

Review of Proposals, Schemes, Ideas and Concepts for the Educational Reform in Belarus

by Svyatlana Krupnik, Uladzimer Matskevich, Maksim Zhbankou*

4

Stage 1 (1991–1994). Search for approaches, intensive, however non-systemic actions. New scientific, educational and research centers established to replace those in Moscow, which had determined the development of the educational system in our country before 1991 (institutes of education¹, of tertiary education, of vocational training, and of further job training). A new education law. Increased unofficial initiatives in the educational sphere. First private educational institutions, from preschools to tertiary education facilities. New types of educational institutions (*lyceum*² and *gymnasium*³). Belarusification of instruction, although non-systemic, begins. Belarus became involved in international academic exchanges and education programs, and joined key international conventions in the area of education.

Culmination: Managerial seminar on the ‘Development of the System of School Education: Current State and Prospects’, held by the Ministry of Education and the Agency of Human Technologies on October 25, 1994.

After the declaration of independence, Belarus needed urgent reform of its educational system. That was caused by two reasons. Before 1991, the educa-

* Thanks to Mikhail Gusakouski, Alyaksandr Palonnikau and all those who took part in our discussion of the educational reform.

¹ Institutes and universities are both tertiary learning establishments, with universities enjoying higher status (transl.).

² Equivalent of ‘senior high’ (US) or ‘secondary school’ (UK) – ed.

³ Equivalent of ‘junior high’ (US) or ‘middle school’ (UK) – ed.

tional system of the Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic (BSSR) had been a regional subdivision of the Soviet educational system, and it was absolutely unsuited in its capacities to the needs of a sovereign country.

As of 1991, the year of the Soviet Union's collapse, the educational system of the USSR and that of the BSSR was in the process of reform, chronically unsuccessful, inconsistent and far from being completed. This means that the new Belarusian state in fact inherited an educational reform from the BSSR.

It became clear almost immediately that Belarus could not continue the Soviet educational reform initiated in 1984, as all bearers of reform's ideas, authors of reform projects and concepts, organizers and managers were in Moscow, and Minsk was a mere implementor. Belarus' national reform makers began to crop up in 1989, but the reform itself had not taken shape before the declaration of independence.

Newly established political organizations also addressed education problems. For instance, the 1989 program of the Belarusian Popular Front 'Adradzhenne' featured educational reform among other issues.

The Supreme Soviet enacted an education law⁴ sponsored by the faction of the Belarusian Popular Front, which set the basis for building a national educational system. The new education law provided for state and public forms of supervising the educational sector, and for establishing non-state educational institutions.

Public activity led to:

- the establishment of associations and NGOs in the sphere of education;
- formation of temporary work teams that embarked on tasks that governmental agencies could not cope with. In particular, they elaborated concepts and programs of education development in the country. At least, three such temporary creative teams should be mentioned:

1. The group led by Uladzimer Parkhomenka and Alyaksandr Kazulin. In 1992, this group developed the 'Concept of Education and Upbringing in Belarus', adopted by the Council of Ministers of Belarus on March 26, 1993⁵. Using that con-

⁴ Закон «Об образовании» Республики Беларусь. Мн. 1991.

⁵ «Адукацыя і выхаванне» 1993, № 10.

cept, the same group elaborated the ‘State Comprehensive Program for Developing Education and Upbringing in Belarus until 2000’, adopted by the Council of Ministers on November 15, 1993⁶.

The main idea was to transform the educational system in the country into a fully-fledged national system, adjust the educational sector to the needs of Belarus, and overcome the legacy of the Soviet educational system. However lacking a developed theoretical substantiation, the concept declared democratic, liberal and humanistic principles that would form the basis for Belarusian education. Those principles would ensure evolutionary de-Sovietization and Belarusification of schools at all levels.

A strength of the concept lay in its organizational aspect which was in harmony with the slow changes characteristic of all social spheres in the country in that period. The concept could be quite successfully implemented by the-then serving personnel of central government and the educational sector. Developed in a comprehensive action program until 2000, the concept was officially approved for implementation. However, it had many flaws and deficiencies which revealed themselves in 1994 (see: section about the education ministry’s managerial seminar).

