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## RECOGNIZING RUSSIAN EDUCATIONAL DOCUMENTS IN EU: KEY PROBLEMS AND SOLUTIONS

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### Abstract:

**Objectives:** The purpose of this article is to analyze the methods of verification of diplomas and other educational documents (certificates, credentials, etc.) for foreign (including Russian) citizens in the countries of the European Union and the main problems that prevent the adoption of a decision on automatic recognition of Russian educational documents at the EU level.

**Methodology:** Author describes the steps taken at the level of the Russian Federation in order to get closer to the educational standards of the European Union and resolve the problems stated above. The analytical method is chosen as the main research method.

**Results:** The results of the study indicate that the Russian Federation and countries of the European Union are actively developing cooperation in educational sphere and are taking steps to harmonize educational standards, which has become especially noticeable since Russia joined the Bologna Process.

**Contributions:** The article shows that the institution of international recognition of diplomas is a valuable tool that makes a significant contribution to attracting highly skilled workers to EU countries.

**Keywords:** recognition of diplomas, highly skilled professional, qualification verification, convergence of educational standards, Bologna Process.

### INTRODUCTION

Globalization is one of the most relevant trends in modern higher education (Zinchenko, 2020). Cooperation between different states in the field of exchanging academic and scientific experience is the most important task, the successful solution of which contributes to the economic and social development of any state (Briede, 2020). Given this, many developed countries, such as the countries of the European Union (EU), are concerned about the issue of exchanging specialists with third countries and are creating legal regulations, designed specifically to attract highly skilled foreign workers to their territories.



An important factor for recognizing an employee's advanced qualification in the EU is higher education, the fact of which is confirmed by a diploma or certificate. Therefore, higher education institutions become the leaders of the process (Efimov, Lapteva, 2020). This is the main problem that impedes the rapid and effective exchange of specialists between the EU countries and third countries: the higher education systems there differ, educational institutions and universities have different statuses and issue educational documents of various types. This fact makes it difficult to make a decision on recognizing the advanced qualifications of a migrant worker because checking their diploma for compliance with the norms and rules of the host country requires extra time.

Within the framework of this article, the problem stated above is considered in the case study of relations between the countries of the EU and the Russian Federation. The presence of advanced qualifications and work experience in a relevant field allows Russian citizens to successfully apply for jobs in Europe, as well as receive a wide range of rights and privileges guaranteed by the EU Blue Card, a document specially developed at the Union level for highly skilled workers from third countries, combining the features of a residence permit and a work permit, as well as granting their holders the status of short-term residents in the EU (Council Directive 2009/50/EC, 2009). Many Russian citizens seek to obtain a EU Blue Card, but in order to do so they need to verify their qualifications first, which often causes difficulties.

The purpose of the study is to analyze the current programs of cooperation between the Russian Federation and the EU countries in the field of recognition of qualifications and educational documents, identify the main problems on the way to their automatic recognition and predict possible solutions to these problems, basing on a comparison of teaching approaches in higher educational institutions of the studied states and taking into account the unique features of their national legislations.

## **METHODS**

To comprehensively consider the problem of recognition of Russian educational documents in the EU, we analyzed some regulatory legal acts adopted at the EU level, the legislative provisions of individual states (for example, Germany and Portugal), as well as bilateral agreements concluded by Russia with some EU countries on the issue of mutual recognition of diplomas. Specialized legal literature was used to a lesser extent.



The methodological framework of the study consists of, first of all, the analytical method, as well as the formal-legal method, the historical-legal method, and the method of comparative analysis.

## RESULTS

The results of the study indicate that, despite the virtual absence of a unified procedure for the recognition of Russian educational documents in the EU, measures are constantly being taken to simplify this process. Russia and the EU are interested in educational cooperation and the possibility of exchanging highly skilled professionals and therefore strive to harmonize the rules for issuing and formalizing diplomas by higher education institutions (Makarova, Egorova, 2021). The Bologna Process, a series of events aimed at creating the most harmonized educational environment in Europe, contributed to this to the greatest extent. Russia joined the process in 2003, and this event was followed by several reforms in the system of Russian higher education. The reforms affected the duration of education, the academic titles and degrees awarded, the system for assessing the academic success of students, as well as the external design and internal content of diplomas issued.

Joining the Bologna Process was only the first step towards the active recognition of Russian diplomas in the EU, and this step pushed many EU countries to recognize them without additional procedures. This is evidenced by a wave of bilateral agreements on the mutual recognition of educational documents concluded with Russia after the Bologna reforms were carried out in the country (France – 2003, Cyprus – 2016, Malta – 2016, Hungary – 2018, Slovakia – 2019).

