

# Understanding the Internationalization of Higher Education in the Context of the War in Ukraine: Critical Conversations from Kazakhstan

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## Abstract

*The paper argues that the War in Ukraine is promoting and accelerating the Westernization of the region's higher education. The paper employs Mignolo's (2011) geopolitics of knowledge as the theoretical framework to illustrate how internationalization promotes the adoption of Western/English liberal education and how the War in Ukraine is speeding up the process. Using focus groups, I capture conversations with local graduate students in Kazakhstan to demonstrate that Western education is acquired to 1) accelerate the de-Russification of Kazakhstan by moving away from the former imperial power, 2) use English to undermine the Russian language and cement Kazakhstan's independence from Russia, 3) acquire internationally recognized English credentials for global/Western competitiveness and modernity. The participants in this study framed their decision to pursue university graduate studies as freedom from the Soviet system, de-Russification, and modern development, underscoring the high value that some graduate students have for an English credential.*

Keywords: de-Russification, geopolitics of knowledge, higher education, internationalization, Kazakhstan, modernity, war in Ukraine.

## Аңдатпа

*Бұл мақалада Украинадағы соғыс осы аймақтағы жоғары білімнің батыстануына ықпал етеді және жеделдетеді. Мақалада Миньолоның білім геосаясаты (2011) интернационализацияның Батыс/ағылшын либералды білімін енгізуге қалай ықпал ететінін және Украинадағы соғыс бұл процесті қалай тездететінін бейнелейтін теориялық негіз ретінде қолданылады. Фокус-топтарды пайдалана отырып, батыстық білімнің 1) Қазақстанды бұрынғы империялық басқарудан ашақ орыссыздандыруды жеделдету, 2) орыс тіліне нұқсан келтіру және Қазақстанның Ресейден тәуелсіздігін нығайту үшін ағылшын тілін пайдалануға алынғанын көрсету үшін 3) жаһандық/батыстық бәсекеге қабілеттілік пен қазіргі заман үшін халықаралық танылған ағылшын біліктіліктерін алуға сатып алынатынын көрсету үшін Қазақстандағы жергілікті студент-түлектермен әңгіме жүргіздік. Осы зерттеуге қатысушылар батыстық жоғары білім алу туралы шешімдерін кеңестік жүйеден,*

*орыстандырудан және заманауи дамудан босату ретінде тұжырымдап, ағылшын біліктілігі бар диплом алған кейбір түлектердің маңыздылығын атап өтті.*

кілтсөздер: дерусификациялану, білім геосаясаты, жоғары білім, интернационалдандыру, Қазақстан, заманауилық, Украинадағы соғыс, батыстандыру

## **Introduction**

The article argues that the Ukrainian War is accelerating the process of Westernizing Central Asia. I specifically refer to the internationalization of higher education in Kazakhstan to illustrate the de-Russification process as Western/English epistemology becomes highly valued. Academics and researchers rarely consider questions that address the relationship between political developments and education. Such topics are considered sensitive, and in the modern era of academic surveillance, tenure requirements and self-censorship (Smith, 2006) the field is under-researched and under-theorized. The War in Ukraine is currently a global topical issue. Political commentators present the conflict as between the liberal democratic West and autocratic Russia (Lewis, 2022). In the process, world opinion is divided, with many countries in the Global South, like in Africa, taking a nonaligned neutral position in public (Nzuki, 2023). The Central Asian countries, all former Soviet republics, have adopted a pragmatic policy as Russia is their largest source of imports (except for Kyrgyzstan) (Jordanova, 2023). Kazakhstan adopted and maintains a neutral position urging the peaceful resolution of the conflict.

Russia is the former imperial power in the region. Ethnic Kazakhs have not forgotten the poor treatment received from the Russians during the Soviet times (Nurpeis, 2003). For those who view Kazakhstan as a Kazakh nation in which ethnic minorities should assimilate, the idea that the country should continue to free itself from Russian and Soviet influence is strong. This section of the population holds rather negative perceptions of Russia and the Soviet past and sees Russian power as oppressive and colonialist (Tsoy, 2022). Consequently, some see the Russian invasion of Ukraine as the return of the Soviets, an attempt to resuscitate the defunct Soviet empire. Sentiments against the Russians are common, especially among young Kazakhs, indirectly fueling pro-Western thinking. This unmasks the pro-West development policies, in which, for the last 30 years, Kazakhstan has developed strong economic, political, and academic ties with Western countries to achieve the de-Russification of the country (Bhavna, 2007; YU, 2017) masked in the development and modernity discourses.

