



## SYSTEM OF EDUCATION AS A TOOL OF REGIME EMPOWERMENT

Was Karl Marx right? Do material conditions really shape minds? At least the Belarusian leaders clearly do not think so. They realize pretty well that education is the most powerful tool of any society. The economic prosperity, social stability, and overall quality of life depend on the efficiency, openness, flexibility and quality of the educational system. However education may also be one of the most efficient means to control society, especially when put under strict government check. This issue of Bell looks deeper into the paradoxes of the interaction between Belarusian political regime and Belarusian system of education. Volha Ramanenka argues that the Belarusian system of education not only doesn't provide proper quality of education but also works against some of the constitutional principles as it remains under strict

state control, is heavily ideologized and impedes the constitutional right to education through its discriminatory nature.

Dmitry Gomeniuk presents and analyses the results of a recent survey measuring the student-friendliness of Belarusian universities on four rating scales: the level of efficacy of student self-governance, guarantees of the basic students' rights, independence of student media, and the general rating – the most student-friendly higher educational establishment. His research reveals how a system of mutually low expectations occurs that naturally hampers both the quality of education and diligence (as well as activism) of the students.

*Živilė Dambrauskaitė, Editor*

## EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM IN BELARUS: SOVIET TRADITIONS VS. CONTEMPORARY CHANGES

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### Educational System in Belarus: Soviet Traditions vs. Contemporary Changes

Education plays a crucial role in formation and development of every society. A certain system of values, which have a direct impact on our mentality and national identity, is cultivated not only in the family, but also by the educational system. It is a well known fact, that many former social and political reformists were inspired by their university professors. Therefore, an analysis of the Belarusian educational system is extremely important for better understanding of the problems existing in the Belarusian society.

Belarusian education system is an integral part of the authoritarian regime in Belarus. It is especially true about the system of higher education, which has a direct impact on forming a personality at a very important stage of his/her development. This

is the time when a person makes a choice of the future perception of the world, and forms a certain attitude towards the society he/she lives in.

### Soviet Past and Soviet Present

Education system in Belarus, formed in the old Soviet times, still has strong Soviet traditions. The Belarusian government still supports the model of subordinated educational system, which does not possess any kind of autonomy. In his numerous interviews, President Lukashenka repeatedly stated that the educational system "shall remain unchangeable" [Belta news agency, 08.06.2010]. He also underlined, that "we do not have the right to break the system of education." [Belta, 08.06.2010]. It means that the government cultivates the idea of Soviet education as the best and most appropriate for the Belarusian society. However, the situation is quite the opposite. The Soviet system of education has proved its inefficiency. Such system provided education, which was unable to meet the real needs

## CONTENTS

### EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM IN BELARUS: SOVIET TRADITIONS VS. CONTEMPORARY CHANGES

*Volha Ramanenka*  
*CEU Student, LLM in Human Rights*

1

### DOES MINSK HAVE ANY HIGHER EDUCATIONAL ESTABLISHMENTS FOR STUDENTS?

*Dmitry Gomeniuk*

4

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of the society. It was the so-called “limited” education. As a result, graduates were good professionals in the conditions existing in the country at that moment. However, they could not adjust to the new requirements and new circumstances. In many cases, Soviet specialists were unable to undertake any constructive actions in a rapidly changing environment. It was especially remarkable after the collapse of the USSR, when Soviet-educated people, who came to power at that time, rejected the possibility of borrowing new education methods and techniques from the democratic countries of the West. Many people with higher education did not have the possibility to improve their knowledge and upgrade their skills on the territory of the former soviet Republic. As a consequence, they left the country to pursue their careers abroad. Unfortunately, the Belarusian government still does not recognize its mistakes. Nowadays, most Belarusian university professors and lecturers do not use new educational methods and techniques, they just use the system, which was formed a long time ago and is still reluctant to any kind of innovations. As a result, the entire system of the Belarusian education has not progressed beyond the late eighties.

