

# HERB

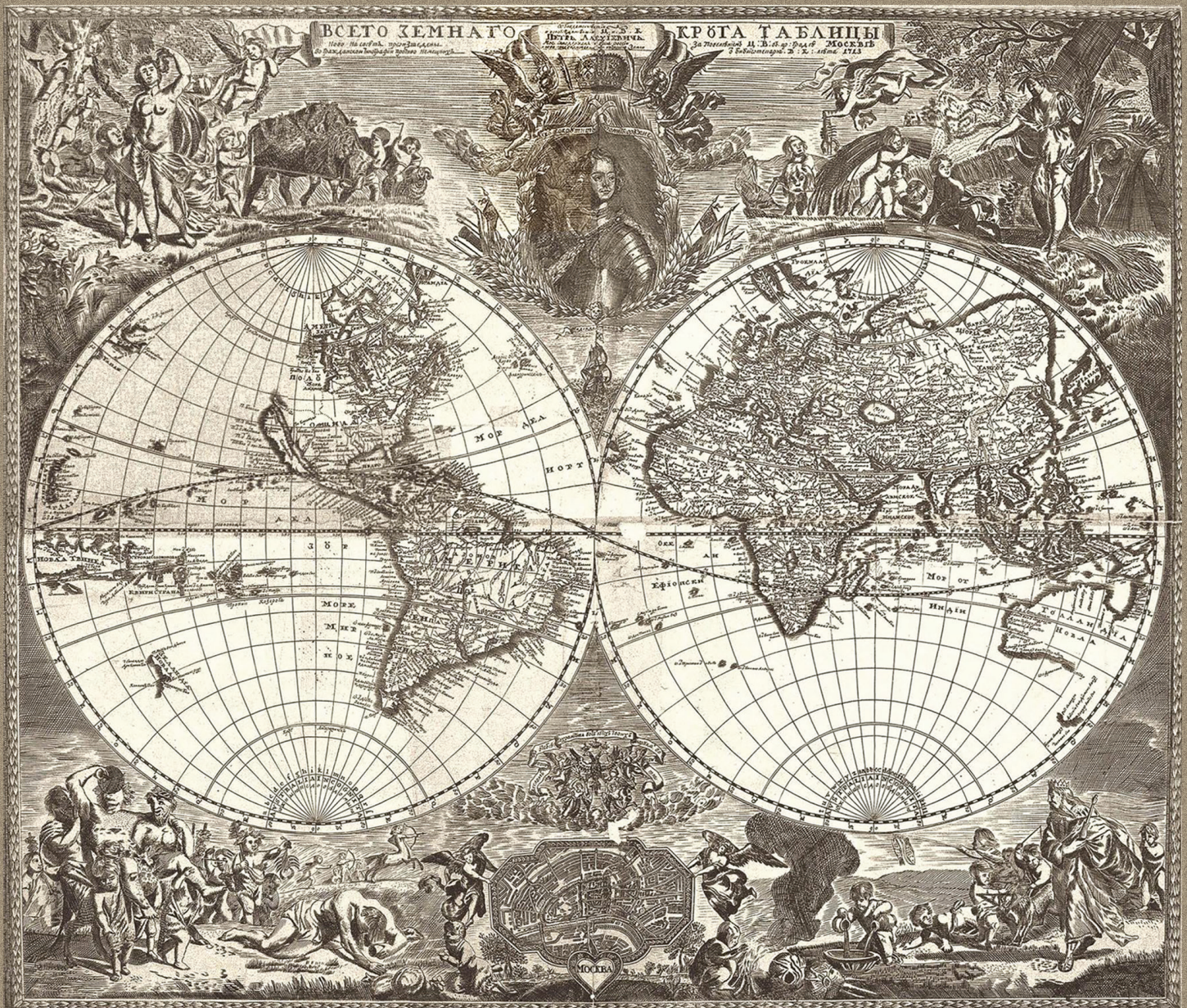


Higher Education in Russia and Beyond

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Regionalism in Higher Education

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## Dear colleagues,

Regionalism is a relatively new lens through which to understand contemporary trends and directions in higher education. Regionalism refers to the introduction of supranational political initiatives for higher education that are formed around regional alliances, associations and groupings. Countries and higher education institutions in the former Soviet space are becoming involved with an everexpanding range of regional higher education initiatives, connecting to large regional political blocs such as the European Union as well as smaller groups that may have more specific economic and social purposes.

In this special issue of HERB, the evolving patterns of regionalism in the former Soviet space and Central and Eastern Europe at national and institutional level are explored. In doing so, the articles in this issue fill important gaps in our knowledge and analysis of how higher education regionalism is playing out and why it is important.

The first section of the special issue contains articles that consider the varieties of regionalism on offer, from Europe to Asia to the Western Balkans. The second section turns to the former Soviet space, examining whether there is a case for a “post-Soviet” or Eurasian region. As one of the most important regions for higher education Russia and beyond, the third section focusses on educational initiatives led by the European Union that countries are choosing to actively participate in.

***Higher Education in Russia and Beyond***  
***editorial team***  
***and guest editor Emma Sabzalieva***  
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## National Research University Higher School of Economics

National Research University Higher School of Economics is the largest center of socio-economic studies and one of the top-ranked higher education institutions in Eastern Europe. The University efficiently carries out fundamental and applied research projects in such fields as computer science, management, sociology, political science, philosophy, international relations, mathematics, Oriental studies, and journalism, which all come together on grounds of basic principles of modern economics.

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The Center for Institutional Studies is integrated into international higher education research networks. The center cooperates with foreign experts through joint comparative projects that cover the problems of higher education development and education policy. As part of our long-term cooperation with the Boston College Center for International Higher Education, CInSt has taken up the publication of the Russian version of the "International Higher Education" newsletter.

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# Higher Education Regionalism in Belarus: Varieties of Initiatives and Arrangements

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The paper describes diverse dimensions of regionalism in the educational policy of the Republic of Belarus. Identified by the Ministry of Education as strongly connected with the political and/or economic initiatives of the Belarusian government, they concern three main areas: Eurasia, Asia, and Europe.

## Eurasia

The first regional initiative concerns some post-Soviet countries and can be called Eurasian. It took shape soon after the collapse of the Soviet Union (1991) when the foreign policy of Belarus was mostly focused on keeping political and economic ties with the post-Soviet states. In 1992, the members of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) agreed on the equal access to education for their citizens regardless of ethnicity or citizenship. Currently, nine post-Soviet countries are full CIS members: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Russia, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan.

As a development of this initiative, in 1997 the concept of a single educational space was approved by the heads of the nine member states. This incorporated coordination mechanisms in education, such as mutual recognition of degrees and theses and the right to study in any ex-Soviet republic. Since 1992, more than 40 multilateral agreements and cooperation programs on various aspects of educational activities, including the Eurasian Association for Educational Quality Assessment, have been signed. In 2008 the CIS member states opened a Network University: it includes 31 universities across the nine countries; half of students study with Network grants.

Within the Eurasian region, Russia with its numerous universities, many of which feature in international rankings, remains the most popular country with Belarusian students. Since 1998, the Union State of Russia and Belarus provides its citizens with equal access to education while lifting border controls. Russian is the lingua franca in the region; there are few, if any, cultural barriers. Opened in 2000 in Mogilev, the Belarusian-Russian University gives its students the choice between Russian and Belarusian programs. However, the balance of students between Russia and Belarus favors the former. In academic year 2017/2018, there were around 1,500 Russian students

in Belarus, while the number of Belarusians studying in Russia (mostly as part-time students) was 10 times higher. Students exchanges are popular in the regions near the common border (Vitebsk, Mogilev, and Gomel oblasts in Belarus). Other major higher education partners of Belarus within this region include Tajikistan and Azerbaijan.

## Asia

Even though the second regional initiative started to develop at least a decade later, in the early 21st century, it has quickly become the most significant, accounting for more than two thirds of all foreign students in Belarus. Aimed at countries across the Asian continent as well as ex-Soviet states that are not CIS members, it can be called Asian.

This regional initiative was driven by the economic interests of Belarus: the authorities sought to enlarge the educational market for the country and sell Belarusian educational services to their economic and political partners. Consequently, it is mainly focused on marketing Belarusian education to mobile students, primarily from the countries that encourage their citizens to study abroad. Programs in the Russian language make Belarus more attractive for students from ex-Soviet states, who mostly originate from families with a good command of Russian. Moreover, the Republic has the reputation of a safe country that provides foreigners with comfortable conditions for studies. Unlike many other ex-Soviet countries, Belarus has never experienced inter-ethnic and/or religious clashes. This factor plays a significant role in the success of this initiative among students from Western and Southern Asian states, such as Iran, India, and Lebanon. At the same time, Belarus does not guarantee residency for foreign graduates, thus reducing to a minimum the brain drain threat for their native countries.

