

# Effects of the Russia-Ukraine Conflict on the Internationalization of Higher Education in Kyrgyzstan

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## Abstract

*The war in Ukraine has affected the internationalization of higher education in Kyrgyzstan in a number of ways, some unique to Kyrgyzstan and some paralleling effects in other countries. This reflective essay, drawing on four theoretical frameworks, with a focus on examining the actors involved, and informed by personal communications and participant observations, suggests that further research is needed on a number of Kyrgyzstan-specific topics. Moreover, the presence in Kyrgyzstan's capital of two internationalized universities with connections to opposing side in the conflict – the Kyrgyz-Russian Slavic University and the American University in Central Asia – puts forth the notion that post-World War II assumptions about internationalization contributing to mutual understanding were developed in specific contexts. The complexity of the forms internationalization takes now implies that the comparative and international education field might benefit from some broader rethinking about the rationales for and effects of internationalization.*

Keywords: internationalization, transnational education, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Ukraine war

Украинадагы согуш Кыргызстандагы жогорку билим берүүнүн интернационалдашуусуна ар түрдүү таасирин тийгизди. Алардын айрымдары Кыргызстанга гана таандык болсо, кээ бири башка өлкөлөр менен бирдей мүнөзгө ээ. Бул рефлексивдүү баян катышуучу тараптарды изилдөөгө басым жасап, о.э. жеке пикир алышуу жана жеке катышып байкоо жүргүзүү ыкмалары аркылуу маалымат алуу менен төрт теориялык негизге таянып жазылган. Ал Кыргызстанга тиешелүү бир катар темалар боюнча мындан аркы изилдөөлөр зарыл экенин көрсөтөт. Мындан тышкары, Кыргызстандын борборунда карама-каршы тараптар менен байланышы бар эки эл аралык университеттин – Кыргыз-Орус Славян университетинин жана Борбордук Азиядагы Америка университетинин болушу согуштан кийин өз ара түшүнүүчүлүккө өбөлгө боло турган интернационалдашуу жөнүндөгү божомолдор конкреттүү контексттерде өрчүйт деген ойду жарат. Интернационалдашуунун бүгүнкү күндөгү түрүнүн татаалдыгы интернационалдашуунун себептери

менен натыйжаларын кайра кенен карап чыгуу салыштырма жана эл аралык билим берүү тармагы үчүн пайдалуу боло турганын билдирет.

Война в Украине повлияла на интернационализацию высшего образования в Кыргызстане по-разному, некоторые из них уникальны для Кыргызстана, а некоторые имеют параллельные последствия в других странах. Это рефлексивное эссе, опирающееся на четырех теоретических основах, с акцентом на изучении участвующих сторон, а также на личном общении и наблюдениях участников, предполагает, что необходимы дальнейшие исследования по ряду тем, специфических для Кыргызстана. Более того, наличие в столице Кыргызстана двух интернационализированных университетов, имеющих связи с противоборствующей стороной конфликта – Кыргызско-Российского Славянского университета и Американского университета в Центральной Азии – выдвигает идею о том, что послевоенные предположения об интернационализации, способствующие взаимопониманию будет развиваться в конкретных контекстах. Сложность форм, которые принимает сегодня интернационализация, подразумевает, что сфера сравнительного и международного образования могла бы выиграть от более широкого переосмысления причин и последствий интернационализации.

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## Introduction

“The State Department sent me to Kyrgyzstan.” This is the headline of Isabella Romine’s article in the student newspaper of Wake Forest University in North Carolina (Romine, 2024). As a student receiving the State Department’s Critical Languages Scholarship to study Russian, Romine did not have the option of spending the summer of 2023 in Russia because of the war in Ukraine and US sanctions. While Romine appears delighted with her experience and eager to return to Kyrgyzstan, others affected by the war have had more disruptive and less pleasant encounters with its results. A list of those affected by the war highlights some of the characteristics of Kyrgyzstan that make the war’s consequences for the internationalization of higher education distinctive in some ways and similar to other countries in other ways.

### Actors Specific to Kyrgyzstan

The following Actors play roles in the internationalization of higher education in Kyrgyzstan. (1) American University of Central Asia, its US partner, Bard College, and Bard’s links to the now-closed Smolny College at the University of St. Petersburg, leading to some Russian and US faculty and administrators relocating to AUCA; (2) Kyrgyz Russian Slavic University and its new rector, Denis Fomin-Nilov, plus the Russian university international branch campuses in Kyrgyzstan; (3) Huge youth population and the lack of sufficient jobs which leads to a substantial out-migration to Russia (and elsewhere) for work; (4) Returning migrants, including some who have obtained Russian citizenship, but who do not want to be forced to serve in the Russian army, and others concerned about the current atmosphere in Russia; and (5) Children of these migrants who lived in Russia and went to school there, and now are coming back and enrolling in Kyrgyzstani schools and universities.

