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KAZAKHSTAN'S PATH IN HIGHER EDUCATION RECOGNITION: FROM BOTTOM-UP INITIATIVES TO GLOBAL CONVENTIONS

Abstract. Since achieving independence in 1991, Kazakhstan has undertaken extensive reforms in its higher education system, with the recognition of qualifications becoming an integral aspect of internationalization and academic mobility. This article investigates the evolution of Kazakhstan's recognition system, from nostrification procedures to engagement in European, regional, and global recognition frameworks. Employing document analysis and historical institutionalism, the study examines how recognition reforms have been shaped by interactions among academic stakeholders, government policies, and international organizations such as UNESCO, the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), and the ENIC/NARIC networks. The results indicate that Kazakhstan has established a hybrid, multi-tiered recognition model that integrates the Lisbon Recognition Convention framework with regional accords and global instruments, including the Tokyo and UNESCO Global Conventions. Although there has been early adoption of European standards, notable disparities persist between formal commitments and actual implementation, particularly concerning automatic recognition and the acknowledgment of non-formal learning and micro-credentials. The article contends that recognition in Kazakhstan serves not merely as a legal procedure but also as an instrument of multi-level governance within the context of global higher education.

Key words: Recognition of qualifications; Bologna Process; Lisbon Recognition Convention; Tokyo Convention; UNESCO Global Convention; multi-level governance.

Introduction

Since gaining independence in 1991, Kazakhstan has undergone a lengthy and intricate process of reforming its higher education system, aiming to align national practices with international standards while maintaining its own educational priorities. A key aspect of this transformation has been the gradual development of mechanisms for the recognition of foreign qualifications and ensuring the recognition of Kazakhstani diplomas abroad. In the early 1990s, these processes largely inherited the Soviet model and were carried out through fragmented and ad hoc nostrification practices. The lack of unified national rules, continued reliance on Soviet equivalence criteria, and limited collaboration with international partners often led to inconsistent recognition decisions that lacked transparency. Nonetheless, these early institutional practices laid the groundwork for more organized approaches that emerged later.

Over time, Kazakhstan became more engaged in major international and regional frameworks that influence higher education and recognition policies. Participation in UNESCO, the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), the Asia–Europe Meeting (ASEM), the Asia-Pacific Network of National Information Centres (APNNIC), and the ENIC/NARIC network significantly affected the development of national recognition reforms. This multi-level engagement positioned Kazakhstan at the intersection of European and Asia-Pacific recognition systems, providing access to diverse regulatory and expert approaches.

A significant milestone in Kazakhstan's recognition system was the ratification of the Lisbon Recognition Convention in 1997, which officially confirmed the country's commitment to principles of fair, transparent, and learning-outcomes-based recognition. Although implementing these obligations took time, ratification marked the beginning of a gradual shift away from strict nostrification toward recognition procedures aligned with international standards. The progress of these changes was supported through phased structural and instrumental reforms, including the transition to credit-based learning, strengthening quality assurance mechanisms, and expanding institutional forms of academic mobility. These developments created conditions for aligning the national higher education system with international approaches to the recognition of qualifications. The Taraz Declaration (2007) and active university engagement demonstrated that recognition reforms in Kazakhstan progressed not only through top-down government decisions but also through bottom-up initiatives promoted by the academic community, which aimed at regional cooperation and increased academic mobility. Together, these factors paved the way for Kazakhstan's accession to the Bologna Process and entry into the European Higher Education Area in 2010, marking its formal integration into European recognition frameworks.

Currently, Kazakhstan is entering a new phase in its recognition policy by expanding and institutionalizing international cooperation within the framework of the Tokyo Convention and steadily developing the legal and institutional foundation for joining UNESCO's Global Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications in Higher Education. Examining this path reveals the hybrid nature of reforms and the strategic decisions that have enabled Kazakhstan to position itself as a bridge between Europe and Asia.

Within Kazakhstan's strategic agenda, the internationalization of higher education is highlighted as a key national policy priority. According to the Concept for the Development of Higher Education and Science in Kazakhstan for 2023–2029 (Resolution, 2023), the national education strategy aims to improve the system's global competitiveness, build international partnerships, and attract international students. These goals present new challenges for recognition of qualifications: ensuring the comparability and legitimacy of foreign graduates' diplomas amid the ongoing alignment of international standards and domestic institutional practices.

This article explores the development of qualification recognition in Kazakhstan by focusing on government policy priorities. It also looks at recognition as a tool of multi-level governance that influences academic mobility, international students' access to educational and career opportunities, and the credibility of the higher education system.