The Belarusian system of higher education is successful among many Asian countries as it provides a relatively good education, especially in medicine, for a moderate price compared to other countries. It is attractive to students from countries where demand for higher education outstrips supply due to either population size or a small higher education system.

Turkmenistan and China account for the two largest groups of Asian students (7,200 and 1,400 people respectively). Thanks to bilateral agreements, foreign students are only required to pass an interview to demonstrate their proficiency in Russian, the language of most courses. Preparatory Russian language training is available prior to degree programs.

## Europe

The third regional dimension, European, demonstrates the multi-vector character of Belarusian foreign policy and the country's openness to the West. It comprises the participation of Belarus in the educational programs sponsored by the European Union (EU): Tempus (from the 1990s), Erasmus (in different variants), and, recently, the Bologna Process. Out of the three dimensions, it has the least im-



pact on Belarusian higher education since it does not generate income due to the lack of incoming foreign students. Belarus formally joined the Bologna Process in 2015, although it had made steps in this direction earlier. However, the Bologna principles have not been fully introduced into Belarusian educational practice. For example, the state continues to appoint rectors, while student self-government and the credit system are under-developed. Since the budget allocated by the EU for academic exchanges is very small, few Belarusian students can study abroad.

Paradoxically, the number of Belarusian students in the EU was higher in the early 2000s. Then, Belarusians made up a third of international students in Lithuania (mainly due to the relocation of European Humanities University from Minsk to Vilnius in 2006) and up to 5,000 studied in Poland every year. These numbers have declined as fewer grants are available for Belarusians, while the opportunities under the Bologna system are not well developed. As for EU students, few of them study in Belarus; those that come do so to study Russian for a semester or to undertake a PhD program in this field.

## Conclusion

Regional initiatives with Asia seem to be the most important for Belarusian higher education at present. Given the income associated with foreign incoming students, this dimension is likely to maintain its position in the future. Currently, fewer than 5% of all students in Belarus are international; therefore, the opportunity for growth is high. The Eurasian dimension is relatively smaller and tends to send more Belarusians abroad (to Russia) than generate income for the country. The European dimension is of political importance as it aims to demonstrate Belarusian multilateral policy; however, the reality shows very low mobility between the country and the EU states.

# Looking East: Russian Regional Educational Cooperation with Asia

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This article explores Russia's cooperation with four regional associations in Asia, two that have wide-ranging mandates that include initiatives designed to deepen educational collaboration, and two that focus specifically on higher education.

## Educational Cooperation as Part of Russia's Multilateral Foreign Policy

Russia has been developing a relationship with the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN) [1] since regaining independence in 1991, becoming a dialogue partner in 1996. ASEAN is an extremely well-established regional association, having been founded in 1967. It emphasizes the diplomatic side of regional relations, pursuing peace, stability and respect for national sovereignty. Russia's collaboration with ASEAN has intensified in recent years: there have been three major joint summits in 2005, 2010 and 2018 and cooperation is governed by the Comprehensive Programs of Actions 2016-2020.

Russia-ASEAN international academic relations are propagated by the ASEAN Centre launched in 2010 at the Moscow State University of International Relations (MGIMO) [2] which facilitates student/faculty exchanges, information sharing and research. In 2016, the first ASEAN-Russia University Forum was held in Vladivostok, a major Russian city in the country's far east. This was followed up with a second Vladivostok-based forum in 2017 that focused on the prospects for enhancing Russia's cooperation with ASEAN in education, science, culture, and the economy. Having been elevated to the status of strategic partner in 2018, an ASEAN-Russia Working Group on Education was launched in late 2018 to work on strengthening cooperation in education.

This will bolster related action plans in science, technology and innovation as well as a recently established Network of ASEAN-Russia Think Tanks. Educational collaboration between Russia and ASEAN is unfolding along a distinct path, with Russian universities not (yet) connected to the ASEAN University Network, the focal point for ASEAN higher education collaboration. According to one Russian expert, this is symptomatic of the turbulence that epitomized the broader relationship between Russia and ASEAN over the years. However, cooperation has been reinvigorated in recent years as Russia finds a space to work more closely with ASEAN in light of shifts in the US and China's approach to the partnership. [3]

In 2018, Vladivostok played host to another strategic gathering of Russian and Asian partners: a conference on cooperation in higher education for the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC). [4] APEC has been operating since 1989, initiated by the then Australian Prime Minister to build on pre-existing informal arrangements and to anticipate future trading relations in the context of growing global economic liberalization. Russia joined in 1998. APEC's involvement in education stems from the stated need to develop 21st century knowledge and skills and integrate human resources development in the global economy. Thus, in 2014, APEC launched a scholarship and internship initiative between member states that aims to promote innovation, productivity and sustainable growth. This is one part of a longer-term strategy to have a million students in university every year by 2020, an ambitious aim that would broaden access to higher education

by 25% and help mitigate the economic threat of future skills shortages. APEC is increasingly focusing its education collaboration on women (e.g. through offering dedicated scholarships) as part of its aim to support women's economic empowerment and greater participation in the workforce. In Russia, this is being actioned by new policies to offer vocational education and training in advanced areas of the economy, providing grants for female entrepreneurs as well as other programs aiming to improve the status of women.

The 2018 APEC conference [5] honed in on educational challenges and opportunities in a digital era. The theme of the conference may be somewhat banal, but it attracted university and government leaders from across the region, indicating not only the high level that the conference was pitched at, but suggesting the conference was considered a worthwhile use of leaders' time. Unlike some regional associations that have wide-ranging missions, APEC stays close to its economic growth mission, and so any educational co-operation activities are designed to support this goal.

## Educational Cooperation between Higher Education Institutions

Similarly to APEC (with which it also cooperates), the Association of Pacific Rim Universities (APRU) [6] has a stated mandate to promote solutions to 21st century challenges in the Asia-Pacific region. APRU was founded in the USA in 1997 but its secretariat has been hosted in Asia since 2002, moving to its current base at the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology in 2015. With members stretching from Australia to Canada to Chile, the emphasis is as much on the Pacific countries as on the Asian continent. APRU positions itself as committed to enhancing innovation and excellence, seeking to transfer its members' research expertise to public policy.

Only one Russian university — Far Eastern Federal University (FEFU) — is a member of APRU, joining at the association's inception. With a total of 50 institutional members, Russian impact on the association might be limited, but the fact that FEFU has been involved from the outset means it has greater institutional knowledge and stronger networks within APRU than newer members. As a sign of FEFU's influence, it initiated new areas of activity for APRU with the creation of an Arctic hub in 2017 and in 2011, FEFU's Rector proposed establishing a shared APEC educational space that would be coordinated by APRU. These examples indicate the importance of universities in enacting Russia's aims not only to be engaged with existing regional structures for collaboration but to shape their future direction.

Russia has greater quantitative presence in the Association of Asian Universities (AAU) [7] with 18 member universities. This makes it the second largest member after Kazakhstan, which has 25 member institutions. The Association has its base at Altai State University in Barnaul, strategically located a few hundred kilometres from Russia's borders with northern Kazakhstan, China and Mongolia.

The AAU was founded in 2012 after Altai State successfully hosted an Asian student forum that attracted more than 250 people from 11 countries. The success of the Altai-Asia Student Forum, which has since become an annual affair, stimulated the creation of a formal association — the AAU — that aims to create an "Asian educational space", support the internationalization of education, trigger academic mobility, and expand cultural links. Unlike the other regional groupings discussed here which operate in English, the working language of the AAU is Russian. Given that AAU was established by a Russian university and that China and Thailand are the only two members not to share the Soviet-era connections of the other members (Armenia, Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, Mongolia, Russia and Tajikistan), the choice of language is unsurprising.

## Looking East... and Beyond

This overview has highlighted only four of the many Asia-focussed groupings Russia and Russian universities actively participate in. Russia not only values its links with Asia but sees itself as an important player in maintaining and extending educational opportunities. With 77% of Russian territory located in Asia and educational connections with China dating from the Soviet era, it seems only natural that Russia would seek to work with and benefit from close connections to the continent it is also shares.

That said, Russia and Russian universities collaborate not only with Asia but countries and regions around the world. FEFU, the only Russian member of APRU, is also connected to two China–Russia alliances, the Eurasian Universities' Association, and the University of the Arctic as well as various disciplinary associations. Altai State, founder of AAU, has signed over 250 agreements with international partners and was held up by President Putin in a 2017 speech as an exemplar for regional higher education cooperation.

Asia is clearly an important regional partner for Russia, but just as the eagle on the Russian coat of arms faces in two directions, so too does Russian educational cooperation by not only looking east, but west — and indeed to the rest of the world.

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- [6] APRU website: <https://apru.org>
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# How “Regional” is the Internationalization of Higher Education in Slovenia?