There seems to be no public debate within universities about the War. Bayetova (2022) observed that most university officials have declared their support for Ukraine and the Ukrainian people on social media platforms and websites worldwide. University websites in Kazakhstan are silent and appear uninterested. There are no public lectures or seminars on the War in Ukraine. Unlike the US and European universities that have cut partnerships and financial ties with Russian universities, partnerships with Russian universities continue to blossom.

Alongside these political developments is the internationalization of higher education that sees Central Asian countries, particularly Kazakhstan, adopting Western/English education and other European/Western education policies (Hwami et al., 2024). Since its independence in 1991, Kazakhstan's development policies have been a balance between its Soviet past, the need for a stable relationship with Russia, and the desire to modernize and be a member of the European Community (Sordi, 2017). Joining the Bologna process, adopting English as a medium of instruction, and the many educational initiatives that expose Kazakhstani youth to Western epistemology all fall under the internationalization banner. Not only is Kazakhstan sending students to study abroad, but it is also a growing destination for international students and faculty (Kuzhabekova & Lee, 2018). Some of the studies on internationalization in higher education captured in this Journal of Comparative and International Higher Education have examined national strategies on internationalization and the justification of these strategies (Zhang, 2020), international mobility (Mendes, 2022), institutional social capital in internationalization (Chan, 2018), strategies that contest the Anglo-American mainstream conception of internationalization (Castiello-Gutiérrez, 2019), among other themes. Kazakhstan, Central Asia, and the former Soviet Union are invisible in this publication except for a rare comparative analysis with other academic markets (Ros, 2021). Also missing is the

deployment of critical-oriented theories in studying internationalization using empirical approaches. Concerns persist regarding the global dominance of Western epistemology that undermines and replaces local and indigenous knowledges in the non-Western world. The universalization of Western epistemology and its appropriateness outside the Western world are growing concerns (Santos, 2018). Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2021) referred to the international in the internationalization of higher education as Western and English. Furthermore, Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2021, p. 78) observes that the dominant approaches to internationalization of higher education are based on “colonial vertical conceptions of internationalization” and Eurocentric worldviews, ideas and practices. Given these moral concerns, this study focuses on how the War in Ukraine promotes and speeds up the Westernization of the region's higher education at the expense of local knowledge. Lured by the institutional, cultural capital inherent in English university credentials, the elite utilize their family socioeconomic advantages to access international higher education.

The context of this study is important since most internationalization research foregrounds developed countries with limited research on non-Western countries. Rarely has comparative and international higher education been empirically studied in a war context. I address this gap and also theorize internationalization by employing the geopolitics of knowledge conceptual tools in an empirical qualitative study. It is, therefore, significant because it offers a space for new contextually relevant internationalization theories to emerge, thus providing the opportunity for a deeper understanding of comparative and international education, especially why, where and whose knowledge questions about epistemology. I draw on Mignolo's (2011) geopolitics of knowledge theory to show how the internationalization of higher education in Kazakhstan promotes Western epistemology. Simultaneously and politically significant, it challenges the dominance of Russian epistemology, including the language. Geopolitics of knowledge refers to the idea that knowledge is power and that certain geographical places produce more influential knowledge than others (An & Zhu, 2018). The framework posits the need to question the privileges of knowledge systems considered universal or international and applied without questioning the social contexts (Shahjahan et al., 2022). The framework further reveals epistemological origins and how ideas are used to influence other people (Mignolo, 2011). Mignolo's geopolitics of knowledge concept can reveal the social dynamics of higher education, including the distribution of power and status and the role of institutions in shaping these processes. Second, his theory of geopolitics of knowledge can illustrate the where, why, and by whom questions of higher education knowledge. Therefore, amidst important developments in Kazakhstan, namely transitioning from a Soviet republic to a modern globally competitive nation-state, this article draws on Mignolo's (2011) concepts as an analytical framework to examine how internationalization, the War in neighbouring Ukraine and the evolving landscape of the Kazakhstani higher education system contributes to the reproduction of Western and English knowledge in Kazakhstan. The War in Ukraine speeds up the processes. This article specifically addresses the following two research questions:

- 1) How does the War in Ukraine influence pro-Western views among Kazakhstani students?
- 2) What is the impact of Westernizing higher education on traditional Russian influence in the sector?

I argue that through internationalization, the local elite in Kazakhstan acquire Western institutional capital to 1) accelerate the de-Russification of Kazakhstan by moving away from the former colonizer, Russia, and join the global elite that is defined by the use of English and belief in liberal values, 2) use English to undermine the Russian language and cement Kazakhstan's independence from Russia, 3) acquire internationally recognized English credentials and create a new elite social class in Kazakhstan and globally, a marker of modernity. Although this study is based in Kazakhstan, its findings are relevant to a broader context in Central Asia, Africa and beyond. Using Mignolo's (2002, 2011) conceptual tools, I demonstrate the authority and influence of knowledge produced in the West. I start with an introduction to the Kazakhstani context, then present Mignolo's conceptualization of geopolitics of knowledge, the research design and findings, and finally, the conclusion and limitations.

