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# Contemporary Transnational Higher Education in the Context of the Global De-Democratization Process

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# Three Stories and the Context

Three stories

**Research context of this presentation: transnationalism.**

To understand and analyze a particular field of inter- and transnational higher education we also need to understand its **global context in the historical perspective of the recent past.**

(the past three, three and a half decades, i.e., global history from the mid 1980s onwards)



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# Global context

The above-mentioned global context is the **unprecedented democratization waves across the globe from the mid- late 1980s** (East- and Central Europe; South America; South Africa)

Functions, roles and aims of HE in general, and inter- and transnational student mobility and internationalization in the context of waves of democratization

- Economic, political, ideological, humanitarian, cultural
- Time frame: late 1980s (e.g. Erasmus Program, est. 1987) through the 1990s well into the 2000s and 2010s



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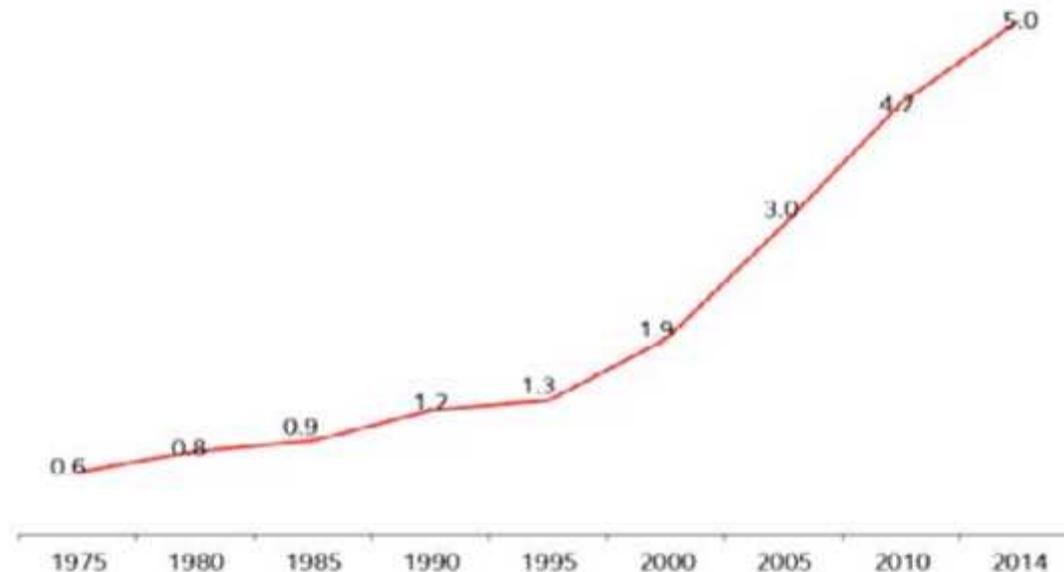
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# Student Mobility

The composition of the globally mobile student body has changed significantly over the last decade, with student mobility shifting **from a largely unidirectional east-west flow to a multidirectional movement** and encompassing non-traditional sending and host countries.