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Slovenia (2 million inhabitants) has a small higher education system with nearly half of the population aged 19–24 enrolled in tertiary education (46.5% in academic year 2017/18). Whereas the internationalization of research has been high on higher educational institutions' (HEIs) agendas for decades, numerous student and staff exchanges and mobility programs have come on the agenda mainly through Slovenian participation in European Union (EU) programs (e.g., Erasmus+). Even though the numbers related to international cooperation have grown rapidly, a closer analysis shows that this has a strong regional footprint in the Western Balkans.

## A Strong Western Balkans Footprint

Slovenia used to be part of Yugoslavia together with Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, the Republic of North Macedonia, Kosovo, Montenegro, and Serbia. These countries are now (together with Albania) referred to as the Western Balkans. This term is rather new, born in Western Europe as a seemingly neutral term for a region that remained largely outside both waves of EU enlargement. [1]

Slovenia joined the EU in 2004 and is seen as a model for the Western Balkans countries, where the “return to Europe” is also an important political project. Despite their diversity, higher education systems in this region have all experienced recent trends such as massification and growth in the number of higher education institutions (mainly in the private sector) and feature a similar governance tradition with individual faculties acting as separate parts of a disconnected university organization.

The strongest regional impact can be seen in incoming degree mobility. Here, the majority of foreign students to Slovenia are from the Western Balkans (75.8% in 2018/19), followed by students from Italy and Russia. This high rate is largely explained by the special study agreements between Slovenia and other former Yugoslavian countries entered into soon after the collapse of Yugoslavia in the early 1990s. They allow students from the Western Balkan region to study at Slovenian HEIs under the same conditions as domestic students on the basis of reciprocity. Since Slovenian higher education is tuition free, this means also free study for students from the Western Balkans.

For staff mobility, individual academics remain the most important driver. Through short-term bottom-up mobility they stimulate further research cooperation, develop joint study programs and cooperate on other activities. With regards to the Western Balkans, this is usually triggered by senior academic staff, i.e., the generation that grew up when Yugoslavia was a single state.

The share of Slovenian academic staff going to the Western Balkans countries in 2017/18 was 16% and for incoming over one third of all staff mobility (36%). Co-publication between Western Balkans colleagues makes up around 20% of all internationally co-authored publications. [2] This cooperation is the strongest among full professors (27%) since senior academics know each other's educational systems, while similar structures and governance facilitate the exchange of faculty and practices.

## Slovenian Higher Education Internationalization Strategy

In 2016, the Slovenian government adopted a National Strategy for the Internationalization of Slovenian Higher Education. [3] Within the regions identified as significant partners, the Western Balkans is the top priority. During the preparation of the strategy, all Slovenian higher education stakeholders also propounded the Western Balkans as the most important region for cooperation. Other regions of interest in the strategy range from the Euro-Mediterranean region to highly industrialized countries (South Korea, Japan, USA) and the BRICS [4]. Yet the strategy does not lay out concrete steps for action in these priority areas, except participation in student fairs in some of these regions.

As a result, cooperation with the Western Balkans remains coincidental and not strategic and depends on the potential interests of academic staff and students. Efforts have been made towards full exploitation of the Regional Platform for Benchmarking and Cooperation in Higher Education and Research [5], however, no concrete results are so far available. Overall, most of the activities under the strategy have focused on the promotion of the Slovenian higher education system to students, and they are mainly from the Western Balkans.

Slovenian internationalization efforts seem to bring more benefits to the Western Balkans countries in terms of quality and fee-free education in Slovenia and for professors with the developed science infrastructure than they do for students and professors from Slovenia looking out to the Western Balkans.

## Next Stop – Russia

While Slovenian HEIs are already well-known within the Western Balkans region, Slovenian higher education and research are considerably less recognizable in other regions. This constitutes an opportunity for the Slovenian higher education system and its institutions, staff and students to strengthen cooperation and investment in the

field of sustainable development, economic and non-economic cooperation, international competitiveness and in the search for solutions to current issues.

Since Slovenian higher education has a rather strict national language policy that mandates teaching in the Slovenian language, there is a strong interest from Slovenian HEIs for greater cooperation with countries from the Slavic language groups outside the EU, such as Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine. Currently, students from the Russian Federation are the third largest group of incoming degree students (2.9%) in Slovenia. Many Slovenian and Russian universities are research intensive and strong in STEM fields, which is a good starting point for student and staff exchanges and institutional cooperation. The challenge is the dwarf-giant proportion of the two higher education systems together with the difficulties related to the search for right partners for Slovenian HEIs in such an enormous state.

## References and Notes

[1] In this article, the term “Western Balkans” is used to refer only to countries of former Yugoslavia (i.e., excluding Albania).

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# University Networks in the BRICS: New Approaches to Academic Partnership

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## The Global South and the Global North: A New Academic Reality

The notions of the “Global South” and the “Global North” seem to have substituted the preceding geopolitical concept of an East–West division and the theory of the First, Second and Third Worlds. Nevertheless, these notions remain extremely problematic. Why, for example, is Australia part of the Global North, while Russia, the former leader of the Eastern or Second World, drifts towards the Global South despite its polar regions and Arctic ambitions? Moreover, since the “North” is neatly defined as European and North American societies (including Australia and New Zealand) and the “South” is perceived as comprised of such different worlds as Brazil, China, India, Russia, and South Africa, the question is then whether this paradigm is not just a slightly modified traditional Eurocentric vision of the world. Yet it is rather persistent: discussions on North–South or South–South relations are more and more widespread.

Higher education is no exception. The rise of the Global South as an important study destination and a place for conducting valuable research makes it visible in transforming academic landscape. Most university partnerships, however, are still oriented along the Global North–Global South lines, meaning that resources (students, finance, etc.) are transferred towards the North, while standards and models travel in the opposite direction. As a consequence, it is no surprise that universities of the so-called Global South are increasingly seeking horizontally organized South–South academic cooperation focused upon common problems of the Southern societies.

The majority of South–South cooperation projects are based on geographic regions, like the African Research Universities Alliance, which founded centers of excellence in 10 priority areas that are crucial for African development. Another example is an attempt to manage Sino-Russian cooperation in Central Asia through the establishment



of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) Network University.

Most of these regional consortia, however, have similarities with North–South cooperation, since one or two regional leaders (as in the case of the SCO Network University) usually hold stronger positions and seem to primarily aim at getting greater access to regional academic markets. For instance, through participation in numerous regional university associations Russia seeks, on the one hand, to maintain connections with the former Soviet Union countries (e.g., the CIS Network University) and, on the other hand, to handle relations with other regional academic powers (e.g., the Association of Sino-Russian Technical Universities, SCO Network University, and Russian–Indian Network.).

### **The BRICS as a New Type of South-South Cooperation**

Russia's academic cooperation with the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa), however, is very different due to the nature of the consortium. Firstly, the BRICS is not “regional” in the geographic sense of the word. Nevertheless, since the cooperation is focused on shared problems and overlapping interests of the leading countries of the Global South, the BRICS can be considered as an example of a different, more innovative approach to regionalism, where spatial distances matter less in defining regions while interests seem to play an increasingly important role.

Secondly, the BRICS is a club of Global South leaders and has potential to expand to other Asian, African, and Latin American countries. Currently, it is a grouping of the powerful and, therefore, excludes vertically structured hierarchical relations. In other words, it is impossible to bring the old North–South paradigm of unequal power relations to the BRICS cooperation.

Thirdly, the BRICS brings together countries with very different backgrounds and histories. Arguably, these countries are even more distant from each other in their academic landscapes than they are geographically, with only China and Russia sharing a relatively similar academic culture. This makes cooperation more challenging.

### **The BRICS, Russia and the Global South: Towards Horizontal University Cooperation**

Over the last few years university cooperation between the BRICS countries seems to be expanding rapidly. Some five years ago Russian participation in the annual conferences of the Brazilian Association for International Education (FAUBAI) or the International Education Association of South Africa (IEASA) was simply unthinkable; today it is a routine that enables professors from these distant countries to meet regularly. This rapid enhancement in cooperation is partly explained by recently established mechanisms that include annual ministerial meetings in education and several horizontal university networks.

Academic cooperation in the BRICS region remains fairly novel; cooperation along the South–North principles continues to be much more intensive than the South–South cooperation. For instance, even the Russian universities that are expected to be actively involved in cooperation with their BRICS counterparts (i.e., members of BRICS Network University) have a very limited number of international students from these countries. In 2017, for example, 12 Russian universities in the network hosted only 39 students from Brazil, 136 from India, and 191 from South Africa. The presence of Chinese students was more conspicuous: 5,120. The number of co-authored publications among any pair of the BRICS countries is even more telling: it never exceeds 3% of the total number of the articles published by a particular country.

However, the recent establishment of two large university networks aiming to address common issues of the BRICS is a sign that academic cooperation is moving forward. The BRICS Network University is an association of 56 universities jointly working on Master's and PhD programs in six main areas: economics, BRICS studies, water resources, ecology and climate changes, energy, and computer sciences. The BRICS University League is another initiative, as yet more loosely organized, aiming to enhance cooperation among universities in the BRICS countries. It is still too early to assess these two initiatives, but their very existence seems to indicate a demand for new forms of partnerships that pursue goals not covered by traditional North–South academic cooperation.

