

# Medical education at the Peoples' Friendship University of Russia

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## Abstract

The Peoples' Friendship University (UDN) was established in February 1960 for the purpose of training native professionals for the newly independent developing countries in Africa, Asia, and Latin America liberated from colonialism in the 1950s and 1960s. UDN became the world's first international higher education institution (HEI), and was initially meant for 3,500 foreign and 500 Soviet students. In its first decades, it was entirely funded by the Soviet government. UDN was founded as a traditional university, with a Faculty of Medicine (the Institute of Medicine since 2016), which was and remains its largest division. UDN's popularity grew quickly, and today it offers more than 450 programmes and has 33,500 undergraduates, postgraduates and interns from 157 countries. They are taught by 2,800 lecturers, including 600 doctors of sciences and 1,400 candidates of sciences. The Institute of Medicine has 93 departments and a Simulation Training Centre, employing more than 1,000 lecturers and teaching more than 7,000 undergraduates, postgraduates and residents. In addition, thousands of physicians do professional development courses there. The institute offers courses in General Medicine, Dentistry, Pharmacy and Nursing, as well as Masters in Healthcare Management. Through their research work, the institute employees are contributing to the development of advanced areas of genetics, cytology, embryology and chronobiology, to the study of new medicines and diagnostic products and of the pathogenesis and clinical presentations of infectious diseases constituting a threat to public health, and to the development of new treatment technologies and methods for chronic, surgical and oncological diseases. Today, the Peoples' Friendship University of Russia (RUDN University) is a global, international centre of learning and research, that works closely with universities in more than 90 countries and features highly in global rankings.

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## Keywords

Peoples' Friendship University of Russia (RUDN University), Faculty/Institute of Medicine, higher medical education, history of medicine

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## Background

After the Second World War, countries in Eastern Europe began asking the government of the USSR to allow their citizens to study at Soviet HEIs. The first such request (in January 1945, even before the end of the war) came from the National Government of Bulgaria, and in the second semester of the 1945-1946 academic year the first Bulgarian students were accepted by the All-Union State Institute of Cinematography (VGIK) and the Leningrad Higher Technical Institute of Cinematography (LIK) (Sovetsko-Bolgarskie otnosheniya... 1981, p. 63, 129). In all, 90 Bulgarian undergraduates and 30

doctoral students entered HEIs in the USSR in 1946 (Belov 2009, p. 10). This marks the start of the history of foreigners studying at Soviet/Russian HEIs.

Initially, they came from socialist countries: Bulgaria, Hungary, Poland, Yugoslavia, Romania, Mongolia, Czechoslovakia, North Korea, East Germany, North Vietnam and Cuba. Their numbers grew rapidly, reaching 12,833 in October 1954, including 1,149 doctoral students (Sofinskiy 1981, p. 76). From 1956, citizens of Italy, Iceland, Finland and France began coming to HEIs in the USSR to study and to work as interns. That same year, the first students from Asia and Africa arrived, while the first students from Latin America came

in 1957. In all, 134 students from developing countries studied at HEIs and technical schools in the USSR in 1957 (Stanis 1980, p. 5). The regulations governing foreign students' studies were backed by international agreements covering periods of 4–5 years. Their stay in the USSR (their studies, accommodation in student residence buildings, medical care, grants, etc.) were paid for in full by the Soviet government.

Between 1946 and the establishment of the People's Friendship University (UDN) in Moscow, 13,500 foreign specialists trained at the Soviet Union's leading HEIs (Belov 2009, p. 21).

The establishment of UDN in February 1960 was driven by the emergence of many independent nation states in the Arab world (Libya in 1951, Egypt in 1952, Algeria in 1954, and Morocco, Tunisia and Sudan in 1956), sub-Saharan Africa (Ghana in 1957 and Guinea in 1958) and the Americas (Cuba in 1959) as a result of anticolonial national liberation movements. Seventeen states in Africa alone gained independence in 1960, which was declared the Year of Africa by the UN. At the start of 1961, there were 26 independent nation states in Africa, which were home to three quarters of the continent's population (Belov 2009, p. 15).

