



## SCIENTIFIC FINAL REPORT

### Two- and three-year projects and postdoctoral projects

Registration number, Östersjöstiftelsen: S2-20-0017

Project manager: Mette Ginnerskov-Dahlberg

Project title: Student mobility at the crossroads of Western and Eastern Europe – aspirations, strategies and assets among Belarusian and Ukrainian students

#### 1. The three most important results of the project and what conclusions can be drawn from them

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and other major political crisis in the countries involved in the postdoc project, I had to change the focus. Thus, the post-doc project is basically divided into two studies, which I will describe below.

**The first study** focuses on students from post-Soviet countries pursuing education in Sweden. Between June 2021 and October 2022, I conducted semi-structured interviews were conducted with 28 students from various post-Soviet countries (Ukraine, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Russia, Belarus, and Georgia) who were preparing to study a master's degree within a wide range of academic disciplines at different universities in Sweden. The interviews lasted from one to three hours. Common for the students was that they had received a scholarship from the Swedish Institute, funded by the Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs. It was also the Swedish Institute that facilitated contact with the students by circulating an e-mail with a description of the research project and my contact details. The scholarship is particular in the sense that it targets so-called 'global professionals' from developing countries, meaning that you, in addition to coming from a specific country, must have had at least 3000 h of work experience from a maximum of three organisations/companies. This requirement of prior work experience entails that many of the individuals participating in this study were older than the typical master's student (between 25 and 44 years) and, for that reason, several also had their own families (including children) in their home countries. In some cases, the students brought their families to Sweden while others travelled on their own. The vast majority of the interviews were conducted online since I aimed to interview the students while they were still residing in their home countries and thus just before they left for education in Sweden. However, I also conducted 11 follow-up interviews with students (from the same group) following their arrival in Sweden—four of which were conducted face-to-face, while the remaining ones were conducted online due to geographical distance.

**The most important results from this study** are that education, for some students, functions as a means to escape conditions viewed as unbearable in their home countries. These conditions involve war (and the fear of being recruited to fight in war), students identifying as members of the LGBTQ+ community and students with political convictions frowned upon by the government of their home country. Thus, many of the students did not have plans to return to their home countries upon graduation but were keen on staying in



Sweden. This research thus provides new insights to a newer research strand on international student mobility called “survival mobility”.

In contrast to other studies on international student mobility conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, my study further revealed that the students from post-Soviet countries exhibited a notable lack of apprehension regarding the global health crisis or Sweden's controversial approach to the pandemic. For these students, the COVID-19 pandemic primarily manifested as a practical impediment to their forthcoming academic endeavours. Conversely, they perceived various enduring societal challenges in their countries of origin—such as unemployment, anxiety and distrust towards governmental authorities, and even war – as possessing a more entrenched and formidable nature, posing a greater threat to their overall well-being.

**The second study** focuses on Indian medical students studying in Georgia’s capital Tbilisi during 2021 and 2023. Indian medical students constitute the fastest rising student group in Georgia, with more than 16.000 Indian nationals pursuing medical education there. The fieldwork was initiated at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic in the summer of 2021, which complicated the aim of doing ethnographic fieldwork physically in Georgia. Indeed, researchers could not travel freely during this period, which entailed that alternative research strategies had to be taken into use. To get an insight into the Indian student community in Georgia, while residing in Sweden, I joined different online groups on various social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter. From there I invited Indian medical students to contribute to my research by sharing their experiences of life in Tbilisi during online interviews. In addition, Facebook and digital debate forums were used as sites for digital ethnography, following posts and discussion threads about life as Indian medicine students in Georgia as well as the social media accounts of her interlocutors. As the world began to open again, I was able to travel to Georgia. In October 2021, in April and November 2023, I spent a total of six weeks in Georgia’s capital Tbilisi. During this period, I socialised with and interviewed Indian medical students and spent time at Indian restaurants, Tbilisi State Medical University, and places frequented often by 8 Indian students. To contextualise the students’ narratives, staff members at them internationalisation department at Tbilisi State Medical University were also interviewed. In some cases, contact with the Indian students was established through social media platforms before I arrived in Georgia. In total, 44 students (around 50 percent females and 50 percent males) from different parts of India were interviewed as well as six students from Sri Lanka (four men and two women). The interviews typically lasted between 30 minutes and 2 hours. They revolved around topics such as the students’ social background, reasons for pursuing education in Georgia, their experiences of life abroad, and their plans and aspirations for the future.