#### **Ideology as Integral Part of Belarusian education**

According to the information, posted on the Ministry's of Education web-site, there are 44 state-owned and 10 private universities in Belarus. The number of students for every 10 000 people has increased from 180 to 435. Institutions of higher education prepare specialists in 361 professions. Despite these facts, none of the universities possess their own autonomy. The system of education in Belarus is dependent on the government: university rectors are usually appointed but not elected; there is a strict standardization of educational programs, control over professors and students, as well as huge bureaucracy at universities. It is not surprising that ideology has become an integral part of the educational system in Belarus. A course of the state ideology is compulsory for students at all universities. That directly contradicts the Constitution of the Republic of Belarus which explicitly prohibits establishment of a single ideology in the country. At present the educational system has become an instrument of ideology in Belarus; teachers do their best to provide ideological legitimacy to the Belarusian authorities despite the interests of the Belarusian society. As the President mentioned in one of his interviews, “teachers who do not agree with the ideological policy of the State can simply leave their jobs” [Charter97, 15.01.2009]. In many Western countries teachers and students at schools and universities can freely express their opinion about the elected authorities. In Belarus, they are afraid of being expelled or fired. This is already a violation of their rights, guaranteed not only by the Constitution, but also by the international documents, ratified by Belarus. No one denies that there is an ideology in every state, even a democratic one, but it should contain an idea about the develop-

ment of the state, its political, economic and social life, which is supported by majority of the citizens. In other words, it shall express the interests of the society as a whole. In a democratic society ideology provides a liberal-democratic consensus, contributes to social cohesion and development of civil society. The basis for such ideology is the Constitution of the State, which contains the main provisions on how the citizens wish to establish legal, economic and social order in their country. It is true that ideology is widely spread through the system of education, which, as a rule, is created by the state with an active support of various institutions of civil society – funds, social and political organizations, churches, etc. Education provides gradual integration of an individual into society. As a result, he/she emerges as an independent subject in different social, political and economic relations. In other words, educational system shall help a person to think critically and build his/her relations with authorities and society on a legal basis. But if an ideology is used in order to support anti-democratic political regime (authoritarian in this case) it might become an effective instrument for “brainwashing”. It will be used to influence a student's mind, to create socialistic illusions of changes and wellbeing of people in the country. As a consequence of strong ideological pressure, the majority of Belarusian youth are deprived of freedom and the sense of responsibility to realize it. The authorities are trying to impose on students one defined way of thinking, aiming to eliminate individuality, creativeness and ability of thinking in different categories. As a result, the Belarusian youth, having one-sided perception of the world, becomes helpless in the society. Furthermore, the Belarusian ideology proclaims Belarus as a prosperous and well-developed country. Obviously, that impedes the progress in development of the country, because improvement is impossible without dissatisfaction and critical thinking.

#### **Pale shadow of the Bologna system**

Belarus is the only country in Europe, which has not joined the Bologna process. The strongest argument against such accession is that the Belarusian education system is the best system, which has its own way of development. Recently the Belarusian President has stated that Belarus will begin the process of joining the Bologna process. It is necessary to mention, that the question of participation of Belarus in the Bologna process is raised constantly, however, the final decision has not been taken. As it has already been mentioned earlier, the Belarusian education system has not changed much during this time, and most of the changes were actually minor and formal. Belarus ratified the European Cultural Convention in 1993 and could have joined the Bologna process a long time ago. However, reform of the education system could become a serious threat for the existing political regime. The establishment of new independent schools, colleges and universities would deprive the authorities of the total control over education, which means that its influence

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on socio-political processes in the country would noticeably decrease. Thereat, European Humanities University, the first truly independent and democratic university in Belarus which refused to follow the ideological orders, was closed down by the Belarusian government. "We must follow the method of education, which we have already determined..., without deep improvement", warned the President [Belta, 08.06.2010]. Moreover, the officials try to convince our society in high quality of Belarusian education, using the argument that a lot of foreign students come to study in Belarus. However, such statement is rather exaggerated. Hardly could it be stated that there are many foreign students in the country. Belarus does have some foreign students, mainly from India, China or Venezuela, who come to Belarus in order to get education which is rather cheap than of higher quality. Hardly can they speak fluent Russian, not even talking about Belarusian. But because of money they pay, universities try to ignore their poor academic results.

Our graduates cannot find any job abroad, because in most cases the Belarusian diploma is not recognized and they have to retake exams or even study again to obtain a diploma, which will be internationally recognized. Obviously, the further the Belarusian system of education is from the Bologna process, the less attractive it is not only for foreign but also for Belarusian students.