2. The National School of Belarus. This group was led by Alyksandr Kazulin (coordinator) and Mikhail Husakouski (scientific director). It authored and released the ‘Theoretical Foundations of the National School Concept of the Republic of Belarus’⁷ in 1992 and the ‘Concept of the National School of Belarus’⁸ in the following year.

That concept was aimed at supporting trends defined by the authors as:

- establishing national and cultural identity;
- modernization (the incorporation of Belarus as a state and nation into the world community and culture).

The concept gave top priority to pedagogical techniques. Much space was devoted to philosophical and psychological substantiation of existing pedagogi-

⁶ «Адукацыя і выхаванне» 1994, №№ 7–8.

⁷ «Адукацыя і выхаванне» 1992, № 12.

⁸ *Фактары станаўлення і развіцця нацыянальнай школы Беларусі. Матэрыялы навукова-практычнай канферэнцыі 11–13 мая 1994, Мн., ІПК, 1994, с. 104–155.*

cal techniques and those yet to be developed. The concept almost did not touch on the organizational, managerial, financial or legal aspects of the reform.

Therefore, the two concepts complemented each other and, if necessary, could serve a basis for a more holistic approach.

3. The group led by Alyksandr Rastunou elaborated the 'Concept of Tertiary school Development in the Republic of Belarus in the New Environment'. The group teamed up with other scholars (Valyantsina Badun and others) to devise the 'Concept for Developing Secondary Vocational Education in the Republic of Belarus'. Later, the Rastunau team drew up the 'State Program for Developing Tertiary Education in the Republic of Belarus in a Market Environment'⁹.

The essence of those concepts was to democratize and liberalize higher and secondary vocational education. Top priority was given to the problem of survival, very acute for educational institutions in 1991–1993. The other problem was with academic liberties and freedom of creative activity of scientists and educators. Hence, the most developed parts of the document concerned diversification of sources of finance, and legal and organizational aspects of tertiary education's administration. That concept could not be used in practice as it failed to keep pace with the changes that had occurred by the time it was released. In particular, the concept did not take into consideration the emergence of private institutions of tertiary education and fee-paying students.

Apart from the above-stated concepts, widely covered by the media, those years saw local products such as the 'Educational and Methodological Concept'¹⁰ – a process designed for working on modern school books and didactically-founded means of educational provision, authored by Leanid Frydman, Barys Palcheuski and Barys Tsytovich. Simultaneously, several creative groups in different institutions started developing educational standards.

In October 1994, the new minister of education, Vasil Strazhau, commissioned the Agency of Humanitarian Technologies with the task of organizing

⁹ «Адукацыя і выхаванне» 1994, №№ 9–10.

¹⁰ «Тэхналагічная адукацыя» 1996, №№ 3–6.

a managerial seminar on the 'Development of the System of School Education: Current State and Prospects'. The seminar was conducted in the form of an organizational game. Participating in the game were: 1. a group from the Ministry of Education (minister, deputy ministers, departmental chiefs and senior experts); 2. heads of national institutes of tertiary education, vocational education and further job training; 3. representatives of local governmental agencies (regional, district and city education departments); 4. directors of state and private schools, university rectors; 5. authors of the former two concepts mentioned above; 6. representatives of the pedagogical science; 7. representatives of non-governmental organizations and foundations; 8. journalists.

Given that some of the seminar participants were members of political parties and the trade union of educators, and many were the parents of students, it is safe to say that all the stakeholders interested in the development of education were represented at the seminar.

Five working groups were formed at the seminar.

1. Investment and financial aspects of supervising education;
2. Legal aspects of supervising education;
3. Structural and functional aspects of supervising education;
4. Conceptual and planning aspects of supervising education;
5. Supervision and control of the educational provision quality.

