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Current trends in the development of the education sector in the Republic of Belarus

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After the failure of the 2020 Belarusian Democratic Revolution, the political regime in the country rapidly turned from authoritarian to totalitarian. This political trend is clearly seen in developments in the sphere of education. There are several processes that indicate the trend is taking place: a continuation of severe political repressions, political indoctrination, militarization, and the elimination of all forms of non-governmental education institutions. These are accompanied by Russification and an overall decline of the system of education in general.

I. Political repressions

After 2020, professionals in the sphere of education were – and still are – subjected to large-scale repression: the deprivation of liberty, politically motivated dismissals, intimidation, a ban on the profession, etc. According to the human rights organization "Honest University", at the end of October 2023, 5 representatives of the academic community were recognized as political prisoners, 203 people were dismissed for political reasons, and 61 were threatened.ⁱ This data only partially reflects the reality. It is known that a significant number of repressed university professors and teachers deliberately avoid making information about themselves public based on the reasoning that this may entail new punishments. A number of victims of repression reported that they could not be hired even as cleaners. An analysis of official statistics indicates an extraordinary (by 7.9%, or 1,550 people) reduction in the number of professors of higher educational institutions in 2021-2022. In Minsk alone, the reduction amounted to 900 people. The number of school teachers declined by 6,265 persons (5.62%) in the same period.ⁱⁱ An analysis of internal documents of the Belarusian State University opened by the Belarusian organization "CyberPartisans BY" indicates that at this university alone, about 500 employees (18.5% of all those employed) became victims of political repression.ⁱⁱⁱ

In the leading universities, the position of "deputy rector for security" was introduced, to which KGB officers were appointed. Moreover, in a number of cases, former military personnel were appointed as directors of scientific institutes. In one particular case, the best lyceum in the country was headed by a former teacher at the KGB Training

Institute. This indicates the direct subordination of the academic sphere to the security services, which makes the repression particularly systematic and special. A significant number of representatives of university administrations – including rectors, deans, and the heads of departments and laboratories – are involved in the organization and implementation of pressure on the academic community. It is known that the vice-deans for ideology have an obligation to monitor social networks. Ideologically “wrong” posts and even likes could be treated as grounds for dismissal. The same roles at schools are played by the directors and deputy directors for ideology. The repressions were carried out in such a way that the consequences involved minimal controversy, including at the international level.

II. Political indoctrination

After 2020, a significant increase in the level of political indoctrination in the entire education system is evident. Lukashenka’s regime does not have a clearly defined ideology. Its role is played by historical narratives, primarily related to World War II. The cornerstone of this at the university level is the compulsory course “The History of Belarusian Statehood”, which was introduced in 2022 and occupies the same place as courses like “The History of the Communist Party” or “Marxism-Leninism” did in the Soviet Union.^{iv} In 2023, a series of textbooks for schools was published entitled *Genocide of the Belarusian people during the Great Patriotic War*.^v The textbooks were prepared by employees of the Prosecutor General’s Office – not by professional educators and historians. This is a typical example of the instrumentalization of history. It represents a modernized version of the old Soviet narrative about World War II, with its inherent distortion of facts. The Ministry of Education has issued special recommendations on the use of textbooks, starting with primary schoolchildren. These include the use of textbooks in teaching reading, music and visual arts.^{vi} There are known cases where presentations on the topic of genocide were held in kindergartens.

III. Militarization

Militarization is being carried out hand-in-hand with the ideological indoctrination. By September 2021, the position of “head of military-patriotic education” was returned to schools in Belarus. Since 2023, the course “Initial military training” has been compulsory for schoolchildren in older classes. This includes the study of weapons and rules for handling them, the basics of shooting, and the use of hand grenades. In addition, high school students “should learn to operate in modern combined arms combat, study the composition and armament of a motorized rifle squad on an infantry fighting vehicle [and] the engineering equipment of a soldier’s position, and learn what a single trench is.”^{vii} The same course will be introduced at the university level in September 2024. In February 2024 all rectors of the state universities passed through short military trainings, which was widely reported on Belarusian official media. After 2020, a network of about 600 summer camps for military training was established.^{viii} It is known that not only Belarusian children but also Ukrainian children deported from regions occupied by Russia are sent to them. A number of symbolic actions have also taken place. For example, the lyceum at the Belarusian State University was named after Felix Dzerzhinsky, the creator of the Soviet secret services.