Methodology

The study's theoretical framework is based on historical institutionalism and interpretive policy analysis. Additionally, the theory of norm localization (Acharya, 2004) is used to help understand internationalization and the recognition of qualifications not just as technical processes of policy borrowing, but as adaptations of international standards within national institutional practices. In the context of the Concept for the Development of Higher Education and Science for 2023–2029, which emphasizes strengthening international cooperation and attracting international students, this theoretical approach provides a deeper understanding of how global commitments on recognition are reinterpreted and localized in Kazakhstan.

The article uses a qualitative research design based on document analysis and historical-institutional tracing of public policy. The study explores the development of Kazakhstan's qualification recognition system through a systematic review of legal and regulatory acts, international agreements, strategic and program documents, ministerial orders, intergovernmental declarations, and archival materials from the early 1990s to today. The primary sources include national education legislation, recognition and nostrification rules, bilateral and multilateral agreements, and Kazakhstan's official materials and reports within

the Bologna Process. These are complemented by international normative instruments such as the Lisbon Recognition Convention (LRC) and UNESCO's Tokyo Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications.

The methodological approach draws on the analytical toolkit of historical institutionalism, which helps identify both continuity and change across different stages of reform, as well as on interpretive policy analysis, which uncovers how global norms were translated, adapted, and localized in the Kazakhstani context. The article also uses the concepts of norm localization, policy transfer, and "bottom-up regionalism" to interpret how national and regional actors influenced recognition practices both before and after Kazakhstan's accession to the Bologna Process.

Secondary sources, such as academic publications, European Union reports, and country-specific data on Kazakhstan, provide contextual grounding for primary documents and enable tracking the influence of international organizations on shaping national policy. Combining different types of sources ensures the validity of the research and enhances the reliability of the analytical results. The proposed methodological framework facilitates a comprehensive reconstruction of Kazakhstan's recognition system and assesses how national reforms, institutional initiatives, and global recognition regimes interact.

Materials

The main international legal instrument regulating the recognition of qualifications and periods of study obtained abroad in Europe is the Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region (Council of Europe, a), more commonly known as the Lisbon Recognition Convention. Adopted in 1997, it predates the Bologna Process and currently has 57 Contracting Parties (Council of Europe, b).

Before the adoption of the Lisbon Recognition Convention, recognition in the European region was regulated by the Convention on the Recognition of Studies, Diplomas and Degrees concerning Higher Education in the States belonging to the European Region, adopted in Paris in 1979 under the auspices of UNESCO. In contrast to the Paris Convention, the Lisbon Recognition Convention shifted the focus from equivalence to the comparability of qualifications (Bergan, 2013), established a procedure based on the rights of the applicant, and created the ENIC-NARIC network to promote coherent recognition practices across Europe.

With the launch of the Bologna Process in 1999, the Lisbon Recognition Convention was immediately integrated as one of its key foundations, as the promotion of student and graduate mobility was defined as a central objective of the process. The Convention remains the only legally binding agreement in the field of higher education in Europe and introduced a fundamental conceptual shift: recognition should be based on comparability rather than strict equivalence.

The system for the recognition of foreign educational documents in the Republic of Kazakhstan is based on a multi-level legal framework encompassing international conventions, regional agreements, and bilateral treaties. At its core lies a combination of legal simplification procedures, mutual recognition, and academic comparability of qualifications.

Regarding the general circulation of documents, Kazakhstan is a party to the Hague Convention (Law, 1999a), which eliminates the need to legalise foreign official documents. This greatly simplifies the cross-border exchange of educational documents and reduces administrative hurdles. Additional importance is placed on agreements in the field of legal assistance, most notably the Minsk Convention (Resolution, 1993) and related regulatory acts, which ensure the mutual recognition of official documents among post-Soviet states within civil-law relations.

The specifically academic pathway of qualification recognition began with the ratification of the Lisbon Recognition Convention in 1997 (Law, 1997). This step demonstrated the country's early readiness to integrate into the European recognition regime long before

most post-Soviet states considered assuming such obligations. For Kazakhstan, ratification had a dual significance: both as a political declaration of openness and as a legal foundation for aligning national recognition practices with European norms.

Ratification became an important step on the path towards integration into the European Higher Education Area. By acceding to the Convention, Kazakhstan officially assumed the obligation to ensure transparent, fair, and comparable procedures for the recognition of foreign qualifications, which significantly facilitated the academic and professional mobility of its citizens. As a result, Kazakhstani diplomas gained international recognition in the Convention's member states, expanding opportunities for further education and employment abroad. Previously, Kazakhstani students had faced difficulties gaining admission to Western universities due to the non-recognition of their diplomas (OECD, 2017).