However, although joining the Bologna Process has clearly facilitated the recognition of Russian educational documents in the EU, some European countries still refuse automatic recognition, citing significant differences in the content of curricula and the duration of studying them. This, however, does not prevent them from implementing joint double degree programs with Russian universities, in which students study according to a jointly developed curriculum and spend several academic semesters at a partner university, receiving two diplomas at once – Russian and European. Such programs began to appear in the early 2000s and are currently very popular. For example, Germany, which does not have a mutual agreement on the recognition of diplomas with Russia, is very actively involved in such programs, cooperating with such universities as the Higher



School of Economics (HSE) (Official website of the Higher School of Economics, n.d.), Russian State University for the Humanities (RSUH) (Official website of the Russian State University for Humanities, n.d.), Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MSIIR) (Official website of the Russian State Institute of International Relations, n.d.) and many others.

Thus, despite the fact that Russian specialists still face difficulties with verifying their high qualifications for European employers, it is clear that both sides (Russia and the EU) are interested in the convergence of educational standards, and certain measures are being taken to gradually reduce the number of problems in this sphere.

## **DISCUSSION**

At the EU level, the problem of recognition of educational documents began to be solved back in the 1980s when the first directives (Council Directive 89/48/EEC, 1988) began to appear on the harmonization of education standards of member states (De Wit, 2019). Initially, harmonization was required for each profession separately (Council Directive 92/51/EEC, 1992), which was ineffective due to the constant introduction of new areas and specialties into educational programs. Thus, it became necessary to create a single act regulating this issue, and in 2005, Directive 2005/36/EC "On the recognition of professional qualifications" (Directive 2005/36/EC, 2005) was adopted, which absorbed all the previous experience, but had a wider scope and eliminated a number of gaps in the legal regulation of education standards. Thus, for example, the Directive was the first act to establish the rule that the term for obtaining higher education cannot be shorter than 3 years. The directive entered into force in 2006 and is currently in effect.

The provisions of this directive state that educational documents obtained in the EU Member States can be recognized in two ways: 1) automatically; 2) through compensation measures.

Automatic recognition of educational documents means that it is enough to simply provide them to whom it may concern, without any additional confirmation. Such a convenient method, however, is available only for some specialties obtained according to the minimum general requirements for education established at the EU level. Such requirements are universal in all EU Member States, and therefore leave no doubt about the qualifications of the employee providing the diploma. At the moment, such general requirements are mentioned in the Directive for some medical professions and the



profession of the architect. Probably, soon this list will be expanded, because active efforts are underway to bring the educational standards of the EU countries closer together in other professional areas.

For all other professions, a mode of recognition of diplomas with compensation measures is provided. This means that the employee will not need to confirm the document itself but will need to pass an additional test, which, as a rule, has two main forms: 1) an adaptation internship or 2) a qualification exam. In most cases, the candidate can independently choose between these options, since their results are equivalent. However, in some situations, there is no choice and passing the exam is necessary. This applies to those professional areas, working in which requires knowledge of the specifics of national law, culture, or other features that are not typical for other countries.

This Directive has become a significant step forward for the EU in the issue of recognition of educational documents. However, the problem of specialists from third countries has not been solved by it in any way, since it obliges to mutual recognition of diplomas only EU member states and member states of the European Free Trade Association (EFTA), because such states are associated participants in the internal market, despite the fact that they are not directly part of the EU (Switzerland, Iceland, Liechtenstein, and Norway). Directive 2005/36/EC does not mention citizens of other countries. Moreover, its preamble contains a provision that the rules and norms enshrined in the directive are not an obstacle to resolving the issue of recognition or non-recognition of diplomas of third-country citizens at the national level.

So, when talking about the recognition of diplomas issued by Russian educational institutions in the EU, one should consider the national legislation of individual EU member states (Recognition of academic diplomas, n.d.). Realizing the need and benefit of cooperation in the exchange of highly skilled professionals, some EU Member States conclude bilateral agreements with Russia on the mutual recognition of educational documents. For example, such agreements with the Russian Federation exist in:

- Italy;
- Spain;
- Cyprus;
- France;
- Romania;
- Estonia;
- Slovakia.