Liberated from colonialism and semi-colonialism, these new countries needed native professionals in practically all areas of economics, education, health-care and administration. For example, when they gained independence Congo-Léopoldville (now the Democratic Republic of the Congo) had just 20 native university graduates, while Lebanon had just 12 (Notes et études... 1969, p. 37). The Soviet Union offered real possibilities for addressing this problem: UDN, founded 'to train native professionals for countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America' (Frolov et al. 2009, p. 25), allowed citizens of the newly independent states to get a university education in six main faculties: Medicine (which has always been the university's largest faculty); Engineering; Agriculture; Physics, Mathematics and Natural Sciences; History and Philology; and Economics and Law.

UDN received thousands of letters from people wanting to study there. By 23 April 1960, 3,170 people from 81 countries had expressed a desire to study at the new university (336 from Asia, 174 from Latin America, 176 from Africa, 2,470 from socialist countries and 14 from capitalist countries) (Svodka o pismakh... 2013).

UDN's first rector was Professor Sergey Rumyantsev (1913–1990), who had until then been Deputy Minister of Higher and Specialised Secondary Education of the USSR. Under him, a framework for a unique new type of HEI was created, its structure established, the lecturers and heads of departments recruited, the buildings for the teaching blocks and student residence buildings identified, and the work plans for the construction of the teaching and ancillary buildings in the future campus in Moscow's District 42 drawn up. UDN became his life's

work. Rumyantsev foresaw the university's future from the outset: "UDN is a landmark education institution. It has no equivalent anywhere in the world. 4,000 students, including 3,500 from countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America, and 500 from the USSR. In essence, it is what these states and peoples need now... Our first graduations will be in 1965. And in 25 years? This will be a first-class university" (Golubev 2013, p. 137). In the history of the People's Friendship University of Russia, Rumyantsev will always be its founding father, who (between March 1960 and December 1970) laid the foundations for the development of this unique international university (Golubev 2013; Letopis Universiteta... 2003).

## The first students and graduates

The first admission of students (across all the faculties) included 539 foreigners, from 59 countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America, and 57 students from the Soviet Union (Nikitin 2010, p. 11). Of these, 101 students from 35 countries were accepted into the Faculty of Medicine, just seven of whom (one in each teaching group) were from the USSR. Admission to UDN in the early years, was not a competitive process: the foreign students did not have to take entrance exams (as directed by their governments and public organisations), while the domestic students in all the faculties were selected from the outstanding pupils who had already got into the country's leading HEIs. For example, the Faculty of Medicine's students were selected from the best applicants who had already got into the Faculty of General Medicine at the Sechenov First Moscow Institute of Medicine of the Order of Lenin<sup>1</sup> that year.

The first classes at UDN began on 1 October 1960. All students entering the six main faculties did a year in the Foundation Faculty. This faculty was set up for two purposes: to teach the foreign students Russian, so that they could understand the classes in the main faculties, and to fill in the gaps in their knowledge of general school subjects and bring them up to the standard of Soviet secondary school leavers. This was facilitated by the fact that all the students – both foreign and domestic (including those from Moscow) – had to live in student residence buildings. From their first days there, UDN became a shared international home for them. Classes in the main faculties began a year later, on 1 September 1961.

Everyone who came to study at UDN in the 1960s felt a responsibility to their country. Many of them did not have the required basic education and sought to fill in the gaps in their knowledge in the Foundation Faculty. They strove for "good" or "excellent" grades; no one underperformed. Even merely average grades

<sup>1</sup> Now Sechenov First Moscow State Medical University.

were a rarity. More than 30% of the graduates from the first admissions qualified with distinction (many with the equivalent of straight As) (Sorokina 2012, p. 36). One of these was Dmitry Bilibin, who would become Vice-Rector of the university, and then (from 1998 to 2005) its fourth Rector.

