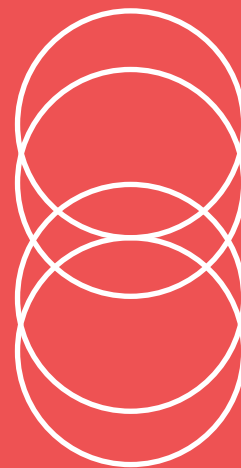# Belarusian education on the way of change
Summary

BELARUSIAN EDUCATIONAL INITIATIVES: MAP OF INTERACTIONS

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ОФИС ПО ОБРАЗОВАНИЮ
Для новой Беларуси

The events of late 2020 - early 2021 have witnessed that different working and social groups in Belarus have been demonstrating different degrees of consolidated actions and mutual trust. For instance, t*eachers' and lecturers' communities have merged to some extent and have implemented separate initiatives, yet, these have not become engines of change. This study is aimed at identifying the causes for this situation* through:

∬ description of the peculiarities of Belarusian educational initiatives interaction, visualizing the map of interrelations;

∬ assessment of the initiatives' interconnection, the density of linkages;

∬ identifying real leaders among educational organizations;

∬ identifying unoccupied niches and areas of educational development needed to be elaborated by the educational initiatives.

Within the framework of the study, 64 representatives of various educational initiatives and organizations were interviewed, and a map of their interaction was created based on these data. In total, 256 educational organizations in Belarus were reviewed.

By the social network analysis method, the links between the most active organizations were analyzed and visualized. This allowed to identify leaders among the educational organizations, to assess the degree of connectivity, to analyze the links between educational initiatives from different regions and their areas of activity. In addition, the initiatives representatives expressed their views on what is missing for the further Belarusian education development and the initiatives, in particular

The results of the study allowed to draw the following conclusions:

∑ *Although there are quite few initiatives, the majority of them have reciprocal projects with other initiatives.*

All respondents indicated that they have working relationships with other educational initiatives and projects. The map of strong interrelationships, which represents 45 respondents out of 64 (70%), confirms that these connections do really exist, as they are noted by the both parties. The isolates include, primarily, those organizations that are likely to deal with educational projects indirectly.

∑ *Sustainable initiative groups are quite few.*

There is a relatively big number of bilateral links, but the initiatives do not tend to merge into larger working groups, where everyone interacts with everyone. There were only 5 stable triads in the whole network (being combined into four communities).

Only 13 organizations (20%) have simelian (triad) connections. There was no community of initiatives spotted in which four or more initiatives would have ties of everyone with everyone.

∑ *Interactions do exist, but they lack team work and unity.*

Triads and larger interrelationship structures are considered to be the foundation for the formation of social capital (a sustainable network of relationships based on mutual trust and achievement of common goals). In the economy, in relation to population, social capital is directly associated with increased opportunities for economic growth. In education management (e.g. in secondary education) high social capital of teachers is associated with improving the quality of education. It is possible to put forward a hypothesis that the same trends will be true for educational organizations and initiatives. The higher the social capital inherent in this system is, the greater the increase in efficiency can be expected in the activities of the entire educational system.

∑ *The most developed direction is systematic support of teachers.*

This can be explained by the fact that the target audience is quite wide. Besides, a part of teachers has a request for knowledge, interaction. At the same time, indirect data on these initiatives indicate that so far this is a fairly small number of teachers (for example, the number of subscribers in social networks, alerts usually does not reach 2 thousand

people with a total number of teachers of about 100 thousand people). In other words, teachers' initiatives are the most notable among others, but they also affect no more than 2-3% of "passionate teachers" within the entire teaching field.
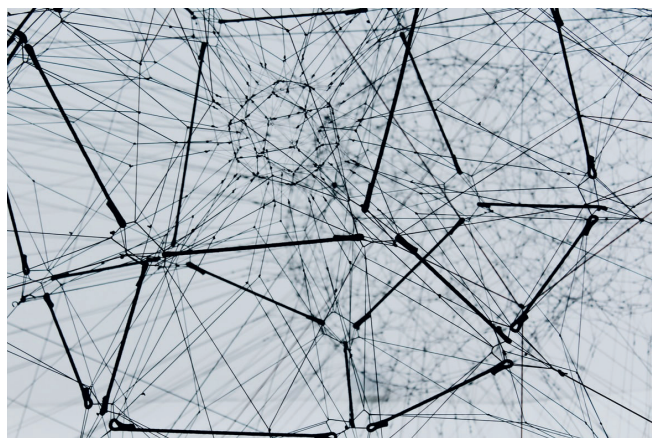
Photography Unsplash