However, there have been some changes, which slightly resemble the Bologna system. According to the law on Higher Education (2007) the present classification of higher educational system consists of 2 levels: "qualified specialist" and "master". The first stage of education prepares qualified specialists. The term of education usually lasts for 4-5 years. The time may be exceeded if the specialization is of high difficulty. The second stage of higher education provides the possibility to obtain a master degree and is focused on training scholar and teaching staff. The time of education is 1 to 2 years. Despite the above-mentioned innovations, which are primary formal, the content and methods of the Belarusian higher education have almost not been changed. Furthermore, the draft of the new Code of Education does not comply with the main principles of the Bologna system. Thereby, an attempt to copy certain Western standards, incompatible with the ingrained soviet methods of education, makes it useless and inefficient. Obviously, it is just a disguise before the presidential elections and a "friendly sign" for Europe in the situation of conflict with Russia. Hardly will the Belarusian government, which closed down independent institutions of higher education and impeded creation of new private universities, take any effective steps and implement the plans it proclaims. That would definitely lead to the loss of its total control over the Belarusian society. Furthermore, education reforms need serious financial investment. At the same time, if realized softly and gradually, they would not reflect so hard on the state budget, especially if the results promise to be effective. One of the most obvious

fears of the Belarusian government in relation to Bologna process is a possible "brain drain".

Well, it would be quite reasonable to ask then: why would the "brain drain" occur in a country with the best education system in Europe? The officials from the Ministry of Education claim, education has become mass and almost two thirds of graduates have a problem of finding a job every year. No one would argue a certain level of unemployment is natural for every country. Nevertheless, the situation in Belarus is more than critical, that is why "brain drain" is a logical consequence of the conditions we have.

### Some Other Drawbacks of the Belarusian Education System

#### • City vs. village

Following the old Soviet traditions, there is a system of obligatory employment of college graduates. It is a consequence of the governmental policy of rural development and revival of villages. However, in modern Belarus, the system works the other way around: students from villages are not placed on job positions in cities as it used to be in the USSR. On the contrary, students from cities are sent to do obligatory jobs in villages, usually without proper conditions. According to a public opinion poll, 76% of respondents believe that the system of obligatory employment of graduates is just a limitation of the freedom of choice and two years thrown out of a graduate's life [mojazarplata.by, 30.09.2010]. However, 20.19% of respondents say, the system provides a guaranteed job after graduation. Still, 2.5% of respondents state that obligatory employment is not a chance to earn money or to solve the housing problems (1,54%).

#### • Accessibility of higher education

Recently, with the adoption of the Presidential Decree on admission to institutions of higher and specialized secondary education, the accessibility of higher education was put into question. Those applying to major in "public administration", "public administration and law", "public administration and economics", "international relations", "international law", "economics law", "journalism", "international journalism", "customs service" are required to pass professional and psychological interview and submit a recommendation letter from the local authorities. Obviously, this requirement is established for the purpose of selecting young people who support the existing political regime. It is the best way to hire the "right" persons to the institutions of public administration. We should underline that this requirement violates Article 49 of the Constitution, which guarantees the right to education.

#### • Discriminative nature of the Belarusian education

The Constitution prohibits any kind of discrimination. Moreover, it was repeatedly

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stated by the Belarusian officials that “there is no discrimination” in the system of education. However, we cannot ignore the so called positive discrimination in the sphere of education. Privileges for entrants from rural areas are a good example of that.

In conclusion we should mention that despite some advantages of the Belarusian educational system (highly qualified teaching staff, well regulated methods of the educational process),

hardly can we talk about well developed system of higher education in Belarus, which is under permanent governmental control and ideological pressure. Abolition of ideology courses at colleges and universities, participation in Bologna process would doubtlessly provide positive results. Such reforms could improve the quality of the Belarusian education and bring it up to the European level. But which system (political or educational) should be changed first?