IV. Elimination of the non-governmental sector of education

The Lukashenka regime is taking consistent steps to establish a complete state monopoly in the field of education. In 2020-2023, 29 of 35 private schools were closed.^{ix} In 2024, it was announced that only one in four non-governmental universities will remain open. Among the closed institutions is the oldest private university of law, established in 1990. In 2024 it was also announced that only state educational institutions have the right to organize summer recreational holidays for children. It was reported that the initiative for such a ban came from Prosecutor General Andrei Shved. In his opinion, individual entrepreneurs allegedly cannot ensure the safety of children, do not develop “patriotic qualities” in them, and people undesirable to the authorities work in the camps themselves.^x

V. Russification

During the entire period of Lukashenka’s era, the Russian educational system was in full swing. From 2005 to 2020, the share of university students who attended education in the Belarusian language decreased from 0.9% to 0.09%, and the corresponding share of students in secondary schools decreased from 23% to 10.7%. Authorities blocked all attempts to establish higher educational institutions, schools, and kindergartens with the Belarusian language of instruction. The Belarusian-speaking population was converted into a discriminated minority, which was fixed in UN documents as part of a special report on the human rights situation in Belarus.^{xi11} After 2020, the Belarusian authorities also closed all educational institutions for Polish and Lithuanian minorities, including schools and language courses.

Russification is accompanied by an unprecedented scale of activity of Russian soft power institutions in Belarus. “Rossotrudnichestvo” has five branches in Belarus. Usually, the number of branches does not exceed two. In Belarus “Rossotrudnichestvo” is focused on providing scholarships for study in Russian universities, which covers the full course of tuition at the BA level. Since 2019, the number of scholarships increased 18 times over, reaching 1,300 per year.^{xii} The “Gorchakov Public Diplomacy Support Fund” opened a brunch in Minsk in 2020, providing a number of scholarships for Belarusian researchers, which filled the scholarship gap that appeared after Western funds stopped collaborating with Belarusian official higher educational and research institutions. The “Russkiy Mir Foundation” also operates at the university and high school levels.

VI. The decline of the system of education

Large-scale repression has led to a severe shortage of qualified teachers at all levels of the education system. There are many unofficial reports that courses at universities are taught by people without academic degrees, subjects are taught by specialists from other fields of knowledge, and in schools some teachers have been replaced by

university students. And there are a few cases of graduate pupils teaching classes in elementary school.

According to a report by the Ministry of Education, only 30% of university professors engage in scientific research. There is not a single Belarusian university in the Shanghai and Times Higher Education university rankings in 2024. Belarusian universities do appear in the QS World University Rankings, where the best position (at number 387) is held by Belarusian State University.^{xiii}

In the 2024 Academic Freedom Index, Belarus dropped to 176th position on a list of 179 countries.^{xiv} More and more Belarusian students prefer to get higher education abroad. Within one year – from 2022 to 2023 – the number of university students in Belarus dropped in almost 25% (by 56,000 people).^{xv}

Conclusion

After 2020, the Belarusian education system underwent significant changes, and it has been turning into an instrument of total control over students and teachers, ideological indoctrination, preparation for war, and Russification. Educational tasks as such play a secondary role, which causes a degradation of the education system as a whole.



ENDNOTES

- i Репрессии против студентов и преподавателей в Беларуси. Как уничтожают свободу в вузах и кто за этим стоит [Repressions against students and teachers in Belarus. How freedom is destroyed in universities and who is behind it.]. <https://hu-repressions.honest-people.by/ru>
- ii Calculated by the author on the basis of: Национальный статистический комитет Республики Беларусь. “Списочная численность работников, выполнявших научные исследования на конец года [Number of employees performing scientific research at the end of the year].” N.d. <http://dataportal.belstat.gov.by/Indicators/Preview?key=148631>
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- iv Марзальюк, І.А. and Краско, Г.Г. “Гісторыя беларускай дзяржаўнасці : вучэбны дапаможнік для студэнтаў устаноў вышэйшай адукацыі [History of Belarusian statehood: textbook for students of higher education institutions].” 2022. Мінск: Адукацыя і выхаванне [Minsk: Education and upbringing].
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- vii Звезда. “В школах со следующего учебного года введут начальную военную подготовку [Primary military training will be introduced in schools from the next academic year].” November 9, 2022. <https://zviazda.by/ru/news/20221109/1667991070-v-shkolah-so-sleduyushchego-uchebnogo-goda-vvedut-nachalnuyu-voennuyu>
- viii Сідарок, І. “В Беларуси растет спрос на военно-патриотические лагеря [Demand for military-patriotic camps is growing in Belarus].” *Звезда*, July 19, 2023. <https://zviazda.by/ru/news/20230719/1689753239-v-belarusi-rastet-spros-na-voenno-patrioticheskie-lagerya>
- ix CityDog. “«Сейчас в школах родителям не доверяют: за турникет не заходить, вопросы классной не задавать». Экспертка – о том, что происходит с частными и госшколами в Беларуси [‘Parents are not trusted in schools now: do not go behind the turnstile, do not ask questions to the class teacher’. Expert on what is happening to private and state schools in Belarus].” August 30, 2023. <https://citydog.io/post/chastnye-shkoly-bel/>
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- xiii QS Top Universities. “QS World University Rankings 2025: Top global universities.” June 4, 2024. <https://www.topuniversities.com/world-university-rankings?tab=indicators&countries=by>
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Attachment.

1. Dr. Irina Kiturko, Rector of Grodno State University, at a military training facility, February 2024

