

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

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### EXTENDED SUMMARY

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The paper, prepared within the framework of the project “VASMINOCH: 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 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 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 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 1 "SECTORAL RESEARCH ANALYSIS"

The educational research landscape is marked by fragmentation and a lack of a systematic approach. The absence of an independent dedicated institution for comprehensive academic research leads to data that are often probabilistic and fragmentary. Various actors, including civil society organizations and initiatives, and independent researchers, contribute to this research, yet their efforts lack coordination and long-term vision.

### *Key findings:*

- The Belarusian education system is studied by a range of actors, including government institutions, international organizations, civil society organizations and initiatives, and individual researchers. However, there's no body overseeing or synthesizing this research.

- Governmental institutions allocate annual budgets for applied research in education, but specific research areas are not clearly defined. National institutions like the National Institute of Education conduct research on secondary education, yet there's a lack of transparency and accessibility in data.
- International bodies like UNICEF, UNESCO, and the World Bank conduct educational research in Belarus, but their presence has diminished post-2020. Belarusian independent research organizations, while few, provide insights into various education-related aspects but often treat education as a secondary area of interest.
- Civil society organizations and initiatives play a role in researching various educational aspects, such as lifelong learning, inclusive education, and policy reforms. However, their impact is limited by the scope and reach of their work.
- The research in higher education is mainly focused on issues like academic freedom, repression, and reform proposals, with entities like the Public Bologna Committee playing a significant role. However, research intensity has declined after 2020.
- Vocational education remains under-researched and poorly understood, with only occasional international studies highlighting its inefficiencies. Pre-school and non-formal adult education also lack comprehensive research, with limited data available on their coverage and quality.
- There is a notable lack of longitudinal research studies necessary to monitor and analyze the primary trends within Belarus's education system. 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. Belarus's education system faces a significant shortage of longitudinal studies to track and analyze key trends. Overall, the fragmented and restricted

nature of educational research in Belarus hinders a comprehensive understanding of the system's dynamics and challenges.

## 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 documents and the actual practices 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.

The chapter presents an analytical overview of the official program documents in the Belarusian education sector from 2020 to 2023. It highlights a stark contrast between the strategic objectives outlined in these documents and the realities of their implementation.

### *Key findings:*

- The legal and regulatory documents in Belarusian education are divided into two groups: programmatic/strategic documents and operational/momentary documents. The former includes broad goals and principles, while the latter consists of more immediate, practical directives.
- Despite aligning with modern democratic educational standards in theory, programmatic documents like The Development Concept of the Belarusian Educational System till 2030 and The Code of Education fail to translate these

ideals into practice. They face issues such as limited institutional autonomy, lack of academic freedoms, and the use of education for state ideological indoctrination.

- Operational documents tend to reinforce an authoritarian and rigid governance system, restrict academic freedom, and increase ideological indoctrination at both institutional and individual levels.
- The strategic documents propose international alignment in education, but practical actions show increasing isolation. Notable examples include suspension of Belarus' participation in the Bologna process and the termination of educational agreements with countries like Poland and Ukraine.
- The management system, as depicted in the strategic documents, emphasizes government control over public participation. The educational governance structure is highly centralized and lacking in autonomy and self-governance.
- The strategic goal of equitable access to education contrasts sharply with the reality. The closure of private educational institutions and the commercialization of higher education sectors, particularly state universities, indicate a deviation from the declared objectives.

### CHAPTER III: "COMPARATIVE STUDY OF REFORM DISCOURSES "

There is a growing divergence between governmental and civil society reform programs. While government policies trend towards isolation and ideologization of education, civic actors emphasize open, liberalized, and European-aligned educational reforms. Primary areas of change encompass shifting from a vertical, authoritarian system of education management to a horizontal, democratic model, emphasizing the Belarusian language, moving towards internationalization and Westernization as opposed to isolation and Russification, fostering the growth of private secondary education, and aligning higher education with the principles of the Bologna process. This divergence highlights the complexities and challenges in reconciling different visions for the future of Belarusian education.

Chapter III provides a detailed analysis of the planned reforms and actual changes in the Belarusian educational system between September 2020 and July 2023, contrasting official government initiatives with those proposed by civic communities, associations, and political parties. The chapter highlights areas of consensus and contention, revealing the complex dynamics between governmental and non-governmental educational discourses.

