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Modernization of Higher Education in Russia: New Challenges and Strategic Guidelines

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Abstract. The article analyzes the problem of qualitative restructuring of the domestic higher education in the context of Russia's withdrawal from the Bologna process. The authors associate strategic guidelines for the modernization of education with the need to create a domestic creative system of education of the future, gaining scientific and educational sovereignty. The results of a

comparative analysis of issues put forward by experts and representatives of the professional community with contradictory positions and arguments regarding the withdrawal from the Bologna process are presented. The article provides directions for searching for value-target guidelines for reforming higher education in the transition period based on the axiology of sociological education and the methodology of social didactics.

Keywords: higher education, Bologna process, bachelor's degree, specialist's degree, master's degree, educational sovereignty, modernization of education, sociology of education and science, social didactics

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Модернизация высшей школы России: новые вызовы и стратегические направления

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Аннотация. В статье анализируется проблема качественной перестройки отечественной высшей школы в условиях выхода России из Болонского процесса. Стратегические ориентиры модернизации образования авторы связывают с необходимостью создания отечественной созидательной системы образования будущего, обретения научного и образовательного суверенитета. Представлены результаты сравнительного анализа вопросов, выдвигаемых экспертами и представителями профессионального сообщества, с противоречивыми позициями и аргументами относительно выхода из Болонского процесса. Даны направления поиска ценностно-целевых ориентиров реформирования высшей школы в переходный период на основе аксиологии социологического образования и методологии социальной дидактики.

Ключевые слова: высшая школа, Болонский процесс, бакалавриат, специалитет, магистратура, образовательный суверенитет, модернизация образования, социология образования и науки, социальная дидактика

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Introduction

A significant event for Russian higher education was the decision of Russia to refuse to participate in the Eurocentric Bologna Process and the adoption of a strategic decision to create its own education system. This gives hope that our country will gain scientific and educational sovereignty, ensuring that each student is provided with the maximum space of opportunities, without making the national system of assessing research results dependent on Western methods of scientometric analysis of academic achievements. It should be noted that this does not mean a rejection of multilateral cooperation, openness and flexibility. What is meant here is a demonstration of commitment to the ideas of humanism, the spiritual and moral values of the native culture, and the principles of Russian civil identity. At the same time, this is “the unique ability of our scientific and pedagogical school to educate and develop world-class scientists and specialists with a broad outlook, fundamental knowledge, independent intellect and powerful creative intuition”¹.

Today harmonization based on the idea of sovereignty should become an impetus for serious changes at modernization of the higher education sector, including applying new approaches to managing its perspective development. It is necessary to return to the Soviet experience of identifying and considering the needs for specialists capable of successfully working in problem regions and in priority development sectors.

There is a need for sociological expertise of the possibility of hybridizing various forms and contents of education, as well as a comprehensive assessment of the performance of Western education standards in Russian conditions.

Exit from the Bologna Process and a New System of Domestic Higher Education

Russian Ministry of Education and Science called the 20 years period of “harmonization of the architecture of higher education” in the Bologna manner “a bygone era” by the rightly believing that “the Bologna system can no longer cope with the tasks of accelerated technological development and modernization of the Russian economy, and therefore does not meet the interests of our country”².

In 2023, a pilot project aimed at changing the levels of professional education was launched. Six universities are participating in its implementation: Immanuel Kant Baltic Federal University, Moscow Aviation Institute (MAI), University of science and tech-

¹ Mironov S. We are obliged to protect the scientific and educational sovereignty of Russia [My obyazany zashchitit’ nauchno-obrazovatel’nyj suverenitet Rossii]. URL: <https://spravedlivo.ru/10588510/> (date of access: 25.01.2025)

² Russian universities will soon develop educational programs for a period of 4-6 years [Rossijskie vuzy v blizhajshee vremya razrabotayut obrazovatel’nye programmy srokom na 4-6 let]. URL: <https://tass.ru/obschestvo/17113889/> (date of access: 25.01.2025)

nology (MISIS), Moscow State Pedagogical University, Saint Petersburg Mining University, and National Research Tomsk State University. These universities have developed and are implementing 173 new educational programs covering more than 5 thousand students³.