## Literature Review

### Internationalization Trends in the Higher Education System of Kazakhstan

In non-Western countries, internationalization studies primarily focus on students' mobility to Western universities, known as internationalization abroad, mainly a preserve of the rich or those who can afford it (Knight, 2004). Another form of international education, internationalization at home, involves the internationalization of the curriculum where domestic students and researchers engage with counterparts from different countries to foster students' international and intercultural skills within their home country, offering an inclusive opportunity for students who may not have the means to study abroad to develop intercultural competencies (Leask, 2016). Higher education internationalization in Kazakhstan aligns with Mignolo's (2011) concept of the geopolitics of knowledge, which refers to a particular form of influential knowledge that is produced in a specific geographical place (West/Europe) and other people from different parts of the world make an effort to acquire this knowledge. In 2010, Kazakhstan became the first Central Asian country to join the European Higher Education Area following the implementation of the Bologna Process, which has significantly influenced international student mobility through various short-term programs such as Erasmus+ (Sordi, 2017). Privileged individuals with advantages and dispositions stemming from their backgrounds tend to benefit from the internationalization process, as it often favours students and institutions with more significant financial resources, language skills, and social capital (Hwami & Bedeker, 2024). For example, internationalization resulted in opportunities for Kazakhstani universities to engage in joint international educational projects, student and faculty mobility through joint research programs and training, double degree programs, international accreditation, and the establishment of Nazarbayev University (NU), and the Bolashak Scholarship Programme (Hwami, 2024).

Three outstanding internationalization policy programs can be observed in Kazakhstan. First, the Bolashak programme, a state policy initiated in 1993, is a policy to promote internationalization abroad by training future leaders in business, public policy, science, engineering, medicine, and other vital fields (Nazarbayev, 2006). It covers all study-related undergraduate and graduate degree costs; the Washington Times called it the "best scholarship programme in the world" (Burton, 2016). Interestingly, most recipients study in Western English universities, further explaining the significance of where knowledge is produced. The second notable internationalization strategy was the establishment of Nazarbayev University (NU) in 2010 with a dual mission: To integrate science, education, and industry, to support the country's development and to advance international best practices (Koch, 2014). NU uses a model of strategic foreign partnerships with institutions such as Duke University, University College London, the University of Pennsylvania, and the University of Wisconsin (NU, 2023). It is well-equipped with high-quality infrastructure, and about 70% comprises international faculty from Western universities (Hwami, 2023). Finally, Kazakhstan has implemented Trilingual Education, stipulating Kazakh as the official state language, Russian as the language for interethnic communication, and English as a means of global integration (Prilipko, 2017). Since then, the availability of English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) in universities has significantly risen. The number of universities in Kazakhstan offering EMI degrees increased to 42 out of 125 tertiary institutions in 2018 (Goodman & Karabassova, 2018). The shift to EMI in Kazakhstani universities necessitates students with Russian and Kazakh as their mother tongues (L1) to exhibit competence in English language skills and academic discourse and practices. Adopting the English language further demonstrates the power of Western knowledge, in this case, English.

All these policies further promote the movement of academics (students and faculty, and in some instances, professional administrative staff) from other countries to Kazakhstan. Many international students from the region, including some from Africa, prefer Central Asia (Kazakhstan) as a destination for graduate studies due to lower tuition fees and generous scholarships. Faculty members are mainly from the UK and the US and are motivated to contribute to education and good working conditions (Kuzhabekova & Lee, 2018). This is further evidence of the high value placed on Western education, as argued by Mignolo's concept of geopolitics of knowledge. International students are attracted to English universities in Kazakhstan, and faculty are drawn by the fact that they impart Western English education.