The presence of such an act makes the migrant worker free from having to verify their diploma when applying for a Blue Card and seeking employment in a given country – it will be recognized automatically. All that needs to be done is to provide a notarized



translation of the diploma into the language of the host state. Such agreements are usually quite brief and contain only the most necessary information. For example, there are only 6 articles in the agreement between the Russian Federation and Italy (Legge No. 214, 2015):

- Article 1 states that the parties have agreed on the mutual recognition of diplomas issued by public higher education institutions and undertake measures to provide each other with a list of such institutions and samples of documents that they are authorized to issue; in addition, the obligation of the parties to inform each other in a timely manner about changes in sample diplomas is formalized here in order to avoid difficulties in mutual recognition.

- Article 2 describes which Italian and Russian diplomas are mutually compatible and give the right to continue higher education in one of the countries; so, for example, the Russian bachelor's degree, traditionally issued by universities after four years of study, corresponds to the Italian 1<sup>st</sup> level diploma (diploma accademico di I livello) and allows one to enroll to Italian educational programs of the 2<sup>nd</sup> level, which last up to two years and approximately correspond to the Russian Master's programs.

- Article 3 establishes that a certificate or diploma of incomplete higher education obtained in one country allows one to continue one's education in another country; the starting point from where the student will be able to continue their education is calculated by taking into account the academic hours the student has listened to and the credits passed in the necessary disciplines.

- Article 4 states that having a diploma from one of the countries does not release the student from passing the entrance exams to the university of the other country following all the rules; an exception is made only for the language – so, if a Russian citizen has completed an Italian language course lasting at least three years as part of their studies, the student does not need to take an exam in it when entering Italy.

- Article 5 defines the need to create a special mixed commission (six specialists from each side) that should interpret this agreement and monitor the correctness of its application.

- Article 6 contains final provisions, in particular, that the agreement is automatically renewed every 5 years for another five years unless the parties wish to terminate it.

Agreements on mutual recognition of diplomas significantly simplify the access to the European labor market for highly qualified specialists from Russia, therefore, more and more countries are demonstrating their desire to conclude them. However, some states that are in demand among Russian specialists (Germany, for example) are in no hurry to conclude them, and in the case of their absence, citizens of the Russian Federation face the need to verify their diplomas.

The procedure for verifying diplomas is established by each state independently, however, in general, the process has some common stages: it is necessary to check whether the institution that issued the diploma ranks high in the host country and whether there is a similar specialty in any of the local universities. Let us consider this procedure using Germany as an example.

In Germany, there is a specially created agency for the evaluation of foreign qualifications (Central Office for Foreign Education, n.d.) which checks all foreign diplomas, including Russian ones. The employees of the bureau start by finding a German curriculum that is as close as possible to the one indicated in the diploma and compare them. This is an important stage since in Germany one can get some specialties only after completing an internship. If so, it is checked whether the applicant had experience in the field and for how long. If the work experience coincides in duration with the duration of



practice required in Germany or exceeds it, the diploma will be recognized, if not, it will be rejected. Moreover, there are differences in the composition of curricula. If it turns out that the applicant did not study some disciplines as a part of his education, they will be denied a job in this specialty but may be offered to take courses at the appropriate German university to fill in the gaps.

Such verification of a diploma for compliance with German rules is not free – its cost varies from 200 to 500 euros. However, it should be noted that it is not always necessary. For Germany, there is an online database ANABIN, by uploading one's diploma into which one can find out if the diploma is comparable to the German one. If the result is positive, then it may be enough just to print an extract from the site and attach it to the documents for the Blue Card application or send it to the employer. If there are no matches, a detailed check is required.

Portugal implements a similar scheme: there are two ways to recognize a foreign diploma (including a Russian one) there. The first way is based on finding the closest academic match (*equivalência académica*). As a part of this method, a foreign citizen independently sends their diploma to the educational institution of interest, where a specially created commission checks whether the curriculum corresponds to any of the local ones. The second way – the recognition of an academic degree (*reconhecimento do grau académico*) – involves a more thorough check, which includes all universities in Portugal, and is carried out by a specialized agency – the National Academic Recognition Information Center (NARIC). If a university or a department finds an appropriate curriculum, the applicant receives a decision on the recognition of the diploma, and can freely apply for a job. If not, the applicant, as in Germany, will be asked to complete the missing disciplines in the country and confirm the results of training by passing the appropriate exam.

There are several reasons why many EU countries refuse automatic recognition of Russian educational documents and require a long and expensive procedure for their verification. However, as the main reason, one can point out the actual discrepancy between curricula even in those specialties that have the same name in the Russian Federation and Europe. This is due to the fact that during the first year of study (or even two) at Russian universities, much attention is paid to general education subjects (history, logic, philosophy, etc.), which are only indirectly related to the specialty acquired. It is noteworthy that this approach can be traced not only in Russia but also in some other post-Soviet states, for example, Belarus (Titarenko, 2019). European universities, on the contrary, rapidly move to highly specialized disciplines, forcing students to study them thoroughly and deeply, not only in theory but sometimes in practice. Accordingly, after graduation, Russian and European students have an unequal set of subjects in their diplomas and an unequal number of hours of study, even in the same disciplines (Guba et al., 2020).