Results of the seminar were set out in a report titled 'On Educational Reform in Belarus, 1994' also known as the 'Green Notebook'¹¹. The Green Notebook was sent out to the president of Belarus, the chair of the Supreme Soviet's standing Committee on Education, Science and Culture, minister of education and science, president of the Academy of Education, chair of the trade union of educators, chair of the independent trade union of teachers, and chair of the Council of Head Teachers.

The conclusion of the report was that nobody in the country had answers to key questions regarding each of the working groups.

¹¹ *О реформе образования в Беларуси образца 1994 года. («Зелёная тетрадь»)*. Агентство гуманитарных технологий. Мн. 1994.

1. Investment and financial aspects of supervising education: how much does Belarusian education cost?
2. Legal aspects of supervising education: how should legal relations be regulated between all the stakeholders in education?
3. Structural and functional aspects of supervising education: what principles should govern interaction and cooperation between various institutions that influence the educational sphere in the country?
4. Conceptual and planning aspects of supervising education: what is the plan of the educational reform? What conceptual approaches should it be based on?
5. Supervision and control of educational provision quality: what are the national criteria, methods and standards for evaluating the quality of the process and product of education?

All papers presented at the seminar were non-comprehensive in vision, mutually discordant and sometimes even conflicting. The concepts, plans and programs presented by participants and experts had to be seen as semi-finished products based on incomplete or unreliable information.

Actually, the establishment of the national system of education and educational reform in Belarus had to re-start.

Stage 2 (1995–1996). All initiatives originating from the preceding period were discouraged and blocked at the government level. It marked an end to Belarusification. All innovations were forced into the non-governmental sphere, the third sector. The Belarusian Soros Foundation and other alternative sources of finance appear. The private sector gained strength. A new education law was drafted.

This period ends in the dissolution of the Supreme Soviet.

The 'State Comprehensive Program for Developing Education and Upbringing in Belarus until 2000' was never implemented, however approved by the Council of Ministers of Belarus, along with many others of the kind drafted in late 1980s and early 1990s. The 1991 Education Law, which opened up broad opportunities for development and innovations, failed to respond to the accumulated changes and innovations.

National research institutes established in the first years of independence – those of basic, tertiary and vocational education, and further job training never became real centers on a national scale. Suffice it to look at subjects of dissertations of *kandidat's*¹² and *doctor's*¹³ degrees in those institutes to understand that Belarusian pedagogical analysts did not address real problems of the educational reform. Not a single thesis was presented regarding the educational process at the national level. All the themes were at the level of individual student-and-educator, or individual educational institution. The broadest-themed dissertation dealt with the structure of educational supervision in Minsk.

Since the Belarusian pedagogical science in its institutional forms remained unprepared to face the challenge of the times, subsequent steps toward the educational reform were taken outside of official scientific institutions. The following activities and centers should be pointed to when discussing the period under review:

1. Further work by the group led by Mikhail Husakouski. The work was commissioned by one of the leaders of this group, Alyksandr Kazulin, who became deputy minister of education and later rector of the Belarusian State University. The work was pursued at the Belarusian Lyceum, National Institute of Education, center of further training for senior education officials, Belarusian State University with the use of their facilities.
2. Work on a new approach to educational reform, which was initiated by Vasil Strazhau, minister of education and science. This work was mainly done by officials. Established on Strazhau's instructions to replace the Coordinating Council for Scientific Studies in Education and founded on June 14, 1993, the Belarusian Academy of Education was deemed inefficient and closed.
3. Work on a new education law initiated by the Supreme Soviet of Belarus. A special working group was formed. It included many former participants of the above-mentioned seminar.

¹² Equivalent to a PhD. degree (ed.)

¹³ Equivalent to PhD. or *doktor habilitowany* (Pl)

4. The Belarusian Soros Foundation's programs. In the framework of one of these, the 'Program of Updating Liberal Education' coordinated by Uladzimir Matskevich¹⁴ worked on the 'Concept of Updating Liberal Education'. By the end of 1996, the scope of this concept was expanded, and it started being regarded as a general concept of a national educational reform.
5. Work on an alternative scheme of educational reform, commissioned by Vasil Strazhau with a group of experts (Uladzimir Matskevich, Barys Palcheuski, Leanid Frydman, Svyatlana Krupnik, and Henadz Pyatrouski) at the end of 1995. 'Organizational Scheme of Educational Reform in the Republic of Belarus'¹⁵.