Within the framework of the project, new levels of higher education have been identified: basic education, corresponding to bachelor's and specialty degrees, and specialized, covering master's, residency and assistantship internship programs; professional education, including postgraduate studies. The first level ("base") is designed for training lasting from 4 to 6 years. Basic education should provide an interdisciplinary, practice-oriented approach to training personnel. According to the head of the Russian Ministry of Education and Science V. N. Falkov, it is necessary to move away from the opposition between bachelor's and specialist's degrees towards discussing the flexibility of the terms of study; a balance should be ensured between the fundamentality and applicability of knowledge. At the same time, the same program may have different implementation deadlines, based on the needs of the labour market, the results of consultations with employers and "regulators" — industry ministries (Ministry of Transport, Ministry of Agriculture, Ministry of Health, etc.).

The second level (specialized) should, firstly, provide in-depth industry training for personnel, secondly, move away from two years in favor of variable training based on employers' requests (1–3 years) and, importantly, access to it is possible only for students who have mastered the "base". It is also proposed to divide specialized education into academic and professional. Academic education corresponds to the priorities of scientific development and should be fully financed from the federal budget. Professional education, which has direct beneficiaries — employers from the industrial sector, should have flexible financing schemes, including from large corporations, industries or individuals.

As a result, there will be fewer specialized level programs corresponding to the current master's degree programs in the new higher education system. Most students will receive basic higher education in bachelor's or specialist's degree programs. Specialized education will be required for a small number of students who plan to gain advanced knowledge in a professional field, or to engage in management or research activities in the future. It is assumed that a graduate of an educational institution with a basic higher education will be able to build a career without a master's degree.

Of course, this requires large-scale work with the labor market and employers in terms of changing qualification requirements in real sectors of the economy. The experimental stage of the pilot project is designed to last until 2026, after which the new levels of higher education will become mandatory for universities. The Russian Ministry of Education and Science also plans to revise the regulatory framework, develop a new mechanism for forming admissions targets, and draw up educational programs by the beginning of 2025.

³ The Russian President signed a decree on the launch of a pilot project to change the levels of professional education [Prezident Rossii podpisal ukaz o zapuske pilotnogo proekta po izmeneniyu urovnej professional'nogo obrazovaniya]. URL: <https://minobrnauki.gov.ru/press-center/news/novosti-ministerstva/67889/> (date of access: 25.01.2025)

Special attention should be paid to postgraduate studies, which in the new system of higher education will represent professional education aimed at training highly qualified personnel. Those who have received a basic higher education, but with a period of study of at least five years (specialist), as well as graduates of the master's degree will be able to enroll in postgraduate studies. The specificity of postgraduate studies will be its focus on scientific and scientific-pedagogical activity. In addition, the Russian Ministry of Education and Science, together with universities and the scientific and professional community, will work on updating the list of scientific specialties and areas of training, educational programs, and improving the distribution of admissions targets.

According to Russian experts, consideration of the stated topic requires an appeal to the capabilities of the social and humanitarian sciences that study man in the sphere of social, spiritual, public and cultural life, including when it comes to the value-targeted foundations of “personal and civic education of youth” (Zamaraeva, 2022). The problem of strategic management of higher education modernization in Russia actualizes a special direction of social knowledge and social practice, integrating social and humanitarian knowledge with scientifically based development of solutions to current and future problems based on sociocultural diagnostics and project technologies (Tikhonov, 2017).

Historical Challenge and Russian Higher Education

The mission of higher education is to create conditions for the production, preservation and enhancement of scientific knowledge, spiritual values and cultural norms. This involves the relevant educational institutions should solve fundamental and applied problems in the widest possible range: from training certified specialists with higher education and conducting research to diagnostics and forming public opinion.