### Actors Present in Other Countries

The following Actors also exist in other countries. (1) Russian “relokanty” – young men, occasionally with families, who left Russia during the military mobilization and came to Kyrgyzstan, either as a “first stop,” or as a more permanent relocation, as they could come without a visa; (2) South Asian medical students who were studying in Ukraine and now look to continue their education elsewhere; and (3) US education abroad students who, under other circumstances, might have studied in Russia and Ukraine.

This list is generated from personal communications, participant observations, and media reports rather than a systematic survey of higher education institutions in Kyrgyzstan. These actors suggest that four theoretical frameworks may

be relevant for analyzing the effects of the war on the internationalization of higher education in Kyrgyzstan. First, Moscowitz and Sabzalieva's (2023) SIAOS framework (Scales, Interests, Agents, and Opportunity Structures) analyzes the "new geopolitics" in higher education, which they describe as an environment altered by "mounting backlashes to multi-lateralism and free trade, a resurgence of populism and nationalism, the COVID-19 pandemic, climate related emergencies, intensified territorial conflicts and new military invasions, and increased attention to structural racism, coupled with the spread of grassroots social and political movements." Second, Dakowska and Harmsen's (2015) model for analyzing Europeanization and Internationalization in Central and Eastern European Higher Education Institutions, which focuses on Structures, Norms, and Actors. Third, Chankseliani's (2020) analysis of Russian International Branch Campuses (IBCs) in "the Near Abroad" which concludes that decisions to locate campuses abroad are made not by individual institutions, but rather by the government of the Russian Federation, and not for financial gain or prestige, but rather "as a tool to retain and strengthen its [the government's] political power and influence in the region" (Online, Abstract). Finally, Ergin and colleagues' (2019) discussion of "forced internationalization" – the need for nations and institutions to develop policies, procedures, and practices to support faculty and students who are working and studying in new locations not by choice but rather because they have been "forcibly displaced" from their home institutions and places as a result of "conflict, violence, or persecution."

### **Actors and Actions Specific to Kyrgyzstan**

#### ***AUCA and KRSU***

One unique factor in Kyrgyzstan is that the American University of Central Asia and the Kyrgyz-Russian Slavic University, named after Boris Yeltsin, are both located in Bishkek, the capital of the country. This sets up an interesting dynamic in which the two institutions have links to countries that are on opposite sides of the war, setting up clear differences in their geopolitical "interests," to use the Moscowitz and Sabzalieva's (2023) term. In Moscowitz and Sabzalieva's schema, the interests may be economic, political, cultural, collective, or individual. Both the US and Russia have interests in most of those categories, with different emphases (Cooley, 2012) and new priorities since the war began.

Russia shows its "soft power" interests in Kyrgyzstan through a number of projects in education, including building schools with Russian-medium of instruction, supplying Russian-speaking teachers to Kyrgyz schools, donating Russian-language textbooks in a number of subjects, training teachers to Russian standards, and supporting nutrition programs (Altynbaev, 2021; Osmonalieva, 2024a; Osmonalieva, 2024b). Rossotrudnichestvo, the "agency whose main mission is to strengthen Russia's humanitarian influence in the world," according to its website (Rossotrudnichestvo, n.d., para 1) is the actor in Kyrgyzstan which implements these projects. Some observers, however, critique Russian methods and materials as being outdated (Altynbaev, 2021).

Kyrgyzstan also is a member of the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU Member States, n.d.). The day before the May 26, 2022 Eurasian Economic Forum meeting in Bishkek, rectors from universities in member countries agreed to form the Eurasian Network University (Belarussian State University, 2022), a virtual university network that now has 32 members from all EAEU member states (Nizhnii-Novgorod, 2024). [This should not be confused with the EU's Eurasian Universities Union, <https://euras-edu.org/>.] The member universities in Kyrgyzstan are Bishkek State University, the Kyrgyz Economic University, the Kyrgyz State Technical University, and Osh State University (Eurasian Network University, 2024). The announcement of the creation of the ENU followed by one day the declaration by the Russian Minister of Science and Higher Education, Valery Falkov, that Russia would leave the Bologna Process (Russia to Quit, 2022). The ENU thus might be seen another element of Russian soft power, an attempt to keep EAEU member states' universities within the Russian orbit.