### **Conclusion**

The BRICS — at least in principle — is intended to be a grouping of the leaders of the so-called Global South. Arguably, it has more value not as a club of five emerging economies aspiring for a fairer place in the current world order, but rather as a group that provides a voice for the emerging Global South. This is the idea behind the “BRICS-plus” format developed over the last BRICS summits. In this context, Russia is considered a leader of a much larger Global South area that includes the post-Soviet countries of Central Asia.

In general, the BRICS seems to be extremely important for Russia, making the country a member of a grouping of the most dynamically developing countries — even if the moniker “Global South” hinders more than it helps. Instead of being focused on its past, Russia is learning to look to the future as part of the BRICS. Higher education is no exception to this forward-looking vision. With the BRICS Network University, BRICS University League and other similar educational forums, Russia can put itself right at the center of a changing academic world, gaining access to the intellectual resources of the countries that together make up 40% of the world population. An ambitious vision like this is certainly worth the effort.

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# Is a Eurasian Higher Education Area in the Making?

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## Does a Eurasian Higher Education Area Exist?

The Eurasian Higher Education Area is a concept that recently entered the lexicon of the post-Soviet political space. [1] It refers to a higher education region involving Russia and other countries of the former Soviet region in different configurations. Shared educational space is often seen as complementary to a regional organization such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) or Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and its predecessor the Eurasian Economic Community (EurAsEc). Thus, in some situations, the “region” even extends beyond the former USSR to include countries such as China, India or Pakistan. At the same time, post-Soviet countries are included in larger projects led by “outsiders”, e.g. European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and China’s “One Belt, One Road” initiative. The lack of clear delineation of the area leads to the conclusion that a Eurasian Higher Education Area is still in the making, when different meanings and scenarios are possible.

## Origins of the Eurasian Higher Education Area

Eurasian integration can be considered a process of alignment of the former USSR countries underpinned by geographical, historical, economic and geopolitical factors. Cooperation started just after the dissolution of the USSR, but due to pervasive crisis, lack of resources and consequent low priority ascribed to education, it remained mainly rhetorical. In 1994, N. Nazarbayev, then President of Kazakhstan, proposed the formation of a Eurasian Union which would also include joint work on higher education. But it was not welcomed by some CIS countries that were reluctant to align more closely with Russia, or by Russia itself, where the primary concern at the time was domestic affairs.

Nevertheless, in 1997, two years before the Bologna Process came into being, political leaders signed an agreement on the creation of a CIS Common Educational Area, defined as the “affinity of principles of state educational policy, coherence of state educational standards, programs, coupled with equal opportunities and the right to education in all educational institutions located in CIS countries.” [2] This new regional space was marked by educational legacies from the Soviet period such as high state

regulation and the notion of education as a right. However, this agreement had no clear agenda and tools and lacked ideational support. Implementation as well as funding were left to the discretion of national governments, which meant it became little more than a proclamation on paper.

### The Bologna Process in the Post-Soviet Countries

The launch of the Bologna Process in 1999 with the aim of creating the EHEA significantly changed the post-Soviet higher education landscape. Eleven countries of the region joined the process, and consequently, are reforming their systems to comply with the common principles.

Bologna reforms, supported by EU programs and funding, resulted in the alignment of higher education systems in the region and the internationalization of universities. The subsequent creation of the CIS and SCO network universities as alternatives to European initiatives recognize the significance of inter-university cooperation in building shared educational areas. In this sense, subsequent Russian-led initiatives can be considered a “Eurasian” sub-region of higher education. These have been based on European principles but take into account features of post-Soviet countries.

## Russia’s “Independent” Agenda

Pursuing the same goal as the EU — to become one of the world leaders in the global education market — Russia sees the Bologna Process as a means of improving its competitiveness. At the same time, dissatisfied with its “periphery” position in the EHEA, Russia launched an Excellence Program and spearheaded alternative regional projects under its leadership. The EurAsEc, a major Russia and Kazakhstan-led project designed for CIS countries that were willing to cooperate more deeply, also helped make significant progress in elaborating regulating frameworks for international educational cooperation.

Reluctance to engage in integration at the governmental level led to the mounting prominence of Russian universities as driving forces of alignment. There was a growing understanding that real integration would not be possible without engagement at the grassroots level. Using higher education, older projects were reinvigorated, such as the creation of the SCO and CIS network universities. Both network universities are consortia of leading national universities working together to deliver joint Master’s degrees, foster student exchanges and undertake collaborative research. Regardless of the limited scope and funding, the SCO and CIS network universities marked an important milestone by engaging universities in regional cooperation and supplementing intergovernmental processes. However, they include mainly elite universities based in capital cities, and thus, represent only a limited number of stakeholders.

## Deadlock of the Eurasian Project

The overlapping initiatives with similar institutional structures and goals that have emerged within the CIS, SCO and EurAsEC are the result of the search for appropriate



forms of cooperation. The transformation of the EurAsEC into the EAEU was expected to be a major project for the post-Soviet countries with the potential to consolidate previous efforts to create higher education regionalism. With the importance of the knowledge economy and ideas around competitiveness in policymaking, the shared research and educational area was supposed to be built based on the mutual recognition of qualifications and an EAEU network university. However, it ended up splitting the region and causing tensions even among supporters of post-Soviet integration. Provisions on the coordination of educational policy were not included into treaty due to the objections of Kazakhstan, which expressed concerns about massive brain drain to Russia. Ultimately, only articles on the mutual recognition of qualifications upon hiring were included.

Considering the situation, Russian universities, not least because of their intentions to develop internationalization as part of competitiveness strategies and capacities built during their participation in EU programs, took the lead in fostering cooperation with EAEU universities. For example, in 2016 Tomsk State University launched a joint Master's program with Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan on Eurasian integration to train students to work in EAEU institutions.

## Future of the Eurasian Higher Education Area

The development of Eurasian higher education regionalism is determined by the levels of resources and trust in political level elites, but at the same time by the interconnectedness of people who used to live in one country and also by the harmonization of educational systems in line with the Bologna Process. Thus far, resources and trust have both been rather low, and the probability that politicians of the countries of the region will push for a new educational project in the short- or medium-term is also low. However, although the process of alignment is frozen at the intergovernmental level, cooperation at inter-university level is developing, and this trend will continue. Such cooperation for higher education led by higher education is the best way out of the current deadlock.

## References and Notes

[1] In 2016 V. Matvienko, Speaker of Russian Parliament (Chairman of the Federation Council of the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation), announced that the building of a Eurasian Higher Education Area is one of the key priorities for education.

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# Emergence of Russian Branch Campuses in the Post-Soviet Space as Regional Integration Strategy

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## From Centralized Soviet Higher Education System to Branch Campus Development

With the dissolution of the Soviet Union, its centralized higher education system became a fragmented network scattered in fifteen newly-independent countries. As an attempt to restore the shared Soviet legacy, the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), a Russian-led political alliance of 11 former Soviet republics, adopted 19 decisions on higher education between 1992 and 2018. These initiatives concerned capacity building in research, facilitation of academic exchange, degree accreditation, etc. One of them pertains to the legal and logistical aspects of branch campus development in the region.

The status of Russia as the successor state to the Soviet Union and a former colonial power explains the predominant position of Russian academia in the higher education network of the region. In the post-Soviet era, export of higher education services is one of the tools for Russian universities to maintain their presence in the former Soviet republics. Branch campus development represents a form of such export.

Coined as international branch campuses (IBCs) in the literature, these institutions are entities affiliated with a foreign education provider through a certain type of ownership over academic programs that leads to a degree granted by such provider. [1] The United States, the United Kingdom, France, Russia, and Australia (in that order) are the five biggest exporters of IBCs. Although Russia is a major exporter, its role in developing IBCs is often overlooked. An overview of Russian branch campus initiatives in the former Soviet republics may shed some light on this role and help understand their origins, purpose and uses as a regional integration strategy.

## Russian Branch Campus Development

Although the significance of Russia ranking in the top five IBC-exporting nations has been underemphasized, it comes as no surprise. The existence of such an expansive network of Russian IBCs can be attributed to the Soviet legacy of higher education. When the USSR collapsed in

1991, it left behind a well-established structure comprised of 946 higher education institutions (HEIs) across the 15 former Soviet republics, with 5.1 million students in total. [2] Moreover, as the USSR's successor, Russia gained access to the grandiose Soviet higher education network that included 66 HEIs (universities, institutes, university centers, specialized faculties and branches), 23 specialized vocational schools, and more than 400 professional–technical education centers in 36 foreign countries.