## **The Importance of English Credentials to Students from Non-English Speaking Countries**

The OECD (2024) indicates that the USA, the UK, and Canada are the top destinations for international students. China, India, and South Korea are at the top of the list of countries that send students to Western/English universities. Studies, mainly from the sociology of higher education, have examined how elites in the Global South employ international education to maintain their socially and economically advantageous positions, particularly in the current global context of credential inflation (Wright & Lee, 2019). Other studies have shown that the middle classes rely on the qualifications bestowed by higher education institutions to maintain their class identity and advantage (Brown, 2000). Research has also established that specific geographical locations can be so valuable in the struggle for class advantage that they become forms of capital in themselves, what Borjesson et al. (2007) called "place-specific symbolic capital" (p. 2). In other words, "spatial location determines access to crucial social goods and, in particular, these different kinds of education may have enormous significance for future life trajectory" (Byrne, 1999, p. 110). However, access to geographical locations where specific institutional capital can be acquired is only open to some (Ayling, 2021). These are exclusive places; only a few from the Global South enter these institutions. As the OECD (2024) statistics show, these highly valued institutions are mainly in the USA, UK, and Canada. Some have argued that because of the rise in credentialism and the ubiquitous nature of hegemonic discourses that typically frame the West as technologically, scientifically and intellectually more advanced than Global South countries (Mignolo, 2011), there has been an increase in both the number of international institutions using international/Western curriculum in the Global South (Adams & Agbenyega, 2019) and Western universities with off-shore campuses in the Global South (Nigel, 2018), and the establishment of Western institutions in non-English speaking countries, for example, NU (Hwami, 2023). The availability of Western international branch campuses or off-shore campuses has arguably made it easier for students in the Global South to acquire a desired Western/English degree. In Kazakhstan, these institutions also attract international students who find living and studying in the country less costly, although socially challenging (Mukhamejanova, 2019). Also, institutions such as NU provide grants and free education to international students (Hwami, 2023), thus making them attractive to international students.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### **Internationalization as Western Epistemology: A Geopolitics of Knowledge Theoretical Framing.**

Geopolitics of knowledge (Mignolo, 2011) refers to how geopolitical power dynamics influence knowledge production, distribution, and validation. It centres around understanding how geopolitical and colonial histories deeply influence the production and circulation of knowledge. Mignolo (2021) challenges the dominance of Western epistemology, advocating for a critical perspective on knowledge that recognizes the colonial and imperial legacies shaping global intellectual spaces. The concept recognizes that knowledge and its legitimacy are not neutral or universal but are shaped by historical, cultural, and political contexts, often privileging perspectives from dominant geopolitical regions (such as the Global North) over others (Shahjahan et al., 2022). Additionally, Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2021a) posits that the concept critically addresses the imbalance and inequality in the global circulation of knowledge, highlighting how specific epistemologies and narratives are marginalized or silenced due to their origin outside the centres of geopolitical power. The geopolitics of knowledge is a challenge for everyone, especially the Global South, to consider who gets to produce knowledge, whose knowledge is considered valid, and how power relations affect the global dissemination and acceptance of knowledge (Mignolo, 2002).

Understanding the internationalization of higher education from this lens in the context of the War in Ukraine encompasses examining how geographical and political considerations influence knowledge production, circulation, and legitimization. To Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2021b), the concept unmask Eurocentric epistemological orders, which reinforce the colonial vertical conceptions of internationalization of higher education, where Europe and North America are seen as the centres of knowledge and education. This perpetuates the idea that the international is Europe and North America,

marginalizing other knowledge systems and perspectives from the Global South. Mignolo (2021) amplifies the concept by observing what he refers to as the coloniality of knowledge, meaning the imposition of Western epistemologies and ways of knowing, often devaluing or erasing indigenous knowledge and practices. This process of distortion and destruction is a means of asserting Western dominance. The West or, Europe and North America are part of the belligerents in the War in Ukraine. Thus, deploying Mignolo's concept to analyze higher education internationalization in Kazakhstan in the context of the War in Ukraine illustrates how this process promotes a specific representation of the world deemed universal and modern, reinforcing the hierarchical global education system dominated by the West (Grosfoguel, 2002). This framework allows for a critical reading of the influence of the War in Ukraine on internationalization beyond mere knowledge production to include considerations of who produces knowledge, why, and where it is produced (Hwami, 2024). While Mignolo's geopolitics of knowledge concept urges a departure from traditional Western-centric epistemologies to embrace a more pluralistic, decolonial approach that recognizes and values the diversity of knowledge systems across the world, the War in Ukraine, I argue, seems to have complicated this call. The War in Ukraine may end up entrenching the coloniality of knowledge, establishing a Kazakhstan/Central Asia centred around Western epistemologies and perspectives while marginalizing and silencing other ways of knowing, Central Asian knowledges. This is observed globally, and Eurasia is just a new front witnessing Western epistemological hegemony, a region that was historically untouched by Western colonization. Table 1 illustrates the geopolitics of knowledge concept.

