

Education in Belarus

Context

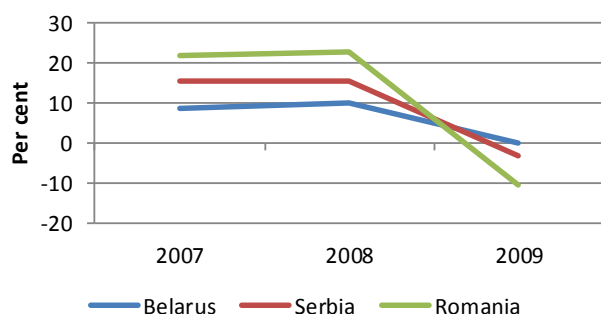
Belarus continues to improve access to pre-primary education and is committed to examining the access and quality of schooling at the primary and secondary level.

Impact of the economic crisis

The global economic crisis seriously impacted the Republic of Belarus. External debt in the nation rose to five times its international reserves and the national bank devalued the rouble by 20 per cent. Export demands decreased by 47.7 per cent despite a 32.4 per cent reduction in prices. According to the National Statistical Committee of the Republic of Belarus, there was 0.2 per cent real annual growth in GDP in 2009, compared with 10.2 per cent growth in GDP in 2008. The GDP per capita (PPP) in 2009 was US\$11,600 (see Figure 1).

Belarus continues to make headway in the social sector in spite of the economic crisis. Unemployment is estimated at 0.9 per cent, one of the lowest unemployment rates in the world. The country has made significant efforts to reduce poverty in recent years. In households with children, poverty rates decreased from 47.8 per cent in 2000 to 8.6 per cent in 2008. Despite this progress, some populations remained highly vulnerable to poverty, including families with three or more children, single-parent households as well as families with disabled people on social pensions. As of 2009, 3.7 per cent of people live in poverty, according to the National Statistical Committee of Belarus. Reports of temporary leave and increased part-time employment have surfaced as a result of the economic crisis, but overall, unemployment rates are holding steady. Inflation rates increased from 8.4 per cent in 2007 to 13 per cent in 2009. Belarus has a Gini index of 0.279, just below the EU Member state average before May 2004 of .3¹. On the Human Development Index (HDI), Belarus ranks 68 out of 182, with an HDI of 8.26.

Figure 1: Real growth in GDP in Belarus, 2007–2009



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Education reform

Education is a national priority in the Republic of Belarus. The government reform agenda focuses on increasing access to all educational services and improving quality at each level. Some notable reform efforts include:

- The Governmental Programme for Basic Secondary Education Development (2007–2016)
- The Common Educational Policy, a national reform focused on secondary and general education
- The introduction of patriotic, civil and moral education in secondary education
- On July 17, 2008, the transition to a 12-year educational system ended and the 11-year programme was restored
- A Vocational Education Law in 2003
- The opening of 19 new early learning centres in 2010–2011 (10 kindergartens and 9 schools) with modern equipment

Access

According to the Belarus government, access to education is free of charge up through secondary school, and higher education is subsidized. Informal fees, such as paying for textbooks, training aids and supplies, are often required at all levels.

Early childhood education

Preschool is recognized as a priority by the Belarus government. It is viewed as the optimal environment for the physical and psychological development of children. In recent years, Belarus has made significant progress to improve enrolment rates. As of 2009, 79.1 per cent of children under 6 years old were enrolled in preschool, while 91.4 per cent of children 3–6 years of age were enrolled in preschool, including 100 per cent of 5 year-old children. In rural areas, however, preschool enrolment drops to as low as 53.4 per cent. Kindergartens and nurseries are free, but parents are required to contribute to meal costs. Reforms in preschool are underway that are

aimed at involving families, increasing flexibility to accommodate different family demands, revising the context and making centres more comfortable and welcoming to children.

Primary school enrolment has remained relatively steady over the past few years. The primary school net enrolment rate (NER) in Belarus is 98.2 per cent. Between 1999 and 2007, the percentage of students enrolled in primary institutions dropped from 0.1 per cent to 0.05 per cent. According to the *Global Monitoring Report 2007*, approximately 36,000 children are out of school. This figure likely reflects a range of reasons related to primary health and disability, as opposed to a lack of access. While the transition between primary and secondary education is 99.2 per cent, the NER in secondary school is only 89 per cent. The teacher-to-student ratio of 16 to 1 is about average for the region.

Belarus ranks fourth in the region (alongside Hungary) in gross enrolment in tertiary education, which stands at 69 per cent. The gender ratio at this level favours girls, with a gender parity index of 1.30. Both public and private universities are available, and admission is based on the results of a centralized testing system.

Children with disabilities

Belarus has 30 special schools and 53 supplementary (boarding) schools for children with disabilities. Children with physical and mental disabilities are integrated into mainstream classrooms, but the quality of inclusion varies. As of 2008, there were 5,833 integrated classes that included 56 per cent of children with developmental delays. There are also 142 specialized centres serving approximately 3,000 disabled children, according to UNICEF Belarus. Children with disabilities are also allowed to be homeschooled. Social discrimination against people with disabilities remains a concern.

Educational challenges facing adolescents and youth

Secondary schooling aims to provide young people with the skills for a changing society. Many adolescents are critical of the school system, suggesting that outdated equipment and weak preparation limit access to higher education. The minimum working age is 16, but with written consent from a parent, a child can begin working at age 14. Potato harvesting is the exception, and all students are required to participate. Trafficking is a concern for girls under 25, due to a lack of economic opportunities. The government has made some efforts to combat trafficking, but greater focus is needed.

