



Funded by
the European Union



NAVIGATING CHANGE: AN ANALYTICAL REVIEW OF EDUCATIONAL REFORM DEVELOPMENTS AND DISCOURSES IN BELARUS (2020-2023)

Andrei Lavruhin (Author)
NN (Author)
Marianne Sakalova
(Lead editorial
contributor)

Vilnius, 2023

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Summary	1
Introduction	3
Chapter I. <i>Sectoral Research Analysis</i>	5
§ 1. Actors and Subjects. Who Studies Belarusian Education?	
§ 2. What Do We Know about Education?	
Conclusions	
Chapter II. <i>Governmental Programs: Policy Ambitions vs. Ground Realities</i>	12
§ 1. Strategic Objectives and Principles: Declarations of Intent vs Reality	
§ 2. Management System	
§ 3. Financing System	
Conclusions	
References	
Chapter III. <i>Comparative Study of Governmental and Civil Society Reform Discourses</i>	21
§1. Review of the Official Discourse	
§ 2. Review of the Unofficial Discourse	
Conclusions	
References	
Chapter IV. <i>Rise of Non-Formal Education Initiatives Post-2020</i>	42
§ 1. Goals and Vision	
§ 2. Attitude to the Reform Projects and Proposals	
§ 3 Political Agency	
Conclusions	
Chapter V. <i>Public Discussions on Educational Reform</i>	49
§ 1. Recurrent Topics in September 2020 - February 2022	
§ 2. Recurrent Topics in March 2022 - July 2023	
§ 3. Recurrent Topics and Reform Projects: Overlapping and Diverging Issues	
Conclusions	
<i>Final thoughts</i>	63
Appendix. List of Regulatory Documents	70

SUMMARY

This paper, prepared within the framework of the project “VASMINOCH: EDUCATION FOR BELARUSIAN CHILDREN TODAY AND TOMORROW”, presents an in-depth exploration of the Belarusian education system's transformative journey from 2020 to 2023 against a backdrop of political unrest and the quest for democratic evolution. It intricately weaves through the complex changes in educational policies, practices, and perspectives during this tumultuous period.

Chapter I, “Sectoral Research Analysis (2020-2023),” unravels the fragmented state of educational research in Belarus, marked by a lack of centralized coordination and resulting in scattered and often incomplete data.

Chapter II, “Governmental Programs: Policy Ambitions vs. Ground Realities” (2020-2023), critically assesses the disconnect between ambitious strategic goals set in official documents and the actual practices within the education system.

Chapter III, “Comparative Study of Reform Discourses (2020-2023)” juxtaposes government reform narratives with those from civic groups and political parties, highlighting the stark differences in their approaches to educational reform.

Chapter IV, “Rise of Non-Formal Education Initiatives Post-2020” sheds light on the burgeoning non-formal education sector, evaluating their goals, adaptation strategies, and perspectives on potential democratic shifts.

Chapter V, “Public Discussions on Educational Reform” presents overlapping and diverging issues in educational reform discourses.

This paper not only chronicles the significant period of change in Belarusian education but also proposes a path forward, emphasizing research, dialogue, and strategic planning as essential components for shaping a more democratic and effective educational system. To address the challenges and capitalize on the opportunities within the sector, civil society can pursue several growth opportunities:

1. *Strengthening research infrastructure:* developing databases, libraries, and online platforms will empower researchers to conduct more thorough and sophisticated studies.
2. *Enhancing accessibility and dissemination of research and policy analysis:* making valuable findings more widely available is critical *for impacting policy and public opinion.*
3. *Improving visibility of educational research and policy analysis:* utilizing centralized publication platforms can *increase the influence of research on educational policy and practice.*
4. *Developing training and support for researchers: elevating the quality and depth of educational research* through specialized training programs.

5. *Building networks among educational initiatives*: facilitating resource sharing, expertise exchange, and best practices *to foster unified visions and collective action*.
6. *Implementing capacity-building programs*: enhancing the understanding and engagement of initiatives in educational reforms, *covering areas like policy analysis and advocacy*.
7. *Establishing forums for regular interaction*: *creating platforms for initiative representatives to meet, discuss, and align their goals*, promoting proactive involvement.
8. *Supporting research and development*: *aiding initiatives to become influencers in the educational reform process*, bridging knowledge gaps in reform project contents.
9. *Increasing visibility through media and public events*: drawing public attention and support *to amplify the influence of these initiatives*.
10. *Establishing international partnerships*: *providing new perspectives and methodologies adaptable to Belarusian civic actors* through collaboration with global educational organizations and experts.
11. *Developing advocacy strategies*: *empowering initiatives to communicate their goals* and influence educational policies effectively.
12. *Encouraging initiative and leadership*: motivating leaders within these initiatives *to initiate dialogues and collaborations* for a more dynamic reform movement.
13. *Collaborating with policy experts and consultants*: leveraging expert knowledge *to develop structured and implementable reform plans*.
14. *Grounding proposals in research*: using case studies and best practices from other educational systems *to formulate viable strategies*.
15. *Involving stakeholders in planning*: *ensuring proposals are comprehensive and responsive* to diverse needs.
16. Adapting successful educational reform models: learning from international models to provide actionable strategies for Belarus.
17. *Implementing pilot projects*: using small-scale initiatives as *testbeds for more significant reforms*.
18. *Developing clear roadmaps*: *outlining pragmatic implementation strategies*, resource allocation, and timelines.
19. *Establishing review and feedback mechanisms*: ensuring *reforms stay on track and are adaptable*.
20. *Addressing underrepresented topics*: *enriching the reform discourse* by focusing on areas like the interplay between education and politics and the global context of Belarus' educational system.
21. *Establishing an independent educational policy think tank*: this becomes a pivotal necessity in the current context serving as a *hub for research, policy development, advocacy, public engagement, and international collaboration*, this think tank will be instrumental in steering comprehensive reform of the Belarusian education system. It will address challenges like increased control, militarization, and isolation while aligning with democratic principles and the reevaluation of educational goals

INTRODUCTION

This paper, prepared within the framework of the project “VASMNOCH: EDUCATION FOR BELARUSIAN CHILDREN TODAY AND TOMORROW”, undertakes a comprehensive analysis of the Belarusian education discourse from 2020 to 2023, a period characterized by turbulent events and the sustained efforts of democratic forces to prepare for and adapt to impending changes in the country. The educational landscape during this time was not only a reflection of the socio-political upheavals and adaptation to the changing circumstances but also a field of democratic actors’ reform initiatives

In this context, the proposed analysis aims to dissect the multifaceted nature of educational discourse in Belarus, exploring how it has evolved. The paper is structured into five critical chapters, each focusing on distinct aspects of this evolution and the diverse responses it has elicited.

Chapter I, *"Sectoral Research Analysis,"* delves into the research conducted during this period. It examines who has been studying the Belarusian education system and synthesizes their key findings, offering a foundational understanding of the current state of education in Belarus.

Chapter II, *"Governmental Programs: Policy Ambitions vs. Ground Realities,"* scrutinizes the strategic objectives and principles outlined in official documents. This chapter critically assesses the alignment between the stated intentions and the realities of the management and financing systems within the educational sector.

Chapter III, *"Comparative Study of Governmental and Civil Society Reform Discourses,"* contrasts official and unofficial narratives surrounding educational reforms. This exploration provides a balanced view of the reform discourse, highlighting both the aspirations and the challenges inherent in these transformation efforts.

In Chapter IV, *"Rise of Non-Formal Education Initiatives Post-2020,"* we turn our attention to the burgeoning sector of non-formal education. This chapter evaluates the

goals, visions, and political agency of these entities, thereby illuminating their significant role in shaping the educational landscape amidst ongoing reforms.

Finally, *Chapter V, "Public Discussions on Educational Reform,"* analyzes the recurrent themes in public discussions related to education reform from September 2020 to July 2023. This chapter aims to capture the pulse of public opinion, identifying key areas of consensus and contention in the discourse on educational change.

Overall, this paper seeks to provide an insightful and balanced analysis of the Belarusian education discourse during this critical period. It is intended as a valuable resource for policymakers, educators, students, and researchers interested in the intricacies of educational reform and discourse in Belarus, and for all friends of Belarusian democracy in general.

CHAPTER I. SECTORAL RESEARCH ANALYSIS

The educational research landscape in Belarus is characterized by its non-systemic nature, lack of strategic objectives, and limited access to comprehensive data. Governmental control over education research, particularly quantitative studies, poses a significant challenge. Key sectors like pre-school, vocational, secondary special, and adult education remain largely ignored by researchers. Additionally, dedicated think tanks are absent to synthesize research data and drive public discourse. Overall, the fragmented and restricted nature of educational research in Belarus hinders a comprehensive understanding of the system's dynamics and challenges.

Belarus has no earmarked institution to specialize directly in overall educational research and to enjoy a stable reputation as a reliable data source. The data related to the educational system in Belarus are of an insufficiently accurate nature but tend to be probabilistic and fragmentary. The educational research is conducted by various actors, such as governmental and non-governmental organizations, registered initiatives, or independent researchers. This part contains a review of the significant Belarusian educational research efforts carried out between 2020 and 2023.

§ 1. ACTORS AND SUBJECTS. WHO STUDIES THE BELARUSIAN EDUCATION?

Government institutions

Every year, Belarus allocates some funding to cover applied research in its draft educational budgets [1]. For example, the 2022 budget included BYN 9.7 m (or approximately USD 3.8 m under the exchange rate as of the year beginning). However, no specific research institutions or areas were indicated.

The core information on the Belarusian *secondary education* status is published within the framework of the National Knowledge Checks Monitoring [2] with the *National Institute of Education*. For example, it analyses the findings of the research carried out into the knowledge and competencies in reading and understanding texts [3],

mathematics [4], history, biology, etc. The same institution was also responsible for the PISA-2018 data analysis [5]. After 2018, the PISA research in Belarus was discontinued; yet, in 2023, plans came underway to launch the National Education Quality Research, which is primarily built on the methodological foundations of the previous PISA research and looks into the pupils' reading, mathematical, natural history and financial literacy [6].

Partial analytics on the school leavers' competencies is published by the National Institute for Knowledge Checks based on the centralized examination analysis findings [7].

There are several journals that publish some education data. For example, *Вестник адукацыі (The Education Herald)* [8], *Адукацыя і выхаванне (The Education and Upbringing)*, as well as some specialized school subject-related publications; for example, *Фізіка (The Physics)*, *Пачатковая школа (The Primary School)*, etc., but their research-based materials are instead exceptions.

International organizations

A certain amount of research and monitoring is conducted by international organizations, such as UNICEF [9], UNESCO, or the World Bank. Typically, these are analytical documents published within the framework of broader social projects or monitoring exercises (for example, analyses of the Sustainable Development Goals implementation). The World Bank study provides information on the vocational education status in Belarus [10]. The visible post-2020 trend is toward an international research project disappearance.

Think tanks

Just a few Belarusian think tanks out of several dozens of them [11] specialize in education [12]. The overwhelming majority of these entities treat educational research as a lateral activity when education is perceived as an economic or political interest domain. For example:

- In 2019 and 2020, the BEROE Economic Research Centre [13] conducted its research mainly in the higher education area (a university performance analysis or an “entrepreneurial university” model) or in educational economics (interrelation between a domicile income and its educational mobility).
- The EAST Centre has presented an insight into the government’s reaction to COVID-19 in 2021. [14]
- The Centre for New Ideas has conducted research on the attitudes among the protesting population groups to the educational system [15].

Civic educational initiatives and organizations

A number of analytical documents on life-long education, inclusive education, digitalization, or educational policies were prepared within the framework of the programme *Belarusian Education on the Way to Transformations* [16]. Additionally, empirical studies were carried out examining the focus of educational experts on specific reform areas [17] and the interaction patterns of educational initiatives [18]. The Office of Education for a New Belarus has analyzed the implementation status of the Bologna system in the higher education sector, as well as drafted some proposals to prepare reforms towards de-ideologization and de-bureaucratization of all the educational stages [19].

The public platform *A New Belarus. Reforms for the Sake of the People* has provided a diagnostic assessment of the problems and presented some blueprints for reforms at all levels of the Belarusian educational system [20].

The higher education research is mainly conducted by the *Public Bologna Committee (PBC)*, which had prepared prior to 2020 two White Books on the European development prospects for Belarusian higher education [21], as well as performed monitoring of the Bologna Process Roadmap implementation. After 2020, the PBC research activity intensity has ground to a halt. Some analytical materials, though, were prepared in 2022 (for example, “Life-Long Learning and Social Dimension of Higher Education Following the 2021 Results”).

In 2021, *the Institute for Development and Social Market* launched its "Reforming Education Together" campaign [22]. The following year, in 2022, the institute undertook a study titled "Reforming the Belarusian Educational System: Towards Expanding Institutional Autonomy and Development of Self-Government in Educational Establishments." Additionally, it developed a comprehensive map for Belarusian education reform. *The DVV International* organization was engaged in studies of non-formal (*dopolnitel'noe*) education and its management or funding features [23].

The Belarusian Helsinki Committee (BHC) has been involved since 2019 in its annual monitoring of enjoying the human right to education within the framework of the project National Human Rights Index in Belarus [24].