## Methodology

### Research Design

The data for this paper is from a larger three-year (2021-2023) qualitative research project that focused on understanding the experiences of graduate students undergoing what is generally referred to as international education in Kazakhstan. Kazakhstani students studying at Nazarbayev University (NU) participated in the phase of the study captured in this paper. The study employed a transcendental phenomenological research design, which aims to examine one's experience of a phenomenon and the contexts or situations in which one experiences it (Moustakas, 1994). This study is anchored in critical interpretivism, which centres graduate students' experiences while acknowledging broader social, cultural, and historical forces that shape their experiences. In such a critical interpretive study, "the researcher builds a complex, holistic picture, analyses words, and reports detail views of informants" (Creswell, 1998, p. 15). This article's data come from students studying at NU because their proximity to Ukraine makes them more interested and concerned about the War and its consequences. While the study was initially not directly about the War in Ukraine, it was a topic that eventually had to be incorporated, and it dominated conversations during the data collection process.

Table 1  
Geopolitics of Knowledge

Questions	Eurocentric/Modern Conceptions	Contemporary Internationalization Practices
Where does knowledge come from?	Matter/idea/ontology conundrum/mind–body dualism	Epistemology frames ontology/reality is made of knowledge (Western reality)
Who produced the knowledge passed on as international in the modern higher education curriculum?	Non-situated knowledge/un-embodied knowledge/objective knowledge	Euro-America/Eurocentrism (Knowledge circulation, origins not important)

Does knowledge have a geography?	Unsituated knowledge/universality/God-complex/God's-eye-view	Ignores situated knowledges/geopolitics of knowledges. The myth of knowledge circulation.
Is there a place for biography/experience in knowledge generation?	Objective knowledge/impartiality/detachment/disinterested knowledge	Some histories are not important. There are no alternatives. There is a template developed from Western history/experience for others to copy and paste.
Does ideology matter in knowledge?	Neutrality in knowledge production/non-political knowledge/scientific knowledge	Power/knowledge dynamics are ignored. Coloniality of knowledge is ignored.

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Notes: Adapted and edited from Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2021a).

### Data Collection

The Nazarbayev University Institutional Research Ethics Committee (NU IREC) granted ethical approval for this study. An email was sent to all graduate students from one faculty inviting them to participate in focus group sessions. The sample included 210 participants. The NU Office of Academic and Graduate Affairs provided the email list. The data came from three focus group sessions with seven students each, the standard recommended number for focus groups (Krueger, 2002). Twenty-one graduate students positively responded to the call to participate in focus group sessions. All twenty-one identified as ethnic Kazakhs were available for the sessions held in places near the NU campus in the city of Astana. The focus group sessions took about 3 hours and were conducted in English. The aim was to encourage balanced contributions and provide a comprehensive understanding of their experience in international education, shedding light on their experiences and perceptions related to the dominance of Western/English education in internationalization initiatives and views towards internationalization in the context of the War in Ukraine. The focus group sessions were held after the outbreak of the War in Ukraine. As a result, the topic was discussed under ideas of partnerships with Western universities, the adoption of the English language in Kazakhstan and internationalization patterns in the region.

Although the research site, NU, is a unique institution in Kazakhstan and Central Asia as a publicly well-funded Western-oriented autonomous institution (Hwami, 2023), similar sites are gradually emerging. Local institutions adopting EMI are growing in number and are attracting international students. Also, Western university branch campuses are increasing at the government's invitation (Nurmaganbetova, 2023). This means the findings from NU could be representative of the broader emerging higher education landscape in Kazakhstan and Central Asia. Pseudonyms were used for all research participants to respect research confidentiality and anonymity (Saunders et al., 2015).

### Data Analysis

Focus group transcriptions were done by three people (me and two research assistants) and later compared for accuracy. I developed a set of deductive codes addressing or related to the War in Ukraine and the conceptual framework. For example, the value of English education, the importance of where international knowledge is produced, who produced knowledge, the value of local languages, and what these internationalization initiatives mean regarding the ongoing War in Ukraine, among other themes. The next stage in the analysis involved developing a list of codes based on emerging patterns or themes identified from a close reading of transcripts. Comparisons within the focus groups and between focus groups were the primary approaches to creating themes. Since the instruments were all structured, most data were categorised by focus group questions and relatedness to the War in Ukraine. Rather than coding line by line (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), I assigned codes to chunks of data (e.g., phrases, sentences, or paragraphs) to offer context for the statement (DeCuir-Gunby et al., 2011). For example, desired international destinations, the value of an English credential, and the value of the English language vis-à-vis Russian and Kazakh. Under each sub-theme, the participants' views were sought in the context of the

War in Ukraine (e.g., seeking participants' views towards the English or Russian language, whether the war is affecting this key internationalization activity) as elaborated in the findings section below. Once coding was completed, data were sorted by codes and clustered into themes to determine patterns and connections to Mignolo's (2011) geopolitics of knowledge conceptual framework and the War in Ukraine.