However, in the 1990s and early 2000s, Russian universities did not use this vast higher education network purposefully. In 2009, following the adoption of the 2011–2020 Russian Education Export Concept, the Russian Ministry of Education and Science started to orchestrate the export of domestic higher education — including, this time, the post-Soviet countries.

My recent survey of Russian universities with branch campuses reveals that during 1992–2017, 58 branch campuses were established by Russian universities in 12 former Soviet republics. [3] The highest concentration of IBCs is in Kazakhstan (15), Kyrgyzstan (11), and Ukraine (11). Turkmenistan and Georgia are the only two post-Soviet countries that have never had a Russian IBC. The top three IBC-exporting Russian HEIs are International Management Institute LINK (IMI LINK), Plekhanov Russian University of Economics (PRUE), and Lomonosov Moscow State University (LMSU) with eleven, seven, and six branch campuses across former Soviet Union, respectively.

These three institutions demonstrate three distinct pathways to IBC development. Whereas IMI LINK, established in 1992, is a newcomer to higher education, PRUE and LMSU are the remnants of the Russian Empire. The providers also differ in the delivery of higher education services. IMI LINK is a private HEI that largely relies on the British Open University model of distance education, providing predominantly profit-driven degree programs aimed at job training for non-traditional students. In contrast, PRUE specializes in economics and offers education with historical traditions and rigorous scientific research in a college campus environment. LMSU, on the other hand, is a comprehensive university that grants degrees in humanities, natural and social sciences. LMSU is the highest-ranked Russian university with widely cited scientific contributions and, as a consequence, is the most prestigious. The appeal of the LMSU brand propelled its internationalization strategy through IBC development. For these reasons, LMSU and its six satellite campuses are offered as an example to make a case for the Russian IBC phenomenon as a form of higher education regionalism.

### Case Study: Lomonosov Moscow State University (LMSU)

LMSU is one of the most successful Russian IBC-exporting institutions with its six branch campuses in post-Soviet states (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Ukraine, and Uzbekistan) as well as two more recent

IBCs in China and Slovenia. Established in 1755, Moscow University is the oldest university in Russia; it boasts multiple Nobel Prize winners in physics and other disciplines. In 1940, it was renamed Lomonosov Moscow State University after one of the greatest Russian scholars, Mikhail Lomonosov. LMSU Moscow's campus is the largest college campus in Russia: it enrolls over 47,000 undergraduate and graduate students every year, including about 4,000 international students.

Over the last twenty years, LMSU has turned into a global university ranked in the Top 100 best universities of the world. The establishment of the IBC network across the post-Soviet region and beyond is an intentional element of LMSU's internationalization strategy driven by federal policies aimed at encouraging Russian universities to expand globally, such as the 5-100 Russian Academic Excellence Project. Furthermore, federal investments in LMSU's transnational partnerships demonstrate the interest of the government in promoting the LMSU brand and using it as an advantage. Indeed, LMSU is funded through a separate federal budget line, estimated at over \$277 million in 2018 and expected to exceed \$280 million in 2020. These figures might explain why the university maintains a network of satellite campuses and actively seeks international partnerships elsewhere.

Nevertheless, my findings point to the persistence of the Soviet university model centered on workforce training, with a strong natural science curriculum and Russian-speaking identity. The IBCs serve as primary outposts of the Russian higher education in the former Soviet republics. Therefore, branch campus development initiatives in the region should be considered primarily as emerging forms of regionalism that is grounded in the Soviet legacy of higher education.

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# Higher Education Regionalism as Russian Soft Power

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## Introduction

In the Soviet Union, student mobility meant for its citizens studying in another Soviet republic. Out of 15 republics, Russia was the academic and administrative center. Russian universities were known not only for their prestige and size but also for the fierce competition that defined their admission processes. Russia was a magnet for students from other Soviet republics; this mobility pattern also contributed to reinforcing the dominant ideology that ensured allegiance to socialism.

Since 1991, as the successor of the Soviet Union, Russia has been using student mobility as a soft power tool in the post-Soviet region. Today, nearly three decades after the collapse of the USSR, Russia remains the first destination for international students from this region. 80 percent of inbound international students in Russia are from former Soviet states; in 2018, their number exceeded 240,000. Government scholarships, a relatively low tuition fees and living expenses, easier admission regulations compared to global outbound mobility destinations, existence of family ties, economic constraints in home countries, immigration opportunities, and the quality of higher education institutions are factors that made Russia the primary choice for students from the post-Soviet countries. To analyze whether Russian soft power influences higher education regionalism in the post-Soviet area, this article discusses mobility patterns of students from Ukraine and Kazakhstan. Both countries are part of the post-Soviet region but have recently experienced very different political dynamics with Russia.

## Ukraine

In Ukraine, outbound student mobility has been growing slowly but steadily since the collapse of the Soviet Union, climbing from 0.78 percent in 1998 to 4.6 percent in 2018. Due to the capacities of the large domestic system to accommodate the demand for higher education, the outbound mobility ratio remained relatively low compared to growth in other post-Soviet countries until the conflict with Russia began in 2014. A significant rise in outbound mobility after the Maidan movement and Russian intervention can be explained by increasingly harsh economic constraints and ongoing war in the region.

Surprisingly, on the eve of the conflict, the number of outbound students from Ukraine to Russia did not show

a downward trend. In fact, while the growth rate of outbound mobile students to Russia remained steady before the conflict, it doubled as the conflict continued to swell (from over 9 thousand in 2014/15 to more than 20 thousand in 2015/16).

Such an increase in numbers could be driven by various factors; each of them requires a thorough investigation. It could be argued that one of the reasons for the shift is a change of attitudes among ethnic Russian minorities in Ukraine who see Russia as the top choice for foreign education. Since many groups from the eastern part of Ukraine feel greater cultural affiliation with Russia and have overarching family ties that span the borderline, students from such groups may be attracted to studying in Russia.

Furthermore, the Russian government increased the quotas of government scholarships for Ukrainians who wish to study in Russia. In 2017, the number of scholarships provided by the federal agency Rossotrudnichestvo reached 472; the number of submitted applications also increased in 2017, with on average four applicants per scholarship.

Although Russia remains extremely popular with Ukrainian students, it was superseded by Poland as the first destination for studies abroad back in 2010/11. [1] Even though the number of students going to Poland dropped from more than 35,000 in 2016/17 to over 29,000 in 2017/18, it was still around seven thousand more than numbers of outbound mobile students to Russia the same year (nearly 23,000). The success of Poland as an academic destination for Ukrainian students can be explained by such factors as a vast Ukrainian diaspora (400,000 Ukrainians in 2015), simplified visa procedures for Ukrainian citizens, and the launch of 450 EU-funded ERASMUS+ scholarships for Polish universities in 2014/15. The growing popularity of ERASMUS+ and Horizon 2020 tools, funded by the European Commission, also contribute to this shift. Although outbound mobility to Russia is increasing every year compared to that of Poland, the success of Polish universities with Ukrainian mobile students can be considered as a counterbalance reducing Russian influence in this field.

## Kazakhstan

Russian soft power is more evident in Kazakhstan. Every year, Russia is chosen by the largest number of mobile students and has no rivals in this field. Besides, once Kazakhstan gained independence, studying abroad quickly became a trendy cultural norm thanks to the Bolshak government program awarding scholarships to study outside the country, which helped to widely disperse Kazakh students around the world.

Figures for 2018 show that 78 percent of mobile Kazakh students preferred Russia for their post-secondary education. Such success of Russian universities can be explained, among other reasons, by ethnic factors (21% of the population of Kazakhstan identify themselves as Russian), political proximity, cultural, familial and language ties, and, last but not least, the relative ease of admission procedures. Furthermore, Bolashak national scholarships have

an indisputable impact on this trend. Although Bolashak provides full coverage for Kazakh nationals to study at numerous universities around the globe, the statistics show that 69% of the 3,000 annually allocated scholarships are granted to students going to Russian universities.

## Conclusion

This brief research on the outbound mobility from post-Soviet countries to Russia demonstrates that mobility patterns are influenced by Russian soft power in the region. Although the conflict on the Russia-Ukrainian border did not have a negative impact on the number of Ukrainian mobile students to Russia, it helped another trend — mobility to Poland — to take over. In the case of Kazakhstan, Russian soft power is strong enough to overcome other competitors. Although the Bolashak scholarship provides the same support from the Kazakh government to study in a wide range of countries, the vast majority of students still prefer Russia. Further research on these trends holds significant potential to explain the tendencies and processes that prevail in the post-Soviet region.

## References and Notes

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# Central Asia: A Geographical but Not a Functional Region for Education

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A Kyrgyzstani university student, having read an article that referred to Kyrgyzstan as “formerly a part of the Soviet Union,” asked, with some irritation, when the United States had ceased being “a former British colony.” Despite its sarcasm, the comment raises serious questions. How are countries and regions categorized, and why? “Formerly a

part of the Soviet Union” implies that the reader will not be able to identify Kyrgyzstan unless it is linked to its former governing entity. Many Central Asians also are offended by the label, “the Stans” — it suggests that not only can the speaker not be bothered to learn the names of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, but that also the speaker is lumping together five nations that differ quite dramatically, based simply on their geographic proximity and the last syllable of their names. Such a speaker likely would not refer to “the lands” — England, Greenland, Iceland, Ireland, Poland, Scotland, and Switzerland, for example, as a region, based on the last syllable of their names and their location in Europe.