*Key findings:*

- *Governmental Reforms and Policies.* The chapter identifies three dimensions in the Belarusian official discourse on educational reforms: political declarations in programmatic documents, draft, and operational, legal, regulatory documents, and practical changes under external duress. A significant trend is the isolation of Belarusian education from global educational systems and international support programs, evidenced by withdrawal from the PISA and EHEA and the end of financial support from entities like the World Bank. Another notable trend is the increasing integration and assimilation of the Belarusian education system with the Russian educational space, promoted by Russia's active policies. The chapter details several specific reforms, such as the expansion of contractual target training, amplification of military and patriotic elements in education, incorporation of remote learning, and introduction of inclusion as a significant principle.
- *Civic Actors Discourse and Reform Proposals.* The chapter reviews a range of reform blueprints proposed by non-governmental actors, including civic and educational initiatives and research centers. These proposals focus on various aspects of education, from digital competence and inclusion to life-long learning and education management reform. Some proposals aim for a total restructuring of the educational system, emphasizing de-ideologization and de-bureaucratization. Others focus on specific, individual changes within the existing system. The chapter notes challenges in making these unofficial documents visible to the public and the lack of active public dialogue on these reforms.

## 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 potential for broader engagement if the right collaborative and communicative conditions are met.

The chapter presents a comprehensive portrait of non-formal educational organizations and initiatives in Belarus and abroad post-2020. Through semi-structured interviews with representatives of various initiatives, the chapter explores their objectives, vision, attitude towards educational reforms, political positioning, and their potential role as educational political agents.

### *Key findings:*

- The initiatives, ranging from diaspora education centers to educational media, have diverse operational goals like building civil society through education, aiding emigrant Belarusian children, and supporting repressed educational sector victims. Despite potential changes in Belarus's political landscape, these initiatives intend to continue their work, adapting their focus areas as needed.
- Most initiatives lack a structured vision for the future of Belarusian education. However, they share common principles and goals, and occasionally discuss the future informally. These organizations generally lack a comprehensive image of the future but have a set of consensus-based goals and principles.

- There is a varied awareness of educational reform plans among initiative representatives. While some are vaguely aware of discussions in diasporas or have a negative view of official government reform documents, others are informed but critical of the reform efforts led by Śviatlana Cichanoŭskaja’s Office and the Coordination Council of Belarus.
- Reasons for limited participation in reform planning include safety concerns, focus on immediate issues, a sense of their opinions being undervalued, and perceived inaccessibility of reform developers. However, these initiatives express willingness to engage in reform discussions under conditions of equality, open platforms, and genuine consideration of their inputs.
- There is a high level of agreement on goals and principles for Belarusian education among the initiatives, emphasizing freedom, choice, Belarusian language, global integration, holistic approach, democracy, and economic relevance. They advocate for decentralization, de-bureaucratization, and de-ideologization in education management.
- Most initiatives currently do not engage in political activities but express readiness to participate actively or in advisory capacities under certain conditions like democratic communication and practical applicability of their ideas.

## 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 non-governmental 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 chapter provides an analysis of public events and discussions related to educational reform in Belarus from 2020 to July 2023. It contrasts the key messages and themes from these events with the recurrent topics in governmental programmatic documents and reform projects. The study divides the period into two phases – pre and post-the onset of the war in Ukraine – and assesses the impact of these events on educational discourse.

*Key findings:*

- The analysis divides the study period into two phases: from 2020 to the onset of the war in Ukraine and from the beginning of the war to July 2023. It notes a shift in the content emphasis and intensity of discussions during these periods.
- In the pre-war period, discussions were largely influenced by internal Belarusian dynamics and the aftermath of the 2020 presidential elections. Key themes included the identification of education goals, the interrelation between education and politics, critical evaluation of the education system, and the need for reform.
- The outbreak of the war in Ukraine has shifted focus to issues like the war's effect on education, Belarus's isolation from European educational frameworks, the risk of the Belarusian education system being absorbed by Russia's education system, and the increasing security focus and militarization within Belarus's educational sector.
- Comparative analysis reveals both overlaps and divergences between the critical messages from independent public events and the government programmatic documents. Common ground is found in areas like education goals and humanization, while stark differences are evident in perspectives on academic freedoms, isolation, and militarization.
- Public events and discussions, although covering many overlapping themes with reform blueprints, often lack specific diagnostics or proposals for reform. This indicates a need for more comprehensive and practical approaches in the reform blueprints.

## “FINAL THOUGHTS”

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.

The "Final Thoughts" section encapsulates the study's fundamental discoveries and outlines potential areas for development.

### *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, for civil society researchers to conduct 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 communicate their goals and influence educational policies and practices effectively.
- 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 the development of 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 champion significant systemic transformations,

advocating for the shift from a vertically structured, authoritarian educational management system to a horizontally integrated, democratic one. They emphasize the importance of the Belarusian language, support internationalization, and Westernization over isolation and Russification, and uphold 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 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 centralized think tank.

Such a think tank would serve multiple critical functions:

- *Centralization 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 centralization 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.