### **Positionality**

Given the interpretive nature of this study, I must acknowledge how my lived experiences, social identity, and subjectivity influenced the design and execution of this study. I identify as a Black man who grew up in Southern Africa in one of the most racially segregated countries. I am a faculty member at an international research-intensive university in Kazakhstan. I acquired university graduate education and initial university faculty practice in Canada. I am interested in relations between developed and less developed countries, the lack of meaningful development in the non-West, and neoliberal influences. As an international educator, I see similar features in the curriculums of universities in Africa, Canada and Central Asia, resulting in me asking how the same education can be relevant to these different social contexts. In reading all these discourses, I wear "a global South perspective that we must see the global through the lens of colonialism and slavery" (Banerjee-Dube cited in Christian, 2019, p. 170). I am, therefore, an outsider researcher in Central Asia. These social realities and experiences influenced this research in that my identity, experiences and university affiliation affected my reading of the participants' voices. The paper captures the participants' voices as quotations to enhance and protect the study's validity (Creswell, 1998).

### **Findings**

In the context of the War in Ukraine, the participants of this study have been exposed to Western education and values. While considered one of the dominant interpretations of the War, that Russia is at War with Western countries and NATO on Ukraine's territory, Kazakhstani graduate students' views were largely pro-West and critical of Russia. I present these emerging themes/findings in the following sections with representative quotes from pseudonymized participants.

#### **Where and Who Produces Knowledge: The Western or Russian University**

The geopolitics of knowledge concept posits that some geographical places produce knowledge that is considered valuable. The issue of where knowledge is produced and by whom (Mignolo, 2011) is topical when critically examining internationalization in higher education. The War in Ukraine is reportedly disrupting student movements, and Russia was a popular destination for students from Kazakhstan. The data from this study show that graduate student participants increasingly desire to go to Western universities for their studies, not Russia. Participants were asked: Would you prefer to study in Western Europe, North America, or Russia rather than at Nazarbayev University? The following responses were captured. "I think studying abroad would be a great opportunity. It would be more like a scholarship to develop as a professional" (Kuttubayeva). Another response was: "I would definitely go if I could study in the West. Even though I said I am patriotic, I believe education in the West is better. Yeah, I think we all have this perspective that Westerners provide better knowledge." (Rauza). For Hamliya, "I will definitely choose a US or UK university because their education is recognized all over the world." Kanat, Nurziya, and Aissulu expressed similar sentiments. When asked what about studying in Russia? The participants persistently referred to Russia as their former colonizer. Moreover, Davran talked more directly about the War in Ukraine. "Who would want to go to Russia? We hear there is a professor here at NU supporting Russia on his Facebook page. Why do such a thing?" Other focus group participants showed support for this view.

The high value placed on Western and English educational credentials in non-Western countries has long been established, with some viewing them as guarantees for top professional positions and social class capital (Ayling, 2021; Holloway et al., 2012). The continued vast movement of students from non-Western countries, primarily non-English speaking Asia, supports the view that Western universities are the centre of modern epistemology (OECD, 2024). The



geopolitics of knowledge concept alleges that the internationalization of higher education promotes a particular representation of the world that is considered universal and modern (Mignolo, 2011), and the interest towards acquiring Western education credentials supports this view. Kazakhstan is no exception to this observation but the War in Ukraine is accelerating the adoption of Western at the expense of Russian epistemology. “We need Western knowledge to run Kazakhstan’s modern industry and not Russian education” (Nursulu). Rauza corroborated this: “Studying in the West is what we all would like to do to develop Kazakhstan. Our history under Russian colonialism makes it challenging to support them or to go and study there. It is not my first choice, not at all.” The student participants expressed their high value on Western English education, providing empirical evidence to the geopolitics of knowledge thesis. Notably, no one indicated that they would like to study in Russia. As indicated above, all the twenty-one participants identified as ethnic Kazakhs, and none were Russian. Ethnic Russians comprise 15% of Kazakhstan's population (Loftus, 2023).