In UDN's early years, the Soviet government paid all the costs of studies not just for the Soviet students, but also for foreigners, including their travel to Moscow and return to their home country after graduating. All the students received grants.<sup>2</sup> Their accommodation in a student residence building, check-ups and treatment at the university clinic, summer holidays at student camps in Moldavia (Moldova), on the Black Sea, or in the Moscow region, excursions to the Soviet republics, and participation in scientific conferences, international festivals and sports competitions were also paid for out of the university budget, which in the early years was ring-fenced. In addition, the foreign students who came to frosty Moscow were fully provided with winter clothing (unsurprisingly, they all wore identical Russian fur hats, checkered greatcoats with sheepskin collars, and similar woollen sweaters) (Sorokina 2012, p. 8).

When UDN was founded, the plan was 'to bring the total number of students to three to four thousand in future years' (Postanovlenie... 2013, p. 26), but this was achieved by the time the first students graduated: UDN had more than 3,200 undergraduates and 140 doctoral students from 82 countries in 1965 (Stanis 1975, p. 6), more than 4,000 undergraduates and 225 doctoral students from 85 countries in 1970 (Nikitin 2010, p. 28), and 4,600 undergraduates, 300 doctoral students, 90 interns and 60 residents from 89 countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America in 1975. There were 76 departments and 6 stand-alone courses. Including lecturers, 7,500 people worked or studied at the university (Stanis 1975, p. 7). 4,250 professionals (including 1,011 physicians) were trained there for developing countries up to 1975 (Universitet druzhby narodov... 1975, pp. 4, 64).

UDN's work won high praise from the Soviet Government, and on 4 February 1975 — the eve of its 15th anniversary — the university was awarded the Order of Friendship of Peoples "for merit in training highly qualified specialists for developing countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America" by a decree of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR (Nikitin 2010, p. 47).

In its 60 years, the university has become increasingly popular, and the number of students originally planned for it has been exceeded more than tenfold. Today, more than 33,500 undergraduates, postgraduates, residents and interns from 157 countries, representing

more than 500 national and ethnic groups from countries in Africa, Asia, Latin America, North America, and Europe, plus Russia, study at RUDN. These include some 10,000 foreign undergraduates, doctoral students and residents. At all levels, almost a quarter of those studying at RUDN are in the Institute of Medicine.

A notable feature of RUDN is that students can qualify in translation from one or more foreign languages in addition their major. This tradition dates back to UDN's early years, when all students registered with the six main faculties did a year in the Foundation Faculty before starting their majors. The foreign students studied conversational Russian, learning to speak and even sing in the language (as well as improving their knowledge of the core subjects — biology, chemistry, etc.), while the domestic students studied English, French or Spanish (26 hours a week), so as to be able to communicate with their foreign colleagues and help them with their studies. Foreign languages studies continued in the main faculties. As a result, all UDN graduates earned a second degree, in translation (Sorokina 2012, p. 7), expanding the future physicians' opportunities in terms of reading the scientific literature and communicating with foreign specialists.

During these years, hundreds of thousands of foreign students learned Russian at RUDN's Foundation Faculty (now renamed the Faculty of Russian Language and General Educational Disciplines). It is worth noting that RUDN teachers continue to teach Russian to practically all foreign cosmonauts and astronauts at the Yuri Gagarin Cosmonaut Training Centre — a reflection of the fact that RUDN has one of the world's best schools for teaching foreigners Russian.<sup>3</sup>

In 1966, UDN's entrance regulations for domestic students changed. Direct competition was introduced for admissions to all the faculties: all those who got through this process became UDN students.

Until the collapse of the Soviet Union, before which higher education was entirely funded by the state, there remained twice as many foreign as domestic students at UDN. From the early 1990s, HEIs saw their funding shrink considerably, and sought to top up their budget by increasing their numbers of domestic students paying to study. As a result, the proportion of domestic students increased severalfold, while that of foreign students gradually decreased (Nikitin 2010, p. 54). Following the introduction of the school Unified State

<sup>2</sup> The foreign students received a grant of 90 rubles, and the domestic students one of 45 rubles (outstanding students received 55 rubles). For comparison, lunch in the student canteen at the time cost 50 kopeks, a metro ticket 5 kopeks, and a tram ticket 3 kopeks.