The countries of Central Asia differ in territory and population, in natural resources and the resulting national wealth, in the level of government repressiveness, and even in alphabets. Each of these factors impacts higher education and cooperation prospects. However, a region does not have to be defined by geography; “functional regions” may be constituted by other kinds of commonalities. [1] Thus, for example, both Canada and Croatia are members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), due to their military needs rather than their geographical proximity.

In an international system, the major actors are nation states; by contrast, in the contemporary global system, non-state actors, including NGOs and international organizations, are also important. [2] This is the case in Central Asia. Diverse interests and affiliation to various functional regions explain the difference in choices related to membership in international organizations and NGOs. For example, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan belong to the World Trade Organization; Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan do not. Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan belong to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization; Turkmenistan does not. Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan belong to the Eurasian Economic Union; Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan do not.

In the field of higher education, functional regions are also important. Education reflects a vision of future, and geographical neighbors may not always share the same vision. President Jeenbekov and the Members of Parliament have a different plan for Kyrgyzstan than President Berdimuhamedov has for Turkmenistan. Similarly, former President Nazarbayev’s “30/2050” concept — to make Kazakhstan one of the 30 most developed nations in the world by 2050 — is different from the idea that many people in Tajikistan, a country that sends enormous numbers of migrant laborers to Russia, have about its future. While its neighbors were writing new textbooks and designing new curricula to forge new nations, Tajikistan was suffering from a devastating civil war. The differences in vision are due to both economic capacity and political will. For example, in 2017 the estimated GDP per capita in Kazakhstan was \$26,300, whereas in Tajikistan it was \$3,200. These economic factors alone suggest that the political leaders of the two countries might have different visions of their societies’ most urgent educational needs.



Moreover, while united by geography, the Central Asian countries are divided by politics. In 2009, the Turkmen government prevented its students from travelling to Kyrgyzstan to attend the American University in Central Asia, literally removing some of them from airplanes. More recently, in 2015, the Uzbek Ministry of Higher and Specialized Secondary Education refused either incoming or outgoing student mobility to the other Central Asian states in the framework of the EU-funded TuCAHEA (Tuning the Central Asian Higher Education Area) project, designed to promote regional integration. At the last minute, students were placed in other universities, such as Naryn State University in Kyrgyzstan, instead of those in Uzbekistan. However, higher education and education in general has been undergoing changes since the death of Uzbekistan's long-time president Islam Karimov and the ascension of Shavkat Mirziyoyev in December 2016. Sherzod Shermatov, the new Minister of Public Education, graduated from Yale and previously served as an administrator at the Tashkent branch campus of Inha University of South Korea — one of more than a dozen international branch campuses currently operating in Tashkent. Nevertheless, like Kazakhstan, the new Uzbekistan seems to prefer searching for higher education ideas beyond the neighboring Central Asian countries.

The most frequently referenced initiative in higher education regionalization, the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), is based on both geographical and functional characteristics. European economic integration and the establishment of the European Union required labor mobility, which, in turn, required transparency of educational qualifications. If a pharmacist educated in Spain wished to work in Sweden, Swedish medical authorities needed to know what kind of education that person received. Such needs gave birth to the Bologna Process, which led to the establishment of the EHEA. A geographic region became an economic region; the latter's viability required educational transparency.

Two of the Bologna Process functions — academic mobility and the resulting labor mobility — also are attractive for some Central Asian countries. Kazakhstan, the only Central Asian country with territory in Europe, signed the Bologna Process accord in 2010. Because joining the Process requires signing the European Cultural Convention, and signing the Convention requires having territory in Europe, Kazakhstan is the only Central Asian nation that legally can join. However, the other Central Asian countries can adopt Bologna Process reforms. Kyrgyzstan is currently the most active in this regard. A small country with few natural resources, Kyrgyzstan has been dependent upon the creativity and openness of its people and multilateral alliances since it achieved independence. In contrast, Turkmenistan, with its enormous reserves of natural gas, until quite recently could be seen as an example of the much-debated “resource curse” — the idea that a country with abundant natural resources, under the control of a central government that can use the wealth generated to fulfill the population's basic needs, is less likely than

countries with fewer resources to develop a democratic infrastructure.

The Central Asian nations thus are no more a functional region than are all the “lands” of Europe. Joined by geography, they are divided by their visions of the future and the resulting views of the functions of education.

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# Integration into the European Higher Education Area: A New Quality Assurance System in Kyrgyzstan

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## International Influences on Kyrgyzstan's Education Policy

In the Soviet Union, the current region of Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan) was called Central Asia and Kazakhstan. The notion of a “region” is different for Central Asian countries compared to more clearly defined regions, such as Europe, because historically Central Asia was connected to Europe, the Middle East, South and East Asia by the Silk Road. This position shaped some common cultural values among the Central Asian countries, but it also brought diversity that made Central Asia part of a broader set of networks.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, countries outside the region have exercised a strong influence on political, economic, cultural, religious and educational development of Central Asian states. Each of them promotes its own agenda and retains influence through cooperation in the educational sphere. The case of Kyrgyzstan, one of the smallest and poorest successor states, is particularly inter-

esting since it is unusually open to external influences. Its higher education system includes international universities that represent educational standards and requirements borrowed from all over the world: the Kyrgyz-Turkish University, Kyrgyz-Russian Slavonic University, American University of Central Asia, Mahmud Kashgari-Barskani Eastern University, University of Central Asia, four Confucius Institutes, etc. Kyrgyzstan also has grant programs and partnerships with China and the European Union (EU). The latter has been particularly influential in higher education.

While Kyrgyzstan continues to borrow educational policies and models from different countries to improve the quality of higher education, it is not a mere recipient of educational resources provided by other countries: it chose to follow the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) models and related educational policies.

### **The European Imperative**

The main priority of the Kyrgyz Ministry of Education and Sciences (MoES) for higher education is integration into the EHEA through the Bologna Process reforms. The Kyrgyz Government has taken steps to achieve this goal, such as amendments to the Law on Education (2013) that established a new independent accreditation system, implemented a credit hour system and changed the structure of higher education.

The new accreditation system was implemented in 2016 to replace the Soviet-era state attestation and to reassure society about the quality of education. The new accreditation standards and procedures are based on the European Standards and Guidelines. [1] The implementation of academic programs accreditation connects Kyrgyzstan not only to the European region, but also to other Central Asian countries that have participated in joint projects to establish new quality assurance systems. For instance, the goals of the Central Asian Network for Quality Assurance (CANQA) initially included establishment of independent accrediting agencies in the three participating countries: Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and Tajikistan. Currently, there are five independent accreditation agencies for quality assurance in education in Kyrgyzstan.

However, the question remains as to whether the Bologna Process reforms promote the quality of higher education in Kyrgyzstan and enable higher education institutions to truly integrate into the EHEA. As with any other borrowed educational policies, new accreditation standards will not be successful in Kyrgyzstan unless local realities and university capacities are taken into account and “best practices” are cultivated gradually and from the bottom up.

### **Imitating Integration**

According to my research findings on faculty perspectives of accreditation, few educators in Kyrgyzstan deeply understand the impact of borrowing or copying European educational models. Some universities simply did mathematical calculations of academic credit hours and adjusted

their curricula to reduce the number of courses offered and the number of contact hours. They failed to define learning outcomes and provide mechanisms for quality assessment.

The Kyrgyz higher education system cannot truly integrate into the EHEA without eradicating the old “habits” of university management. Even though Kyrgyzstan adopted the European credit hour system, transcripts, and syllabus in 2012, the MoES keeps using both credit hours and academic hours to approve new curricula of educational programs; universities still use the *kafedralnyi jurnal* (departmental journal) as the main tool for faculty accountability; professors keep on using *rabochie programmy* (work programs) instead of a syllabus; students still have to use *zachetnye knijki* (grade books) instead of transcripts. Some university administrators still believe that in a credit hour system, universities cannot expel students for their poor academic performance. For this reason, some universities designed a summer semester for students to retake exams without retaking the courses they failed in previous semesters. These examples reveal that Kyrgyzstan has imitated integration without thoughtful reforms that would take into account how prepared the higher education system and its constituents were for such reforms. The limited resources of the higher education institutions prevent universities from making meaningful and qualitative changes in the education process.