### **Internationalization, Universal Western Epistemology and the War in Ukraine**

Arguing from the geopolitics of knowledge perspective, Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2021a) posits that Eurocentric epistemological orders reinforce the colonial vertical conceptions of internationalization of higher education, where Europe and North America are seen as the centre of knowledge and education. Mignolo (2011) argues that there is an imperial form of understanding the world where only Western-defined ideals are considered developed and modern. The data captured in this study showed that graduate students consider Western education the only one worthy of study because of its relevance to modern development. This is corroborated by research evidence from other parts of the non-Western world where an English/Western credential is the most sought after as it brings advantages in class competition for scarce goods and services (Kim, 2016; Waters, 2005). The supremacy of the West, Western education and Western-educated faculty is widely recognized and admired by Kazakhstani graduate students. For instance, “the presence of international faculty, some of whom are very successful in academics and industry, for example, one who worked at NASA and the other at Rolls-Royce Motors, brings immense international expertise to the local Kazakhstanis” (Nurziya) including developing open-minded and tolerant Kazakhstanis (Gullala, Aknu, Zhanat, Aizat). The importance of understanding the imbrication of the global and the local was indicated by some participants (Aigul, Serik, Raushana, Azza). These expressions were presented with constant reference to the Soviet past as a time of colonial rule, backwardness and lack of meaningful development. For example, Anar said, “My father told me that Kazakhs were not allowed to be international during the Soviet times. We were only allowed to interact with fellow Central Asians. Only Russians and Ukrainians were allowed to interact with other nations. Now we are free, and to develop, we need Western education and good relations with the West.” Extending this historical perspective, Davron said, “The Kazakh language was suppressed, and we spoke only Russian at school. But now we are independent; I am changing my identity and using Kazakh everywhere possible.” These historical experiences explain the emerging trend in Kazakhstan, where students prefer to study in the West and not in Russia. The War in Ukraine is cementing an anti-colonial and anti-Russian attitude that is very strong among the young generation, such as university students. “The Russians are the aggressors; do not forget they were in Almaty in January (Almira).” “We invited them, though,” retorted Gullala. “That does not matter; what is happening in Ukraine could also be done here in Kazakhstan”, was Almira’s response in this focus group discussion. “So, after this situation between Russia and Ukraine (the War in Ukraine), we started to remember the history that Russia once colonized us; therefore, like most of us, our first language is Russian. And after this, I started to realize that actually like this is what it takes to be patriotic. First of all, you have to know your language, your Kazakh, your mother tongue. So, to be patriotic right now means learning the Kazakh language, even though your first language was Russian. Knowing your language is one of the most important ways to save your identity. Furthermore, that means being patriotic. Yeah!” (Zilola)

The discussion about language and patriotism inevitably led to the focus group discussion on the war in Ukraine. Azza said, “We were forced to speak in Russian. Now my Kazakh is poor. I speak and write Russian better than Kazakh. It is embarrassing.” Nursulu corroborated, “The Soviet times were not good for the Kazakhs. It is difficult to support the Russians.” What is observed from these expressions is a historically developed animosity towards Russia and its imperial

past. The participants observe the old imperial Russia in the War in Ukraine. Concerning the internationalization of higher education, Russian universities and language are the first casualties of this war. It can be argued that Kazakhstani students now prefer to study in the West rather than Russia despite the huge cultural differences between the West and Central Asia. The War in Ukraine is causing the young Kazakhstanis to drift away from Russia towards the West faster than past Soviet experiences had caused. As was observed, the English language is creating a new class of people in Kazakhstan (Hwami & Bedeker, 2024; Bedeker et al., 2024). As the War in Ukraine is seen as between Russia and the West, the recipients of education under internationalization have a Western outlook towards life. The young would like to see more Westernization in Kazakhstan. To Nurziya, "The West has freedoms, and that is what we would like to see here." Laisara expanded, "We should have a democracy like it is in the West." Wearing a qualitative interpretive lens, these participants are saying they like the democratic West and not Russia. Considering the views of these participants, it will be interesting to see whether student movements to Russia will retain the pre-war volumes after the war.

The geopolitics of knowledge concept enables the reading of higher education internationalization beyond what is knowledge to who and where knowledge is produced (Mignolo, 2011; 2021). The perspective unmasks cognitive injustices, where specific knowledge systems and perspectives are privileged over others (Santos, 2018). What the War in Ukraine promotes in Kazakhstan is an adoption of Western epistemology, dealing a significant blow to the cries of the geopolitics of knowledge school. Because of the War in Ukraine, the intersecting of history and international education, an imagery of Kazakhstan's future could be made. For these Kazakhstani participants, the future is Western. This may culminate in the marginalization and exclusion of diverse ways of knowing, hindering the cultivation of a truly inclusive and diverse international higher education in Kazakhstan.