<sup>3</sup> RUDN employees have also been much more deeply involved in space programmes. For example, Nikolai Agadzhanian, Head of the Department of Normal Physiology and a member of the Academy of Medical Sciences, was not only a theorist but also a practitioner in the field of space medicine (he took part in the preparations for Yuri Gagarin's flight), while Professor Gennady Zhukov is recognised in legal circles as the founder of space law (Nikitin 2010, p. 36).

Exam (USE) in the early 2000s, the total number of domestic students has increased considerably, with even pupils with a low USE grade being accepted for studies on a paid basis. This has had a noticeable effect on student performance and has made work significantly harder for the academic staff.

To improve potential first-year students' level of preparation and knowledge, the university has started running specialised classes and holding competitions for school pupils, the winners of which have been admitted at the university. RUDN is doing this not just in Russia, but in many countries worldwide. Meanwhile, the question of whether Russian HEIs should have at least one additional entrance exam or an interview with the applicants (as is done at Moscow State University and Saint Petersburg State University), is being raised increasingly often, but it is not up to the institutions to decide.

## University medical education

UDN was founded as a traditional university. For its first two decades, it offered 14 programmes in six main faculties. Today, RUDN is Russia's only HEI with the diverse structure characteristic of leading traditional universities. RUDN now has 17 faculties and institutions.<sup>4</sup>

A physician's education at a traditional university (university medical education) differs from such education at a medical school, as medical students at a traditional university are taught the fundamental sciences on which medicine is based (physics, chemistry, mathematics, biology and genetics) and social subjects (Russian history, philosophy, psychology, etc.) by the university academic staff from the relevant departments of specialised faculties of the fundamental sciences.

Taking advantage of this, the Faculty of Medicine<sup>5</sup> has continuously developed in cooperation with the university's other faculties, running joint educational and research programmes.

In the year when its first physicians graduated (1966), it had 22 departments and 4 stand-alone courses, employing 120 academics, including 21 professors and doctors of sciences and 58 readers and candidates of sciences (Sorokina 2012, p. 9).

Today, the number of medical departments has increased to 93, and the Institute of Medicine has more than a thousand academic staff.

During its first decade, social subjects, including History of Medicine, were not taught at the Faculty of Medicine. The latter course was introduced in 1974 as part of UDN's restructuring in the early 1970s. Since then, a course in the history of medicine has been an

independent part of the Faculty of Medicine (now the Institute of Medicine), while History of Medicine is a mandatory subject for second-year students in all medical specialisations (Sorokina 2014; Sorokina 2016), as well as a stand-alone module in the subject History and Philosophy of Science, for first-year doctoral students preparing for their Candidate examination in this subject (Sorokina 2017).

RUDN is constantly adding to the areas in which it offers medical training. For its first 37 years, the Faculty of Medicine trained physicians in one specialisation: General Medicine. Over time, the faculty's popularity grew, and it added new majors (Pharmacy in 1994, Dentistry in 1998, Nursing in 2005, Economics and Management at an Enterprise (in Healthcare) (now the master's programme "Healthcare Management") in 2007). With the opening of the Faculty of Professional Development for Medical Workers,<sup>6</sup> the opportunities available at the Faculty of Medicine have significantly expanded.

In 2016, the Faculty of Medicine became the Institute of Medicine — RUDN's largest division. At the start of the 2019–2020 academic year there were 5,863 medical students at the Institute of Medicine, ten times as many (!) as planned when UDN was founded. Including with doctoral students, residents and interns, more than 7,000 people study at the Institute of Medicine today, and thousands of physicians are doing professional development courses there.

Many RUDN graduates have become prominent government and public figures, ministers, members of parliament, leading scientists, and heads of major organisations and academic and research institutions in their home countries. They include Bharrat Jagdeo, former president of Guyana, and surgeon Augusto Fábrega, who, after leaving the medical profession, was for many years Panama's ambassador to Russia.

## HEIs and research

Throughout the long history of HEIs in the USSR and Russia, their main purpose was to train specialists under the auspices of the Ministry of Higher (later also Specialised Secondary) Education. It was with this goal in mind that UDN was established.