Ratification also entailed introducing appeal mechanisms for cases of refusal of recognition, developing a national information system for academic recognition, and participating in the ENIC/NARIC network, which ensures coordination and trust among countries regarding the mutual recognition of qualifications. In a broader context, the ratification of the Lisbon Recognition Convention laid the foundation for Kazakhstan's subsequent entry into the Bologna Process. It confirmed the state's commitment to modernising the higher education system in line with international norms and standards.

Kazakhstan began aligning with the principles of the Bologna Process even before its formal launch, by deciding to transition to a two-tier higher education system in 1999 (Nurmagambetov, 2003). These early structural changes created the preconditions for the subsequent introduction of mechanisms of academic recognition and the comparability of qualifications. For the first time in Kazakhstan, the term "nostrification of educational documents" is defined as a procedure carried out for the purpose of determining the equivalence of documents issued to citizens who received education in other states, in international or foreign educational institutions (their branches) established in 1999 in the Law On Education (Law, 1999b).

In the early 2000s, the basic elements of the institutional architecture were established, including national classifiers (Order, 2001), accreditation procedures (Resolution, 2001 (a)), and later the credit-based learning system (Order, 2007) and PhD programmes (Law, 2007), which ensured formal compatibility with European educational frameworks.

Academic initiatives played an important role in shaping the recognition agenda. The Taraz Declaration of 2007 (Bekturganov, 2007) became an early example of a "bottom-up" orientation toward mutual recognition, mobility, and regional cooperation, anticipating key principles of the Bologna Process. This step provided subsequent reforms with a clearer political rationale and formalised the regional dimension of recognition policy. This academic impulse was later reinforced by state actions and culminated in Kazakhstan's official accession to the European Higher Education Area in 2010.

The ratification of the European Cultural Convention in 2010 created the legal conditions for Kazakhstan's formal entry into the European Higher Education Area, formalised through the signing of the Budapest-Vienna Declaration (EHEA, b), and consolidated the country's international commitments in the field of qualification recognition.

As a result, Kazakhstan's trajectory demonstrates that the development of the recognition system was not solely the outcome of external borrowing of Bologna instruments, but also the product of early domestic reforms and academic initiatives. Despite persistent gaps between formal commitments and recognition practices, accession to the EHEA became a key milestone in establishing frameworks of comparability and trust underpinning academic mobility and international cooperation. Kazakhstan demonstrated regional leadership, built sustainable European networks, and developed mechanisms of international collaboration.

In 2005, the National Accreditation Center was established (Resolution, 2005) and entrusted with conducting institutional and specialised accreditation, developing harmonised accreditation criteria and procedures to align quality assessment with the requirements of the Bologna Process, and carrying out procedures for the recognition and nostrification of educational documents issued by foreign education providers (Decree, 2004).

By 2010, although the national ENIC/NARIC centre, in accordance with the Lisbon Recognition Convention, had not yet been fully institutionalised, progress had been made in formalising transparent and consistent recognition procedures. Since 2012, the National Center for Higher Education Development (News, 2023) (formerly the Bologna Process and Academic Mobility Centre (News, 2012) (hereinafter – the Center) has supported and facilitated the practical implementation of the Convention in Kazakhstan and has been responsible for providing the public service of “Recognition of Educational Documents.”

The early stages of qualification reforms in Kazakhstan were primarily oriented toward aligning workforce training with labour market requirements and the objectives of industrial and innovative development, rather than toward developing academic recognition as an instrument of international mobility. As shown by Kalieva et al. (2015), priority was given to establishing a national qualifications system, professional standards, and mechanisms for competency assessment, thereby entrenching the dominance of the professional rather than the academic dimension of recognition.

In 2012, Kazakhstan developed and approved the National Qualifications Framework, consisting of eight levels and providing a unified description of qualifications based on learning outcomes. The framework was designed to link academic qualifications with labour market requirements and lifelong learning pathways.

To ensure the recognition of qualifications of Kazakhstani higher education in the countries of the Bologna Process, an attempt was made to prepare a self-certification report aimed at establishing the comparability of descriptors of levels 6–8 of the National Qualifications Framework of the Republic of Kazakhstan (NQF RK) with the Qualifications Framework of the European Higher Education Area (QF-EHEA). However, international experts provided substantial comments on the draft report, highlighting insufficient comparability between the NQF RK descriptors and those of the QF-EHEA.