Studies by independent experts

A part of the Belarusian education studies is conducted by individual researchers at their own instance or with external support, but with no affiliation to any specific organizations or initiatives. The following studies can be quoted as examples: Monitoring and Assessment of School Education in Belarus [25]; Conclusions and Advice Following the PISA Results [26]; Research into the Teachers' Problems and Delights [27]; Focus Group Dedicated to the Belarusian Education Management Challenges; and Analysis into the Educational Organisations in Belarus [28]. The advantage of such studies is that they tend to address a specific task or analyze a certain situation. Their disadvantage is that they are fragmented and unsystematic, which is a barrier to reaching target groups.

§ 2. WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT EDUCATION?

Secondary Education

The PISA-2018 research [29] and the findings of the national monitoring practices, which are based on the international measurable tools (for example, PIRLS, a reader literacy monitoring) provide evidence that on average the Belarusian education quality has an intermediate level, neither a higher or lower one than to be expected of a country with an appropriate economic development and education expenditure levels. That being said, the public research findings interpretations vary greatly: from a highly positive assessment by the Ministry of Education to harshly negative interpretations in

the non-government media. Its major failures to be quoted are a low formation level of critical thinking or inability to make independent judgments and express a well-reasoned opinion, even among highly educated pupils.

Speaking about a subjective attitude among various stakeholders, they may be generalized at the “average” or “satisfactory” evaluation levels. For example, protest-oriented audiences, albeit having a negative attitude toward the educational system, by and large, tend to assess individual academic levels as satisfactory ones [30]. The same lenient assessments can also be seen in the school education monitoring and evaluation findings: despite certain deficiencies or dissatisfaction, most teachers and pupils, when making their assessments, tend to name average parameters. That being said, the pupils demonstrate a demand for more freedom in the educational process provisions [31].

Higher education

In 2020 through 2023, the sector’s studies are much less numerous than in the previous period, prior to 2020, or even than the 2020 to 2023 secondary education research. The latest higher education studies point to an increased repression intensity and academic emigration [32]. The PBC keeps track of the repressions in higher education and indicates a considerable deterioration in academic freedoms [33]. The BHC records in its monitoring a stable situation worsening with the citizens’ rights to higher education under most parameters or indicators [34]. The educational sector’s negative dynamic patterns may be traced to some indirect factors. For example, under a lower student enrolment or under a mass-scale prospective university student emigration to other countries. Nonetheless, there are some proposals and analytical documents appearing on the higher education system reforms [35].

Vocational education

Vocational Education in Belarus is the least studied and little-known one to the public at large. Very infrequent international studies specify vocational education inefficiency, primarily in terms of the correlation between the resources spent and the growth in economic and human capital as an outcome of education [36]. The major challenges faced are as follows: the vocational training establishment ghettoization,

since they enrol the least motivated students; accordingly, a low teacher motivation; vocational curriculum estrangement from the actual labor market; lack of specialist equipment; etc. The platform A New Belarus. Reforms for the Sake of the People presents some reviews of the general situation, challenges, or possible solutions in vocational [37] and secondary special [38] education. The BHC tracks on an annual basis the deteriorating rights to education in the sector [39].

Pre-school and non-formal (*dopolnitel'noe*) adult education

Pre-school and non-formal (*dopolnitel'noe*) adult education remain a terra incognita as far as research is concerned. There are just some official data available, for example, on the preschool education coverage – it is one of the region's highest in Belarus, with almost 90 p.c. [40] for children aged between 1 and 6 years. Yet, the education quality and efficacy remain unstudied. Materials published by the Office of Education for a New Belarus on possible reform focus areas for this educational sector [41], as well as the BHC monitoring findings [42], are available in the public domain.

Non-formal (*dopolnitel'noe*) adult education in Belarus covers less than 15% of the persons between 25 and 64 years of age, against 50 or 60 % in Europe or the USA, which is a testimony of a very low focus put on the educational level both on behalf of the government and the non-governmental actors.

CONCLUSIONS

The following weaknesses could be identified in the educational research:

- There is no information available for an analysis of the educational system's dynamic patterns. Most studies have a one-time-only nature, with the longitudinal methods being hardly widespread.
- There is a certain amount of monitoring studies available that governmental institutions have conducted. Yet, their baseline data are restricted and private, contrary to the principles of international research of the PISA sort, which does not enable any external researchers or civil society to get additional ideas or findings based on the already collected anonymized data.

- The research conducted remains non-systemic and had an acute shortage of longitudinal studies, which alone allow us to understand the main trends in the education system of Belarus. There is also lack of studies featuring strategic objectives to analyze phenomena in a multifaceted manner and under a variational methodology to present their findings to non-specialist audiences or to track changes. Partially, it is only the national education quality monitoring data that meets these criteria, although access to it remains restricted and private. In addition to that the monitoring is not regular.
- The government, in fact, exercises a monopoly on education research, particularly in the case of a quantitative methodology, because there is no possibility to collect representative samples. Researchers and scholars encounter persecution, which does not enable sustainable research activities.
- The bulk of the research is dedicated to secondary and higher education; that being said, some of the sectors, for example, pre-school, vocational, secondary special, and additional adult education, almost in their entirety fail to be targeted by researcher interests.
- There are no think tanks to generalize the research data, track new papers, organize public discussions, set the directions of other scientific research, or crystallize around them the expertise generated by the Belarusian researchers who would like to work in the area of education.
- The research findings are poorly presented in the public space and in specialized publications.

CHAPTER II. GOVERNMENTAL PROGRAMS: POLICY AMBITIONS VS. GROUND REALITIES

The analysis of official program documents from 2020 to 2023 reveals a significant gap between the declared strategic intentions, operational documents, and the actual practices in the Belarusian education system. While the strategic documents promise a modern, inclusive, and internationally aligned education system, the operational records and realities reflect increased governmental control, isolation, and a deviation from democratic educational principles. This discrepancy underscores the need for reform and a realignment of Belarusian educational policies and practices with the stated strategic goals to ensure a more democratic, open, and effective educational system.

From 2020 through 2023, the Belarusian government authorities have adopted several dozen legal and regulatory documents in the area of education.¹ These may be tentatively subdivided into two groups:

1. The programmatic documents declare the objectives, principles, or citizens' rights and freedoms, which, by and large, are in tune with their analogs in the modern democratic developed nations in the world. The only exceptions from the rule are represented by a few topics: regulations on the vertical education system management model, institutional autonomy deficiency, lack of academic freedoms, and misrepresentation of the education humanization idea as a public ideological influence/indoctrination tool.
2. Documents of an operational/momentary significance are dominated by the trends towards strengthening a rigidity of the vertical, authoritarian, and personalist governance system; preservation and growth of budget funding; restriction of institutional autonomy; academic freedom

¹ Please, refer to Appendix 1. List of Legal Regulatory Documents.

cancellation; and reinforcement of the ideological indoctrination and harsh governmental supervision at the macro-level (school, college or university), as well as at the micro-level (a teacher's work in a classroom).

This section of the paper concentrates on the first category of documents. Within this group, we highlight two key framework documents characterized by their comprehensive and long-term approach: "The Development Concept of the Republic of Belarus Educational System till 2030" (2021), henceforth referred to as "the Concept," and "The Code of Education" (2022), hereinafter referred to as "the Code."

Simultaneously, we continue to emphasize documents of operational significance, which typically function in legitimizing the spontaneous practices preceding political decision-making. This approach allows for the identification of both discrepancies and areas of agreement between the two types of documents. This section of the paper addresses three principal themes: strategic objectives and principles, the financing system, and the management system.

§ 1. STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES AND PRINCIPLES: DECLARATIONS OF INTENT VS REALITY

The original strategic goal behind the Concept is to develop the educational system as a vital institution in the formation of a knowledge society and the creation of an innovative economy. Accordingly, the educational system development provides for its permanent updating:

"Society needs educated, moral, entrepreneurial and competent persons with the ability to make independently responsible decisions in a situation of choice while forecasting the decisions' possible aftermath, who are capable of selecting collaboration modalities. They must be characterized by mobility, dynamic nature, and constructive attitudes, as well as have a developed sense of responsibility for their own destiny and that of their country."

The Concept positions the Belarusian educational system as part of the international educational space and declares (a) supporting the world trends in the sphere of education and (b) an efficient experience sharing (Art. 2). Yet, at the level of practice and “tactical” legal regulatory documents for the last three years the authorities have meticulously isolated themselves from the world educational space. Here are a few examples:

- the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) has suspended Belarus’ membership in the Bologna process.
- Belarus has terminated on a unilateral basis its agreement with Poland on the recognizing equivalence of higher education and academic degrees in science and arts (Resolution by the Republic of Belarus Council of Ministers of 25.10.2022 No. 728).
- Belarus has amended the Law On Military Conscription and Military Service to abrogate draft deferment for Belarusians who study abroad (15.05.2023 No. 268-3).

It should be noted that the number of students undergoing training abroad under the training assignment issued by the Belarusian authorities under the framework of state programs is insignificant (for example, from 2011 through 2015, these were 20 graduates or 0.03% of the total) (The White Book, Art. 260). At least 4,000 persons go to study abroad on an annual basis beyond the frameworks of any state programs. Attempts to compensate for the self-isolation from the developed democratic countries by cooperation with exotic African nations bear a symbolic nature (the Belarusian higher educational establishments train 11 Zimbabwean nationals) and do not correspond to the strategic objectives declared.

The chief beneficiary of the present-day isolation of Belarus is the Russian Federation. According to the data provided by the *Rosstrudnichestvo* (Russian Government Agency for Foreigners’ Education), the number of places under the Russian Federation government quotas for Belarusians to study at the budget cost went up from 73 in 2019 to 1,300 in 2023 (approximately another 1,000 persons pay fees to study).

As of March 2023, the Russian Federation's higher educational establishments had been training more than 12.5 thousand Belarusian nationals.

Likewise, the Concept and the Code declare their adherence to the UN Sustainable Development Goals, for example, to goal 4, or life-long education for all (Art. 2). Another such goal is education humanisation and *humanitarisation* (*gumanitarizatsia*). In its turn, *humanitarisation* is conceived in the programmatic documents as a consistency of the educational and upbringing practices. Another development trend in foreign education is learning and upbringing integrity. Such education's specific trait is *humanitarisation* devised to form spirituality, culture, and holistic development in all aspects of a personality

Yet, in practical terms, upbringing is understood to mean an indoctrination process by the totalitarian state ideology. Upbringing is performed at the educational establishments of all levels (from the preschool to the higher on) and finds its legislative consolidation in the key programmatic documents, such as the Code or the Concept, as well as in the 2022 to 2025 Programme of the Republic of Belarus Population's Patriotic Upbringing (referred to hereinafter as the Programme) (Resolution by the Republic of Belarus Council of Ministers No. 773 of 29.11.2021). Thus, the new revision of the Code names as a primary upbringing objective "*the formation of civic-mindedness, patriotism and national self-consciousness based on the state ideology*" (Art. 17, Section 2.1). Under this definition, where the state exerts total dominance over society and maintains absolute oversight of its citizens' lives and activities, unity of interests necessitates the complete alignment of individual citizens' interests with those of the state apparatus.

To achieve these goals and objectives, an ear-marked body was set up, the National Interdepartmental Coordination Council for Patriotic Upbringing of the Population (please refer to Resolution by the Republic of Belarus Council of Ministers No. 773 of 29.12.2021).

§ 2. MANAGEMENT SYSTEM

The contents of the Code and the Concept suggest that a principal aim of state policy is to establish an unequivocal dominance of government management over public management (as referenced in the Concept, Chapter 3, and the Code, Article 2, Section 1.9). The management system described therein is characterized by a vertically structured, personalist approach. Notably, the latest revision of the Code omits any mention of autonomy and, consequently, excludes all legal norms associated with it.

The management system is declared to be *“built on a combination of the undivided authority and self-government principles”* (the Code, Art. 21, Section 1). Yet, the councils, the main self-government body at all the educational establishments in Belarus *“shall be headed by the education institution’s leader”* (the Code, Art. 24, Section 4). The whole vertical managerial structure ends up with the Republic of Belarus president, who enjoys complete power and control over the educational system, which can be expressed using the following wording often comes across in the Code: *“unless otherwise specified by the President of the Republic of Belarus.”*

§ 3. FINANCING SYSTEM

The core programmatic documents declare equal protection of the citizens’ rights to get a free education within the framework of state financing or on a privately paid basis. Yet, in reality, the right is only implemented at a minimum level. A mass-scale closure of private schools for political reasons in 2021 and 2022 has determined an absolute domination of the state sector in compulsory secondary education; out of 1.07 m pupils, a mere 2.7 thousand, or 0.25%, attended private schools. All the vocational education institutions are state-owned. At the secondary special education level, 13 private establishments (5.8 % of their total number) train 10.3 thousand persons (9 %). The private institution share in the higher education is 17.6%. with a 6.3% student share. At the same time, the government's higher education sector is greatly commercialized: about 50% of the students pay fees to study.

To enhance oversight of the career paths of school leavers and graduates from higher education institutions in the country, there has been a significant increase in the

proportion of contract and state-funded students over the past three years. In certain medical fields, the share of contract students has risen to 80%, and in agricultural majors, it has reached 70%.