KRSU itself received substantial attention from Russia in the second half of 2023 and the beginning of 2024. On June 1, 2023, Vladimir Nifadiev, who had been the rector of KRSU since it was founded in 1993 was removed (Podolskaya, 2023). On September 13, 2023, Denis Fomin-Nilov was appointed the new rector (Osmonalieva, 2023a). On September 19,

2023, plans for building a new campus for KRSU were announced (Orlova, 2023). On October 5, 2023 during Putin's visit to Kyrgyzstan, his first international trip since the International Criminal Court had issued a warrant for his arrest, the Russian Government and the Cabinet of Ministers of Kyrgyzstan signed an updated agreement covering KRSU's operations in Kyrgyzstan (Government of Russia, 2023). On October 17, 2023, an agreement between KRSU and Far Eastern University in Russia was announced; the agreement included retraining for KRSU faculty at the Russian university (Osmonalieva, 2023b). On October 27, 2023, the Deputy Minister of Education and Science of Russia, Konstantin Mogilevsky, gave a speech at a conference in Kyrgyzstan in which he emphasized the strong ties between the two countries in the field of education and their "common intellectual space" (Mogilevsky, 2023, p). On December 8, 2023, the new rector of KRSU gave an interview in which he said that KRSU had "advanced illnesses which will be painful to treat" but that he had plans to make it a university that students from Russia would want to come to (Kudryavtseva, 2023, p.1 ). On January 31, 2024, the Parliament of Kyrgyzstan approved the agreement the Cabinet of Ministers had signed on October 5, and on February 7, 2024, President Japarov also signed that agreement (Alybekova, 2024).

The new agreement limits the tenure of the rector to a maximum of two five-year terms. The rector also cannot be more than 70 years old and the agreement clarifies that the rector is chosen by the Russian side. The university will be run by a council of six members from Russia and six from Kyrgyzstan. The agreement also spells out land and property agreements and includes the legal basis for financing construction, which is necessary for building a campus and dormitories (Government of Russia, 2023; Alybekova, 2024). The conditions of the agreement, and the plans laid out by the new rector, presage a more activist KRSU than had been evident in the last two decades.

Following Chankseliani's (2020) insight, the Slavic university's interests, as a jointly founded institution of the two governments, more likely parallel those of the Russian government, whereas AUCA, despite its current links to US and international partners, is a Kyrgyzstani institution, founded by Kyrgyzstanis. Russia has economic and cultural interests in Kyrgyzstan, as well as political ones, including a military base in Kant. The cultural interests affect higher education institutions in terms of languages taught, languages of instruction, how history is taught, and other elements of the curriculum, although, as will be discussed later, resentment toward being considered "the near abroad" is growing in Kyrgyzstan among a number of commentators.

Even at the individual level, professors at the two institutions are affected by the conflict. The new rector of KRSU, Denis Fomin-Nilov (2023), reportedly told faculty not to communicate with or teach at AUCA, although some KRSU faculty deny this (personal communications, January 2024) and at least one professor from KRSU is teaching a class at AUCA in the Spring 2024 semester. Although KRSU is not a branch campus of a Russian university but rather a jointly-established university (Kyrgyz-Russian Slavic University, n.d.; Knight & Simpson, 2022), Chankseliani's (2020) observations based on research on Russian International Branch Campuses are relevant here: KRSU is not an independent institutional actor, but rather, using her term, a "tool" of the Russian government to advance its interests in Kyrgyzstan. Khaydarov (2023), in his recently published chapter on Russian IBCs in Uzbekistan, agrees: "I argue that Russian IBCs serve Russia's political and economic interests rather than contributing to Uzbekistan's academic interests and the internationalization of HE" (p. 209).

The "scale" dimension of the Moscovitz and Sabzalieva (2023) framework also provides insights into the dynamics occurring between AUCA and KRSU. Moscovitz and Sabzalieva offer options of global, regional, national, local, and individual. The scale of the relationship between AUCA and KRSU is not simply institution-to-institution but rather nation-to-nation. This suggests the need for further research and theorizing in the evolving field of Transnational Education, defined as the movement of programs, providers, and institutions to a host nation, in contrast to traditional forms of mobility, where people – students and faculty – do the traveling to an institution's home or host campus (Knight, 2010; Knight, 2016). Many of the publications on transnational education have focused on its economic dimensions (see, inter alia, Lane & Kinser, 2013) and fewer have looked at political interests. Although some consideration has been given to changing relationships between guest and host nations – the case of US international branch campuses in China is an example – the relationships between guest campuses in the same host nation has barely been considered. At the same time, the Kyrgyzstani case is