**The most important results from this study** are how a medical education in Georgia functions as a social mobility project for some families in India. Contrary to the stereotype often connected to international student migration, the students in this study are not a part of an affluent global middle class, nor have they grown up in internationally oriented families with long traditions of medical doctors. The families invest a lot of money in the students’ education in the hope that the students – upon returning to India – will be able to provide a better life for their families. An important point is, however that the success of their mobility project is, however, far from assured. Upon returning to their homeland,



India – where most students intend to practice – a rigorous and highly competitive screening test with only a 20 percent pass rate awaits them. This study thus highlights how the journey of Indian students aspiring to become medical doctors is precarious, best understood as a ‘high-risk’ educational endeavor. Despite investing six years in studies abroad, obtaining the anticipated medical license remains uncertain.

Because the Indian students and their families are so inexperienced with navigating the international space of higher education, their path to Georgia is shaped by much “randomness” rather than being the outcome of well-informed choices. They are furthermore easy prey for education agents, who take advantage of the students and their families lack of knowledge. Many students are furthermore not familiar with Georgia’s geopolitical position, and became surprised when learning that the country was not an EU-member.

**Another important insight** concerns the study destination Georgia itself. Even though Georgia has witnessed a dramatic rise in international students, my study indicates how this does not make it an international destination per se. The Indian medical students reported a lot of racism in Georgia and some even recalled episodes of violence. Many of the students lived rather isolated lives – confined to an “Indian bubble” – and with little to no contact to local Georgians.

## 2. The project’s contribution to the international research frontline

The project has contributed with valuable insights to the international front line in several important ways:

- 1) Little research has been conducted on “survival mobility” (Brunner et al., 2023) among international students and how foreign education may function as a means to escape unbearable conditions in one’s home country. In this postdoc project, I have shown how students in post-Soviet countries are attracted to education in Sweden as a means to avoid persecution on the basis of political convictions or their sexual orientation. Thus, students wish to pursue education abroad for many other reasons than education itself. As a part of this, I have showed how students identifying as members of the LGBTQ+ community were attracted specifically to Sweden because of its reputation as a “gay friendly country”. Because of this image, they considered Sweden as a country where they could express themselves openly and freely. Some from this group even applied for asylum following their graduation. Moreover, following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, I talked to Russian men who wanted to pursue education abroad because they feared being enrolled in the Russian army.
- 2) There has been a considerable scholarly interest in the COVID-19 pandemic’s impact on international student mobility. By focusing on the narratives of student from post-Soviet countries and adopting a conceptual framework that views ‘crisis’ as a relational, I was able to shed light on their divergent experiences and perceptions of the COVID-19 pandemic. More broadly, I showed how the students did not view the COVID-pandemic as a crisis. Often the students did not mention pandemic concerns at all. Instead, they articulated a spectrum of societal challenges in their



countries of origin, perceived as possessing a more enduring and entrenched nature, thereby representing a more substantial threat to their overall well-being compared to the pandemic, which they regarded as transient. My study thus underscores the significance of examining the responses of international students to the pandemic through a nuanced, case-specific lens.

- 3) Focusing on Georgia has a part of a greater aim of focusing on “off-beat” destinations which have been less explored in the literature on international student mobility. While Anglophone countries typically are perceived as “onbeat” destinations, there has been a gradual rise in studies focusing on study destinations outside this mainstream circuit during the last 10 years. However, we still know fairly little about what draws individuals to the countries and the ways it differs from study destinations in “the West” and my study thus adds with important knowledge regarding the socio-economic profile of the students arriving in Georgia, their educational strategies and lived experience of residing in Tbilisi.

### **3. The contribution of the research to the knowledge of the Baltic Sea Region and Eastern Europe**

Very little research on student mobility focuses on post-Soviet countries. Many students from post-Soviet countries pursue education abroad but the region also attracts many international students from a large variety of countries. Through qualitative research tools, the postdoc project has shed light on why students from post-Soviet countries pursue education in Sweden but also why international students increasingly are drawn to post-Soviet countries – exemplified by the country Georgia.

### **4. New research questions that the project has led to**

There has been very little focus on how sexuality remains a driver for international student migration. Thus, this would be a topic to explore more systematically, exploring how students who identify as member of LBGTQ+ community use education as a means to escape conservative norms and dangerous conditions in their home countries more in depth.