Following reforms and the creation of the Russian Ministry of Education and Science, and its subsequent transformation into the Russian Ministry of Science and Higher Education, a new objective was set: HEIs were to become research universities, focused mainly on scientific research. When assessing an HEI's performance, the main factor taken into account is how many publications it has in prestigious journals and how many citations it has in foreign databases. At leading Russian

<sup>4</sup> See [http://www.rudn.ru/u/www/files/about\\_rudn/broshyura-rudn1.pdf](http://www.rudn.ru/u/www/files/about_rudn/broshyura-rudn1.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> The Institute of Medicine since 2016.

<sup>6</sup> Now the Faculty of Continuing Medical Education.

universities (such as Moscow State University), these two functions (education and research) are mainly carried out by the relevant professional groups: the academic staff (professors, readers and assistants) mainly teach, while prospective research projects and areas are developed by researchers in research units, who are typically less involved in teaching. This approach ensures high quality of both teaching and research, and ultimately a high ranking for the institution. Most Russian HEIs, however, do not have specialised research departments, so both these functions fall on the shoulders of the teaching staff.

It is important to note that education and research at UDN's Faculty of Medicine have been closely connected from the start: the academics who established the faculty were also leading specialists in their field. The first dean of the Faculty of Medicine was Aleksandr Gromov (later Vice-Rector of the university). He founded the faculty together with Vice-Rector Aleksandr Shabanov, professors Fyodor Talyzin (biology and parasitology), Dmitry Zhdanov and Nina Krylova (anatomy), Vladimir Yeliseyev (histology and embryology), Konstantin Kullanda (normal physiology), Temirbolat Beryozov (biochemistry; later a member of the Russian Academy of Medical Sciences and the Russian Academy of Sciences), Vasily Kiktenko (microbiology), Irina Yesipova (anatomical pathology), Igor Kirpatovsky (operative surgery and gross anatomy; later a member of the Russian Academy of Medical Sciences and the Russian Academy of Sciences), Vladimir Vinogradov (surgery; today, Moscow's City Clinical Hospital No. 64 is named after him), Valentina Kononyachenko (therapy), Robert Babayants (skin diseases), Aleksey Ivanov (obstetrics and gynaecology), Maria Korkina (psychiatry), Viktor Frolov (pathophysiology), who headed the faculty for 30 years, and many more (Sorokina 2012, p. 9-11; Tritsatiletie... 1990, p. 27-31).

Today, RUDN's Institute of Medicine is headed by one of its graduates, Aleksey Abramov. Under him, a new generation of scientists is helping to advance important areas of modern science.<sup>7</sup>

Year by year, the institute's infrastructure is also developing: the number of training clinics is increasing, and its teaching laboratories are being fitted with modern equipment, while its Simulation Training Centre, set up to develop students' practical skills and teach specialists at all levels, is one of the best in Moscow.

## International recognition

The first graduates from UDN's Faculty of Medicine had to confirm their degree after returning to their home country: they had to retake all their

exams in their country's language. Once they had passed them, they were permitted to practise medicine. Their work showed the quality of the training at UDN, and after several years UDN degrees were recognised as equivalent to national ones. The example of the first UDN students was followed by many of their compatriots, and later by their children and grandchildren.

Today, RUDN is a global, international centre of learning and research, a traditional university well-known both in Russia and abroad: more than 150,000 of its graduates work in more than 180 countries, including more than 6,000 candidates of sciences and doctors of sciences.

2,800 lecturers, including 600 doctors of sciences and 1,400 candidates of sciences work in its various faculties and institutes. Among these are more than 150 foreign lecturers.

RUDN offers 472 courses for specialists at different levels, including 155 dual honours courses and exchange courses ran jointly with foreign partner universities<sup>8</sup> and 74 programmes in foreign languages,<sup>9</sup> including General Medicine and Dentistry.

RUDN's Faculty of Medicine has offered programmes taught in English since the mid-2000s. This has required creating an anglophone learning environment, where not only lecturers but also administrative and support staff know English well enough to communicate with foreign students. On the other hand, the patients in the clinics speak Russian, so the foreign students and resident physicians need to know Russian to communicate with them. Accordingly, they study it as a foreign language from their first year. This is also important because "Only medical workers with a sufficient command of Russian may practise medicine" in Russia (Churilov 2013, p. 28).