particularly complex in that AUCA is not an international branch campus but rather a Kyrgyzstani institution, initially established by Kamila Sharshkeeva and other Kyrgyzstani academics as a kafedra of the Kyrgyz National University (AUCA, n.d.b). Only later did it become free-standing and acquire US and international partners, such as Bard College in the US (AUCA, n.d.a) and the international Open Society University Network (OSUN, n.d.a) So AUCA can hardly be told to “go home” – it is home, even if some in the Jogorku Kenesh (national legislature) would like to brand some of its partners and associates as “foreign agents” (Putz, 2023a; Putz, 2023b).

The role of what Moscowitz and Sabzalieva (2023) call “Agents” and Dakowska and Harmsen (2015) call “Actors” is relevant here. Moscowitz and Sabzalieva state that Agents may be governments; higher education institutions; faculty, staff, and students; nonstate entities; civil society; or “anomalous geopolitical spaces” (p. 8). The “agents” in the case of KRSU and the Russian International Branch Campuses operating in Kyrgyzstan are not individual institutions or administrators making choices about setting up branch campuses and interacting with other players on the ground; rather, the agents are governments, with national interests (see Moscowitz & Sabzalieva’s “interests” category) at play (Chankseliani, 2022; Gogotishvili, 2023; Knight & Simpson, 2022). Dakowska and Harmsen, who were writing specifically about change in Central and Eastern European universities, in terms of internationalization and Europeanization, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the reunification of Germany, and the advent of the Bologna Process, are interested in the roles of international organizations and national actors as “policy entrepreneurs” and “norm entrepreneurs” in times of change (pp. 16-17). National actors, they suggest, can either “download external norms” or try to “upload” national norms into international debates, or the national actors can try to implement a complex balancing act between national traditions and new ideas and mandates from abroad. Dakowska and Harmsen, along with other authors in the special issue of the *European Journal of Higher Education* they edited, are interested in who the national actors are and why they make the policy choices they do. As noted below, the study of such motivations is a potential area for future research regarding the choices individuals in Kyrgyzstan have made in the era of the war, particularly those who might be considered “norm entrepreneurs” in the case of decolonization, discussed below.

### **AUCA’s Partners and Connections**

The situation becomes more complicated when an internationalized Kyrgyzstani university is embedded in a web of external relationships. The American University in Central Asia, as noted, is partnered with Bard College in the US (AUCA, n.d.a). Bard, in turn, founded Smolny College at St. Petersburg State University in Russia.

Smolny College, a collaboration between Bard College and St. Petersburg State University, was founded in the mid-1990s and became Russia's first liberal arts college. It offered dual- degree programs, hosting numerous student and faculty exchanges and providing courses through virtual classrooms. Despite political challenges, it continued to thrive until June 2021, when Bard College was labeled an "undesirable organization" in Russia, marking a significant attack on the liberal arts model and institutions (Bard College Berlin, 2024, paragraph 2.)

With the closure of Smolny, both US and Russian faculty and administrators there relocated, and some relocated to Kyrgyzstan. Michael Freese, the Dean of Student Affairs at AUCA, directed Bard programs at Smolny for nine years before he was deported from Russia when Smolny became “undesirable” (Moscow Times, 2021; AUCA, 2022). Three former Smolny faculty now are teaching at AUCA, with their salaries reportedly paid by Bard (personal communications, January 2024). This would be an example of Ergin and colleagues’ concept of “forced internationalization” (Ergin et al., 2019). Whether or not the former Smolny professors are pleased to be in Kyrgyzstan, and whether or not AUCA administrators, faculty, and students are pleased to have them, their movement took place not by their own choice, but rather because of the decisions taken on a scale, to use Moscowitz and Sabzalieva’s (2023) term, that is far removed from them as individuals or institutions; the scale, rather, is national and international.

AUCA also is a member of OSUN, the Open Society University Network, founded by Bard and Central European University, which has the Open Society Foundation as its “philanthropic partner” (OSUN, n.d.a.). Among the goals of OSUN is to “foster critical thinking and intellectual inquiry to strengthen the foundations of open societies amidst a

resurgence of authoritarian regimes” (OSUN, n.d.b.). Actors linked to AUCA are embedded in a particular set of values, recalling Dakowska and Harmsen’s (2015) concept of the role of norms in the changes in Eastern and Central European universities brought about by internationalization and Europeanization after the collapse of the Berlin Wall. As Dakowska and Harmsen’s framework would suggest, national actors at AUCA at times likely have complex roles to play, balancing the norms of influencers with conflicting values. This is because the web of organizations AUCA is connected to, and their norms, are not the only values and influences found in Kyrgyzstan. Kyrgyzstan is a young country – 45% of its population was under 25 in 2022 (CIA World Factbook, 2024) and one that cannot provide well-paid employment to all of those of working age.