In the study focusing on Indian students in Georgia, I have highlighted the educational strategies and lived experiences of the young aspiring doctors. An important point is that their studies in Georgia should be understood as a ‘high-risk’ educational endeavor, since they face a rigorous and highly competitive screening test with a pass rate of only 20 percent in India. Passing this test is a required for practising as doctors in India. I am thus very curious to investigate what happens after a medical degree in Georgia and if the graduates actually succeed in becoming doctors upon their return to India. Or if they do not manage to pass the exam in India, what do they do? Do they have alternative strategies for other career paths? This is a knowledge gap in my study but also seems to be a big question mark in the literature.



In general, little research has been conducted on medical education in Eastern European countries. Many students – also from Western countries – pursue medical studies in Eastern European countries. This is where I foresee my own academic focus in the forthcoming years. As a part of this, I’m highly interested in the medical institutions and ‘their’ motives for education a large sum of doctors. Is it mainly financial motives or are there other factors at stake? Also, what are the social profiles of these individuals pursuing education in Eastern European countries? And finally, to what extent can my insight from Georgia be applied to other Eastern European countries?

## **5. Dissemination of the results of the project within and outside the research community**

### **National and international conference attendance**

#### **2024**

ENIS (European Network on International Student Mobility) yearly conference in Tbilisi, Georgia. Presentation: *Comparing mobilities: The strategies and future dreams of international students in two atypical destinations* (accepted). Tbilisi, May 2024.

International Symposium: Democratizing International Student Mobility at Waseda University in Tokyo. Accepted paper for presentation: *Comparing mobilities: The strategies and future dreams of international students in two atypical destinations*. Tokyo, February 2024.

#### **2023**

IMISCOE conference in Warsaw. Presentation of two papers: “*Coming out*” *abroad. The role of sexuality in making international students pursue foreign education*, and, *Georgia (not) on my mind. Exploring the strategies and lived experiences of Indian medicine students in a small post-Soviet country*. Accepted presentations for the IMISCOE conference in Warsaw, July 2023. I was also the chair of the panel: Student Migration to Off-beat Destinations.

#### **2022**

Internationalization conference at Uppsala University: The Internationalization of Higher Education Institutions. Presentation: *On a Quest for Recognition. The Migration Trajectories of Students from Post-socialist Countries*. Uppsala, May 2022.

#### **2021**

Sussex Centre for Migration Research on behalf of the H2020 MIRNet consortium (Migration and Integration Research and Networking): *New Dynamics of East–West Migration and Migrant Integration Within Europe and Beyond*. Accepted paper for



presentation: *On a quest for recognition. The migration trajectories of students from post-socialist countries.*

## 6. List of publications

### *Journal articles*

- 1) **Ginnerskov-Dahlberg, M.** 2024: “Towards a safe haven: Students from post-Soviet countries travelling to Sweden during the COVID-19 pandemic”. *Population, Space and Place*. 30: e2833. <https://doi.org/10.1002/psp.2833> (Open access).  
  
<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1002/psp.2833>
- 2) **Ginnerskov-Dahlberg, M.** (accepted): “On a quest for social mobility. The hopes, dreams, and high-risk educational strategies of Indian medical students in post-Soviet Georgia”. *Current Sociology Monographs*. Special issue: Translation and transformation of class through migration: Rethinking social and spatial mobility across contexts. Eds. Stevens, C, Coates, J., Cederberg, M.
- 3) **Ginnerskov-Dahlberg, M & Valentin, K.** (accepted): “Understanding migration strategies and future imaginaries of international students in Georgia and Denmark through a comparative perspective.” *Journal of Immigrant and Refugee Studies*. Special issue: International Education as a Pathway for Diversified and Interconnected Mobilities: Aspirations, Modalities and Policy. Eds. Liu-Farrer, G., and M. Moskal

### *Chapters in monographs*

- 1) **Ginnerskov-Dahlberg, M. & Valentin, K.** (in print): COVID-19 and social exclusions. The experiences of Indian medical students in Tbilisi during and after the pandemic. In: S. Irudaya Rajan (eds.) *Edward Elgar Handbook of Research on Migration, COVID-19 and Cities*

### *Editor of forthcoming special issue (accepted)*

- 1) European Journal of Education (EJED). Title: “What is offbeat about offbeat study destinations? Strategies, Choices and (mis)calculations”. Editors: **Ginnerskov-Dahlberg, M.**, Roohi, S., & Franca, T.