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Education in Belarus

Some elements of the Soviet system have recently been reintroduced into Belarus' education system. Especially worrying was the introduction of ideological control and the compulsory job assignment system.

Kindergartens

The kindergarten is a place where young children make their first nearly independent step into the future. Children in Belarus usually go to kindergarten at the age of three to six.

Although the Ministry of Education claims that education services are free of charge, parents begin spending considerable amounts on their children's education starting with kindergartens, which offer optional classes for fees. In addition, they pay for meals provided there.

Parents also have problems placing their children in kindergartens with instruction in Belarusian as there are few Belarusian-language preschool establishments in the country.

Secondary schools

About 70 percent of the first-graders were taught in Belarusian before the 1995 referendum that elevated Russian to the status of an official language. At present, 20.5 percent of pupils are taught in Belarusian-language classes.

Minsk has the lowest percentage of children educated in Belarusian. The situation is also worrying in the Mahilou and Homiel regions. For instance, there is not a single Belarusian-language class in the Mahilou region, according to the Franciřak Skaryna Belarusian Language Society.

Apart from that, the Ministry of Education earlier this year allowed schools that use Russian for teaching most subjects to also teach Belarusian history in Russian. The number of Belarusian-language pupils is shrinking because children at Belarusian schools are purposely transferred to Russian-language classes. Senior grade students are mostly instructed in Russian so that they will have no problem understanding ter-

minology when they take entrance exams and study at universities.

Indoctrination remains part of school curricular. Every school has a deputy principal for ideology and education responsible for shaping students' outlook. As during the Soviet time, pupils are obliged to join the Soviet-style government-supervised children's organizations of Little Octobrists and Young Pioneers. Later, they are forced to join the Belarusian National Youth Union (BRSM), which has the same functions and powers as the Soviet Union's Young Communist League, also known as *Komsomol*. There are BRSM branches in every school, formed of both pupils and teachers.

Those who refuse to join the BRSM are viewed with suspicion, considered "problem children" and are often summoned to "ideologically-mature" mentors for indoctrination sessions.

Belarus has a 12-grade secondary school system. On completion of the 10-year basic school, students can continue education at technical and vocational schools. Pre-university instruction is provided in the 11th and 12th grades.

Most secondary schools have some specialization or several subjects taught in depth. Despite teachers' hard work,

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Leaving a school.

school leavers have almost no chances of passing university entrance exams without additional training. The content of graduation tests and university entrance requirements differ so much that the situation has almost got out hand in the last few years: senior pupils often skip classes to attend tuition sessions with private teachers. A school leaver's chances of getting into a university largely depend on his or her personal effort and the parents' ability to pay for private instructors.

Rural and small town school leavers are at a disadvantage because of a lack of qualified teachers and poor access to technical aids as compared to the capital. Although rural school leavers enjoy preferential treatment during enrollment as tighter selection criteria apply to city school leavers, pupils from rural areas make up just 15 percent of the to-

tal number of first-year students. Most rural school leavers apply to less prestigious faculties and departments, often relying on references from local authorities that require them to return to the area they came from on graduating from university and work there for several years.

Secondary school leavers take tests in three subjects, required for applying to a university. They are given a certificate which is attached to their application. Universities require applicants to pass one or two additional exams depending on the selected major subject.

Much like 30 to 40 years ago, admission depends on secondary school grade point average which is added to points scored in final secondary school tests.

Like before the collapse of the Soviet Union, school leavers can apply to one university only. The government an-

nulled a regulation that allowed applicants to apply to more than one higher education establishment.

In a recent incident that shocked both parents and applicants, a top-scoring applicant was not granted admission to Minsk State Linguistic University. The university did not have a vacant seat for the boy because of a large number of applicants entitled for preferential treatment, which usually means that a lower pass mark is applied during the selection process of applicants who produce referrals given by local authorities, or those who win prizes at science Olympiads.

The flawed selection system often rejects talented and smart applicants who then have to pay a tuition fee, while government-allocated stipends go toward mediocre students.

University students

There are 53 higher education establishments in Belarus, including 11 private ones. A total of 76,700 students were enrolled in the summer of 2006 with 46,200 attending regular courses and the rest studying by correspondence or taking night classes. Of the 76,700 students, 31,400 study at the government's expense, while most students pay a tuition fee.

Each state university enrolls a certain number of students who study free of charge and receive a monthly stipend, and students who pay a tuition fee. Fees range between \$800 and \$2,500 a year depending on the university and the major subject.

Students learning via correspondence or those taking night classes pay between \$300 and \$750 a year.

For several years in succession, the number of students who pay for instruction has exceeded the number of those who do not.

For instance, in the 2006/2007 academic year, the universities are expected to enroll 74,400 students. More than 40,000 will pay for tuition and more than 30,000 will be instructed at the government's expense. In Belarusian State University, the country's top university, those who pay tuition will constitute a majority for the first time this year.

Paradoxically, the constitution declares the right to free education, but most university students either pay tuition fees or are given a compulsory job assignment on graduation as a way of recovering the money that the government had spent on their education. One cannot call the education system free because of the tuition fees and job assignment practices.

The much-advertised student credit does not withstand criticism. It is very difficult to qualify for a soft loan, while most second-year students have no opportunity to take any loan.

Not only did Belarusian State University raise tuition fees (at some departments they jumped by as much as \$400) this year, but it also eliminated



Aleś Čyhir, teacher from Babrujsk, was fired because of his political activity.

discounted rates that had been offered to some students.

Each student taught at the government's expense is given a job and required to work at the designated place for two years to reimburse the government for his or her education. Otherwise, university graduates are required to pay the government around \$5,000 to recompense its expenses. Despite the fact that first-year students sign contracts to that effect starting in the 2005/2006 academic year, the reimbursement requirement applies to all students. This measure has proven effective especially with regard to medical graduates — more than 300 were given jobs this year in the area contaminated as a result of the Chernobyl nuclear accident.

In general, secondary school leavers from rural areas have access only to the least prestigious professions, but they are happy with the opportunity to live in a city. Students from the rural areas do not care about the compulsory job assignment, they have no ambitions and their self-esteem is low. They are an easy target for the BRSM.

Students from the capital are different — parents occasionally take them abroad; they are taught in elite schools and by private teachers.

Secondary school leavers do not normally consider opportunities of studying abroad. This is however offered by European Humanities University in Lithuania and Poland's Kalinouski scholarship program. The Kalinouski program was launched in the wake of the 2006 presidential election to help Belarusian students expelled from universities for taking part in anti-government protests.