CONCLUSIONS

The analysis of official program documents related to the Belarusian education system from 2020 to 2023 reveals a significant gap between the stated strategic objectives, operational documents and the actual implementation of these policies. While programmatic documents like *The Development Concept of the Belarusian Educational System till 2030* and *The Code of Education* propose ambitious goals aligning with global educational trends and UN Sustainable Development Goals, operational documents and practical realities demonstrate a stark contrast.

The Belarusian government's strategic documents express intentions to develop an innovative, knowledge-based society. However, the operational realities are marred by self-isolation from the global educational community, evident in the suspension of Belarus' membership in the Bologna process and the unilateral termination of international educational agreements. This isolation is further accentuated by the country's growing educational alignment with the Russian Federation, as seen in the increased quotas for Belarusian students in Russian universities.

The Concept's goal of humanizing education is contradicted by the practical application of these principles, where upbringing is often synonymous with state ideological indoctrination. This is reflected in the legislative frameworks and programs like the *2022 to 2025 Programme of the Republic of Belarus Population's Patriotic Upbringing*, which prioritizes state ideology over holistic educational development.

The management system, as outlined in the Code and the Concept, is heavily centralized and personalist, lacking in institutional autonomy and self-governance. The vertical structure culminates in the overarching authority of the President, undermining the principles of democratic and participative management in education.

Finally, the financing system, while declaring equal access to education, reveals a stark reality of state domination and commercialization in education sectors. The

closure of private schools and the increasing commercialization of higher education underscore the challenges in achieving equitable and inclusive education.

The analysis of the 2020 to 2023 official program documents in Belarus' education sector exposes a dissonance between declared intentions and actual practices, with systemic issues in governance, financing, and alignment with global educational standards. This underscores the need for a critical re-evaluation of the policies and their implementation to bridge the gap between strategic goals and practical realities.

REFERENCES

- [1] Draft [2022 Budget](#)
- [2] A page in the [National Knowledge Checks Monitoring](#).
- [3] Findings of the [Text Reading and Understanding Monitoring](#).
- [4] Findings of the [Mathematics Monitoring](#).
- [5] International Comparative Education Quality Survey ([Report on Belarus](#)).
- [6] Description of the [National Knowledge Checks Monitoring](#).
- [7] Publications of the [National Knowledge Checks Institute](#).
- [8] Journals: «[Веснік адукацыі](#)» and «[Адукацыя і выхаванне](#)» (The Education Herald and The Education and Upbringing).
- [9] Research-based [UNICEF publications](#).
- [10] Publication [A diagnostic and Policy Options for the Vocational Education and Training System in Belarus](#).
- [11] Enumerated on the [thinktanks.by page](#).
- [12] For example, the Public Bologna Committee: <https://bolognaby.org>.
- [13] Publications by [BEROC on education](#).
- [14] Research [Belarus' Response to Covid-19 in the Education Sector](#).

[15] Research [How the Belarusian Educational System is Assessed by the Protest-Prone Belarusians.](#)

[16] Summary of the analytical documents dedicated to: [life-long education](#), [inclusive education](#), [digitalisation](#) and [educational policies](#).

[17] [Summary of a remote expert discussion on the educational reforms.](#)

[18] [Summary of the analytical document on interaction among the educational initiatives.](#)

[19] Link to [the analytical documents](#).

[20] Please, go [here](#).

[21] [The 2013 White Book. Reforming the Belarusian Higher Schooling in Line with the Objectives, Values and Major Vectors of the European Higher Education Area.](#) Minsk, 2013; and [The 2018 White Book. The European Prospects of the Belarusian Higher Education.](#) Vilnius, 2018.

[22] Go for the analytical documents [here](#).

[23] Studies of the [Additional Adult Education](#).

[24] The 2019 to 2021 monitoring findings are presented [here](#).

[25] Amialusik, V. [The Monitoring and Assessment of the School Education in Belarus](#), 2021.

[26] [The Conclusions and Advice Following the PISA-2018 Results.](#)

[27] Educators' Report [Following the Results of the Research into Problems and Delights.](#)

[28] The Research into the [educational organisations and projects](#).

[29] [PISA-2018. Belarus Country Report.](#)

[30] Based on the materials of the research entitled: [How the Belarusian Educational System in Assessed by the Protest-Prone Belarusians.](#)

[31] Infographics based on the [monitoring findings](#).

[32] The RADA research: [What Do the Belarusian Young People Think?](#)

[33] Please, refer to the latest Academic Freedom Index data on Belarus [on the PBC website](#).

[34] Please, go [here](#).

[35] For example, [analytical documents of the Office of Education](#), as well as [the materials of the Institute for the Development and Social Market for Belarus and Eastern Europe](#).

[36] Quoting [The Diagnostic and Policy Options for the Vocational Education and Training System in Belarus](#).

[37] Review of the [vocational education](#).

[38] Review of the [secondary special education](#).

[39] Please, go [here](#).

[40] Statistics provided by the [Ministry of Education of Belarus](#).

[41] Analytical document entitled: [Reforming the Pre-School Education»](#) (please, refer to the relevant chapters in the documents *De-Bureaucratisation of the Educational System in the Republic of Belarus* and *De-Ideologisation of the Educational System in the Republic of Belarus*).

[42] Please, go [here](#).

CHAPTER III. COMPARATIVE STUDY OF GOVERNMENTAL AND CIVIC REFORM DISCOURSES

There is a growing divergence between governmental and unofficial civic reform programs. While government policies trend towards isolation and ideologization of education, unofficial civic actors emphasize open, liberalized, and European-aligned educational reforms. Key areas of divergence include the role of the Belarusian language, the development of private education at secondary levels, and the alignment of higher education with Bologna process principles. This divergence highlights the complexities and challenges in reconciling different visions for the future of Belarusian education.

This chapter delves into the critical components of the government's strategies for reforming the educational system, alongside the reform plans put forward by civic communities, associations, and political parties. It also presents an analysis of the similarities and differences in their programs, statements, and projects. This approach is designed to identify areas where these actors might reach consensus, as well as pinpoint the most contentious issues or "grey zones." These are areas where there is not only a lack of agreement between governmental and civic narratives (a), but also among representatives of civic democratic entities (b).

§1. REVIEW OF THE GOVERNMENTAL DISCOURSE

Despite the prevalence of a systemic matrix approach to reforms and a vertically oriented administration model in the country's educational system, three relatively autonomous dimensions or levels can be discerned within the official governmental discourse related to the declaration, design, or implementation of education reforms:

- 1) political declarations of intent formulated in the programmatic documents, like the Development Concept of the Republic of Belarus Educational System till 2030 (2021) or the Code of Education (2022), and announced by the educational sphere policymakers (for example, A. Lukashenka's

- “assignment” to the Ministry of Education on the reform completion focal areas or timeframes [1]);
- 2) drafts, design or operational legal regulatory documents (regulations, decrees, edicts or resolutions by the Ministry of Education); and
 - 3) practical changes in the educational system under duress (as a rule, forced by external circumstances; for example, due to the beginning of the war in Ukraine or suspension of Belarus’ participation in the Bologna process).

Every one of these levels has a rationality, feasibility or impact efficiency level of its own.

This chapter will analyze a range of draft, design, and operational documents adopted between September 2020 and September 2023. It will also examine the practical solutions implemented and the impact of external pressures on changes within the educational system during this period [2]. An analysis of the first-tier documents has been provided by us hereinabove (please, refer to Chapters I and II).

The two most impactful force-majeure factors that have decisively influenced the Belarusian educational system are: (1) the increasing isolation of Belarus's education system from the educational domains of developed countries and the withdrawal of international financial support programs previously benefiting it; and (2) the growing integration and assimilation of Belarus's education system into/with the educational framework of the Russian Federation.

All reform-oriented designs, projects, and actual changes implemented in the educational system during the relevant period, from September 2020 to July 2023, can be categorized into two broad groups:

- 1) general/systemic reforms, which impact all levels of education,
- 2) specific/targeted reforms, carried out at particular levels of education.

Documents Related to the General/Systemic Level Reveal the Following Trends and Features:

1. *Isolation of the Belarusian educational system from the educational areas of the developed world nations or international financial support programmes.* The most evident symptoms are visible in Belarus being abandoned by the European educational institutions and representative offices (for instance, the *Goethe-Institute* and the DAAD); Belarus' exclusion on a unilateral basis from the PISA, Programme for International Student Assessment, WorldSkills International professional youth movement and WorldSkills Belarus; decision by the BFUG, Bologna Process Follow-Up Group to suspend Belarus' membership in the EHEA; withdrawal of the international financial support programmes to fund educational reforms in Belarus (for instance, the World Bank's *Belarus - 2020 to 2025 Higher Education Modernisation Programme* worth USD 109 m); or limitations imposed on the opportunities and support needed by the Belarusian students to enrol at the higher educational establishments of the Western countries (primarily, the higher educational establishments of our closest neighbour nations, such as Poland or Lithuania).
2. *The trend towards integration and assimilation of the Belarusian educational system with/by the Russian Federation's educational space.* The process is promoted by the pro-active educational policies pursued by the Russian Federation, which aim at a financial, technical and infrastructural support of the Belarusian educational system (at all the levels), the latter's harmonisation and unification with the Russian educational system and at strengthening the academic emigration of the Belarusian (prospective) university students or teachers to the Russian Federation.
3. *Broadening the scope of contractual target training and forced labor* (as per Edict No. 23) to encompass not only organizations situated in small communities and contaminated areas but also those in other regions. This expansion applies to both the vocational and secondary special education levels (encompassing all types of vocational education institutions) as well

as to higher education levels (including universities, academies, and other higher learning institutions).

4. *The emphasis on ideological, military, and patriotic elements in education.* For instance, the Ministry of Education's resolution dated 15.07.2021 [3] has mandated the appointment of a military and patriotic upbringing supervisor in all educational institutions, ranging from nurseries and day-care centers (excluding elementary schools, night classes, special needs schools, and specialist high schools). Additionally, the curricula across all educational levels now incorporate military, patriotic, or ideological courses.
5. The Code now *incorporates the notion of inclusion* as a major principle of the state politics in the educational domain.
6. *The Code formally recognizes distance learning as an independent form of education, although it does not extend to compulsory secondary education.* Additionally, it includes provisions for implementing educational programs through network-based interactions among various educational institutions within the country.
7. *The Code enables the teenagers who stay at pre-trial detention centres to continue their education*, the procedure thereof being specified in a separate legislative act.

Pre-School Education (ISCED 0):

1. *The latest revision of the Code introduces the option of preschool education at home.* It has also streamlined the types of preschool education institutions: while the previous version recognized six types, the new revision includes only three – kindergartens, sanatorium kindergartens, and preschool child development centers. Despite these changes, the overall number of preschool education institutions remains unchanged.
2. *The local executive and administrative authorities have been granted powers to modify the classroom occupancy standards*, provided objective

circumstances are in place, as well as a relevant positive opinion by any bodies or institutions, which exercise the government hygienic supervision.

3. *The Code now formalizes the provision of additional educational opportunities for children and teenagers at day-care centers.*

Compulsory secondary Education (ISCED 1 to 3):

1. *the authorities have augmented the compulsory secondary education (ISCED 1 to 3) level with several additional measures aimed at reinforcing "discipline and order within the learning process."* These measures include the implementation of style and CCTV-monitored access and the requirement of mandatory school uniform.
2. *specific emphasis on systematically enhancing ideological, military, and patriotic elements.* Beginning in September 2021, schools have created the new role of a teacher/supervisor for military and patriotic upbringing, with approximately 2,000 full-time positions being filled by active servicemen, who typically do not have specialized teacher training education [6]. Additionally, extra lessons focusing on patriotic upbringing have been incorporated into the curriculum *noticeable trend toward de-internationalization and increased reliance on the Russian Federation.* This is evident in initiatives such as the introduction of PISA-type testing and the Russian Federation's funding of 150 engineering and innovation classes, or STEM classes, as part of the ROBBO program. The latest revision of the Code of Education now mandates *the completion of eleven grades (Art. 2), an increase from the previously required nine grades* [, the concept of inclusion, as formalized in the new Code for the secondary school level, involves extending the duration of special education from 9 to 10 years *centralised examination introduced for the 2023 school leavers.* The measure has been put in place for the sake of simplifying the enrolment procedure at the Belarusian higher educational establishments, particularly so, at the technical ones (instead of four centralised tests (CTs) now just two centralised examinations (CEs) and one CT are needed) under the conditions of a

demographic pitfall and an outflow of prospective university students to the foreign higher educational establishments. When holding the 2023 CEs and CTs, the structure and complication of the examination materials have undergone a change: the assignments are fewer and simpler (the texts lacked an advanced complexity level). The current Minister of Education has announced plans to develop new methodological guidelines for all compulsory secondary education institutions. Starting from the 2022/2023 academic year, beginning 1 September, these guidelines will reintroduce pre-professional training in schools from grade eight onwards *the age requirement for first-grade pupils has been reduced*: while previously schools admitted children turning six years old by the end of September, now, as an exception, children who turn six by 31 December of the same academic year are also eligible for admission. The revised Code formalizes a previously practiced norm in which a specific neighborhood is assigned to an educational institution. Under this regulation, schools will primarily admit children residing in their designated neighborhood, with others being accepted only if there are remaining vacant places *the updated Code has extended the academic year duration: from 1 September to 31 August* (rather than to 31 May as previously valid). The Ministry of Education has explained the need for such a correction by the fact that during the summer holidays schools also conduct an educational process: summer camps are open, events are held, etc. *sixth school day has been introduced*, allowing for elective courses to be taught in schools on Saturdays. Previously, this option was only available for senior-grade pupils, but now it applies to students from grade five and above *the revised Code has modified the conditions for entering the tenth university-preparatory school grades* (now a competitive basis will apply due to the closure of private schools in the summer and autumn of 2022, *the private sector for compulsory secondary education has effectively ceased to exist*. Out of the previously existing 30 private schools, only 3 remained active as of November 2022. This event should be viewed as a drastic measure resulting in the complete nationalization of compulsory secondary education.