The rate of HIV infections among teens is falling, which may be in part due to life-skills education courses being offered at more than half of schools in Belarus. The courses promote healthy lifestyle choices. There is also increase medical counselling available for young people.

The 'Chernobyl generation'

Twenty four years after the fallout from a radioactive blast at a nuclear power plant in Ukraine, children in Belarus are still feeling the impacts. As of January 2009, 256,617 children, or 14.4 per cent of the total child population in Belarus, lived in the affected areas (Gomel, Mogilev and Brest oblasts). These boys and girls, many of whom were not even alive during the blast, are now more susceptible to illness due to contamination in their region. Iodine deficiency is the leading cause of mental retardation. It can lower a child's IQ by 10 per cent to 15 per cent, resulting in poorer school performance.

Those with the economic means tend to leave the area for fear of passing along birth defects to their future children; those without the economic means have fewer options. Approximately 1.1 per cent of the GDP is spent on social services related to the accident.

Equity

Inequities surface around gender, geographical location and minority status. The Third National Action Plan on Gender Equality for 2008–2010, and the 2007–2010 National Programme on Demographic Security focused on improving gender parity in Belarus. The government continues to work on the transformation of gender stereotypes. In pre-primary and primary school, girls are slightly underrepresented, comprising 48 per cent of the student population. By secondary school, however, the gap is almost non-existent. The Millennium Development Goals Belarus Report 2010 notes that the gender ratio is 1 to 1 for secondary school. Girls' attendance in secondary schools did drop slightly, from 49.5 per cent in 2000 to 49.2 per cent in 2009, but in tertiary education, the proportion of girls rises to 56.76 per cent. One explanation for this is that boys are more likely to seek early employment opportunities. Women have higher levels of education than men (58 per cent of women obtain postsecondary education, and 66 per cent have a specialized secondary education), but women continue to earn lower salaries and have fewer opportunities to be promoted than males. While Belarus' laws calls for equal pay for equal work, in reality, this is not enforced.

There also exists a rural-urban gap in both primary and secondary schools. Students in urban centres continue to outperform their peers in remote locations. The quality of education is better in urban schools than in remote areas.

A new equity issue emerged with the recent influx of refugees in Belarus. UNICEF Belarus reports that at the end of 2009, Belarus accepted 8,456

migrants, including 580 recognized refugees, 77 asylum seekers and 7,799 stateless persons (no age or gender data is available). Of the refugees, 160 were children (54 per cent girls and 46 per cent boys) and 70 per cent were Afghan. The children have varying levels of education and often do not speak Russian or Belarusian, thus straining the limited resources in the system. Under the 1951 UN Convention on the Status of Refugees, all nations are to provide education to refugee children.

Roma education

UNICEF does not currently have comprehensive data on Roma education in Belarus, but the 2009 census reported only 7,079 Roma in the nation. According to the International Barometer of Human and Trade Union Rights in Education, the Roma in Belarus are often victims of discrimination. Unemployment among Roma is projected to be as high as 93 per cent, according to Education International. Roma enrolment in school at all levels is significantly lower than their non-Roma peers. Many that do enrol are often at a disadvantage, since their native language is Romani. Out of the estimated 7,079 Roma in the nation, only 1,243 identified Russian as their first language and 550 indicated Belarusian.

Teachers are often undertrained in the best methods to support students. Roma children are frequently labelled as having disabilities or accused of being lazy, when in fact their learning limitation is the linguistic barrier. Roma culture and traditions are not highlighted in the curriculum, further segregating the Roma children from their non-Roma peers. The few Roma who continue in school, despite these obstacles, are often denied access to state universities. Some have been accepted into the few private educational institutions.

Educational quality

Belarus has not participated in any large-scale international assessments such as TIMMS, PIRLS or PISA. Quality assessments are monitored using national secondary exit exams and a new 10-point grading scale. The government is striving to improve the quality of student outcomes by reforming the curriculum and teacher preparation.

All secondary students take an exam as part of their graduation requirements. The assessment covers a range of subjects, and there are current considerations to include foreign language as a subject on this exam. The examination results are also used for university entrance. Within individual classes, a new 10-point scale has been introduced to improve the measurement of student learning.

Various curriculum reforms – including reducing the number of required subjects, shifting the compulsory education years and introducing new

teaching methods – have been implemented in the educational system to improve school quality. Belarusian will be the language of instruction for 195,592 school children (18.4 per cent) by 2011. Physical education and foreign language reforms are currently being considered at the national level. The MoE believes that foreign language instruction is critical for furthering the development of the country.

The purpose of secondary education in Belarus is to prepare children for further vocational training or higher education. The high drop-out rate of boys in secondary school could be an indicator of low school quality, which results in many boys exiting school early and seeking work.

Education financing

Public spending on education in Belarus was 5.15 per cent of the GDP in 2007. This was a 0.93 per cent drop over the 2006 expenditure level, which was 6.08 per cent of GDP.²

Priority challenges in Belarus education

Future educational priorities in Belarus include:

- Implementing the Law of General Secondary Education and its corresponding regulations
- Enhancing quality assurance and quality metrics
- Eliminating student overload and increasing health protection
- Raising the effectiveness of national programmes, such as foreign language instruction and supports for children with special educational needs

1 Monitoring quality of life in Europe, Gini Index *Eurofound*, 2009

2 World Bank Indicators, Belarus, Inputs