In 2019, an interministerial working group, including representatives of the Ministry of Education and Science, the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection, the National Chamber of Entrepreneurs “Atameken”, sectoral associations, and higher education institutions, reviewed the identified shortcomings and decided to develop a separate National Qualifications Framework for Higher Education (NQF-HE), taking into account its comparability with the QF-EHEA. Similar practices had already been adopted in several European countries.

The working group developed descriptors for the NQF-HE for higher and postgraduate education levels, including bachelor’s, master’s, and doctoral programmes. The self-certification report for the NQF-HE was presented and approved on 19 February 2020 at the final meeting of the Bologna Process Working Group on Qualifications Frameworks Self-Certification and ECTS, with the participation of representatives of the European Commission, the Council of Europe, and the Bologna Process Secretariat (Self-Certification Report, 2020).

The compatibility and comparability of Kazakhstan’s NQF-HE with the QF-EHEA provided evidence of the successful harmonisation of the national system of higher and postgraduate education with the education systems of countries participating in the Bologna Process.

In 2023, the Law on Professional Qualifications was adopted, representing an important step toward strengthening the link between education and the labour market. The law regulates the recognition and validation of professional qualifications within the National Qualifications Framework. Its main objective is to ensure that qualifications acquired through education

correspond to actual labour market requirements. Sectoral ministries, in cooperation with business representatives, develop professional standards that define the competencies, skills, and knowledge required for specific professions. Based on these standards, universities and other higher education institutions design educational programmes, thereby enhancing the practical orientation of graduate training.

In 2025, with the participation of the expert community, an updated version of the National Qualifications Framework was approved, grounded in the principles of the European Qualifications Framework and oriented toward the needs of the modern economy (News, 2025). Unlike the previous version, the revised NQF covers eight qualification levels and incorporates outcomes of formal, non-formal, and informal learning, as well as practical experience. For the first time at the national level, official recognition of competencies acquired outside formal education programmes was established, increasing the flexibility of the qualifications system, supporting lifelong learning, and contributing to the international comparability of qualifications.

The significance of the recognition procedure is viewed as a key factor in enabling academic and professional mobility. In essence, it involves granting holders of foreign diplomas the same rights and opportunities for continuing education or professional activity as those available to holders of national diplomas of an equivalent level.

The recognition process comprises two main stages: verifying document authenticity and identifying substantial differences. Verification of the issuance of an educational document is carried out through foreign databases of issued educational credentials or by sending an official request to a foreign educational institution, research centre, or laboratory to obtain confirmation of the document's issuance and the legal status of the institution that awarded it. The Center maintains an extensive database of contact and address information for foreign educational institutions and authorised bodies, enabling effective interaction and the provision of relevant public services.

The Center represents Kazakhstan within the international network of national information centres for academic recognition and mobility (ENIC/NARIC). It provides information on the authenticity of documents, the accreditation status of universities or educational programmes, and related matters. Between 2010 and 2025, more than 2,000 responses were provided to inquiries from foreign universities, organisations, and employers.

An analysis of international practice in the field of qualification recognition shows that many countries employ a centralised system in which all recognition decisions, for both academic and professional purposes, are taken by a single central authority. Examples include:

- France: ENIC-NARIC France, National Information Centre;
- Italy: CIMEA-NARIC Italia, Information Centre for Academic Mobility and Equivalence;
- United Kingdom: UK ENIC, National Information Centre for International Qualifications and Skills;
- Ukraine: ENIC Ukraine, National Information Centre for Academic Mobility.

Since 2012, the Center has actively cooperated with international and relevant foreign organisations and has participated in international projects in the field of qualification recognition.

Between 2010 and 2025, more than 250,000 foreign educational documents were recognised (table 1). The number of applications has steadily increased, reflecting the growth of overseas education among Kazakhstani citizens and the rising inflow of international students.

Recognition (nostrification) is carried out in accordance with established rules. It may result in a reasoned refusal in cases where the authenticity of a document cannot be confirmed, the awarding institution is not recognised, or the educational programme does not comply with

the state educational standards of the Republic of Kazakhstan. During the period 2010–2025, approximately 500 fraudulent documents were identified, along with 140 cases of non-compliance with state educational standards.

Table 1.