The Level of Vocational Education (VE) and Secondary Special Education (SSE) (ISCED 4 and 5):

1. *The overall systemic tendency towards the isolation of the Belarusian educational system from the international organisations and foundations has found its manifestation at the VE and SSE level in the exclusion of Belarus on a unilateral basis from the WorldSkills International professional youth movement and from the WorldSkills Belarus (ISCED 4 and 5).*
2. *Vocational education policymakers reorient the sector towards the Russian and Asian educational markets (All-Russian and Asian professional skill contests, conferences, projects and endowments of the Russian Federation or Asian nations).*
3. *A new occupation and skill classifier has been introduced since 2023 to be in “harmony with the relevant Standard Industrial Classification.”*
4. *Starting with September of the 2022/2023 academic year, a single vocational educational institution system has been put in place allowing the entities to implement both the VE and SSE curricula. The measure may be understood as a tool of an institutional and substantial (curriculum level) unification of the ISCED 4 and 5 educational levels.*
5. *The period set for receiving a full-time vocational education based on the compulsory secondary education has been reduced: it amounts now to between 6 and 12 months instead of the previous 1 to 2 years. A number of professions are now learnt in less than a year. The measure indirectly bears record to a lower VE appeal against the background of an acute deficiency of the blue-collar personnel at the Belarusian labour market.*
6. *Trainees in vocational education who excel in skill contests are eligible to pursue higher education under preferential conditions. On the other hand, students who complete secondary specialized education can pursue higher education in a reduced timeframe, primarily through extramural study programs. This measure aligns the education structure in the*

Republic of Belarus more closely with the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), which considers ISCED 5 as a condensed practice-oriented form of higher education.

7. The provision introduced in the updated Code regarding the implementation of educational curricula through networking has been realized at the ISCED 4 and 5 levels through *the establishment of resource and competence centers*. These centers enable students to acquire skills in operating modern equipment and to master cutting-edge technologies.
8. *The rights related to enrollment in VE establishments have been expanded for both Belarusian nationals and foreigners*. This includes Belarusians, regardless of their place of residence, as well as foreign nationals and stateless individuals residing permanently in Belarus, who are now eligible to enroll in VE establishments. This change may be indicative of a significant shortage of skilled blue-collar workers in the country.
9. *A job-reservation-based employment system has been implemented for orphaned children or individuals with disabilities who have completed vocational education*. This measure is regarded by the regulatory authorities as a means of supporting socially vulnerable populations in the Republic of Belarus [11].

Higher Education Level (ISCED 6 to 8):

1. *The trend towards an isolation of the Belarusian educational system from the educational areas of the developed world nations and international financial support programmes* has found its clear manifestation in a decision passed by the BFUG, Bologna Follow-Up Group, to suspend Belarus' membership in the EHEA. The external isolation factor has been reinforced by an internal one. In October 2022 Belarus abrogated on a unilateral basis its agreement with Poland on recognising equivalence of higher education and academic degrees in science and arts [12]. In May 2023 Belarus amended the Law *On Military Conscription and Military*

Service to abrogate draft deferment for the Belarusians who study abroad [13].

2. *The trend towards integration and assimilation of the Belarusian higher education with/by the Russian Federation's educational space has been strengthened due to a number of external and internal factors.* Suspension of Belarusian participation in the Bologna process went parallel to that by the Russian Federation and with a media support from the Russian functionaries at the Ministry of Education and Science. The pro-Russian policies pursued by the Belarusian policymakers have made "harmonisation" and integration of Belarus' higher education with the Russian Federation's educational space alternative-free and inevitable.
3. The coverage and duration of contract learning have been extended. Whereas earlier (Art. 84 of Code-2011) a five-year mandatory job placement following contractual training used to cover the first higher education stage, or baccalaureate, now (Art.75 of Code-2022) it also covers the specialist higher education, or masters after a continuous education cycle. Likewise, the percentage of budget-funded places has considerably grown under the contract study conditions: for agricultural occupation specialists up to 70 % of the prescribed enrolment figures; in healthcare occupations up to 80 %; and in other university majors up to 60 %.
4. *Changes have been implemented in the system and procedure for enrolling students in higher education institutions, including the introduction of a centralized examination.* According to the regulator, these changes aim to prevent the migration of prospective university students to neighboring countries and enhance the competitiveness of Belarusian vocational education institutions while improving the selection quality of prospective university students.
5. To encourage academic migration from the Russian Federation, *individuals who have passed a single state examination in Russia are eligible for certain advantages when enrolling in Belarusian higher*

education institutions. This policy has been in effect since 2022 and applies to paid education programs.

6. *The system-wide trend towards ideologisation and militarisation has its peculiarities in higher education.* Since December 2020 the higher educational establishments of Belarus have introduced a new position of a “secret” pro-rector for safety/ security and personnel who is vested with a wide range of duties. Since 1 September 2022 the mandatory set of social courses and humanities includes three subjects with an explicit ideological component: History of the Belarusian Statehood, Modern Political Economics and Philosophy. Since 2022/2023 academic year the higher educational establishments have introduced their enrolment preferences to the leavers of the sporting pedagogics and military/patriotic-oriented classes, as well as to the children of servicemen or authorities of the interior staff members who perished, died or became disabled in the line of duty.
7. Supervision of attendance discipline at higher educational institutions has been commercialized. Students who consistently skip classes will incur additional fees, and they will also be required to pay for individual tutoring and catching up with missed program requirements.
8. *Following the introduction of the updated Code of Education, Belarus has gained the so-called specialist higher education element,* which is introduced for individual technical or medical majors.

§ 2. REVIEW OF CIVIL SOCIETY DISCOURSE

This chapter provides an overview of reform proposals put forth by unofficial actors, including their unique characteristics, core principles, and intersections with government programs. The analysis of draft reform plans considered the following aspects:

1. Presentation Format: Examining whether the proposals were presented in published texts or other formats.

2. Elaboration Depth: Assessing whether the proposals focused on systemic changes or individual adjustments and their coverage of different education levels.
3. Contents: Evaluating the conceptual foundations of the proposed reforms, the essence of the proposals, and how they align or diverge from government policies.

The review includes input from various organizations and initiatives, including:

- The Office of Education for a New Belarus [1].
- Proposals published on public dialogue platforms like the Bank of Ideas [2], New Belarus [3], and For Belarus [4].
- Proposals from civic and educational initiatives and organizations such as "Belarusian Education on the Way to Transformations" and "EuroBelarus."
- Proposals from research centers like the Institute for Development and Social Market (IDSM) and the Public Bologna Committee.
- Political party programs from parties such as the Belarusian Popular Front, Hramada, Greens, and the Belarusian Christian Democrats.

During the review process, the following adjustments were made:

1. Exclusion of Political Parties: Political party programs, although containing education sections, were excluded because they often represent declarative visions of educational development rather than specific reform projects. An exception was made for the program put forward by Hramada on the For Belarus public platform, which represented a collaborative effort among different parties.
2. Addressing Overlapping Actors: Some reform proposals may be presented on different platforms, and there may be overlaps in the actors involved. To address this, we considered each platform separately and treated actors as separate entities, even if they collaborated on certain projects.
3. Analysis of Inaccessible Platforms or Documents: One challenge encountered was the inaccessibility of certain reform proposals to the public. In some cases, blueprints were developed in theory but were not readily available for public access. For example, the IDSM website did not open, and while the Office of

Education mentioned certain documents, they were not accessible to a broader audience and were only available "on request."

2.1. DRAFT REFORM PROPOSALS BY THE OFFICE OF EDUCATION FOR A NEW BELARUS

The core concepts and proposals were initially introduced in 2021 through a draft reform page. Several of the proposed measures had been formulated as part of the "Belarusian Education on the Way to Change" program, which was jointly developed with the EuroBelarus consortium.

Four policy papers were prepared by experts from the Office of Education for a New Belarus and published on the website:

1. De-Bureaucratization of the Educational System in the Republic of Belarus [5],
2. De-Ideologization of Education in the Republic of Belarus – When and How Is It Possible? [6],
3. Election of Rectors at the Higher Educational Establishments. Regulations on the Council and Elections [7], and
4. Analysis of the Bologna Process Status in Belarus [8].

The first two documents propose significant changes across the entire education system, including reducing the influence of ministries and vertical power structures, empowering educational institutions, simplifying the legal regulatory framework, and more. These two documents share a common overarching concept of a comprehensive and profound transformation of the education system, which makes them incompatible with the current official state policies. Both documents can be considered as framework documents: they establish requirements for transformation processes and the elimination of negative practices like bureaucracy or ideological influence. However, they do not aim to provide a specific blueprint for the reforms.

The other two documents focus on challenges in higher education. The provision regarding the election of rectors aims to establish a legal framework for the period of system transformation, addressing the issue of the lack of autonomy in selecting the leadership of higher education institutions even before the reforms are fully implemented. The second document could be described as an analytical paper, but it

emphasizes the priority of returning to the bologna system for the development of higher education in Belarus. Therefore, while these documents may have a narrower focus, they essentially propose changes in the key actors of government policies.

2.2. PROPOSALS OF THE BELARUSIAN EDUCATION ON THE WAY TO CHANGE

Proposals contained in the programme the Belarusian Education on the Way to Change are partially outlined on the Office of Education website and partially as private analytical documents or public discussions.

The reforms suggested in the programme may be tentatively subdivided into two focal areas: the “broader” and “narrower” ones.

The following could be singled out as a “broader” plan:

- 1) reform preparation roadmap [9],
- 2) reform preparation blueprint [10].

The team members' primary stance is that conducting reforms requires public discussion and the involvement of various stakeholders in a dialogue to create a well-balanced system. The main focus of the blueprint is on describing the power transition processes along with actions at different time horizons (both short- and longer-term). Prior to this, an analysis was conducted on the relevant stakeholders and problem interpretation by various actors in school education.

The Education Governance Reform [11] can also be categorized as one of the “broader” documents. It is a research project conducted using the DELFI method, which involved capturing the expert community's position on education management principles, activists, or tasks. A generalized framework position was formulated, emphasizing efforts towards decentralization of the educational system and the development of a focus on public management as areas of consensus. Similar to the previous documents, this program aims at a profound transformation of the current system and seeks to engage various actors in its formation. Like the Office of Education

blueprints, it includes a stratification of the reform period, consisting of fast-track changes and a step-by-step crystallization of a fundamental vision, with the involvement of different stakeholders.

Apart from the broader projects, the programme puts forth some framework documents for certain focal areas:

- Digital Competence in a New Belarus [12] (the document refers to the UNESCO, OECD or DigCompOrg projects and, using them as a basis, proposes a vision of the digital transformation process of the Belarusian education at all the levels).
- Educational Initiatives in Belarus – an Interaction Map [13] (a research project offering an insight into the status of the non-governmental educational initiative sector. It contains no specific reform blueprints, yet, rather aims at the civic sector development).
- The Comparative Review of the Educational Policies in the European Countries [14]. It looks into the reforms conducted in Hungary, Lithuania and Slovakia and proposes some priority transformation directions, such as improving the teacher training or school management along with some changes in the evaluation and financing systems.
- Creation of an Inclusive Educational Environment in Belarus' Schools – Reference Points [15]. It proposes an inclusive education development concept to combine the Belarusian experiences with the World Bank and UNESCO paradigms.
- Life-Long Learning Strategy – Check-List [16]. It proposes a generic framework for the life-long learning policies along with the key items of these policies.

On one hand, the aforementioned documents address specific and relatively narrow aspects of state policies in the field of education. On the other hand, each of these documents presents a broader vision of the educational system, one that is integrated into the global context and focused on individual benefit with reduced dictation from the system.

The position of the program proposed by "Belarusian Education on the Way to Change" can be characterized as a comprehensive reconstruction of the educational system as a whole, rather than just changes in individual processes. This reconstruction

is to be based on foundations defined through a public dialogue. Furthermore, the framework documents make reference to international documents such as those from UNESCO, the Bologna system, or the OECD, implicitly advocating for European concepts and a more liberal approach compared to current policies. Additionally, the project drafted by "Belarusian Education on the Way to Transformations" includes a dedicated focus area, such as a YouTube video discussion, where potential scenarios or changes, like ensuring equity, are discussed in more detail.