This fact also applies to academic degrees. So, on the territory of the Russian Federation, one is not prohibited from obtaining a Bachelor's qualification in one specialty, and a Master's qualification in another. Since Master's studies last only two years, it is impossible to fully master a fundamentally new specialty during this time (Abrossimova et al., 2020). Russian students who have radically changed the vector of education in the Master's program will face the fact that their Master's degree will have very significant differences from the diplomas of their colleagues in the EU countries, where one can enroll in the Master's program only in a specialty related to the one studied in the Bachelor's degree.

An additional obstacle to the automatic unhindered recognition of Russian education documents in Europe is the high level of corruption in some of Russian



universities. Despite the active struggle against this phenomenon in Russia in general and in the academic sphere in particular, it has not yet been fully resolved (Trubnikova, Trubnikov, 2018).

Thus, one can conclude that several EU countries have serious grounds for requiring additional checks of diplomas and confirmations of the qualifications of Russian specialists.

As mentioned above, all these problems stem from the lack of a single regulatory legal act at the EU level that would allow the development of a common scheme for verifying educational documents obtained in Russia and other third countries. However, it cannot be said that absolutely no steps are being taken in this direction – convergence is still taking place (Tikhonova, Raitskaya, 2018).

At some point, an important milestone was the Bologna Process – a series of meetings at the ministry level held to harmonize higher education systems in all states located on the European territory. Russia joined the process in 2003 after which changes gradually began to take place in the system of Russian higher education, bringing it closer to the educational standards of the West. So, for example, the process of obtaining an education at a university bifurcated, dividing into the first stage (Bachelor's degree) and the final stage (Master's degree). Furthermore, Russia has adopted a uniform template for a diploma supplement within the Bologna System and has also introduced a new way of assessing student performance according to a rating system that provides letter designations instead of digital grades on a five-point scale. Most of the bilateral agreements on mutual recognition of diplomas concluded between the Russian Federation and the EU countries became possible only after the entry of the Russian Federation into the Bologna Process and the implementation of relevant educational reforms (Baykov et al., 2021). Nevertheless, the fact of Russia's participation in the Bologna Process is not a key to the automatic recognition of Russian diplomas in the EU, although it significantly helps in this matter (Maleshin, 2015).

Russia's decision to join the Bologna Process not only allowed a more active conclusion of mutual recognition agreements to start, but also encouraged European universities to cooperate with Russian ones (Polyakova et al., 2021). In the early 2000s, educational cooperation between the Russian Federation and the EU countries began to actively develop, which led to the emergence of the phenomenon of double degrees (Melikyan, 2018). This term implies joint educational programs, in which a Russian and European university enter into a partnership, jointly develop programs, allow students to study part of the program at a partner university, and automatically accept the results of exams and certifications received there. After completing such a program, the graduate receives two diplomas at once (from two universities) instead of one. This idea quickly gained popularity both among Russian and foreign students who actively use the opportunity to study at leading Russian universities (Dekhnich et al., 2021). At the moment, most of the leading Russian universities have several such programs in their arsenal.

## CONCLUSION

Therefore, it can be concluded that the institution of international recognition of diplomas is a valuable tool that makes a significant contribution to attracting highly skilled workers to EU countries. However, this tool still needs significant development because unified rules on the recognition of diplomas exist only between EU countries. Cases of third-country nationals do not have a general supranational regulation and are resolved at the national level. This complicates the process of recognizing the qualifications of Russian specialists and creates the need for additional checks, hindering the ability of Russian





citizens with a high level of education and qualifications to find employment in the EU and receive a Blue Card, which provides the status of a short-term EU resident and a wide range of rights and opportunities on the territory of the Union. Despite the active convergence of the educational standards of the Russian Federation and European states, there are still several significant differences in them that do not allow to come to the universal automatic recognition of Russian educational documents in Europe. However, this problem is gradually being resolved through the implementation of a number of educational reforms in Russia and the creation of conditions for active cooperation with European universities. Thus, it can be assumed that if the movement in this direction continues, the vast majority of EU countries will begin to recognize Russian diplomas without additional procedures, which, in turn, will allow highly qualified specialists from the Russian Federation to efficiently find employment in Europe using the legal tools offered by the EU.

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