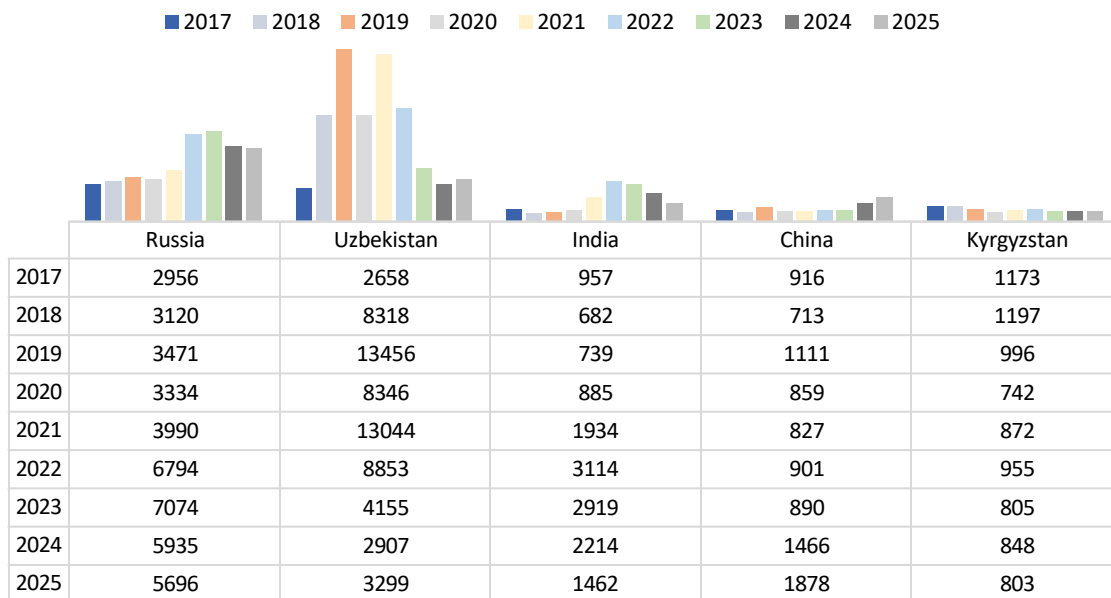
Statistics on documents undergoing recognition/nostrification, 2017–2025

| № | Years | Received applications | Recognised | Fake | Non-compliance with the State Educational Standards of the Republic of Kazakhstan |
|----|-------|-----------------------|------------|------|---|
| 1. | 2017 | 10524 | 11974 | 53 | 3 |
| 2. | 2018 | 16003 | 12335 | 29 | 25 |
| 3. | 2019 | 22180 | 14697 | 34 | 13 |
| 4. | 2020 | 15386 | 11931 | 25 | 2 |
| 5. | 2021 | 22228 | 19288 | 34 | 5 |
| 6. | 2022 | 23372 | 18505 | 26 | 12 |
| 7. | 2023 | 18717 | 15892 | 23 | 13 |
| 8. | 2024 | 15855 | 15505 | 59 | 11 |
| 9. | 2025 | 18557 | 16757 | 44 | 7 |

An analysis of applications for recognition of educational documents presented in Table 2 shows a stable concentration of applications from five countries (Russia, Uzbekistan, India, China, and Kyrgyzstan), reflecting the main areas of educational and labor mobility associated with Kazakhstan.

Table 2

Information on recognition by country



Throughout the entire period, the largest number of applications originated from Uzbekistan and Russia, reflecting close historical, linguistic, and migration ties, as well as active cross-border mobility of students and workers. Applications from India and China display a more uneven dynamic, with noticeable increases in certain years, which may be

associated with the growing inflow of international students into Kazakhstan's higher and postgraduate education institutions. Kyrgyzstan consistently ranks among the top five countries, although the volume of applications remains relatively moderate, indicating stable but less extensive mobility.

The presented data confirm that Kazakhstan's recognition system operates under sustained migration pressure and plays a key role in facilitating access to education and the labour market for mobile population groups.

Recognition within the Bologna Process extends beyond formal academic qualifications. Since the Berlin Communiqué (2003) (EHEA, c), ministers have encouraged the recognition of prior non-formal and informal learning (RPL) as an instrument for promoting lifelong learning. RPL enables the validation of knowledge and skills acquired outside formal education, either for access to higher education or through the allocation of credits within a qualification.

Since the Bucharest Communiqué (2012) (EHEA, d), ministers have repeatedly emphasised the recognition of comparable academic degrees as one of the "key commitments" of the Bologna Process, expressing the intention to move towards the automatic recognition of comparable academic degrees. To support this objective, instruments such as the European Area of Recognition Manual, the Database of External Quality Assurance Results, and new interoperable digital solutions have been promoted.

The Tirana Communiqué (2024) (EHEA, e) reaffirmed this agenda by confirming the continuation of the mutual support approach through Thematic Peer Group B (TPG B) on the Lisbon Recognition Convention, originally established by the Paris Communiqué (2018) (EHEA, f). TPG B plays a central role in translating political commitments into practice. Its activities include developing appropriate legal frameworks, clarifying institutional responsibilities, supporting the recognition of non-traditional learning pathways and prior learning, ensuring fair treatment of refugee qualifications, and using digital technologies to simplify recognition procedures and strengthen the role of the Diploma Supplement.