### **Next Steps for European-Style Quality Assurance**

Early experiences of the new independent accreditation process are limited to program self-study reports. They were perceived by the faculty members I interviewed as “too much paper work” that may or may not promote quality of education. According to some of the interviewed university professors, accreditation is just another external inspection of a higher education institution to examine its compliance with state educational standards. Moreover, faculty members who were educated in the Soviet system are reluctant to change their teaching style, which relies heavily on lectures and where students are tested on knowledge retention rather than the ability to conduct research, analyze data and materials, and form conclusions based on evidence. There are few resources for faculty and students to improve the quality of teaching and learning.

While examining faculty perceptions of the new accreditation purposes, standards and procedures within my dissertation research, I found that universities and programs in Kyrgyzstan cannot succeed in accreditation based on European regional models and the new independent accreditation processes will not assure quality for several reasons. First, the agencies are not independent from the MoES; second, the current standards do not provide evidence of quality; and third, the institutions do not have what is called in Europe a “quality culture”: ongoing, continuous efforts towards quality.

The higher education system in Kyrgyzstan is experiencing the challenges of adopting a different region's accreditation



system and making attempts to promote educational reforms with the limited resources that are available in the country. However, in the Kyrgyz educational context, it is not enough just to borrow a new system and announce reforms: universities cannot integrate into the EHEA and promote quality of education unless they renew their infrastructures, create resources and retrain faculty.

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# The Regionalization of Academic Science in Ukraine: Challenges of Cooperation and Competition

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After 25 years of a bumpy political journey towards integration into the European Union (EU), Ukraine officially became an EU Associated Country in 2015. Although the European regionalization of Ukrainian higher education had been developing through the Bologna Process for more than a decade, this latest political achievement was announced by politicians as a historic moment that opened unprecedented opportunities for Ukrainian universities to participate in the EU's Horizon 2020 Program (H2020) on equal terms with the EU member states. While politicians described it as a "magic deal" to fill a gap in academic research funding, academics were more skeptical about their capacity to compete or even to cooperate with their European counterparts in research. After decades of underfunded academic research, brain drain, and neglect of international research cooperation, the prospects of integration into EU research initiatives has led to a number of challenges at institutional and system levels for Ukrainian universities.

These concerns were confirmed by analytical reports that came out just two years after the first EU participation attempts. Ukrainian participation in H2020 was dominated by private research companies and public research insti-

tutes under the Academy of Sciences; only 26% of proposals submitted by Ukraine were prepared in universities. Of those, only 19 out of more than 600 Ukrainian universities were successful in securing project funding from H2020. [1] Numerous policy recommendations that emerged as a response to these low numbers reflected the urgency of further reforms in higher education, science and innovation aimed at enabling Ukrainian universities to intensify cooperation with partners from the EU and other countries involved in H2020. Despite these reform efforts, there are five key reasons why Ukrainian universities continue to struggle for equal participation in competitive research programs such as H2020.

## Research Funding and Infrastructure

Total governmental expenditure on research and development in Ukraine has significantly decreased over the last 25 years. Funding dropped by almost half to its lowest — 0.29% of GDP — in 2010. Moreover, the allocated resources were mainly spent on maintaining old Soviet-era infrastructure and paying salaries to scientific staff, leaving innovation out of scope. While the objectives of a newly created National Research Fund, scheduled to start operating in 2019, are quite promising (e.g., competitive distribution of research grants, research infrastructure development, support of young researchers, scientific cooperation promotion), it is too early to evaluate whether this initiative will lead to real changes. Furthermore, improvement of funding allocation might not have any impact unless total government expenditure is significantly increased.

## Teaching vs Research at Universities

There are over 600 public and private universities in Ukraine. Public universities were mostly established during the Soviet era, although about a dozen are much older. Universities traditionally had a teaching mission, while research and scientific talent were mainly concentrated in the Academies of Sciences and their research institutes. This structure has not considerably changed. Ukraine counts 160 research institutes under the umbrella of the National Academy of Sciences; their position seems to be unchallenged. From a national knowledge development perspective, it could be argued that there is little difference whether research occurs in academies or universities, yet the shortage of talent and resources at Ukrainian universities significantly affects their competitive advantage in regional research initiatives.

## Internationalization

Internationalization and development of academic cooperation was perceived by Ukrainian universities as a new and significant institutional mission back in 1991. Despite high expectations, internationalization had a more fragmented than systemic character, often being limited to the recruitment of international students from the ex-Soviet countries. Students and faculty mobility as a new form of internationalization has gradually developed only after Ukraine joined the Bologna Process in 2005. As for inter-

national research competition, it has been at best average, if not limited. This problem is two-fold: while senior faculty demonstrate a high level of inertia and lack enthusiasm to engage in internationalization, younger faculty seem to be more internationalized. However, it is middle-career researchers who are supposed to be the driving force in drafting successful European grant proposals at Ukrainian universities; yet they are more likely to prefer academic work outside the country because of scarce research conditions back home.

### Competitive Culture

The quality and originality of ideas for research projects are as important as how a project proposal is pitched to the funding agency. Faculty at Ukrainian universities significantly lack the competitive culture and academic writing skills in English required to prepare successful research grant proposals. For decades, research funding in Ukraine was highly centralized, with top-down directives to scientists on required research topics. Moreover, after gaining independence in 1991, academic writing in Ukrainian language was valorized as part of broader nation-building processes. Recently intensified cooperation between Ukrainian universities and their more experienced European counterparts in preparing grant proposals helps Ukrainian academics develop this competitive culture and academic writing skills, but leaves unaddressed the major issue of how to sustain these early achievements as academic brain drain persists.

### European Knowledge Community

After decades of isolation from the EU knowledge community, Ukrainian universities are taking gradual steps towards regional integration. While English language proficiency is still a significant barrier, the solution is not limited to language training for faculty and PhD students. To successfully integrate, researchers need to be more involved in academic networking at international conferences and associations, have greater access to databases and resources, and prioritize publishing in international journals. Contributing to a deeper engagement of Ukrainian universities in the regionalization of academic science, these elements might improve their competitive positioning in Europe.

Ukrainian universities face a number of challenges in their attempts to cooperate and compete in European regional research initiatives. Their efforts are limited by a lack of funding, a talent gap, a competitive culture that is barely nascent, lack of experience and insufficient access to global knowledge. Strategic vision from the government and institutions together with further structural reforms aimed at reducing these challenges will be important steps ahead. Nevertheless, the regionalization of academic science in Ukraine shows promising tendencies. Today, more Ukrainian universities demonstrate a positive shift towards a higher participation in regional research initiatives, while a new generation of academics is increasingly willing to engage in international cooperation.

### References and Notes

[1] Institute of Fundamental Technological Research of the Polish Academy of Sciences (2017). Statistics and Analyses of Ukrainian Participation in HORIZON 2020. Warsaw. Retrieved from [https://ri-links2ua.eu/page/25/attach/0\\_Statistics\\_and\\_Analyses\\_of\\_UA\\_Participation\\_in\\_H2020\\_updated\\_after\\_404\\_concluded\\_calls.pdf](https://ri-links2ua.eu/page/25/attach/0_Statistics_and_Analyses_of_UA_Participation_in_H2020_updated_after_404_concluded_calls.pdf)

## Building Higher Education Cooperation Across Regions: The Case of Finnish-Russian Double Degree Programs

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### Higher Education Cooperation Across Regions Through Double Degrees

The Bologna Process established the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and provided a framework for international higher education cooperation among universities from its 48 participating countries. It has also played an important role in facilitating dissemination of experience between the universities that have already established various practices of international higher education cooperation and those that are only planning it. Double degree programs (double degrees) that allow students to obtain two degrees from partner universities in different countries exemplify such practices.

### Regional Dissemination in the EU and the SCO

Cooperation experience has not disseminated evenly across the EHEA. While effectively disseminating within European sub-regions, it often fails to spread across the borders of European sub-regions, like in the case of cross-border higher education cooperation between Fin-



land, a member of the European Union (EU), and Russia, a member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). [1]

In the EU, at the European Social Summit in Gothenburg in 2017 the European Commission proposed a series of recommendations on strengthening European identity through cooperation in culture and education with a special focus on higher education. This resulted in such initiatives as a network of European universities, mutual recognition of degrees, and a European student card. In the SCO, multiple universities from Russia and other member countries established the Network University of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in 2008. The abovementioned networks cover the transaction and financial costs related to dissemination of higher education cooperation practices among the participating universities. As a result, these practices disperse smoothly within the boundaries of the EU and, similarly, among the SCO member states, but less effortlessly over the border separating two sub-regional blocs.

Finland and Russia enjoy fruitful cooperation that includes numerous internationalization activities involving universities on both sides of the common border. However, this cooperation lacks the exchange of the practices that Finnish universities gain by virtue of the country's EU membership and those developed by Russian universities within the SCO. To fill this gap, a regional Finnish-Russian research and action project called "Towards Good Neighbourliness with Higher Education Cooperation" (EDU-neighbours) [2], was established in 2017 with support of the Kone Foundation, Finland [3]. The remainder of this article analyzes the project's aim to study and disseminate the experience of building higher education cooperation, with a focus on double degree practices implemented jointly by Finnish and Russian universities.