2.3. THE IDSM / NEW BELARUS REFORM PROJECTS

The analytical background and the reform proposals by the IDSM are laid out in the following documents:

- The Belarusian Higher Education System – Status, Problems and Reforming Vectors (2021) [17],
- The Legal Opportunities and Practical Implementation of Student Representation and Self-Government in the Republic of Belarus, Ukraine, Russia and Germany (2021) [18], and
- Reformation of the Belarusian Educational System towards a Greater Institutional Autonomy and Self-Government Development at the Educational Establishments (2022) [19].

The New Belarus website [20] features the basic ideas borrowed from the above documents. The reform blueprints are described at two levels: firstly, a reform roadmap, which outlines the general action areas. Secondly, insights into the challenges and proposals for all the education stages (ranging from the pre-school to the post-graduate ones).

Unlike the Office of Education projects or the programme by the Belarusian Education on the Way to Transformations, this reform blueprint does not describe the power change process, but proposes a precise vision of the educational system transformation. The vision rests upon a neoliberal model of the educational system structure with a high autonomy and self-government levels, de-bureaucratisation, public monitoring, competitive encouragement system or closer relations between the education and the market.

Like in the previous cases, the transformations proposed differ intrinsically from the present-day state politics and require some substantial changes in the entire governance system. At the same time, a possible continuity is provided for: the authors propose amendments to the new *Code of Education* revision.

2.4. "FOR BELARUS" REFORM PACKAGE

An educational reform blueprint has been presented by the Hramada party [21]; yet, according to a description, it reflects a consolidated position of several parties. The plan is placed on the page Resuscitation Reforming Package for Belarus, which enables comments, but fails to carry any real feedback. According to its form, the blueprint is similar to the previous one, when a specific vision of the educational system development is proposed. It is based on certain modifications in *the Code of Education* and in the education management patterns at various levels, rather than a complete reshuffling of the entire educational system.

One of the key and foremost programme items is a national learning aspect with the Belarusian language being established as the main teaching language. An important role is attributed to the government's social protection and free education guarantees. Educational establishment or teacher certification provisions remain a government domain; yet, at the same time, the project recognises the role of private educational institutions. According to the principles entrenched in the reform blueprint, it may rather be categorised as a social democratic undertaking.

2.5. PROPOSALS BY THE BANK OF IDEAS

The platform has to offer ideas or projects by individual experts, which is why, more often than not, they do not cover transformation of the whole educational system, but tend to aim at specific areas. The site features two proposals:

- Bilingual Monolingualism. The Linguistic Policies in Belarus – Status, Trends and Prospects (2022) [22], and
- What Does PISA Talk About? Recommendations for the Belarusian Educational System (2023) [23].

These proposals cannot be classified as systemic ones and rather specify the problematic areas along with their solutions and set a basis for a dialogue. However, as a matter of fact, the numbers of independent proposals aimed at educational system reforming is meagre with no dialogue conducted on the site.

2.6. PUBLIC BOLOGNA COMMITTEE

The organisation is engaged in higher education research and analysis, and publishes its evaluation of the Bologna principles implementation status. In this regard, the reforms initiative proposals only cover the higher education sector and pertain to the implementation of a specific reform roadmap, which has already been developed within the Bologna system frameworks. That being said, the initiative to a lesser extent deals with the issues related to the general educational system administration, but rather focuses on individual aspects; for example, on liberalisation and reducing the weight of the role played by the state.

CONCLUSIONS

In the realm of educational reform, civil society actors have put forth a diverse array of proposals, each reflecting unique positions and approaches. These reform blueprints can be broadly categorized into two distinct approaches: the 'Total Restructuring Approach' and the 'Individual Changes Approach.' Let's delve into each of these approaches and explore their key advocates, features, strengths, and weaknesses. Additionally, we will examine the challenges and areas of concern associated with these alternative reform blueprints and their correlation with the official government reform initiatives."

Reform Proposals by Civil Society Actors.

The reform proposals put forward by non-governmental actors are not unified or universal; instead, they represent diverse positions and approaches to educational reform. Two distinct approaches to creating reform blueprints can be identified:

Total restructuring approach. Advocates: Office of Education, Belarusian Education on the Way to Transformations, IDSM, New Belarus.

- **Key features.** These projects argue for a comprehensive overhaul of the educational system, emphasizing the need for significant changes. They prioritize a democratic dialogue among various stakeholders during the reform preparation process and the development of a clear reform vision. Axiomatic elements include de-ideologization, de-bureaucratization, and increased autonomy for higher educational institutions through rector elections. These projects also implicitly promote principles such as integration into the international arena (inclusion, lifelong learning, digital transformation, and education management reform).
- **Strengths.** Emphasis on democratic dialogue during reforms.
- **Weaknesses.** Lack of a specific, fully-formed reform vision for broader audiences, as it is expected to be jointly developed later.

Individual changes approach. Advocates: For Belarus, PBC, Bank of Ideas.

- **Key features.** These projects typically work within the framework of the government's Code of Education and the existing educational management model, proposing specific ad hoc changes. While some of these changes may differ significantly from the official policies (e.g., language policies or private education), they focus on correcting specific development lines rather than radically restructuring the entire system.
- **Strengths.** Focused on specific, practical changes.
- **Weaknesses.** Limited to certain aspects of the educational system, not a comprehensive overhaul.

Problematic Areas in Alternative Reform Projects

- *Limited accessibility:* unofficial reform documents are often inaccessible to the general public due to information exchange difficulties, repression risks, or indifference towards external communication. Initiatives may become inactive after their projects conclude, leading to inaccessible websites or a lack of online presence.

- *Lack of dialogue*: while technical mechanisms for discussing reforms exist, public discussions are limited, and there is often no feedback mechanism. Public discussions are more feasible outside Belarus.
- *Political underdevelopment*: few systematically described reform programs are available in the public space, and they tend to lean towards either right-liberal or left-centrist directions. The role of political parties in explaining and advocating their proposals remains underdeveloped, resulting in a lack of significant choice among project proposals and limited stakeholder involvement in discussions.

Correlation Between Governmental and civic Reform Projects

In recent years, a growing discrepancy has emerged between governmental and unofficial civic reform programs. While some overall reform projects overlap thematically (e.g., inclusion, digitalization, or lifelong learning), there are substantial differences in their comprehension and implementation. The state increasingly emphasizes education's closure and ideologization, while independent civic actors prioritize de-ideologization and de-bureaucratization. Unofficial civic proposals raise questions about the Belarusian language in education and the development of the private education sector at the secondary school level. There is a consensus among unofficial civic actors on aligning Belarusian higher education with Bologna system principles, which contradicts state policies. This trend reflects a growing divide between state policies and unofficial civic discourse.

REFERENCES

-
- [1] The Office of Education for a New Belarus. Access point: <https://edu-office.org/ru/reforms/документы-и-материалы-2021-года/>
 - [2] Bank of Ideas. Access point: <https://www.ideasbank.vision/be/projects>
 - [3] New Belarus. Access point: <https://newbel.info>
 - [4] Resuscitation Reforming Package for Belarus. Access point: <http://zabelarus.com/2023/02/11/рэформа-system-education/>

[5] The Office of Education for a New Belarus. De-Bureaucratization of the Educational System of the Republic of Belarus (2021). Access point: <http://reform.edu-office.org/debureaucratization>

[6] The Office of Education for a New Belarus. De-Ideologisation of the Education in the Republic of Belarus: When and How Is It Possible? (2021). Access point: <http://reform.edu-office.org/deideologization>

[7] The Office of Education for a New Belarus. Election of Rectors at the Higher Educational Establishments. Regulations on the Council and Elections. Access point: <http://reform.edu-office.org/council>

[8] The Office of Education for a New Belarus. Analysis of the Bologna Process Status in Belarus (2021). Access point: <https://reform.edu-office.org/bologna>

[9] Belarusian Education on the Way to Transformations. Education Reform Preparation Roadmap (2021). Access point: <http://reform.edu-office.org/roadmap>

[10] Received on request.

[11] Belarusian Education on the Way to Transformations. Education Management Reform (2021). Access point: <http://reform.edu-office.org/reform>

[12] Belarusian Education on the Way to Transformations. Digital Competence in a New Belarus (2021). Access point: <http://reform.edu-office.org/digital>

[13] Belarusian Education on the Way to Transformations. Educational Initiatives in Belarus – an Interaction Map (2021). Access point: <https://edu-reform.eu/map>

[14] Belarusian Education on the Way to Transformations. The Comparative Review of the Educational Policies in the European Countries (2021). Access point: <http://reform.edu-office.org/comparison>

[15] Belarusian Education on the Way to Transformations. Creation of an Inclusive Educational Environment in Belarus' Schools – Reference Points (2021). Access point: <http://reform.edu-office.org/inclusion>

[16] Belarusian Education on the Way to Transformations. Elaboration of the Life-Long Learning Strategy – Check-List (2021). Access point: <http://reform.edu-office.org/lifelong>

[17] Received on request.

[18] Received on request.

[19] Received on request.

[20] New Belarus. The Reform of the Educational System. Access point: <https://newbel.info/2021/07/08/educational-reform/>

[21] Resuscitation Reforming Package for Belarus. The Reform of the Educational System (2021). Access point: <http://zabelarus.com/2023/02/11/рэфарма-system-education/>

[22] Bilingual Monolingualism. The Linguistic Policies in Belarus – Status, Trends and Prospects. Access point: <https://www.ideasbank.vision/ru/projects/12>

[23] What Does PISA Talk About? Recommendations for the Belarusian Educational System. Access point: <https://www.ideasbank.vision/ru/projects/24>

CHAPTER IV. RISE OF NON-FORMAL EDUCATION INITIATIVES POST-2020

Post-2020 Belarusian educational initiatives represent a responsive and evolving landscape, characterized by a commitment to their core objectives and principles, yet demonstrating flexibility and adaptability in their approach. While they possess a superficial understanding of ongoing reform efforts, there's a clear readiness to contribute to shaping the future of Belarusian education. However, this willingness is conditional upon democratic and inclusive processes. The initiatives currently see themselves more as local actors within their areas of focus, showing a potential for broader engagement if the right collaborative and communicative conditions are met.

This chapter identifies objectives seen as paramount by the educational initiatives and organizations representatives and their preparedness to pursue these objectives.

Ten semi-structured interviews have been conducted with the educational initiative representatives within the survey framework. The initiatives were selected from the perspective to feature different organisation types: the Belarusian school abroad; educational projects; an educational centre for diaspora children; initiatives to support former or present education or science personnel; civic activism education-oriented projects; and educational media. For safety and security reasons, no initiatives have been named, neither this text contains any indirect information to identify them. An interview has been subdivided into three portions:

Goals, principles and vision. The portion's purpose is to answer the question, if the initiative representatives have a strategic vision of the Belarusian education's principles and future.

Attitude to the reforms. The portion's purpose is to gauge the levels of knowledge and involvement in preparation of educational system reforms, as well as to identify the fundamental attitude to the reforms.

Political position. The portion's purpose is to identify the political philosophy system shared by the Belarusian initiative leaders/representatives, as well as to determine their readiness to engage in a political advocacy of these objectives and principles.

§ 1. GOALS AND VISION

1.1. ACTIVITY OBJECTIVES – NOW AND IN THE LONG RUN

All the respondents could rather easily describe and enumerate the goals and principles characterising their entities, which fact is indicative of a high awareness level, when launching activities. The participants named various operational objectives, like building a civil society through education, adaptation assistance for the Belarusian children abroad, a possible education continuation for the Belarusian pupils following their emigration, support to the victims of repressions from the educational sector, creation of a popular educational medium, society democratisation through educational events, mentor and education support of target groups in Belarus, etc.

When responding to the question how their activities would be transformed, if the power in Belarus became democratic, all the initiatives noted that they planned to continue their work. Many initiatives, that being said, foresaw some drastic changes in their activity's focal areas:

1. Implementation of more ambitious projects that would require collaboration with the state administration authorities or ministries.
2. Expanding audiences and rolling out an offline infrastructure in Belarus.
3. A drive towards long-term education development programmes to replace shorter-term support programmes.

Some of the initiatives are localised in their current countries of stay. Such initiatives more frequently tend to see the continuation of the activity with no radical changes, but the respondents often have plans underway as to how their skills or new experiences could come in handy in Belarus.

A representative of one of the initiatives has pointed out that now his organisation aims at opening “a window of opportunities,” like building a community or civic education, with no clear activity vision afterwards except for perceiving the need for a continuous civil society building process.

1.2. VISION OF THE BELARUSIAN EDUCATION FUTURE

The purpose behind the next question was to identify, whether the initiatives focus exclusively on the achievement of their initial programmatic objectives, or else contemplate forming in the future a broader vision of the Belarusian education.

A majority among the initiatives did not have an organised internal discussion over the general image of the Belarusian education’s future. Nonetheless, there are a few tendencies to be observed:

- a part of the organisations had touched upon the topic during an informal communication or collaborations; and
- although the initiatives do not aim at formulating a structured vision, their representatives deliberately identify the principles to provide a basis to build education on along with their activity areas (some of the organisations have it fixed in the formal paperwork; for example, on their website or in their statutory documents).