Recognition has become one of the most dynamically developing areas of Bologna cooperation. It is grounded in the legally binding framework of the Lisbon Recognition Convention, reinforced by Bologna instruments and peer-support mechanisms, and complemented by global initiatives such as UNESCO's Global Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications (UNESCO, 2019), as well as humanitarian instruments, including the European Qualifications Passport for Refugees (Council of Europe, c). Today, recognition is not only a prerequisite for academic mobility but also a means of strengthening trust, transparency, and inclusiveness across diverse higher education systems.

At present, the Center also carries out the apostille procedure for official documents issued by higher and postgraduate education institutions of the Republic of Kazakhstan (Order, 2023 (a)). Under the Order, the Center acts as the operator of this public service. It is responsible for the initial receipt of applications, their processing (verification, affixing the apostille stamp, and compiling documentation), as well as the subsequent submission of the processed materials to the Non-Profit Joint-Stock Company "State Corporation 'Government for Citizens'".

The apostille service is required for the following purposes:

- use of educational documents (diplomas, transcripts, certificates, etc.) issued by higher and postgraduate education institutions outside the Republic of Kazakhstan;
- admission to foreign higher education institutions;
- employment abroad;
- continuation of studies, confirmation of qualifications, or academic mobility;
- submission of documents to foreign public authorities.

Results and discussion

The recognition procedure performs not only an administrative but also a systemic function, facilitating academic and labour mobility, access to the labour market, and the fulfilment of Kazakhstan's international obligations under the Bologna Process and the Lisbon Recognition Convention.

Kazakhstan's experience in implementing the Bologna Process demonstrates a selective and uneven application of its principles, particularly in the recognition of qualifications. This can be interpreted through the lens of norm localisation theory (Acharya, 2004), which holds that international norms are not implemented mechanically but are reinterpreted and adapted to local institutional practices, political priorities, and power configurations.

Within the national strategy for 2023–2029, internationalisation functions not merely as a declarative goal but as an instrument for shaping a competitive educational environment, in which the recognition of qualifications becomes a central mechanism for international graduates' access to academic mobility and the labour market. However, current recognition practices in Kazakhstan remain selective and fragmented, indicating a systemic divergence between state policy objectives and routine recognition procedures. This divergence is explained not by technical constraints, but by an institutional process of selective norm localisation, whereby international commitments are transformed into conditions conducive to national governance of educational mobility and qualification markets. Consequently, qualification recognition in Kazakhstan operates as a mechanism of multi-level governance, shaping access to educational and professional resources, rather than as a universal right for all international graduates.

Fair and transparent recognition of foreign qualifications is one of the key principles of the Bologna Process and a fundamental value of the European Higher Education Area. Despite ratifying the Lisbon Recognition Convention as early as 1997, Kazakhstan remains among the EHEA countries in which the principle of automatic recognition has not yet been fully institutionalised.

In practice, automatic recognition of qualifications in Kazakhstan remains fragmented and conditional. Formally, national legislation and international agreements provide for exemptions from the general procedures of recognition and nostrification of educational documents (Yelyubayev, 2022). These include agreements within the framework of the Commonwealth of Independent States (Agreement, 1992), provisions of the Treaty on the Eurasian Economic Union (Law, 2014), as well as special regimes for graduates of state-sponsored programmes – most notably the Bolashak programme (Law, 2007, Article 39(8)), and for graduates of certain foreign educational institutions, including the branch of Lomonosov Moscow State University in Kazakhstan (Law, 2019).

However, none of the mechanisms outlined above implements the principle of automatic recognition in the form envisaged by EHEA instruments. Exemptions from recognition procedures are applied selectively, extend only to clearly defined categories of individuals and qualifications, and are accompanied by significant professional and sectoral exclusions. In particular, within the framework of the Eurasian Economic Union, automatic recognition does not apply to regulated professions, including teaching, law, medicine, and pharmacy (Molovtseva & Fyodorov, 2021).

A study by Kuzhabekova (2024) demonstrates that the reintegration of PhD graduates who obtained their education abroad in Kazakhstan is determined less by individual competencies and more by a state-applied “legitimacy sorting mechanism.” Graduates of Western universities, often educated with the support of the Bolashak programme, are automatically recognised and absorbed into leading research universities, where they gain access to superior resources, academic networks, and career advancement opportunities. In contrast, graduates of post-Soviet or non-Western institutions face significant barriers,

including difficulties in diploma recognition, heavy teaching loads, and limited opportunities for research and academic leadership.