## DOES MINSK HAVE ANY HIGHER EDUCATIONAL ESTABLISHMENTS FOR STUDENTS?

*Dmitry Gomeniuk*

In the Middle Ages students and teachers gathered in corporations, later called universities, which provided education. Each corporation had its own rules – the Statute, which was to be observed by both teachers and students. Statutes were created in order to make the process of education more effective. It reflected the interests of both students and teachers. University rector was elected by senior students and was supposed to defend and represent the interests of the corporation. There was practically no university administration; everything was focused on the education process.

The very historical point of universities is that they were created for students. If not for the students, universities would not exist. That approach inspired the Youth Union Group “Student Council” (or StudRada) to create a rating of “The Most Student-Friendly Higher Educational Establishment in Minsk. 2010”. About 800 students from 11 Minsk higher educational establishments took part in the questionnaire survey held in July 2010.

It’s worth pointing out that the rating is a mere reflection of the respondents’ opinion. The participants of the survey answered the questions, and each answer received a certain number of points. For instance, if the question “Does your university or faculty have a students’ newspaper?” was answered positively, the university was given 1 point; if the answer was negative, the university received -1 (minus one) point. This way, a respondent could give his or her educational establishment from 33 to minus 17 points. The average grade of each university was calculated as a simple average of the answers. The questionnaires were distributed among the students both on paper in student campuses and in the electronic form in the Internet.

As a result we created four rating scales: the level of efficacy of student self-governance, guarantees of the basic students’ rights, independence of student media, and the general rating – the most

student-friendly higher educational establishment. In the opinion of Minsk students, the most student-friendly higher educational establishment in 2010 is the Academy of Public Administration under the aegis of the President of the Republic of Belarus. It also scored best in the rating of the efficacy of students’ self-governance and independence of student media. I should point out, the places in the rating were distributed not according to the absolute figures, but relatively to each other, i.e. the Academy of Public Administration received 15.6 point out of 33 possible.

We, as researchers, were quite surprised by the results, as in reality the freedom of speech, freedom of opinion and other fundamental human rights are oppressed in this establishment of higher education. Student mass media cover everything but student problems, and avoid conflicts with the administration, just as in the majority of other universities. Student self-governance is represented by a structure which is an obedient hand of the administration, successfully imitating activity in the culture and entertainment sphere.

Analyzing the result we can come to a conclusion about faulty methodology of the research. However, the results would not change if we keep the condition that we study only student opinions. An objective situation can be reflected only by an independent research with such means as external observation, interviews of students and representatives of the administration, etc.

In our opinion, the reason for such results is the inner climate at the Academy of Public Administration, which is imbued with overall support to the principle of power vertical. The students of the Academy are the future officials, members of the state vertical. Thereafter, already on that stage the Academy does not encourage critical thinking and, even more so, free expression of opinion. The students of the Academy, just as of the other Minsk colleges, demonstrate passive attitude to

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the environment. In other words, the students do notice the existence of student newspapers but they don't know what the papers are writing about – “about some good things for sure”; student self-governance exists, but “it most probably helps students to solve their problems”, while “no one seems to violate students' rights”. Students' passivity and the dominating ideology of the “right course” result in good opinion of the students about their higher educational establishment.

The general picture of the universities covered by the research leaves much to be desired. Let's look into the details.

### **Efficacy of Students' Self-Governance**

Student self-government is a structure, created for representing and defending interests of students. For the research purposes we chose three indices of efficacy of the students' self-governance structure: democratic elections, activity, and students' opinion about its work.

The results of the research demonstrate that the majority of students do not know and are not interested in the way the students' self-government is elected. This is possible for a number of reasons. Firstly, in view of the current education system in Belarus, the majority of young people come to universities for anything but high quality education. They are not interested in having impact on university processes, as their main goal is to receive a diploma with minimal intellectual, nervous and physical efforts. Secondly, there are “conscious” students, who are well aware of “who calls the tune” and are not interested in activity of the students' self-governments.

The survey results demonstrate that the students think of the students' self-governance as of the body that deals with entertainment, and not with defending the rights of students and representing their interests. We believe the main factor that forms such an opinion is the basic principle of the Belarusian education system that is directly linked to the current political system – “you can do anything but politics”. In university environment that means an informal ban on the students' participation in solving the most important university problems, and, as a result, leaving the self-government in the sphere of culture and entertainment.