A generalised tentative description of a typical initiative is as follows: the organisation lacks a structured image of the future, but has a set of goals and principles based on a broad consensus. From time to time they have internal conversations on how individual education function spheres (particularly those targeted by the initiatives’ expertise) should look like.

§ 2. ATTITUDE TO THE REFORM PROJECTS AND PROPOSALS

2.1. LEVEL OF AWARENESS

The initiative representatives enjoy different awareness levels of the reforms planned for the Belarusian education in the future.

The respondents do know that something about the reforms is being discussed in the diasporas, but not in a very exact way. A respondent pointed out that she only knew

about the official government documents on the reforms, but had a negative attitude to them.

Most frequently, Światlana Cichanoŭskaja's Office (although, in fact, the blueprints are presented on the website of the Office of Education for a New Belarus) or the Coordination Council (although not a single blueprint for reforms has ever been provided in its name) are referred to as the draft reform authors. The reform blueprint authors are typically not known to the respondents. Most frequently, the respondents are only aware that the reforms do exist (in particular, the roadmap), but lack a mature idea as to their contents.

A respondent had to say that his initiative had taken part in the roadmap development at the counselling stage (probably, he meant a "private" reform roadmap submitted to the EU and never made public). He stressed an important role played by the roadmap for cooperation with the European Union and for the preparation of a more inclusive programme to support the Belarusian educational sector.

A representative of another initiative expressed his strikingly negative attitude to the reform programme offered by Światlana Cichanoŭskaja's Office. We might hypothesise that a negative stance to an organisation could be transferred to the reform blueprints. His active criticism targeted an excessively high concentration on projects meant "for the future" that is as yet unknown instead of addressing more urgent problems "here and now."

Nobody has pointed to any other draft reform proposals published by other authors, apart from Światlana Cichanoŭskaja's Office, Coordination Council or the affiliated initiatives.

2.2. INVOLVMENT (PARTICIPATION IN DISCUSSIONS)

The below reasons were quoted among those, why the initiatives fail to take part in the reform planning process:

- they do not want to be affiliated with any political forces for the sake of their audience safety in Belarus;

- they do not see a point in a long-term planning under a situation featured by a high uncertainty level, but choose to focus on momentous issues;
- they do not feel that their opinions will be heeded;
- isolation and “inaccessibility” of the reform developers; or
- they do not consider themselves to be experts in political matters.

When answering a question on what conditions the initiatives would be prepared to engage in the reform debates, they had a consensual position: equality, available platform, confidence and readiness to treat the participants’ opinions in earnest.

A part of the initiatives informed that they had limited knowledge on the reform development process; that being said, they did have expertise in a certain areas or opportunities to arrange feedback from the target audiences directly in Belarus.

Answering the question as to how a vision of the Belarusian education has to be formed, the consensual opinion was that it has to be an all-inclusive process with an involvement of different groups. Yet, their ideas differ as to what it could mean in practical terms:

- some see the process as only possible in case the political forces are formed directly in Belarus;
- some delegate the function to the Coordination Council;
- some refer to broader actor groups, like teachers, parents or students; and
- sometimes the respondents point to the protest-oriented Belarusians at home and in diaspora as the relevant engines of change.

Yet, almost all the participants solidarize in underlining the importance of horizontality, attentive treatment of different opinions or non-coloniality in the decision preparation process.

2.3. OPINION ON THE AIMS AND PRINCIPLES OF EDUCATION

The respondents were asked a number of questions as to how goals and principles for the Belarusian education should be formulated and which ones among them they could name on behalf of their initiatives.

A high consensus level must be noted. The most frequently mentioned ones were as follows:

- freedom and a possible choice;
- Belarusian language (the importance of the Belarusian language prevalence in education was also stressed by the Russian-speaking respondents);
- openness and integration into the global education;
- a drive towards personality (a holistic approach);
- democratism and civic spirit development; and
- economic prowess and respect.

Besides, a high unanimity level was recorded in respect of the question as to how approaches to the Belarusian education management must change. The most frequently provided answers, broadly conceived, mentioned de-centralisation, de-bureaucratisation and de-ideologization of education. That being said, the representatives also quoted some minor changes; for example, cancellation of job placement by the universities, guidance of the managerial sphere by educational analytics and research, articulated goals and principles in educational administration, search for professional leaders and their training, description of the good governance-related administrative practices and professional selection of the potential educational managers.

§ 3 POLITICAL AGENCY

The participants were asked a question, whether they saw themselves at this moment in time as educational political agents and if they could become a more pro-active.

Most initiatives have stated that they now rather do not engage politically. Yet, the respondents' intentions and attitudes very much differed:

- part of the respondents aims at a potentially active engagement; the initiatives typically link it to the fact that originally their initiatives sprang up to seek different objectives (more opportunistic ones), but now are able to address a broader range of issues; and

- part of the respondents aims at counselling roles and is prepared to share their expertise on request.

The factors similar to those quoted during the reform discussion process have been named as participation pre-conditions:

- available invitations from the parties engaged in it;
- a democratic horizontal communication pattern; and
- readiness to transform ideas into practical steps.

CONCLUSIONS

A generalised portrait of a Belarusian educational initiative (after 2020) looks like an entity, which was set up as a response to a specific challenge or as a request from its target audience. Within the period passed, most initiatives could identify and, most frequently, fathom their chief principles and activity goals or to accumulate expertise in their fields of endeavour. The initiatives engage locally in their focal areas and, so far, display a low-key involvement in the shared activities to develop a vision of the Belarusian education.

Typically, the initiative representatives have very superficial ideas about the contents or authors of the reform projects. Nonetheless, they are ready to participate in the joint work to identify the goals and principles of education in Belarus and see a point in doing so, but are only prepared to engage under the condition of an equal-standing democratic communication supported by feedbacks. As yet, they are not ready themselves to act as initiators of such discussions, although are prepared to join in, if properly invited. They see Śviatlana Cichanoŭskaja's Office and the Coordination Council as initiators of any such team-up.

CHAPTER V. PUBLIC DISCUSSIONS ON EDUCATIONAL REFORM

The discussions highlight a clear need for comprehensive educational reform in Belarus, addressing issues from basic education principles to systemic governance and management issues. There is a notable challenge in making civil society organizations and initiatives research findings visible and accessible. Additionally, the lack of dialogue and discussions among stakeholders and the public indicates a gap in participatory processes in educational reform. These include engaged, comprehensive, and practical approaches to educational reform, emphasizing the importance of research visibility, stakeholder dialogue, and systematic studies in shaping the future of education in Belarus.

This section covers some findings following an analysis into the events (video blogs, conferences, workshops, discussions, seminars, webinars, etc.) dedicated to the education matters and held from 2020 till July 2023, as well as some findings of a comparative analysis into the thematic key messages dominating such fora with the recurrent topics of the programmatic documents or reform blueprints (please, refer to Chapter III). With these ideas in mind, we have identified the overlapping and diverging items with the key messages of the events with recurrent topics of the programmatic documents or reform blueprints prepared by the governmental policymakers and civil society experts in the educational domain of Belarus.

The logic permeating this study has been dictated by the need to address the above tasks. At the first stage, during a content analysis, we have processed the data pool (video, audio or textual materials) and drafted some laconic summaries to the major events. Thanks to the operations performed, we have succeeded in making a list of key themes/recurrent messages, which are dominant in different communities or on various communication platforms. The second stage included, based on a comparative analysis, identifying the overlapping or diverging key messages in the events considered with the

recurrent topics of the programmatic documents or reform blueprints prepared by the official policymakers and independent experts in the educational domain of Belarus and outlined in Part III.

§ 1. RECURRENT TOPICS IN SEPTEMBER 2020 - FEBRUARY 2022

According to their content emphasis, the topics of all the events may be tentatively subdivided into two periods: (1) from 2020 to the beginning of the war in Ukraine (February and March 2022); and (2) from the beginning of the war in Ukraine till now. The conventionality of such a division is conditional on the fact that a part of the first period themes remained relevant also for the second one, although, that being said, undergoing a certain transformation in the content emphasis, intensity or wordings.

Recurrent topics of the events staged between autumn 2020 and February 2022

The period from 2020 till February 2022 saw more than 20 events dedicated to education or educational policies in Belarus. The timeframe is dominated by the internal Belarusian agenda, while the general discussion context is determined by the public protests following the 2020 presidential elections in Belarus. Despite a certain disenchantment, by and large, their participants are featured by optimistic moods: a civil society awakening is stressed along with the formation of the pre-requisites needed to problematise the actual educational system, as well as to encourage a more pro-active public engagement in the educational initiatives or projects. The period is dominated by the following themes/key messages:

- 1) identification of the education goals, principles or philosophy;
- 2) the problem of interrelations education vs politics;
- 3) critical situation and reform preparation (reform problem and direction prioritisation);
- 4) educational policy subjects;
- 5) the issue of relationship between the internal condition of Belarus' educational system and the international context (global educational trends);
- 6) the issue of education management and institutional autonomy;
- 7) academic freedoms.

Below, we provide a summary of discussions on these issues.

1. Identification of the education goals, principles or philosophy

Most event participants share the same opinion about a priority/paramount nature for a drive to identify the education goals, principles and philosophy as a pre-requisite for a possible sensible, efficient and successful reformation of the Belarusian educational system. That being said, there are some considerable discrepancies both in terms identifying the contents of the education goals, principles and philosophy and in the manners of their formation. Some persons assume that the goals and principles in question must correlate with the political interests of the key educational policy actors. Accordingly, this paradigm framework provides for a primary clear articulation of these key actors' political interests and for a determination of the educational policy ideology (neoliberal, leftist, conservative, elitist, egalitarian, etc.). That being said, all the educational policy ideologies contain the three key invariant reference points: (1) development of the labour market and professional competences, (2) development of solidarity and civic competences, and (3) personality development and meeting individual needs. Hence, the chief task is to strike a balance among the three dimensions and systems in the Belarusian education. Other speakers insist on a leading role to be played by intellectuals and the expert community who are to address all these issues and propose to the society their conceptual vision of the education essence/mission, which subsequently may be presented to the society and coordinated with the policymakers. The third group of persons believes that, when identifying the education goals, principles and philosophy, we should be guided by the framework documents adopted by the international educational community (UNESCO, UN, OECD, etc.), the principal task being to implement these goals' meaningful content-related components in the Belarusian educational system.

2. The problem of interrelations education vs politics

Numerous event participants agree that thanks to the 2020 political crisis education, which had been up to then perceived as a system functioning beyond politics, has found its eloquent political dimension. The dimension is diagnosed by the participants mainly in a negative way: for example, the school teachers against their own will were mobilised

by the authorities to rig the elections, imitate support, etc. At the same time, the very fact of a forced political engagement of the public enables making a precious step towards comprehending a much closer interconnection between the allegedly politically neutral educational processes and the educational policy realities. Thereby, the following issues move up the current agenda: an active involvement in the educational policies of previously “apolitical” stakeholders (teachers, parents, experts or employers); formation of their subject position as agents in the area of educational policies; nature of intercommunion among various educational policy subjects: (representatives of the expert community, parents, employers, functionaries and politicians); and adopting new practices in the deliberative process designed to help the public to gain their agency as subjects in the educational policy domain.

3 Educational policy subjects

The key problem, according to the experts, lies in the current customs and persistency of the previous practices, under which citizens were determined and identified themselves as educational policy objects. The “induced helplessness” syndrome that is vividly manifested in the educational domain makes the subject agency formation an uphill struggle. *Any reformatory initiatives have been punishable for dozens of years and used to bring to bear many more expenses to the initiators themselves than any gains/benefits for the education. Notably, it is true of the initiatives domestically or abroad alike (e.g., the annoying experiences related to multiple reformation attempts at the European Humanities University in Vilnius).* Many speakers underscore that the problem is aggravated by a deficiency of viable collective subjects in the sphere of education, such as professional associations, trade unions, etc.. Nonetheless, most participants are optimistic about the future and see opportunities to solve the issue. That being said, opinions about the ways to form subject agency have split. Some presume that Belarus already has its expert and professional pedagogical communities, which simply lack solidarity and perception of their political interests. Others believe that the initiative to ascend the stakeholders to a political participatory level must be vested with the expert community representatives who are “idea generators and political position promoters.” Yet others tend to reason that without a deliberative process the expert and

functionary activism will bring the educational policies back to the tracks of the old authoritarian model with its hackney limitations of rank-and-file stakeholders' rights and powers.

4. Crisis and reform preparation (reform problem and direction prioritisation)

Most event participants share an opinion on a productive/positive role played by the 2020 political crisis: it highlighted for the public at large the systemic problems faced by the educational sector in Belarus and put on the agenda a need for profound and mass-scale (rather than cosmetic) reforms. Many participants point out to the necessity of clarifying the very notion of a "reform," the sense of which has been made hollow by the systematic official reform imitations performed by the Belarusian authorities for the last thirty years. Bearing in mind an intrinsic problems nature and the reform scale, the need arises to identify the priority areas, which include the following: de-ideologization; de-bureaucratisation; dismantling the vertical authoritarian management pattern and building a horizontal transparent management pattern with an embedded participation and open access for all the stakeholders to activate the public management focus; extending institutional autonomy; and introduction of academic freedoms.