Since 2015, RUDN has successfully taken part in Russia's 5-100 Project to improve the positions of its leading HEIs in internationally recognised world university rankings.<sup>10</sup>

Out of 24,000 HEIs worldwide, RUDN is one of the top thousand in the QS World University Rankings (WUR), and has risen from 601st to 392nd in the past three years.<sup>11</sup> RUDN has enjoyed similar success in the Times Higher Education (THE) World University Rankings, rising into the top 150.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>8</sup> See [http://eng.rudn.ru/education/educational-programs?second\\_diploma=1](http://eng.rudn.ru/education/educational-programs?second_diploma=1)

<sup>9</sup> See [http://www.rudn.ru/u/www/files/about\\_rudn/edinaya-informacionnaya-spravka.pdf](http://www.rudn.ru/u/www/files/about_rudn/edinaya-informacionnaya-spravka.pdf) (in Russian); <http://eng.rudn.ru/education/educational-programs>

<sup>10</sup> See [http://www.rudn.ru/u/www/files/about\\_rudn/edinaya-informacionnaya-spravka.pdf](http://www.rudn.ru/u/www/files/about_rudn/edinaya-informacionnaya-spravka.pdf) (in Russian).

<sup>11</sup> See [http://www.rudn.ru/media/news/about\\_rudn/rudn--na-13-meste-v-reytinge-forbes](http://www.rudn.ru/media/news/about_rudn/rudn--na-13-meste-v-reytinge-forbes) (in Russian).

<sup>12</sup> [http://www.rudn.ru/media/news/about\\_rudn](http://www.rudn.ru/media/news/about_rudn).

<sup>7</sup> See [http://med.rudn.ru/?page\\_id=587](http://med.rudn.ru/?page_id=587) (in Russian).

RUDN is Russia's "greenest" university, ranking 41st in the GreenMetric World University Rankings.<sup>13</sup>

In the Forbes ranking of the top 100 Russian universities, RUDN has risen 3 places to 13th.<sup>14</sup>

RUDN's reputation outside Russia is shown by the fact that it is a member of the International Association of Universities, the European University Association, and the Euroasian Universities Association, has more than 480 cooperation agreements with universities and research centres in more than 90 countries, and plays an active role in programmes and forums organised by the UN, UNESCO and the Council of Europe.

RUDN's rector, Professor Vladimir Filippov, Doctor of Physical and Mathematical Sciences and Member of the Russian Academy of Education, has led RUDN

for many years (from 1993 to 1998, and since 2004) and was Russia's Minister of Education from 1998 to 2004. Since 2013, he has chaired Russia's Higher Attestation Commission. Mr Filippov was President of the Organising Committee of the UNESCO World Conference on Higher Education from 2006 to 2009, and President of the Steering Committee of UNESCO's "Education for All" world programme from 2012 to 2014.

In 2010, RUDN was awarded a UNESCO Gold Medal for its contribution to training professionals for developing countries worldwide.

In the year when its first students graduated (1965), UDN's first rector, Sergey Rumyantsev said, "It was hard, but we did it! And for the first time not just in the USSR, but anywhere in the world" (Golubev 2013, p. 138). At the time, the main objective of the unique new international university was to train professionals for developing countries. Now, RUDN's model is changing: in today's world, its mission is not only to train native professionals for Russia and foreign countries, but also to grow successfully as a research university.

<sup>13</sup> See [http://www.rudn.ru/u/www/files/about\\_rudn/edinaya-informacionnaya-spravka.pdf](http://www.rudn.ru/u/www/files/about_rudn/edinaya-informacionnaya-spravka.pdf) (in Russian); [http://www.rudn.ru/u/www/files/about\\_rudn/edinaya-informacionnaya-spravka.pdf](http://www.rudn.ru/u/www/files/about_rudn/edinaya-informacionnaya-spravka.pdf) (in Russian).

<sup>14</sup> See [http://www.rudn.ru/media/news/about\\_rudn/rudn--na-13-meste-v-reytinge-forbes](http://www.rudn.ru/media/news/about_rudn/rudn--na-13-meste-v-reytinge-forbes) (in Russian).

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