## **Finland-Russia Higher Education Cooperation**

EDU-neighbours investigated Finnish-Russian double degrees at the graduate level [4], found five Finnish universities implemented 18 master's programs announced with 23 Russian partners between 2014 and 2017 and selected seven double degrees with ten Russian partner universities from Northwest Russia and Moscow. One Finnish university usually had two or more Russian partners for the same program. The vast majority of Finnish-Russian university partnerships were based on common areas of teaching and joint research. These activities led to the launch of double degrees under Finnish government funding for regional initiatives such as the Finnish-Russian Cross-Border University and the Finnish-Russian Student and Teacher Exchange.

However, further double degree development correlates with the volume of transaction costs related to its implementation. For example, many students have to pass their exams twice, not only in Finnish but also in Russian universities, because the latter are not able to transfer credits

earned abroad. Students and academics encounter two very different evaluation systems according to internal rules of the partner universities isolated from each other. The websites of partners indicate different titles, curricula, and learning outcomes. Therefore, selected double degrees do not mean the whole program is based on one framework.

The "1+1" curriculum model prevails in double degree management: students spend the first year in their home university and the second year abroad. Another solution of partner universities in how to interact is to organize intensive courses several times a year. While "twin" programs with similar curricula seem the easiest solution to combine the degrees of partners into one program, the added value of such university cooperation is questionable. However, it is curriculum harmonization that remains the most painful issue. Some Russian universities hire special managers to adjust the visions of the administrators and academics in charge of program implementation; in other universities, all duties including transport and accommodation are imposed on the program academic head or students.

## **The Challenges of Cross-Regional Cooperation**

Finnish-Russian double degrees are not sustainable due to the gap between the goals of national internationalization policies and their implementation at the university level. Finland is eager to attract talented foreign students; Finnish universities are keen to use double degrees only if they increase inbound mobility without multiplying transaction costs. Russian universities are interested in developing double degrees to the extent that they provide additional benefits for the academics and administrators involved, for example, new international projects or growth in government funding for the departments that can formally report on internationalization implementation.

The universities that have implemented Finnish-Russian double degrees usually refer to high transaction costs as the main challenge in building these programs. High transaction costs are often mentioned as the reason to abandon a double degree program despite the desire of both parties. Transaction costs could be reduced if the universities learn from the experience of double degrees built elsewhere. However, when the universities go along the beaten path unaware of their predecessors' experience, transaction costs remain high. Thus, the probability of success in building new double degree programs between Finnish and Russian universities remains low.

## **References and Notes**

[1] Full members of the SCO are China, India, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Russia, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan; recently, the SCO has evolved into a universal international organization facilitating cooperation in multiple fields including higher education.

[2] EDUNEIGHBOURS website:  
<https://research.uta.fi/eduneighbours>

[3] Kone Foundation website:  
<https://koneensaatio.fi/en>

[4] Full methodology of the study is discussed in: Shenderova, S. (2018). Permanent uncertainty as normality? Finnish-Russian double degrees in the post-Crimea world. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, 40(6), 611–628.

## Twinning Projects as Tools for Regionalism in Higher Education: The Case of Azerbaijan

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### European Higher Education Area and Azerbaijan

The cooperation between the European Union (EU) and Azerbaijan is carried out within the framework of the European Neighborhood Policy and its Eastern Partnership dimension. This partnership is being implemented through the Technical Assistance and Information Exchange (TAIEX) instrument and twinning projects. Twinning is a tool that brings together expertise in public sector administration of the EU member states and partner countries through joint activities such as training, study visits, internships, and legislation modification in line with the EU norms and standards. To date, 46 twinning projects have been implemented with several public institutions since the EU–Azerbaijan Partnership and Cooperation Agreement of 1999.

The EU–Azerbaijan cooperation in the field of higher education increased after Azerbaijan joined the Bologna Process in 2005 and became a member of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). The EHEA brings together 48 countries who seek to harmonize their higher education systems through structural reforms (degree systems, qualifications, and quality assurance) and shared tools (standards and guidelines). In 2015, implementation of a EU funded twinning project “Support to the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Azerbaijan for Further Adherence of the Higher Education System to the European Higher Education Area” [1] (hereinafter the “EHEA Twin-

ning project”) ensured a better integration of Azerbaijan into the EHEA region through aligning its university quality assurance practices with the European standards and guidelines. This twinning project serves as an example of a tool that led to the adoption of regional practices and increased participation of an EHEA member country.

### Higher Education Reforms in Azerbaijan

The EHEA Twinning project was timely and highly needed as the Ministry of Education (MOE) and several other public institutions had started drafting the National Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning of the Republic of Azerbaijan (AzQF), that would include standards and guidelines for quality assurance in higher education. Although Azerbaijan started transforming its higher education system shortly after its independence in 1991, urgent changes were still pending. Post-independence reforms were primarily focused on the elimination of Soviet-era centralization and tight regulation practices, with the aim to modernize the education system in order to meet the demands of the new economy.

Between 1993 and 1997, a two-cycle higher education system with Bachelor and Master degree studies was introduced. Private universities emerged to accommodate the increased need for qualifications in society. In 1997, the country signed the Lisbon Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region. Higher education institutions (HEIs) were merged and admission to universities was changed in the early 2000s through the establishment of the State Student Admission Committee and the introduction of a centralized admission examination.

After joining the Bologna Process, several reforms were implemented to increase Azerbaijan’s integration to the EHEA. These included the introduction of the European Credit and Transfer System and Diploma Supplements and participation in student mobility programs. Nevertheless, some issues remained unchanged, such as the Soviet two-tier doctoral degree system of Candidate of Sciences and Doctor of Sciences granted by a central agency, the Academy of Sciences, while the MOE continued to implement quality assurance practices in HEIs for the purposes of accreditation and license renewal rather than actually assuring institutional quality.

### EHEA Twinning Project

The EHEA Twinning project was focused on bringing the Azerbaijani higher education system closer to the EHEA by reviewing its legal and normative framework, developing recommendations for quality assurance and AzQF higher education sections, and building standards and guidelines for quality assurance in line with the European Standards and Guidelines. It also aimed to increase the institutional capacities of the MOE and HEIs and support them in the implementation of the EHEA objectives. The project brought together three partners, the Finnish Education Evaluation Centre (FINEEC), the Estonian Higher



Education Quality Agency (EKKA) and the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Azerbaijan with a budget of 1.3 Million Euro over the time period of 2015–2017.

### Impact of the Twinning Project

The project resulted in the standards and guidelines for quality assurance in higher education in Azerbaijan developed in line with the European standards. The new standards and guidelines were pilot tested in three public universities (Pedagogical University, University of Economics and Technical University). In these universities, committees were established to develop institutional evaluation reports. A team of experts from the project partners supported the committees throughout the international evaluation processes and provided constant consultation. During pilot testing, more than one hundred trainings and workshops were conducted to train staff in the European standards and quality assurance practices. Thus, the institutions had a chance to perceive quality assurance as something more than a minimum requirement checklist for license renewal, to analyze their successes and challenges, and work out action plans.

Like any twinning project, the EHEA Twinning project also set multi-level goals and objectives that cover legal changes, reforms in the higher education system, and the operations of institutions. In the summer 2018, the Cabinet of Ministers approved the AzQF. This document sets our qualifications from primary education to doctoral studies with the level descriptors that are harmonious with their equivalents in the European Quality Framework (EQF). The AzQF also details the state educational standards and guidelines and introduces internal quality assurance and evaluation in higher education institutions.

In addition to listing standards for each of the eight qualification levels, the AzQF sets requirements for universities to maintain their internal quality assurance units and go through regular external evaluations. Although the Accreditation and Nostrification Office (ANO) under the MOE and the Higher Attestation Committee remain responsible for external quality assurance of higher education institutions, the new standards commit to better guidance for both the institutions and the ANO in assuring quality education.

As described above, the EHEA Twinning Project has brought concrete results that will enable a more active participation of Azerbaijan in the European region through more comparable degrees. That, in turn, is expected to result in increased international mobility, cooperation and recognition as well as better quality institutions.

### References and Notes

[1] Support to the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Azerbaijan for Further Adherence of the Higher Education System to the European Higher Education Area website: <http://ehea.edu.az/en>

## About HERB

Higher Education in Russia and Beyond (HERB) is a quarterly informational journal published by National Research University Higher School of Economics since 2014. HERB is intended to illuminate the transformation process of higher education institutions in Russia and countries of Eastern Europe and Central Asia. The journal seeks to adduce the multiple-aspect opinions about current challenges and trends of regional higher education and give examples of the best local practices. Our audience represents wider international community of scholars and professionals in the field of higher education worldwide. The project is implemented as part of cooperation agreement between Higher School of Economics and Boston College Center for International Higher Education.

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