5. Education management and institutional autonomy

A key reform area is related to the drastic change in the educational system administration pattern in place in Belarus, which is characterised by all the independent experts as a paternalistic, vertical, authoritarian and inefficient one. There is a shared consensus among all the participants as to the shape of an alternative management pattern, which should have a horizontal nature and provide for a strong "public management focus," an active involvement of all the education stakeholders, transparency, accountability and responsibility for any decisions made. Discrepancies appear in the issue of the ways to achieve the goal or how exactly the alternative management pattern can and must be put in place. Some insist on depriving the Ministry of Education of the central managerial body's role, because, in the opinion of this expert group, it has monopolised all the administrative functions. Under their paradigm, all the administrative functions should be assigned to the educational institutions, which requires ensuring an utmost institutional autonomy level. Others tend to doubt the

efficacy of such a solution because of a number of factors, which include, among other things, a risk of anarchy or even collapse under the existing conditions of the institutional or administrative patterns, as well as due to the lack of infrastructure that might guarantee a usual function of the horizontal model (at least, at the very first stage). In this respect, a gradual dismantling of the vertical management pattern is proposed with a concurrent horizontal pattern reconstruction, development of the self-government procedures and institutions, revival and encouragement of the grass-roots initiatives, creation of a motivation structure to develop the self-government skills, training of a new managerial personnel, etc. Yet others propose commencing the construction of an alternative/horizontal management pattern by launching a deliberative process to form an understanding among the key stakeholders, by articulating their interests and activating the motivation structures. In the opinion of the expert group, it is only through a broader deliberative process that the creation of a viable, efficient and successful management pattern will become a possibility.

6. Belarus' Educational System and the Global Educational Trends

A long levitation of the Belarusian educational system in an inertial mode has isolated it from the global/international trends. The process has deteriorated after 2020. Therefore, an overwhelming majority of the event participant agree on the need for a much stronger integration of the Belarusian educational system into the European and international educational area. That being said, all the participants indicate at a deficiency among the Belarusian citizens and the expert community representatives of an adequate comprehension, absorption or conceptualisation of the challenges, opportunities or tendencies prevailing in modern education. At the same time, many an expert emphasise that under the present situation the previous participation format (for example, via the Bologna process) has become obsolete and fails to match to the full extent the present-day challenges. Besides, it is obvious that a mere borrowing of an “exemplary” model is impossible without its adaptation to the possibilities available in the country (personnel-related, social, political, financial, etc.), which dictates a need for the development of an independent vision of the educational policy strategy or tactics in the would-be democratic Belarus. Thereby, the major task is to strike an optimum balance between

integration into the international educational space or borrowing a successful foreign experience and a self-determination in the country's authentic coordinate system.

7. Academic freedoms

Last, but not least, a number of reforms is proposed towards a consolidation and development of academic freedoms as a pre-requisite for the creation of an educational system based on the principles of an open democratic society. The issue has rallied around itself an absolute consonance among all the participants of the events reviewed, while the reforms themselves have a priority and urgency status. At the same time, the matter also generates certain mismatches as to the depth or radicalism level. Thus, some experts tend to believe it a must to exclude the upbringing component from the educational process (at least, at the university level), insofar as the laws in effect (the Code of Education) treat the upbringing, in practical terms, as an ideological indoctrination by the government. Another part of experts argue that it would be impractical to exclude the upbringing component, but suggest reformulating it in a terminology of civic education or instilling civic competences of a democratic community, such as critical thinking, solidarity, etc. There are some outstanding issues left, like academic ethics/code of ethics or intellectual conscience, which are perceived and interpreted in different ways. Probably, all these matters need an additional consideration and debate for the purpose of achieving a consensus, at least, at the level of insights into the key notions, procedures or institutions.

§ 2. RECURRENT TOPICS IN MARCH 2022 - JULY 2023

The beginning of the Russian Federation's aggression in Ukraine in February 2022 became a shocking event, which served to cease the activities pursued by the experts and participants in the educational agenda events for several months. It was the time when many educational process experts or participants were trying to pinpoint a relevant thought arrangement modus to correlate to the basically new situation of a war-time period. Virtually, the educational agenda events did not resume until in May 2022 and their contents marked a major shift towards new themes, such as war and education (discourse shift in the direction of outstanding issues); isolation of the educational from the European educational area and its assimilation by the Russian Federation's

educational space; and securitisation and militarisation of the educational sector. We offer below some brief characteristics to these topical clusters.

War and education (discourse shift in the direction of outstanding issues)

The Belarusian educational sphere becomes a consciential battlefield for the Belarusians' world perception and identity. With the beginning of the war in Ukraine and with recognising Belarus by the international actors as an aggressor nation, two main trends were set in the foreign politics domain: the country's complete isolation (also in the sphere of education and science); and selective/differentiated isolation of the governmental educational institutions and their official representatives, while continuing to cooperate with the civil society and private initiatives in the educational realm. In its turn, the domestic situation rolls out towards harsher repressions aimed at the Belarusian citizens and academic community representatives.

Isolation of Belarusian educational from the European educational area and its assimilation by the Russian Federation's educational space

Practically all the independent experts and event participants point out to one global external factor – a trend towards an isolation of the Belarusian educational system from the educational areas of the developed world nations and international financial support programmes pertinent to Belarus' educational system. The experts single out the following factors determining the internal condition of Belarus' educational system: a considerable funding reduction; a legislative consolidation and legitimisation of more radical and brutal forms of the government supervision over the function by the educational institutions (the 2022 Code of Education); deterioration of the intrinsic/unsolved systemic problems by some new challenges; devaluation of a teacher's image (following the mass-scale involvement in the 2020 election vote rigging); harsher supervision over the academic life and mobilisation of the repressive institutions and mechanisms to identify dissidence, personnel purges, etc.; indoctrination of all the participants of Belarus' educational system with the "Russian world" ideologemes; bleeding of the professional, but disloyal personnel (consequently, a lower education quality); a mass-scale exodus of students from Belarus' educational system (a striking example is presented by under-enrolment of 6,000 potential students at the country's

higher educational establishments, including more than 500 for the budget funded places); the threat of the Belarusian educational area's colonisation by the Russian education officials and by representatives of the scientific and educational communities of the Russian Federation; destruction of the domestic NGO infrastructure, which represents, lobbies and implements the (European) educational projects and practices that are alternative to the official ones; and blocking (using censorship, supervision or possible sanctions going as far as penal ones) of the fully-fledged communication among the educational sphere actors, such as teachers, students or administration representatives) inside the country and beyond (the Belarusian diaspora).

Securitisation and militarisation of the educational sector

Most of the experts or educational process participants indicate at a stronger and stricter government monitoring of the educational sphere and at repressions against the educational establishment employees, which have acquired a targeted systematic nature and are driven by newer infrastructural and HR mechanisms. It is exactly this significant qualitative transformation in the scale, profoundness and systematicity of supervision and repressions that is referred to by the experts as education securitisation.

Education militarisation is manifested in a transition of the upbringing component to the modus of an aggressive militarist preparation of students to a consensual and classical conventional war against the ideological Ukrainian and West-European adversaries.

§ 3. RECURRENT TOPICS AND REFORM PROJECTS: OVERLAPPING AND DIVERGING ISSUES

Moving on to the next part of our study, we should single out a few significant points, which assist in information structuring and in getting a clearer and meaningful comprehension of the findings yielded by the analysis conducted. Primarily, it should be taken into account that the recurrent topics in the reform projects or programmes outlined in Chapter III represent two discourses: the official (in the form of ministries and departments inside the country) and the civil society ones (in the form of independent experts and civic activists, who mainly stay outside of Belarus). The bulk of the events reviewed in this material was held by representatives of the independent experts and

civic groups and initiatives. The events staged domestically are generally impossible to analyse, because there are no electronic or hard-copy event materials (and/or access to them). Thereby, the study's second part features the overlapping and diverging items in the key messages of the events held by the independent experts and civil activists in exile versus (1) the recurrent topics in the official programmatic documents and reform blueprints; and (2) the recurrent topics in the programmatic documents and reform blueprints drafted by the independent experts in exile.

The overlapping and diverging items in the key messages of the events held by the independent experts and civil activists in exile vs the recurrent topics in the official programmatic documents and reform blueprints

A fair majority of the issues or recurrent topics are in a mutual contradiction for quite understandable ideological and methodological reasons. Thus, while the independent experts highlight a crisis available in the educational system, the official documents carry statements about "certain underperformances and issues." The educational system operation efficiency is not doubted either by the official experts or, moreover, by the official policymakers. In terms of the key issues related to the education vs politics relationship, as well as to self-determination of the new educational policy subjects or the management system dismantling, the official discourse legitimises the present *status quo*, while clearly distributing the roles played: acting as the fully-fledged educational policy subjects are the official institutions (the Ministry of Education, the National Institute for Higher Education – NIHE, etc.) with their official representatives (Minister of Education and his Deputy, NIHE Director and official experts or spokespersons), whereas all the others "quasi-subjects" in the best-case scenario are declared to be the ones at a legislative level or are imitated to be the ones, when implementing the educational policies. The discrepancy between the discourse becomes even more pronounced and clearer, if dealing with the issues pertaining to interrelations between the internal status of Belarus' educational system and the international context (global trends in education), academic freedoms, isolation and education's securitisation or militarisation.

At the same time, despite some essential ideological differences between the representatives of these two camps, certain overlapping points are also to be discerned.

Above all, it relates to setting the education goals, principles and philosophy, which, at least at the level of declarations, remain in the official discourse leaning towards the general human and/or European principles and embed into the international context of trends and challenges (innovative development, human rights, principles of the society of knowledge, competition for the educational or labour markets, etc.). That being said, the official discourse is dominated by two of the three trends defined by the independent experts: (1) development of the labour market and professional competences; and (2) development of the solidarity and civic competences (which, to be true, are interpreted by the official discourse in a basically different manner – within the etatist, militarist and patriotist plane). The third trend is mentioned to a much lesser degree (and, most frequently, as a formality, only) – personal development and meeting individual needs. The frameworks of the topic “goals, principles and philosophy of education” marks the highest level of harmony between the official discourse and some representatives of the independent expert and civil societies in the area of egalitarian principles and “a priority of mass-scale, accessible and equitable education for all,” which, with some insignificant discrepancies as to their justification or radicalism levels, are juxtaposed to the elitist and meritocratic principles or to the competition-based and market-oriented relations.

There is also a certain overlapping to be found in the issues of education’s humanisation. Notably, the introduction of the inclusion notion into the new version of the Code of Education, the right to education enjoyed by the teenagers in detention and other norms fixed in the official legal regulatory documents within the last three years may be fully interpreted as a “common ground” in the two discourses. A similar situation exists in the institutional autonomy development: the superficial level is outwardly featured by similar intentions, notions or declarations, whereas a deeper conceptual level is marked by substantial or sometimes bitter controversies.

The overlapping and diverging items in the key messages of the events held by the independent experts and civil activists in exile vs the recurrent topics in the programmatic documents and reform blueprints drafted by the independent experts in exile

Despite the fact that the bulk of the issues or recurrent topics are placed in the overlapping category, just a meagre share of the key messages in the events has found its reflection in the programmatic documents and reform blueprints drafted by the independent experts in exile. These, in particular, include such blueprints for reform preparation in the sphere of education as the Belarusian Education on the Way to Transformations. Education Reform Preparation Roadmap (2021), Belarusian Education on the Way to Transformations. A Blueprint for Reform Preparation (2021), Belarusian Education on the Way to Transformations. Elaboration of the Life-Long Learning Strategy – Check-List (2021), Belarusian Education on the Way to Transformations. Digital Competence in a New Belarus (2021), Belarusian Education on the Way to Transformations. Education Management Reform (2021), Belarusian Education on the Way to Transformations. Creation of an Inclusive Educational Environment in Belarus' Schools – Reference Points (2021), The Office of Education for a New Belarus. De-Ideologization of Education in the Republic of Belarus – When and How Is It Possible? (2021), The Office of Education for a New Belarus. Education Management: from an Abnormal Bureaucratisation to a Decentralised and Transparent System (2021), The Institute for Development and Social Market in Belarus and Eastern Europe. The Legal Opportunities and Practical Implementation of Student Representation and Self-Government in the Republic of Belarus, Ukraine, Russia and Germany (2021), The Institute for Development and Social Market in Belarus and Eastern Europe. The Belarusian Higher Education System – Status, Problems and Reforming Vectors (2021), and The Institute for Development and Social Market in Belarus and Eastern Europe. Reformation of the Belarusian Educational System towards the Expansion of Institutional Autonomy and Self-Government Development at the Educational Institutions (2022). It is also worth mentioning that a fair share of the above projects fails to contain any specific diagnostics or reform proposals, but tend to limit by outlining the general areas of focus, which is why they may be characterised as political documents.

In practical terms, the following topics are not represented at the project drafting level at all:

- identification of education goals, principles and philosophy (apart from the analytical documents related to the UNESCO or UN objectives or principles, which reflect the position of just one independent experts' team);
- problem of education vs politics correlation;
- educational policy subjects;
- problem of relationship between the internal status of Belarus' educational system and the international context (global educational trends);
- isolation of the Belarusian educational sphere from the European educational area and its assimilation by the Russian federation's educational space.