International labor migration continues to serve as a safety valve that decreases pressure on the labor market and resources (healthcare, education, and pensions), while also reducing poverty through much-needed remittances. The main destinations for labor migrants are Russia and Kazakhstan, where wages are higher; almost a third of Kyrgyzstan’s working-age population migrate to Russia alone (CIA World Factbook, 2024). Moreover, as noted, Russia has a military base in Kant (Tiwari, 2023) and six branch campuses of Russian universities operate in the country (Bilim Aki Press, 2024). Vladimir Putin stated in a recent speech:

Currently, over 16,000 university students from Kyrgyzstan are studying in Russia, including 7,000 with the Russian government’s grants. The government quota for Kyrgyzstan in the 2023/24 academic year will be 1,000 places with such grants (President of Russia, 2023). Clearly, then norms and influences that contrast with those that AUCA and its partners espouse are present in Kyrgyzstan, and it is not only external actors that espouse these contrasting values.

### ***Changing Migration Patterns***

The war has had an impact on Russia’s influence in Kyrgyzstan and in ways that affect higher education. While changing labor migration numbers and migrants’ motivations can be difficult to document, reports of that some migrants, particularly those holding Russian passports, being forced to fight in Ukraine, and the deaths of others, plus the diversification of possible labor migration destinations (Agence France-Presse, 2023; Aki Press, 2024b; Ismailbekova & Almazbekova, 2023; Lillis, 2022; Ozat, 2023, Ziener, 2023) all may mean that Russia is no longer seen as the most desirable option for young people seeking to earn a decent wage. Those with limited education and skills, including language skills, have fewer alternatives than do those with higher education, English or other language skills, and family resources. However, some migrant families are returning to Kyrgyzstan and are bringing with them children educated in Russian schools who now seek to enroll in Kyrgyzstani universities. At AUCA, for example, in the Spring 2024 semester, 73 students with Russian citizenship are studying, almost all from families returning due to the war (personal communication, February 2, 2024). This would be another example of forced migration, although in a milder form for all concerned than Ergin and colleagues’ original conceptualization of the idea, based on thousands of Syrian refugees now living in camps in Turkey who speak Arabic and not Turkish, who do not have families who are established in their host country, and who were uprooted without their necessary documents proving prior education and credentials (Ergin et al., 2019).

Changes in destinations for labor migration and changes in families’ choices about staying in Russia could have implications for higher education in Kyrgyzstan. If destinations other than Russia become favored for migrant work, then languages other than Russian might gain greater emphasis in schools, although English already is widely taught. This, in turn, would have implications for the teachers of those languages and those preparing to become teachers. If the numbers of children educated in schools in Russia, without academic knowledge of the Kyrgyz language and Kyrgyz history are enrolling in Kyrgyzstani schools and universities, then more teachers in those fields might be needed. Moreover, it will be interesting to see what attitudes these new students have toward both Russia and Kyrgyzstan. Will they have absorbed Russian chauvinism? Or will they have faced sufficient discrimination that they will be happy to be among their compatriots and eager to learn their own language and history? Or will they fall somewhere in between? In any case, they and their prior

education will provide challenges for Kyrgyzstani educators. Without intending to be, the returning students might be “norm entrepreneurs” (Dakowska & Harmsen, 2015).

### ***Decolonization***

Languages taught, languages of instruction, and how history is taught connect to the broader idea of decolonization, which Gorshenina (2021), in a comprehensive chapter on the subject, defines as “The process of liberation from colonialism and of gaining independence, as well as the process of overcoming (post)coloniality.” (p. 178). Postcoloniality, in its turn, she defines as “The intellectual, ideological and cultural consequences of colonialism that remain after the formal end of a colonial order.” Much has been written about decolonization in Central Asia, although Smagulova, speaking specifically about Kazakhstan, is quoted by Konurbaeva (2023) as saying:

decolonisation ... lies in the horizontal plane – and is mentioned by the civil society, and various activists, artists, feminist movements view their activities through the lens of decolonisation. However, there is no intergroup dialogue between them (para. 3)

This seems to be the case more broadly, as decolonization is discussed separately in the arts (Baibolova, 2021), politics and conflict resolution (Lottholz, 2022), the impact on feminism (Kravtsova, 2022), media (IWPR, 2023), language and culture (Marat, 2023), and other topics. Doolotkeldieva (n.d.) and the 2023 Esimde conference (Esimde, 2023) are exceptions, discussing decolonization from multidisciplinary perspectives. Yet specific treatment of decolonization in higher education curricula remains rare. Those curricula in Kyrgyzstan still are designed by groups appointed by the Ministry of Education, and innovation comes slowly.

