element has been limited, mainly by lack of proximity. These concerns have been underscored by recent events in Ukraine, as a result of which Central Asian elites are acutely aware of the desirability of reducing dependence on Russia. The moment is especially ripe, therefore, to provide an expanded avenue for diversification: including education, social network building, and prospective economic ties.

Finally, the anticipated downsides of launching such an initiative appear relatively few and, moreover, are quite manageable. Expanding the availability of scholarships obviously represents a strategic investment. But even raising this moderately from its current low level (0.8 percent of the funding received by international students in the United States in 2012-2013) could have an enormous impact. In addition, the visa application process ought to be further streamlined and the \$200 SEVIS fee waived. While the costs of doing so and of monitoring recipients would not be negligible, they would be vastly outweighed by the benefits.

In sum, youth from Central Asia appear to be approaching a turning point with regard to their willingness and ability to pursue higher education abroad. It is very much in everyone's interest to encourage them to attend university in the United States. Notwithstanding the current budgetary constraints, expanding the scope of government-sponsored grants, and simplifying the process of attaining them, would greatly contribute to increasing Central Asian student enrollments—along with the many economic, cultural, and political benefits this stands to offer.