As a result, a two-tier system emerges: graduates of Western universities enter the academic system “through the front door,” enjoying institutional legitimacy and career prospects, whereas graduates of non-Western institutions find themselves “at the back door,” frequently confined to teaching positions with limited recognition of their qualifications.

Thus, automatic recognition in Kazakhstan functions not as a universal principle, but as an exception embedded within regional and programme-based mechanisms. This confirms the existence of a gap between formal international commitments and their practical implementation (Osmanov & Mukhtarova). Transitioning toward automatic recognition of qualifications in Kazakhstan requires both technical modernisation of state procedures and the political will to expand international commitments.

The recognition of qualifications became one of the key motivations for Kazakhstan’s participation in the Bologna Process, as the issue of international diploma recognition inherited from the Soviet system was regarded as a significant barrier to academic mobility and global integration (Lodhi & Ilyassova-Schoenfeld, 2023). As the authors note, the Bologna Process in Kazakhstan was initially perceived primarily as an instrument of external recognition and symbolic integration, while its core objective, mobility based on trust and the comparability of qualifications, was implemented to a limited extent.

Such a gap between the formal adoption of Bologna principles and their practical implementation is not unique to non-EU countries. However, it is also characteristic of European Union member states, where the recognition of qualifications remains an institutionally complex, fragmented, and uneven process within the EHEA (Sticchi Damiani, 2019). This demonstrates that recognition constitutes not merely a technical procedure, but a deeply institutionalised process shaped by political, regulatory, and normative constraints (Agbo et al., 2023).

Alongside pan-European instruments, regional and bilateral agreements continue to play an important role in the recognition system, primarily within the framework of the Commonwealth of Independent States (Resolution, 1999), as well as agreements with individual countries, including China (Resolution, 2007), Turkmenistan (Resolution, 2001 (b)), Ukraine (Resolution, 2001 (c)), Mongolia (Agreement, 2019), and others. These agreements provide simplified recognition regimes and reflect the high intensity of educational and labour mobility within the Eurasian space.

As a result, Kazakhstan’s recognition model is hybrid, combining the European normative framework of the Lisbon Recognition Convention with the regional logic of mutual recognition characteristic of the post-Soviet and Eurasian context. This approach confirms that Bologna principles have been formally adopted, while their practical implementation is adapted to national and regional priorities.

At an early stage, recognition in Kazakhstan continued to rely on nostrification procedures (Order, 2003), reflecting the post-Soviet system’s administrative, control-oriented logic. Gradually, with the introduction of Bologna instruments, the credit system, qualifications frameworks, and quality assurance mechanisms, recognition (Order, 2021) came to be understood not as an exception, but as the standard procedure in the absence of substantial differences.

International experience indicates that recognition of qualifications is increasingly moving beyond formal diplomas to encompass outcomes of non-formal and informal learning, assessed based on achieved learning outcomes rather than educational pathways (Satdykov & Sazonov, 2020). In UNESCO and EU policy documents, recognition is viewed as an instrument for supporting lifelong learning, mobility, and access to the labour market. Against this backdrop, Kazakhstan’s recognition system remains predominantly oriented toward formal

education, thereby reinforcing the gap between international normative approaches and national practice.

In this context, the recognition of micro-credentials is particularly significant. In European and international approaches, micro-credentials are understood as certified learning outcomes that are recognized for employment, further education, and mobility, as reflected in UNESCO's Global Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications. In Kazakhstan, micro-credentials are recognised either through the recognition of learning outcomes within educational programmes or through separate certificates, emerging as an element of a broader lifelong learning policy oriented toward flexibility, transparency, and alignment with labour market needs, while preserving the principles of trust and comparability enshrined in the EHEA framework and global conventions.

At present, the procedure for recognising foreign educational documents in Kazakhstan is carried out in accordance with the Rules for the Recognition of Documents on Higher and Postgraduate Education (Order, 2023b) and the Rules for the Recognition of Documents on Secondary, Technical, and Vocational Education (Order, 2023c).

One important innovation has been the introduction of "digital recognition certificates." Applicants who have completed the recognition procedure can now obtain the relevant certificate in electronic format through their personal accounts on the Egov.kz portal, via the Egov Mobile application, or through the Kaspi.kz application.

On 15 January 2026, Kazakhstan ratified UNESCO's Regional Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications in Higher Education in the Asia-Pacific Region (the Tokyo Convention) (News, 2026). This step strengthened Kazakhstan's position in the international education arena by complementing its commitments under the Bologna Process and opening new opportunities for academic mobility, diploma recognition, and integration within the Asia-Pacific region.