Four authors who discuss decolonization in academic contexts are Bissenova (2023), Doolotkeldieva and Ortmann (2024), Kassymbekova (2022), and Niyozov and Bahry (2022). Bissenova writes about anthropology, Doolotkeldieva and Ortmann about area studies, Kassymbekova about history, and Niyozov and Bahry about academic research. Of the three, only Kassymbekova mentions the Ukraine war. She discusses how the location of Ukraine and Belarus in Europe has caused German and other European historians to examine Ukrainian and Belarusian history in terms of European themes. In addition, the invasion of Ukraine has led to renewed attention of the study of imperialism. That renewed attention may also be taking place in Kyrgyzstan, but documentation thus far is lacking.

### **Actors and Actions Also Present Elsewhere**

The Russian “relokanty” (relocated individuals who left Russia due to the military mobilization) seem to have had a minimal effect on higher education internationalization in Kyrgyzstan, which is different from the situation in Uzbekistan, where even before the mass military mobilization (Kakasenko, 2022), some professors with international backgrounds assessed the situation and decided to seek options elsewhere (personal communications, July 2023; January and February, 2024). Many of the relokanty in Kyrgyzstan appear to have jobs that they could do remotely, and those who do not have such positions usually are not qualified to be professors (Matusevich, 2023). Sharshenova (2023) notes that:

in 2022 Central Asian republics witnessed waves of Russian migration following stages of military mobilisation in Russia. Their experiences are quite different from Central Asians’ experiences in Russia. The 2022-2023 migrants from Russia usually come with either a secure remote job or some savings. Central Asian governments quickly developed special visa and tax regimes to facilitate their arrival. Kyrgyzstan offered “digital nomad” programme for Russian and the Eurasian Economic Union’s professionals and their families. While life in migration

certainly comes with difficulties, one cannot ignore the stark difference in the experiences of an average Central Asian Gastarbeiter and an average Russian Relokant. (para. 5).

On February 2, 2024, *Aki Press* reported that 2070 individuals had received “digital nomad” status in Kyrgyzstan (*Aki Press*, 2024). Although citizens of 12 countries are eligible for this status, it seems likely that the majority of those becoming digital nomads are Russian relokanty.

### **Ukrainian Migrants**

Ukrainian males of appropriate ages must serve in the military and cannot leave their country. As such, many of the Ukrainian academics who have left are female (Strelnyk & Shcherbyna, 2023). Few of these scholars appear to have settled in Kyrgyzstan, even temporarily. Their movement instead appears to be westward into Poland and further to other European countries. The few academics who did arrive in Bishkek often leave, sometimes mid-semester, when visas to European countries come through (personal communications, January 2024). Colleagues in the IT sector in Uzbekistan also report that many IT relokanty who initially arrived in Uzbekistan, as they could come without a visa, have moved to places paying higher salaries, often elsewhere in Asia (personal communication, January 2024).

### **South Asian Students and Forced Internationalization**

A number of articles discuss South Asian medical students who left Ukraine and resumed their medical studies elsewhere, with Kyrgyzstan mentioned simply as one country in a list of places they have moved to (e.g. Shirodkar, 2023). In one article that quotes a student who relocated to Kyrgyzstan (“Ukraine in turmoil” 2023), only the low cost of studying in Kyrgyzstan is mentioned. If the forced migration of South Asian students from Ukraine to Kyrgyzstan resulted in changes of curricular content rather than simply changes in the number of attendees, this has not yet been reported. The flows of South Asian students to medical schools in Kyrgyzstan – estimated at 13,000 from India and 8,000 from Pakistan in 2021 (Imanalieva, 2021) as well as to many other nations worldwide, can be studied in terms of the Moscovitz and Sabzalieva (2023) categories of scale, interests, and agents, and the Dakowska and Harmsen (2015) idea of norms. That migration, however, is not forced migration of South Asia students and forced internationalization of universities in Kyrgyzstan; it predates the war and is due to the enormous youth population in South Asia, a growing middle class with higher education aspirations, and the inability of South Asian higher education institutions to accommodate the growing numbers. Academic and economic entrepreneurs in Kyrgyzstan in this situation have internationalized enrollments and staff willingly, for mutual benefit.