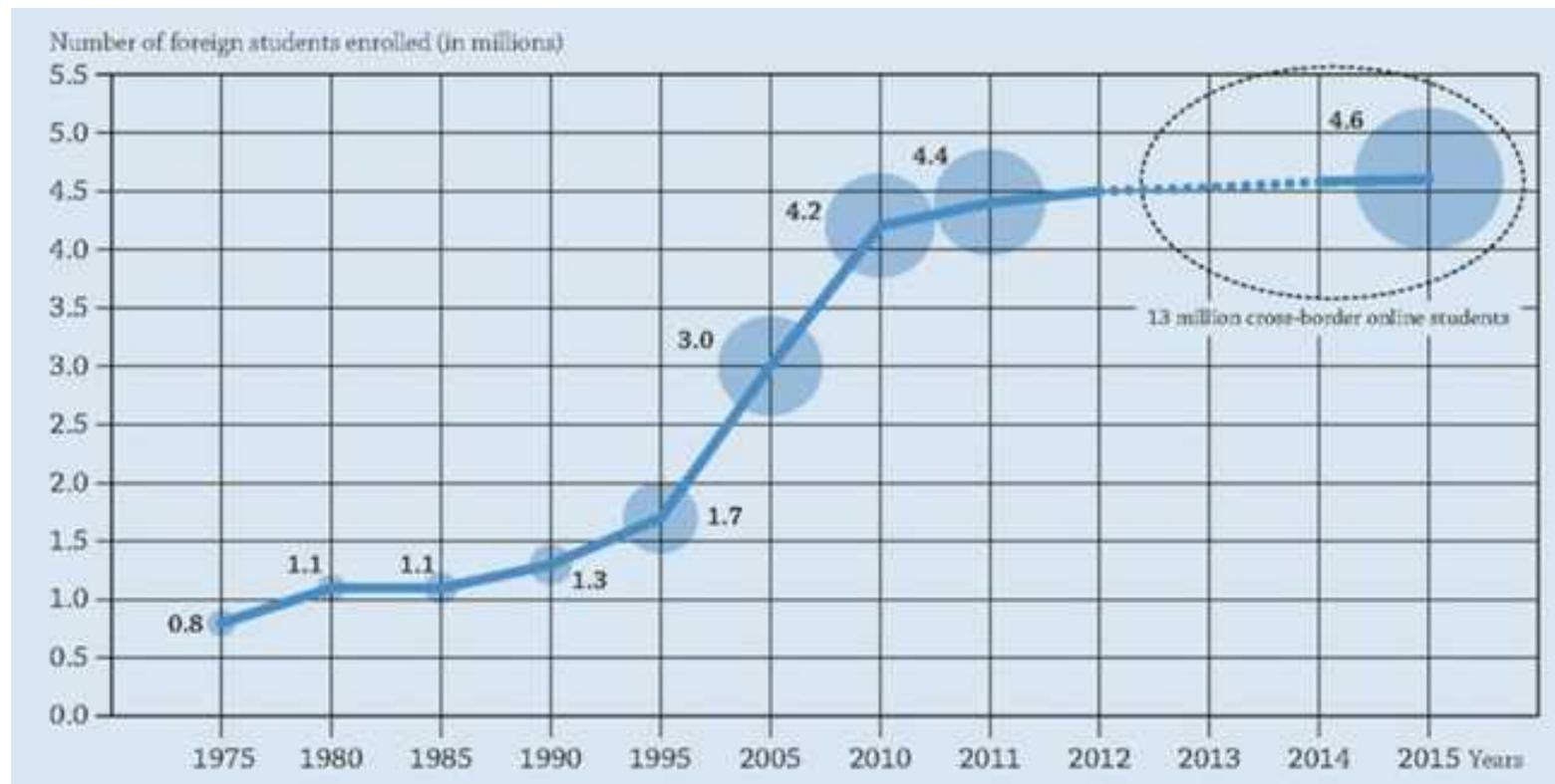
Cf. also the even more recent trend: *Internationalization at Home (IaH)*.

Figure 5: Higher education students enrolled outside their home country (millions)<sup>47</sup>



# Slowing of International Mobility Growth

<http://monitor.icef.com/2017/09/oecd-charts-slowing-international-mobility-growth/>



# De-democratization

HOWEVER: something very important began to take shape, once again, globally and in the beginning almost imperceptibly:

## de-democratization

According to the Freedom House report on global freedom in 2022:

“The present threat to democracy is the product of **16 consecutive years of decline in global freedom** [i.e., since 2006]. A total of 60 countries suffered declines over the past year, while only 25 improved. **As of today, some 38 percent of the global population live in Not Free countries, the highest proportion since 1997. Only about 20 percent now live in Free countries.**”

<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2022/global-expansion-authoritarian-rule>



