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Universities Need to Hire From Outside

By Konstantin Sonin

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The clowns finished their show, the circus rolled up its tents and left town, and the Group of Eight summit came to a successful close. But the public is still here. This means we can get back to discussing purely Russian problems.

Take higher education, for example. One of the issues confronting Russian higher education is its integration into the international labor market. You can find Russian graduates everywhere, from New Zealand to Stockholm. But prominent foreign institutions of higher learning don't only send their graduates into the international marketplace; they hire their professors there. Last year Spanish, Swiss, Brazilian, Mexican and Chinese universities -- not to mention their counterparts in the United States, Britain, France and Sweden -- hired dozens of young professors who had just received their advanced degrees from the world's best universities. Russian universities, by contrast, didn't hire a single professor from abroad.

This may be one of those rare cases when the problem can be solved with money from the federal budget, but only if that money is not used to prop up the current system. Russian universities could be provided with funds earmarked for hiring young specialists, perhaps as part of the national project on education. These funds should not be used to raise salaries across the board, however. They should be used to hire young specialists on a case-by-case basis.

You might think that university rectors would find it advantageous to hire their own graduates. But imagine that the head of Moscow State University were to announce he had used these earmarked funds not to lure Harvard-educated professors on the five- or six-year contracts that are standard around the world, but to hire less-qualified local products.

By offering starting salaries of 100,000 rubles (\$3,720) per month, Russian universities could begin to compete for physicists and mathematicians trained at the world's top schools. Salaries for historians and anthropologists could be slightly smaller, but economists would expect at least twice this amount.

I'm speaking primarily about Russian specialists who have earned their doctorates both here and abroad. Foreign specialists of the same caliber would demand higher salaries, and those who would accept the lower salary would also be less qualified.

This money would not necessarily have to be spent on luring professors from abroad. If you want to hire a Russian graduate, go for it -- with one exception: Universities should not be permitted to hire their own graduates. This practice is currently widespread, but if we don't put an end to it, we will never be competitive on the world market. We have to begin competing for academic talent here at home before we can compete globally.

The Germans, from whom we borrowed this practice, managed to phase it out without compromising the continuity of distinct scholarly communities, such as the Frankfurt school of social theory. In today's world of air travel, Internet and e-mail, these schools can thrive even when co-authors and students live on different continents.

This plan does not apply to research scientists. Nuclear reactors for physicists, centrifuges for geneticists and field work for anthropologists can't be financed by individual research grants. But we can't fix everything at once. The problem of the Russian sciences, and the Russian Academy of Sciences, is the topic of another column.

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