### **US Education Abroad Students**

Education abroad organization such as American Councils, SRAS, and Bard which traditionally place college students in Russia no longer are doing so because of the war and US sanctions. American Councils and Bard students can study Russian as well as Kyrgyz at AUCA; SRAS students take their language classes at the London School in Bishkek. The implications of the larger numbers of US students studying in Central Asia than in the past are of course difficult to predict. However, the author of this article recently served as a reviewer for the Fulbright Program’s English Language Teaching Assistant programs in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan and found a not significant number of students who had studied abroad in each country as undergraduates and who, like the Wake Forest student mentioned at the beginning of this article, now are eager to return. The war may have the unintended consequence of creating more US citizen Central Asian specialists.



## Relevance of Theoretical Frameworks

The four theoretical frameworks introduced at the beginning of the paper all offer options for analyzing these issues and suggest multiple areas for future research on the effect of the Ukraine war and other geopolitical events on the internationalization of higher education in Kyrgyzstan. The “scales” dimension of the Moscowitz and Sabzalieva (2023) SIAOS framework (Scales, Interests, Agents, and Opportunity Structures) connects to each of the other three frameworks and to all of the events in question. The scale of the conflict is international. This affects structures (Dakowska & Harmsen, 2015), of course most clearly in terms of the higher education institutions (HEIs) in Ukraine itself, but also in Kyrgyzstan as schools and HEIs enroll the children of returning migrants and HEIs employ some relokanty as well as foreigners who have been forced to leave Russia – new faculty who may or may not stay even for a full semester as political, financial, and family exigencies mandate moving on. Such movement represents forced internationalization (Ergin et al., 2019) for all concerned. The “scales” dimension of the Moscowitz and Sabzalieva (2023) SIAOS framework also applies to Chankseliani’s (2020) notion of Russian IBCs not operating on an institutional level but rather with directives from the level of government. This observation is relevant as well to the jointly-established KRSU. Finally, Moscowitz and Sabzalieva (2023) and Dakowska and Harmsen (2015) discuss actors or agents. However, only Dakowska and Harmsen discuss the idea of norms and changes in norms. This idea connects to decolonization and how the war in Ukraine may be changing some of the norms in higher education in Kyrgyzstan. That issue, along with a number of others, requires more research.

## Additional Research

Although a focus on AUCA and KRSU provides insight into some effects of the war on the internationalization of higher education in Kyrgyzstan, as they are connected to two of the major players, many other relevant issues have not been considered and deserve research.

One category for additional research is other higher education institutions, both public and private, both in the capital and those outside. Of particular interest would be the Russian international branch campuses, to see what motivated the university administrations to locate in Kyrgyzstan and if Chankseliani’s (2020) thesis of decisions being made by the government and not by individual institutional administrators holds. This would, however, likely be a difficult question to research; the relevant actors are unlikely to want to be interviewed. Another category for research on higher education institutions would be those in the Issyk-kul region, as anecdotal reports suggest that some of the relokanty who could work anywhere moved on from Bishkek to the Issyk-kul region, where off-season housing was cheap and plentiful and the natural environment is clean and inviting. Whether any of those relokanty or their family members are teaching at or enrolling in local universities and if so, if their presence is having any effect on local norms (Dakowska & Harmsen, 2015) has not yet been researched.

Moving the individual scale of geopolitical effects (Moscowitz & Sabzalieva, 2023), a number of types of people would be worth interviewing in order to obtain a fuller perspective of the effects of the war on higher education in Kyrgyzstan. Here, too, it is worth recalling Dakowska and Harmsen’s (2015) concept of “norm entrepreneurs” and to consider how some individuals make choices not only for themselves but rather also are able to shift the public conversation to the consideration of new norms, such as a role for Russia in higher education that is different not only in scale but also in kind, more than thirty years after the collapse of the Soviet Union. One group to study would be the faculty and administrators who were in Russia and needed to move. Another group would be non-faculty relokanty and their families, to discover why they chose Kyrgyzstan. A third would be the students who attended school in Russia and now are enrolled in Kyrgyzstani universities. The classmates and professors of such students also might have insights that could broaden a researcher’s perspective on the impacts of the war. A fourth group might be, as Sharshenova (2023) makes the distinction, “our” Russians (ethnic Russians who are Kyrgyzstani citizens) and their impressions of “Russian Russians” in higher education. An additional group might be parents and prospective students and the factors that weigh into their choices of where to study. In the past,

some students and families chose schools and universities with Russian-medium of instruction, with the assumption that Russian fluency and cultural knowledge would be useful for a future that might include migration to Russia for work and perhaps citizenship. Anecdotally, because of the war and changes in labor markets, researchers and educators hear of students and families making different choices, but whether these anecdotes hold up more broadly needs research.