∬ *In spite of the extensive network, there are very few organizations in each category.*

Certain initiatives noted in the interview, "We would like not only us to deal with this issue, but other initiatives to appear in this area, as well." Notional "competition of ideas" exists only in secondary education sphere (for example, systematic support of teachers), partly - in educational projects (mainly, in the field of culture). However, even these areas are not fully occupied, as evidenced, for example, by the low coverage of teachers by alternative methodological initiatives (no more than 3% of teachers). It is also a common respondent response that cultural initiatives are still lacking, as well as there's shortage of education in niches where there

were mapped nominally 1-2 organizations (in political rights, citizenship, legal literacy, equality, etc.).

∬ *Certain areas of education are hardly represented.*

The map reflects no initiative working, for example, in the field of preschool education. At the same time, hardly any concern about this was voiced by the actors (specifically about preschool education). At the same time, international studies emphasize the significant role of early education in successful further learning. Higher education is modestly represented (only few student initiatives and a think tank). This may be partly due to the peculiarities of the research methodology, when not all the possible organizations are being mapped. On the other hand, it may indicate the isolation of educators, in-depth vision of their specific context without seeing a broad perspective, strategy.

∬ *Most organizations and initiatives are concentrated in Minsk.*

Regional initiatives are an order of magnitude less, districts-based initiatives can be considered an exception. The conclusion that there are far fewer initiatives in region and in district towns is not a new one: a previous research has demonstrated this. However, the problem seems to be that, despite the small number of organizations, they often remain isolated. An active working group of initiatives may have been spotted in Hrodna, but the rest of the regional initiatives are isolated. Partly, this can be explained by

the fact that in a particular area there may be no organizations with a similar educational agenda, whilst the links with other regions haven't been established. The limited character of the study should be highlighted once again as isolated regional initiatives may remain outside the scope of the analysis.

∬ *Educators quite unanimously identify the items described above as challenges.*

On the one hand, there were many responses that educational initiatives are now quite few (i.e. this landscape of actors may be denser), especially outside the capital. On the other hand, the need to facilitate interactions, to build communication between different initiatives was identified. An important direction is the development of infrastructure for the "cultivation" and "adaptation" of educational initiatives: from accelerators, hubs, consultants to research centers and think-tanks. Initiatives develop spontaneously. Very rarely these determine the existence of each other as there is no relevant legal field, the demand from society, the involvement of teachers and representatives of other fields of activity. Simply put, there is no awareness that this is possible at all, and thus willingness to take part of the responsibility for the educational landscape.

∬ *Originally non-educational organizations have occupied a significant space among educational initiatives.*

The leaders on the map of interaction are represented by many organizations that don't register educational activities as their major ones. For example, these were mapped human rights, environmental, socially-oriented communities, which, in addition to the main activities, organize educational projects.

∬ *The structure of interactions is quite dynamic.*

Although the foundation of the interactions is an NGO community that has existed for at least a decade, new organizations can quite often become central in network interactions. This is evidenced by the fact that among the top 10 influential initiatives, four of them are relatively recent. For example, the growing role of private schools can be noted, which actively interact with each other and at the same time remain incorporated in the methodological community of various types of organizations.

∬ *Based on the year of their foundation, three waves of initiatives can be identified.*

The most mature initiatives have existed since the 1990s (there are not many of them, and they are usually NGOs with several areas of activity); another wave of initiatives has emerged during the period of relative liberalization in 2011 and a little later (these can be referred to as the "basis"), and there are new initiatives (aged less than 3-5 years). The new initiatives behave differently: one part merges into a common community, the other forms small communities in their field of activity that are indirectly linked to the common group.

∑ *The initiatives representatives show a high level of awareness of education challenges.*

According to the responses, 12 directions of educational projects development were identified. Almost every response was reflected in different forms at least three times. High demand can be seen in the direction of educational research, reflection and analytics. Another major area of improvement is working on the content of educational projects: more modern, "painful" for society, focused on specific groups, interdisciplinary educational, illumination projects.