In the upshot, students rated their satisfaction with the work of students' self-government as 3.25 (out of 5). Students seem to be satisfied with the work of the students' self-governance. However, the need in real representation of the students' interests is not met.

### **Independence of Student Media**

The majority of student newspapers published in Minsk universities offer entertainment materials and cover university and faculty events. If they write about student problems, they write about some “general” things that do not apply to their university. Here we have the same vicious circle:

the newspapers are entertaining, because they can't write about the problems existing in a university; they can't write because of censorship; censorship means that no one even tries to write about relevant problems; if not writing about problems – then writing about something not dangerous.

As a whole, the respondents evaluated democratic nature and independence of student media as 2.57 points out of 5. We observe the same trend as with the student self-governance -- “they do something, and that's enough”. The newspapers satisfy some of the students' needs (to learn about culture activities in their university), but, as we see from the results of the study, this is not enough.

### **Guarantees of Basic Student Rights**

From the data of the survey we have grounds to suppose that about 37% of students are forced to perform different types of work by their college administration. The kinds of work most often performed by students are the so-called “subbotniks”, movement of furniture, cleaning rooms and windows, unloading trucks. University administrations use students' work in order to save money. However, we have also registered facts of students being forced to do community work (in the answers of the respondents we often read “we were sent to the works on reconstruction of the Opera Theater”). The practice of forcing students to do unpaid work, which exists from the Soviet times, is a serious violation of students' rights.

Over 50% of students do not believe in the possibility of replacing “inadequate” teachers. This is connected with the absence of real replacement mechanisms. Going back to the principle “a university is created for students”, we can say that the possibility to replace teachers is a good indicator of a democratic and student-friendly higher education establishment. Furthermore, this is a guarantee of the quality of education. How can one learn the material if a teacher responds to student's questions with anger and outrage? In such cases we need a working mechanism of replacing such teachers without loss for both students and teaching staff.

The majority of students who took part in the survey (83%) address dean's office for solution of their problems, as the body where they can receive most effective support. This way, student organizations are far behind dean's offices as the structures that are supposed to assist students. That is so for a number of reasons: students do not believe that students' organizations can actually help them; student organizations do not demonstrate their capabilities; furthermore, student organizations are really unable to help and solve the problems.

On the basis of the research data we come to conclusion that students do not enjoy full rights as participants of the education process in Belarusian universities. The system that has been formed for many years treats students as ordinary consumers, whose opinion is not important, and whose rights can be violated. The state ideology that imbues the whole education system leaves small chances for

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development of critical thinking, making a student a powerless creature fed with “entertainment slops”. That entails certain attitude on the students’ side – young people come to higher educational establishments only to get their diplomas, while their main task is to obtain them with maximum fun and minimum efforts.

We believe the students rights should not be violated under any circumstances. That presumes certain efforts from both the administration (not to violate the rights) and the students’ self-governments (to defend the rights). University administration should hire paid staff for doing various jobs within campuses, or use students’ work on the voluntary basis. Universities should introduce mechanisms of receiving feedback from the students about their satisfaction with the education process and of real students’ control over teachers’ work.

### Recommendations

Student media should be able and know how to write about student problems, about concrete situations of violation of basic student rights (such as freedom of speech, freedom of opinion, freedom of association, etc.) This will help to solve these problems in a constructive manner. The main step

towards solution of the problem would be for university administration to stop all sanctions against student newspapers that cover such situations. In their turn, student media should not be afraid of writing about the problems, and stop filling all the paper space with fun stuff.

For the process of change to begin, administration of higher educational establishments should change their attitude to students – they should treat students as full members of the educational process, important for efficacy and quality of the education system. Students’ opinion should be taken into account in as many spheres as possible.

In their turn, the bodies of student self-governance should make efforts to implement changes, reviewing their priorities and activities. Change of the election procedure for the students’ self-governance should become a top priority. Self-governance bodies should be elected in an open, public and democratic election. Then the changes should occur in everyday activity of the students’ self-government. That does not mean that all fun activities should be abandoned as a whole. That means, the student self-governments should give the main priority to defending the rights of students, representing their interests, and helping them in finding solutions to their problems.

**Opinion expressed by the authors of “Bell” does not necessarily correspond with that of the Eastern Europe Studies Centre.**



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