CONCLUSIONS

This chapter underscores the evolving nature of educational discourse in Belarus, shaped by both internal political dynamics and external geopolitical events. It highlights the need for more engaged, comprehensive, and practical approaches to educational reform.

One notable challenge identified in this chapter is the difficulty in making civil society organizations and initiatives' research findings visible and accessible to a wider audience.

Despite the valuable insights generated by independent experts and civil activists, these findings often struggle to reach policymakers and the general public. This lack of visibility can hinder the translation of research into actionable policy changes.

Additionally, the chapter highlights the limited dialogue and discussions among stakeholders and the public in the context of educational reform. This gap in participatory processes represents a missed opportunity for engaging various perspectives and voices in shaping the future of education. It suggests the need for more inclusive and transparent decision-making processes that involve educators, students, parents, and civil society organizations.

Thematic gaps and faults in independent research point to potential growth areas in the field of educational reform in Belarus. These include:

- greater visibility and distribution of research findings, which can be achieved through collaboration with media outlets;
- stakeholder engagement, and participatory processes in shaping the future of education;
- development of accessible platforms for sharing research outcomes;
- systematic and longitudinal studies to provide a comprehensive understanding of the challenges and opportunities in Belarusian education.

The establishment of think tanks or analytical hub focused on educational research is seen as a means to consolidate expertise and promote evidence-based policymaking. It can serve as platforms for bringing together experts, policymakers, and civil society representatives to discuss and formulate effective strategies for educational reform.

FINAL THOUGHTS

The events of 2020 and 2023 have significantly influenced both governmental and non-governmental, civic approaches to education in Belarus. There is a noticeable national trend towards increased control, militarization, securitization, and isolation in Belarusian governmental policies. Non-governmental, civic initiatives, conversely, are increasingly advocating for a comprehensive overhaul of the educational system, reevaluating its purposes and principles. These trends are apparent to those working within the educational sector.

This document aims to highlight some less apparent conclusions and observations in four key areas:

- 1) research (governmental and civic organizations and initiatives),
- 2) the evolution of non-governmental civic educational initiatives post-2020,
- 3) proposed reform strategies,
- 4) similarities and gaps in public discourse, studies, and reform proposals by independent experts outside Belarus.

Governmental and civil society organizations and initiatives research

Government studies focus on education quality, directing significant funding towards monitoring student progress. However, following Belarus' exit from the PISA program, there's been a shift towards localized education quality research, often lacking international input. There is a trend of nationalizing education research methods, especially post-exclusion from PISA. This includes the National Education Quality Research, which is a localized version of PISA, conducted without international collaboration. Regular monitoring of academic progress is conducted, but the results are not publicly disclosed, limiting external analysis and critique.

Civil society organizations and initiatives research lacks access to direct student data, making it challenging to assess educational quality directly. Research efforts are more geared towards evaluating the effectiveness of education management and system functioning. These studies often use qualitative methods and open-source data to identify

and propose solutions to educational problems. Independent researchers often utilize qualitative methods, such as interviews or focus groups, and rely on open-source data for their studies. Notable is the absence of systemic research following the reduction of international involvement in Belarus. Independent research, in its turn, lacks systemic longitudinal studies. In addition to that, it struggles with visibility.

Growth opportunities:

- developing research infrastructure, such as databases, libraries, and online platforms to civil society researchers in conducting more extensive and sophisticated studies;
- enhancing the dissemination and generalization of existing studies to make them more accessible;
- improving the visibility and exposure of educational research through centralized publication platforms;
- developing training and support mechanisms for education researchers in Belarus.

Self-determination of independent civic educational initiatives post-2020

Post-2020 Belarusian civic educational initiatives typically emerged in response to specific challenges or community requests. These initiatives have gradually defined their core principles and goals, gaining expertise in their respective fields. Despite their evolution, there is a noticeable lack of collective action or unified vision for the broader Belarusian educational landscape.

Representatives of these initiatives are often unfamiliar with reform project contents but are willing to participate in democratic, feedback-supported discussions about educational goals and principles in Belarus. While these initiatives are open to collaboration and discussion, they tend to wait for external facilitation rather than initiating these dialogues themselves.

Growth opportunities:

- Building networks among various educational initiatives can help in sharing resources, expertise, and best practices. This collaborative approach can lead to a more unified vision and collective action in the educational sector.
- Implementing capacity-building programs for these initiatives can enhance their understanding and engagement with educational reforms. This could include training in policy analysis, advocacy, project management, and stakeholder engagement.
- Establishing forums or platforms where representatives of these initiatives can regularly meet, discuss, and align their goals and actions could encourage more proactive involvement and reduce reliance on external facilitation.
- Supporting research and development within these initiatives can aid them in becoming thought leaders and influencers in the educational reform process. This can also help bridge the gap in their familiarity with reform project contents.
- Increasing the visibility of these initiatives through media, public events, and collaborations with other civil society organizations can draw public attention and support, thus strengthening their role in educational reform.
- Establishing partnerships with international educational organizations and experts can provide these initiatives with new perspectives, resources, and methodologies that can be adapted to the Belarusian context.
- Assisting these initiatives in developing clear advocacy strategies can empower them to effectively communicate their goals and influence educational policies and practices.
- Encouraging leaders within these initiatives to take the initiative in starting dialogues and collaborations can foster a more dynamic and self-sufficient educational reform movement.

Reform projects by governmental and independent civic actors

Both sectors claim to base their reform proposals on humanism, equity, and development the students' potential. Common ground exists in areas like labor market development, civic competencies, and individual development, although these are interpreted differently by each side.

Governmental proposals display a contradiction between democratic principles in programmatic documents and hierarchical, militarized applications in practice. Exhibit a disconnect between democratic ideals in policy documents and actual authoritarian practices. Generally, they propose minor changes, suggesting the current system is largely effective.

Independent civic actors' proposals maintain democratic principles at both conceptual and implementation levels. They advocate for substantial systemic changes, maintaining democratic principles throughout the reform process. However, these proposals lack the detailed, actionable plans seen in governmental proposals, focusing more on broad strategies and system critiques.

Independent civic actors can benefit significantly from focusing on the creation of more detailed and actionable reform plans. This involves moving beyond broad strategies and critiques to develop comprehensive frameworks that outline specific steps, timelines, and measurable objectives for educational reform.

Growth opportunities:

- Collaborating with educational policy experts and consultants who have experience in drafting detailed reform policies could provide the necessary expertise to develop more structured and implementable plans.
- Grounding proposals in thorough research, including case studies and best practices from other educational systems, can help in formulating more concrete and viable reform strategies.
- Actively involving a wide range of stakeholders, including educators, students, parents, and policymakers, in the planning process can ensure that the proposals are comprehensive and address the needs and concerns of all parties.

- Looking at successful educational reform models from other countries and adapting their strategies to fit the Belarusian context can provide a blueprint for actionable change.
- Implementing pilot projects or smaller-scale initiatives as a testbed for larger reforms can provide valuable insights and data to refine and adjust the proposals.
- Developing a clear roadmap with implementation strategies, resource allocation, and timelines can make the proposals more pragmatic and feasible.
- Establishing mechanisms for regular review and feedback on the implementation of these proposals can help in making necessary adjustments and ensuring the reforms are on track.

Convergences and critical gaps in themes and proposals highlighted by independent experts in public forums, studies, and educational reform projects

Between 2020 and February 2022, over 20 events focused on Belarusian education and policies. These discussions, initially centered on Belarus' internal situation, shifted towards topics like the impact of the Ukraine war, the isolation of Belarusian education, and its integration into the Russian educational framework.

Analysis reveals ideological and methodological divergences between governmental and democratic civic discourses, especially on topics like academic freedom, educational isolation, and militarization. While there is some overlap in declared educational goals and principles, the official narrative often diverges in its interpretation and application.

A substantial portion of independent experts' and civic activists' work overlaps with official narratives but is not always reflected in programmatic documents or reform proposals. Many independent projects lack specific diagnostic or reform strategies, focusing instead on broader focus areas, which categorizes them more as political documents than practical blueprints.

To address the challenges faced by independent experts and civic activists in Belarus, whose work often lacks representation in programmatic documents or concrete reform strategies, several *growth opportunities* can be identified:

- Addressing underrepresented topics in project development, such as the correlation between education and politics, the relationship between Belarus' educational system and global trends, and the impact of Belarus' educational isolation.
- Developing stronger channels of communication and engagement with policymakers can help ensure that the perspectives of independent experts and activists are considered in the decision-making process.
- Emphasizing data-driven approaches in their research and proposals can lend more credibility and persuasiveness to their work, making it more likely to be incorporated into formal strategies and policies.
- Regularly documenting and publishing their findings and proposals in accessible formats can help in keeping a public record of their efforts, thereby increasing visibility and impact.

The recent shifts in both governmental and democratic actors' approaches to education in Belarus, accentuated by the events of 2020 and 2023, have highlighted *a critical need for a dedicated think tank*. This entity would serve as a central coordinating body, focusing on analyzing the current educational landscape, developing policy solutions for ongoing challenges within Belarus and the diaspora, and preparing for comprehensive reform of the Belarusian education system.

This think tank emerges as a necessity, not merely an option, in the current climate of increased control, militarization, securitization, and isolation within the Belarusian education system, contrasted with the civil society push for a radical restructuring and reevaluation of educational goals and principles.

Governmental research, focusing on the quality of education and heavily funded for monitoring student progress, lacks international collaboration and openness, limiting its scope and application. Democratic actors' research, though rich in qualitative assessments, is restricted by limited access to direct student data and struggles with visibility and systemic depth. This disparity in research approaches and outputs underlines the urgent need for a think tank, which, thanks to its institutional memory,

could harmonize, collect, preserve, develop and popularize research in the field of education, and become a public platform for communication between all stakeholders.

Such a think tank would serve multiple critical functions:

- *Accumulation and systematization of research.* It would provide a platform for consolidating research efforts, both governmental and non-governmental, ensuring that studies are comprehensive, systematic, and accessible. This systematization is vital for overcoming the current fragmentation in educational research and for building a coherent understanding of the challenges and opportunities within the Belarusian educational landscape.
- *Training and support for researchers.* In an environment where educational research faces multiple challenges, including limited access to data and a lack of visibility, the think tank could offer essential training and support to researchers. This would not only enhance the quality of research but also encourage more in-depth and innovative studies into the various aspects of education in Belarus.
- *Policy development and advocacy.* Beyond research, the think tank would play a pivotal role in policy development and advocacy. By synthesizing research findings, it could provide informed recommendations for educational reforms and advocate for these changes at both the governmental and societal levels.
- *Public engagement and dialogue.* As a neutral and authoritative entity, the think tank could facilitate public engagement and dialogue on educational issues. This role is particularly important in fostering a collaborative approach to reform, involving various stakeholders including educators, students, parents, and policymakers.
- *International collaboration and benchmarking.* Given the isolation of the Belarusian education system, the think tank could establish vital links with international educational bodies and experts. This would not only bring in global perspectives but also help benchmark Belarusian education against international standards and practices.

The establishment of an independent educational think tank would serve as a hub for research, policy development, and public engagement, playing a crucial role in steering the much-needed reform of the Belarusian education system.

APPENDIX. LIST OF LEGAL REGULATORY DOCUMENTS

1. The 2021 to 2025 *Social Security State Programme* (adopted under Resolution by the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Belarus of 21.12.2020 No. 748)
2. The 2021 to 2025 *Labour Market and Employment Promotion State Programme* (adopted under Resolution by the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Belarus of 30.12.2020 No. 777)
3. The 2021 to 2025 *Education and Youth Policies State Programme* (adopted under Resolution by the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Belarus of 29.01.2021 No. 57)
4. The Code of Education of the Republic of Belarus (2022)
5. The Development Concept of the Republic of Belarus Educational System till 2030 (2021)
6. The National Strategy for a Sustainable Socio-Economic Development of the Republic of Belarus for the Period till 2030 (adopted by the Presidium of the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Belarus, Minutes of Meeting of 2.05.2017 No. 10)
7. On the 2021 to 2025 *Education and Youth Policies State Programme*
8. Education in the Republic of Belarus. Brochure. Minsk, 2021
9. Education in the Republic of Belarus. Statistical compendium. Minsk, 2019
10. Education in the Republic of Belarus. 2019/2020 academic year. Minsk, 2019
11. Education in the Republic of Belarus as of the beginning of the 2022/2023 academic year. Brochure
12. Activity Programme of the Government of the Republic of Belarus for the Period till 2025 (adopted under Resolution by the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Belarus of 24.12.2020 No. 758)
13. 2022 to 2025 Programme of the Republic of Belarus Population's Patriotic Upbringing (adopted under Resolution by the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Belarus No. 773 of 29.12.2021)
14. The 2021 to 2025 Programme of Socio-Economic Development of the Republic of Belarus (adopted under Edict by the President of the Republic of Belarus of 29.07.2021 No. 292)

15. Development Strategy of the State Youth Policies of the Republic of Belarus till 2030
(adopted under Resolution by the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Belarus of
19.06.2021 No. 349)
16. The Aggregate Report on State Programme Implementation in 2021