It is fair to say that the long history of the first and main Russian university — Lomonosov Moscow State University, is an integral and important part of the history of the Russian intelligentsia, representing at the same time the elite of society, the elite of education and science, and the elite of the creative spirit. So, the modern historical challenge poses tasks, consisting of preserving existing in our country positive elements of the worldview and transforming the social heritage in the direction of its rationalization, as well as in the formation of moral guidelines and ethical self-restraints that keep scientific and technological progress under efficient management (Khvedchenya, 2002; Kogan, 1996; Krasnova, 2023; Narkhova, 2019).

The transformation of the values of Russian education is often associated with a change in the life orientations of individuals. Many scientists believe that the significance of value lies in its ability to satisfy a need, to “correspond to an interest, and the content of any value relationship increasingly represents an individualized measurement of the phenomena of material and spiritual culture, educational and social reality” (Osinina, 2022; Yakovleva, 2022). Therefore, the problem of forming a value system for a future specialist (teacher, lecturer and researcher) should receive special attention from the professional, pedagogical and academic community. Students of pedagogical universities, in the process of professional training, determine the content of the worldview that shapes the personality of their future pupils for many years. Such a pedagogical

cal system, realizing itself as a set of life principles and guidelines, acts as the basis for social regulation and determines the content of future education (Krasnoshchekova, 2017).

Assessments and opinions of the professional and pedagogical community on Russia's withdrawal from the Bologna process

The first reaction to the information about the withdrawal from the Bologna process was restrained. The Russian Ministry of Education and Science described this process as gradual, which allowed the issue of education reform to be put on "pause". The head of the education department declared that "the search for a specific vector of development of education that will provide such broad opportunities for young people that do not exist in other countries, since here it is impossible to rebuild everything overnight"⁴.

- As a starting point for the analysis of the problem of Russia's exit from the Bologna process and strategic management of the modernization of higher education, domestic researchers studied some controversial positions and arguments of students and teachers of domestic universities (N = 220). The study involved 40 universities, including: Lomonosov Moscow State University, Moscow State Linguistic University, Russian Presidential Academy of National Economy and Public Administration, Peoples' Friendship University of Russia, National Research University Higher School of Economics, Financial University, and Bauman Moscow State Technical University. An important result, reflecting the general background of the problematic field, was the retreat of almost half of the respondents in making this decision. This partly shows that representatives of the pedagogical community presence "in a state of uncertainty, unwillingness to leave the zone of the immediate environment (written plans and programs, developed educational and methodological complex)" (Krupchenko, 2020; Krupchenko, 2023).

Here are the most interesting results of a comprehensive analysis of the assessments and opinions of experts and representatives of the pedagogical community:

- About two thirds of respondents believe that the labor market is not adapted to the Bologna process. The respondents associate this statement with the "bachelor's degree" level, in particular. The respondents also assess in training at the master's degree program, which is not continuous with the direction of the bachelor's degree as a serious problem (Krupchenko, 2023).

- 26% of respondents are concerned about the issue of returning to the specialist degree, which, in their opinion, could doom the Russian education system to complete isolation and non-recognition. However, "we note that the world's leading universities (USA, India, China, etc.), as well as countries of the Asian and African continents, did not join the Bologna process, which did not prevent them from developing national education systems"⁵.

⁴ The updated education system in Russia may be launched in 2025 [Obnovlennuyu sistemu obrazovaniya v Rossii mogut zapustit' v 2025]. URL: <https://ria.ru/20220803/obrazovanie-1806876891.html> (date of access: 25.01.2025)

⁵ Foreigners can apply to study at Russian universities... [Inostrantsy mogut podat' zayavki na obucheniye v rossiyskikh vuzakh...]. URL: <https://ruskiymir.ru/news/310475/> (date of access: 25.01.2025)

- Almost half of the respondents agree with the position of the rector of Lomonosov Moscow State University, V. A. Sadovnichy, who supports creating “our own, strong education, and not copying foreign models”⁶. Respondents supported his opinion regarding the return of the valuable quality of fundamentality to university education. The Russian President also drew attention to this circumstance in his 2023 Address to the Federal Assembly, noting that new technologies are almost always based on fundamental research and that we must give scientists greater freedom for creativity. The Head of State concluded that our youth should have new opportunities, not problems, for quality education, employment and professional growth⁷.