### **The War in Ukraine, Modernity and the International**

According to Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2021), the international in Western and English. Some scholars and commentators present the War in Ukraine as an attack on European civilization (Petrencu, 2023), thus not expected to happen in Europe but maybe in Africa or the Middle East. The West is associated with modernity. It is a view that positions the West and its values, knowledge systems, and achievements as superior and universal while marginalizing and devaluing non-European cultures and knowledge (Bedeker et al., 2024; Mignolo, 2021). Contemporary internationalization initiatives emulate Western education systems, and Kazakhstanis are very conscious. Some brand internationalization in higher education as Westernisation, specifically Anglicization (Stein et al., 2019). To Serik, "In Kazakhstan or post-Soviet countries, there is a mindset when discussing development. We are always thinking about the West." The government of Kazakhstan refers to a multi-vector policy in education that underscores diversification, international collaboration and educational modernization (Nurbek, 2024). The international is Western and English (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2021), and modernization refers to the West, not Russia. "We need Western ideas and education to develop and maybe catch up with the First World" (Kuttubayeva). After probing questions on whether adopting Western education was not moving from one Soviet to Western neoliberal hegemony, Rauza said, "It is out of free will. No one is forcing us to study English or go to study at Cambridge or other universities in developed countries. We want to develop and be modern like the West. We have the resources. However, we were forced to learn the Russian language." To Zilola, "Russia is not a modern society. Russians are Soviets and the Soviet Union was not good for us. Russia is not good for us, but Western knowledge and technology is what we need." The association of the West with the modernity that Kazakhstan should strive to become was consistent in this discussion. For example, "Most of us are angry because of this war. We do not need it in this region. We must develop, we are behind and need to catch up and not wars" (Nursulu). Davron thought that not supporting the War in Ukraine was in line with the policy of the government of Kazakhstan. "I think what we are saying here is in line with our government's policy. I have not heard any government official, even our President, speaking in favour of the war." Serik said this was practical as Kazakhstan cannot survive without Russia: "We have to be practical, however. We cannot do without Russia. She is our neighbour, but I do not support the war. We all think that if Kazakhstan does anything that Russia does not like, we can also be invaded. What we want is not war but to develop and be modern."

Thus, these voices present Russia as an obstacle to Kazakhstani modernization, and the War in Ukraine is the evidence. From a geopolitics of knowledge perspective, these participants yearn for Western education. The participants' views are characterized by believing in the superiority of European epistemology and civilization (Mignolo, 2021).

## **Conclusion**

This study aimed to centre and amplify the voices and experiences of Kazakhstani graduate students participating in international education in Kazakhstan in the context of the War in Ukraine. I did so by offering insight into how they understand and conceptualize the importance of English international credentials and the historical factors that motivate them. I drew on the geopolitics of knowledge (Mignolo, 2011) as a conceptual framework to understand what drives students from Kazakhstan towards an English education and to shed light on the role and importance of institutional cultural capital derived from English universities. Equally significant is Kazakhstan's Soviet past, which many would instead not remember. The War in Ukraine is catalysing a process already in motion: the drift away from Russian influence and ways of life, including international education. Increasingly, Kazakhstani students are imagining international education as Western. Several significant conclusions can be derived from the findings contributing to comparative and international higher education research.

First, the concerns of scholarship from the Global South that there is cognitive injustice characterized by Western epistemologies dominating and marginalizing other knowledges (Santos, 2018) has been dealt a significant blow. Case studying Kazakhstan, the local epistemology cannot be separated from the Russian language and culture. With the War in Ukraine defined as an attack on modern civilization values and Kazakhstan students agreeing with that view, it can be reasonably argued that the foundations of Westernized Kazakhstan have already been laid down.

Second, while university choice decision-making is often framed as rational (Perna, 2006), this study's findings suggest that obtaining an English credential is the most crucial consideration for some students and nothing else. While this is common among students in the Global South, what makes this unique in Kazakhstan is that some participants in this study framed their decision to pursue university graduate studies as freedom from the colonial Soviet system. Therefore, Western-oriented international education could be instrumental in the de-Russification of Kazakhstan.

The findings show that the War is accelerating the adoption of Western values via international education offered in English/Western institutions. However, it must be added that the study participants are young and ethnic Kazakhs, a category that is generally pro-West and anti-Soviet/Russia. Also, the research site is a Westernized social entity, possibly more than any other institution in Kazakhstan. One wonders what findings a different age group (e.g., over 50) or ethnic group (e.g., Russian) would produce. Equally complicating the developments in Kazakhstan is the growing number of Russian universities branch campuses (Nurmaganbetova, 2023) and the movement of academics from Russia to Kazakhstani universities (Bayetova, 2022). These developments present the higher education terrain as fluid and there is the need to avoid rushing into conclusions caused by the War in Ukraine. Moreover, more research is needed on the long-term outcomes of academic and social experiences that fall under the banner of internationalization in uncertain environments, such as those created by the War in Ukraine.

## **Limitations of the Study**

Like all qualitative research studies, the study's sample means the findings should be cautiously generalized. Also, qualitative interpretive research involves the researcher employing his experiences to understand participants' expressions. Other people might interpret the findings differently. Lastly, the fact that NU is a very Westernized institution should also be considered as it is the only one of its kind in Kazakhstan. The participants of this study are different to the rest of the country's student population.

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