Also, as mentioned previously, the Kyrgyzstani case suggests the need for further research and theorizing in the evolving field of Transnational Education (Knight, 2010; Knight, 2016). What happens when two or more guest campuses in a host nation represent governments conflict with each other? What are the issues that arise if the guest campuses are not independent actors, but rather are “tools” of their governments, as Chankseliani (2020) suggests that Russian international branch campuses are? And what are the impacts of institutional statuses: AUCA as established by Kyrgyzstanis, the Slavic university as jointly established by the Kyrgyz and Russian governments, and Russian international branch campuses as not jointly established but also not independent actors?

A final category of needed research is the effect of the war on changing norms in higher education institutions and on decolonization more broadly. Are professors or curriculum committees at individual institutions, or staff working in the Ministry, thinking about modifications in how history is taught, in language requirements, or other elements of the curriculum? Such changes are not yet reported, but may be under discussion.

## Conclusion

The internationalization of higher education in Kyrgyzstan has been affected by the war in Ukraine in some ways that are unique to Kyrgyzstan and in other ways that parallel the effects in other countries in Central Asia and the Caucasus. A unique situation in Kyrgyzstan is the existence of both the American University in Central Asia and the Kyrgyz-Russian Slavic University. AUCA has links to Bard College and thus to the now banned Smolny College in St. Petersburg, as well as to the Open Society University Network (OSUN). KRSU was jointly established by the Kyrgyz and Russian governments, and that agreement recently was renewed and modified, as discussed above. As such, Kyrgyzstan is home to two institutions – Kyrgyzstani institutions, not branch campuses – that are allied with opposing sides in the conflict.

Kyrgyzstan also is distinctive in the degree to which large numbers of migrants and their families depend upon employment in Russia for financial survival. This dependence has led some families to privilege Russian-medium schools over Kyrgyz language ones, and for Russian citizenship to be sought after. However, Russian citizenship now can mean forced military service, injuries, and death. Some families thus are returning to Kyrgyzstan, bringing with them children educated in Russian schools. Moreover, the shock of seeing Russia invade another country that once was part of the Soviet Union has caused considerable rethinking in academe and elsewhere about what Kyrgyzstan’s relations with Russia were in the past and what they are now. The concept of decolonization is widely discussed, although it seems not to have had a major impact on higher education curricula thus far.

In other ways, Kyrgyzstan’s experience parallels that of other countries. Russian *relokanty* avoiding mobilization arrive, as Kyrgyzstan is a country they could come to without a visa. Some stayed and worked remotely and some moved on to other countries. A small number are teaching in Kyrgyzstani universities, but in many cases their situations are not stable. Some displaced South Asian medical students have arrived in Kyrgyzstan and US study abroad students who cannot study in Russia are arriving in larger numbers than before.

Many questions related to the effect of the war remain to be studied, on many levels: institutional case studies, the experiences of professors and students, the reactions of newcomers and the reactions of residents. On a theoretical level, the issue of having two campuses in one country that are each affiliated with a different side of a conflict seems like a new concept that deserves further exploration.

Despite the questions that remain to be answered, the four theoretical frameworks used to analyze the available data have proven useful. Moscowitz and Sabzalieva’s (2023) SIAOS model suggests analyzing the changes brought about by the war in terms of their differing Scales, the Interests of those involved, and who the Agents are. Considering what

Opportunities may be available and for whom leads to some intriguing hypothesizing. Dakokowska and Harmsen (2015) discuss Structures and Actors, but also Norms – for whom are norms changing, why, and in what ways? Chankseliani’s (2020) idea of Russian International Branch Campuses as not being independent Actors or Agents but rather representative of the Interests of the state adds a new insight to the analysis of their presence and their interaction with other higher education institutions in Kyrgyzstan. Finally, Ergin and colleagues’ (2019) discussion of “forced internationalization” helps researchers to frame the actions of students, faculty, and administrators who are internationalizing not according to a plan but rather according to the need to support others whose lives have been disrupted.

Vladimir Putin’s decision to invade Ukraine on February 24, 2022, has had many far-reaching consequences. Effects on higher education are not the most dramatic or disturbing, but those effects are likely to have long-term influences on the thought patterns of more than one generation.

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