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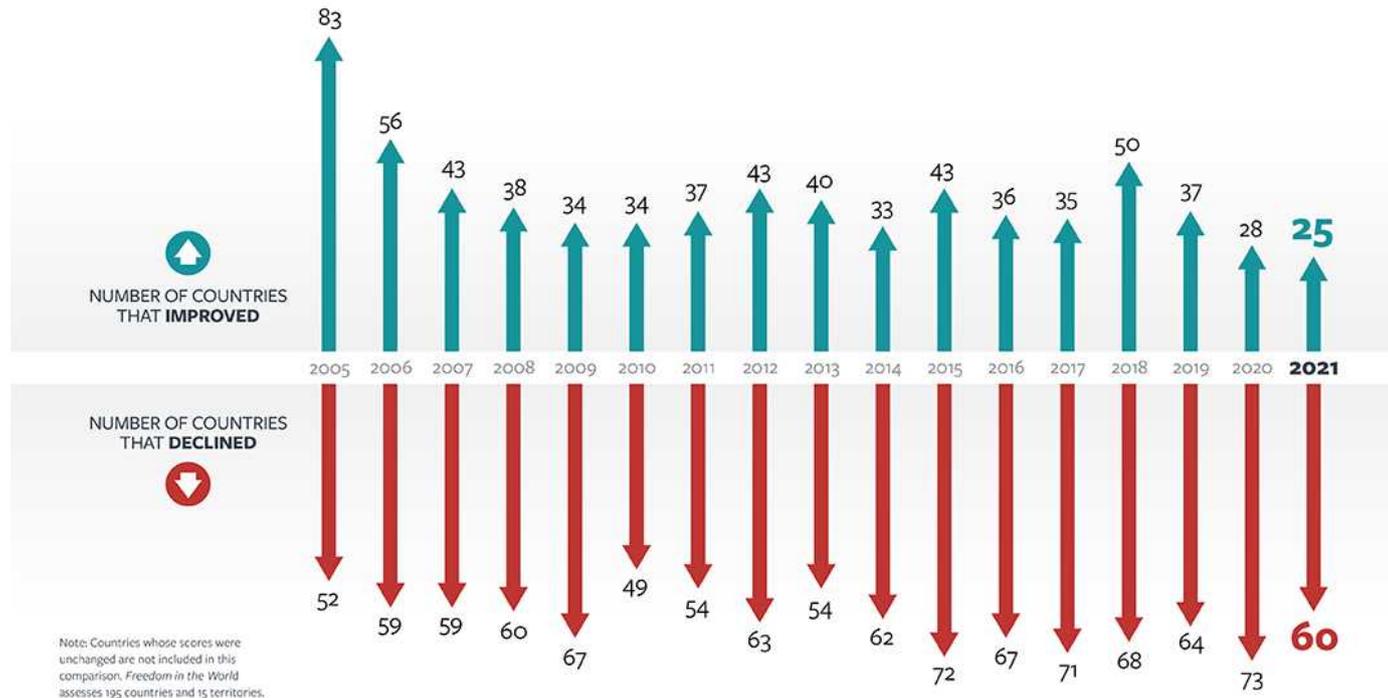


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# De-democratization

## 16 Years of Democratic Decline

Countries with aggregate score declines in *Freedom in the World* have outnumbered those with gains every year for the past 16 years.



This infographic is from the *Freedom in the World 2022* report by [freedomhouse.org](https://freedomhouse.org).



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# Possible definitions and expectations of democracies

The question as to what can be regarded a democracy and what not is highly disputed:

**minimalist views** regard regular contested elections as sufficient;

**maximalist approaches** include a large range of additional conditions, (democratic political culture, state capacity, and socioeconomic equality, etc)

The **pragmatic approach** stipulates a core definition of democracy as *“a political system in which the government is held accountable to citizens by means of free and fair elections,”* complemented by a number of *“necessary preconditions,”* such as basic liberties, including freedom of association, expression, and the press.



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# Transnational space

→ the forms and the nature of **transnational space that has taken shape in the context of contemporary global higher education** and processes of internationalization and student mobility

Formerly, three major types of international student mobility based on sponsorship models:

- self-sponsored
- third party grant-sponsored
- sponsored by host institution

A special case that is becoming more widespread:

→ **state-sponsored mobility for development AND legitimation/ stability of partly or non-democratic regimes**



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## Case Studies: Kazakhstan, Hungary

Research Questions (referencing the work of Del Sordi):

- 1) could study-abroad programs and internationalization sponsored by non- and semi-democratic states be a space *where the relationship between such states and their populations becomes apparent?*
- 2) could a study-abroad program or the process of internationalization *in themselves contribute to regime stability?*

The research on state-sponsored study-abroad programs and even on student exchange schemes has seldom looked at the political implications of such initiatives for the sending state.

The **relevance could be best understood in light of the global trends** described and analyzed by Freedom House.