- 60% of respondents supported the need for active involvement of students in research work at the university. This issue also attracted interest in the context of a study conducted jointly with the editorial board of the journal “Higher Education in Russia”, which identified the “fact of a sharp decline in the number of students participating in scientific work as paradoxical” (Ambarova, 2022).

- One of the successful examples of involving students in scientific work is the work of the section “Sociology and social analytics in the context of a project-network society: problems and development guidelines” of the annual All-Russian scientific and practical conference “Student Spring of RSU SocTech-2024”, organized by the Department of Sociology and Media Communications of the Russian State University of Social Technologies. The conference program included presentations by 3rd–4th year undergraduate students and 2nd year master’s students majoring in Sociology. The speakers had the opportunity to present for discussion analytical materials prepared by them within the framework of the disciplines “Applied sociological research” and “Managerial consulting and social analytics”. Also, final year bachelor’s students had the opportunity to test the obtained results, the validity of conclusions and recommendations for their final qualifying works.

In this regard, among the reasons that motivate students to engage in scientific activity, two main ones can be identified: “in-depth study and consideration of complex sections and topics of the programs of academic disciplines”, as well as “the influence of the scientific and pedagogical staff of the university”. This fact was diagnosed and confirmed during a survey of the winners of the student grant competition (N = 200) within the framework of the Program for the Development of Student Associations “The State University of Management — 95 years. Vector of Development of Youth Competencies” (Balashov, 2016).

More than 70% of respondents supported the opinion that training at a university should be “an element of preparation for future professional activity” (Krupchenko, 2023).

⁶ Rector of Moscow State University: there will be no radical educational reforms in Russia. [Rektor MGU: v Rossii ne budet radikal'nyh obrazovatel'nyh reform]. URL: <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/5395686/> (date of access: 25.01.2025).

⁷ Address of the President to the Federal Assembly from 21.02.2023 [Poslanie Prezidenta Federal'nomu Sobraniyu ot 21.02.2023]. URL: <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/70565/> (date of access: 25.01.2025)

An example illustrating the interdisciplinary direction of training specialists is the author's approach to teaching technologies of social forecasting and modeling to 2nd-year students of the master's program in the field of "Sociology" of the RSU SocTech for professional purposes. We believe that the discipline of "Social Forecasting and Modeling" is becoming, to a certain extent, universal, carrying human-centered information for the management sphere. It creates a social and humanitarian foundation for the value basis of personal and civic education of young people in the context of the axiology of sociological and managerial education. This discipline is a carrier of professional knowledge that contributes to the formation of prognostic professional communicative competence of a future specialist within the framework of social didactics, aimed at the formation of social intelligence, preparing students to overcome social barriers and solve socially significant problems (Lenkov, 2016).

Conclusion

In response to the challenges of Russia's withdrawal from the Bologna Process, it is necessary to turn to social didactics, the principles of which fully ensure the maximum openness of universities for domestic society. In our opinion, social didactics best defines the normative basis for the modernization of the national higher education system. The relevance of social didactics is determined, firstly, by the need for theoretical justification of the tasks facing the executive authorities of the constituent entities of the Russian Federation, which are related to the problems of the state status of universities and social partnership. Secondly, the importance of social didactics lies in expanding the sphere of influence of universities as activators of the coordination of relationships between social institutions in the educational space. Priority here is given to the personality of the student, his individual trajectory of mastering the social experience of solving socialization issues. Under these conditions, the learning process becomes social, and the learner's personality becomes a key component of society (Masharova, 2023).

Also, the guideline for the formation of a creative domestic system of higher education should include social axiology, which is a moral regulator that transforms the goals of state educational policy into meta-subject and subject tasks of academic disciplines. The attention of the academic community should be focused on the national goals of the state for the period up to 2030, in particular, on creating conditions for the education of a harmoniously developed and socially responsible individual based on the spiritual and moral values of the peoples of Russia, historical and national-cultural traditions⁸.

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⁸ Decree on national development goals of Russia until 2030 [Ukaz o nacional'nyh celyah razvitiya Rossii do 2030 g.]. URL: <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/70565/> (date of access: 25.01.2025)

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