For Kazakhstan, the ratification of the Tokyo Convention represents a timely and well-founded step within its internationalisation strategy. It does not require amendments to domestic legislation, builds on the institutional and expert capacities developed through the implementation of the Lisbon Recognition Convention, and provides access to the high-potential education and labour markets of the Asia-Pacific region through a shared legal and conceptual recognition framework (Nurmagambetov et al., 2023).

In this context, Kazakhstan's membership in the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) since 2014 and its participation in ASEM education ministerial processes have created an additional and complementary channel for advancing priorities related to the recognition of qualifications, quality assurance, balanced academic mobility, the interaction between education and the labour market, and lifelong learning. The Europe-Asia dialogue within ASEM builds on accumulated experience in applying the Bologna instruments and their Asia-Pacific counterparts, thereby creating a favourable environment for aligning approaches and for the practical implementation of the Tokyo Convention's principles.

A pronounced dual orientation in higher education reforms characterises Kazakhstan's experience. On the one hand, national policy draws on initiatives of European origin, primarily the Bologna Process and its associated instruments for recognition and quality assurance. On the other hand, Kazakhstan actively develops engagement with the Asia-Pacific and interregional space through UNESCO's Tokyo Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications, specialised mechanisms of the Council of Europe in the field of higher education and research, and the European Commission's external internationalisation agenda. This combination of European and Asia-Pacific frameworks provides access to policy expertise, technical support, and institutional resources, while simultaneously embedding Kazakhstan in multi-level networks of global higher education governance.

UNESCO's Global Convention expands the scope of international qualification recognition and academic mobility beyond the European Higher Education Area, complementing the European model based on the Lisbon Recognition Convention. At the same time, the Council of Europe's normative approaches, which emphasise academic freedom, inclusiveness, and institutional trust, provide a value-based foundation for fair and transparent recognition procedures. Taken together, these frameworks reflect the multi-level nature of governance in qualification recognition and demonstrate the adaptation of Bologna principles in non-European contexts.

For Kazakhstan, the convergence of European, regional, and global recognition regimes creates opportunities to simplify cross-border recognition of qualifications and enhance the international comparability of national diplomas, while simultaneously increasing demands for policy coherence and institutional accountability. In this context, the ratification of UNESCO's Global Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications represents a strategic policy choice to strengthen trust in Kazakhstan's higher education system and expand the normative basis for academic mobility.

Conclusion

The analysis demonstrates that, despite the Republic of Kazakhstan's strategic commitment to internationalisation and the attraction of international students, institutional mechanisms for the recognition of qualifications remain only partially aligned with international norms. The challenges of recognition in Kazakhstan are related not only to procedural shortcomings but also to deeper processes of institutional adaptation of international commitments to national priorities, as reflected in the Concept for the Development of Higher Education and Science for 2023–2029. Understanding recognition as a selective governance mechanism enables not only the explanation of existing practices but also the outlining of directions for future policy aimed at enhancing the transparency, fairness, and effectiveness of qualification recognition procedures in the context of global academic mobility.

Kazakhstan's trajectory in the field of higher education qualification recognition illustrates the hybrid and multi-level nature of reforms. On the one hand, the country adopted the legal framework of the Lisbon Recognition Convention early and has integrated into the European Higher Education Area. At the same time, in recent years, it has expanded its international engagement through the ratification of UNESCO's Tokyo Convention. On the other hand, the persistence of nostrification elements, the absence of universal automatic recognition, and the fragmented implementation of recognition of prior learning indicate a gap between formal international commitments and their practical implementation.

This gap reflects a broader logic of reform in the post-Soviet context, where internationalisation often performs a performative function of external legitimation. At the same time, substantive institutional change progresses gradually and selectively. In Kazakhstan, the recognition of qualifications operates not as a neutral technical procedure, but as an instrument for allocating access to academic mobility, the labour market, and institutional resources, embedded within regional and programme-based mechanisms.

In this context, the ratification of the Tokyo Convention represents a pragmatic, strategically calibrated step that complements the European recognition model and strengthens Kazakhstan's position as a bridge between Europe and the Asia-Pacific region. The prospect of accession to UNESCO's Global Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications may further expand the normative basis of recognition and enhance trust in the national higher education system. However, the realisation of the potential of these instruments will depend on Kazakhstan's capacity to ensure policy coherence, institutional accountability, and a shift from selective exemptions toward a more systematic and equitable recognition regime.

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