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# Case Study 1: Kazakhstan

(very little English language literature on this specific topic)

Kazakhstan: basic facts, info

World's 9<sup>th</sup> (!) largest country

19 million people

dominates Central Asia economically and politically, generating 60 per cent of the region's GDP

41<sup>st</sup> on list of global total GDP

Muslim majority secular country

Was a republic in the Soviet Union (independence from 1991)

Transcontinental country (Central Asia, Eastern Europe)

Not free (23/100 points, Freedom House)

<https://freedomhouse.org/explore-the-map?type=fiw&year=2022>



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# Case Study 1: Kazakhstan

In 2016, Kazakhstan celebrated 25 years of independence. President Nursultan Nazarbayev addressed the participants of a forum, reminding them of their freedom of movement like this

*“Today, you have the whole world in front of you”, [...] “in Soviet times, to go abroad was forbidden; even the lucky ones who could go [...] were followed by the secret services [...]. For you, instead, everything is open. You are happy people for this.”*

Soviet times vs. the era of Kazakh independence

So what is problematic here? Let’s look at the **Bolashak Program**:  
<https://bolashak.gov.kz/en>



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# Case Study 1: Kazakhstan

Independent Kazakhstan established a **social contract** with its citizens, promoting the idea that individual freedom could be waived in favour of economic and social development. This was of course also a **renewal of the pre-existing social contract between the Soviet state and its citizens** and perpetuated the Soviet vision of an **all knowing and all-providing state**. In contemporary Kazakhstan the position that ‘economy should come first’, translates not only into general acceptance of **limitations to individual rights** in the name of other goods, but also in a **paternalistic relationship between the state and the population**.

The trade off is that in exchange for sponsoring their studies at top tier international universities, **the participating students** (at all three levels of university education: B.A., M.A., and Ph.D.) **are expected to loyally serve the paternalistic state** not only upon their return to their home country but also during their studies,



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# Case Study 2: Hungary

## Basic facts/info on Hungary

EU and NATO member

Central Europe (since 896 A.D.)

10 million people

Christian

Satellite country (i.e., Communist) between 1948 and 1989

54th on list of global total GDP

ONLY country in the EU that is not in the “free” but the “partly free” category (69/100 points) (Freedom House)



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## Case Study 2: Hungary

(No English language literature on this; very little in Hungarian too.  
Referencing the work of Pal Renyi)

**Stipendium Peregrinum Program, est. 2019**

<https://ntk.hu/projektjeink/stipendium-peregrinum-osztondijprogram/>

What is it about? “A,” “B” and “C” component

67 top tier universities in the world, e.g. Yale, MIT, Oxford, Fudan, Heidelberg, etc. (CEU is not on the list)



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## Case Study 2: Hungary

What is expected in return? (student alliances, PR, promotion)

Decision makers in first round:

- non-independent academics
- instructors/mentors in summer camp

Similar to the Kazakh example where the number of grants for each year is decided by a commission, made up by 15 **government representatives, appointed by the President of Kazakhstan.**

The Commission has the final say on scholarship awards and withdrawals.



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## Case Studies: Hungary, Khazakhstan

One candidate describes their feelings this way:

*“They were trying to create a seemingly direct, friendly atmosphere, but I sensed a large dose of cynicism. I was expected to directly address the President of the Republic who is 25 years older than me, Bishop Zoltan Balog, and the other instructors who would decide on my scholarship, in an obviously hierarchical situation. **How can I be myself in an environment where practically everyone has the same conservative worldview and thinking?** I felt a sense of hypocrisy at being held accountable for honesty by politicians while being at the mercy of their decisions.”*



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## Case Study 2: Hungary

One instructor started an argument with a candidate stating that London School of Economics (LSE) is a communist institution that propagates gender ideology. The candidate did not feel the need to argue...

Another candidate remarks that "*The government they serve has never rewarded open debate and expression. What makes anyone think that such a valuable scholarship will be any different?*"



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# Case Studies: Hungary



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# Case Studies: Hungary



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# Conclusion

These and similar state-sponsored scholarships can be thus seen as multi-dimensional tools, promoting development and channelling authoritarian rule at the same time.

We've tried to map how they can possibly contribute to one, two, or three 'pillars' of authoritarian stability:

Repression

Co-optation

Legitimation

The practices presented here demonstrate that freedom of movement is no longer an evil to be avoided by authoritarian regimes, **but can become an asset in terms of legitimacy and co-optation**, a tool in the execution of soft power within and beyond the nation state and national boundaries.

Instead of authoritarianism being constrained by territorial boundaries, **the socio-political space where patriotism and patrimonialism can be utilized has been expanded beyond national borders.**



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Thank you for the attention.

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