None of those activities would stand any chance of success if conducted separately. Educational reform could start and end successfully only if supported by both the government and the society. However, such concord was never reached because of both positive and negative factors, with the latter being predominant.

Positive factors:

– Sufficient experience and input had been accumulated in previous years.

– Flaws and deficiencies in what had already been done were known. It was clear how they should be eliminated.

– Most of the experts were in various forms involved in all the above activities. Participants in each of the above-mentioned activities were somehow involved in other activities.

Negative factors:

– The country was experiencing an ideological crisis, which was exacerbating. This resulted in a political upheaval at the end of 1996.

– All concepts based on national priorities, democratic and liberal values were ideologically unacceptable for the new regime, while others did not exist.

¹⁴ Информационно-аналитический бюллетень «Обновление гуманитарного образования» 1997, № 11; гл. таксама: *Всемирная энциклопедия: философия*, Москва «АСТ» – Минск «Харвест», 2000. Статья: *Образование, Педагогика*.

¹⁵ В. В. Мацкевич, Б. В. Пальчевский, Л. С. Фридман, С. А. Крупник, Г. Н. Петровский, *Оргпроект реформы образования Республики Беларусь*, Мн., 1995.

- A conflict broke out between Education Minister Strazhau, who was supervising some activities, and Deputy Minister Kazulin, who was supporting others. Although this conflict bore no relation to ideology, it considerably impeded all work.
- The conflict between the Supreme Soviet and the president's 'vertically integrated' government administration was gaining momentum. The chairman of the Supreme Soviet's education committee, who shared the administration's stance, in fact sabotaged work on the new education law.

As a result, two more years were lost. With the dissolution of the Supreme Soviet in November 1996, everything was back to square one. The 'Concept of the National School of Belarus' by Husakouski and others and the 'Organizational Plan of Educational Reform in the Republic of Belarus' by Matskevich and others were ultimately rejected. Established in place of the Supreme Soviet, the House of Representatives of the National Assembly rejected the existing version of the new Education Law and started drafting a new law.

The group of Husakouski limited its work to the premises where its members worked officially, and later became a subdivision of the Belarusian State University. The Agency of Human Technologies (led by Matskevich) transformed into the Belarusian Soros Foundation's 'Program of Updating Liberal Education'. Its operation stopped with the closure of the Belarusian Soros Foundation in early 1997.

The only entity that continued to function at the national level was the Ministry of Education. There was no other alternative.

Stage 3 (1997–1999). The government establishes tight control over education. Private education and the third sector still exist.

This was a 'dead season' for educational reform. It had some peculiarities.

The non-state sector was still surviving and even expanding despite the lack of a legal framework, bureaucratic obstacles, fiscal burden, and economic stagnation. There was a rise in demand for non-state education, and the education market responded by expanding the range of provision.

Russian influence on Belarusian education strengthened. This affected the conceptual, organizational and technological aspects of education. Both education standards and school textbooks were borrowed from Russia.

All democratic achievements in public education were reversed. In this period, the government ultimately rejected the principle of state and public control that had been laid down by the 1991 Education Act. Academic liberties were mere declarations. In schools and universities, the authorities started implanting units of the Belarusian Youth Union and the Belarusian Patriotic Youth Union, politicized organizations loyal to the regime, which were immune to the ban on political activity in educational institutions. Orthodoxy acquired the status of government-supported religion. The Russian Orthodox Church started to filter into schools, which was a breach of the Education Act and the Freedom of Religion Act.

This period spawned the Council of Ministers' Directive No. 500 dated April 12, 1999, entitled, 'On the Development Guidelines for the National Educational system'¹⁶. That directive in fact rejected all that had been done since 1991 and revived the ideas of 1984, when the USSR started its failed educational reform.

To clarify the directive's vision, it is enough to cite an excerpt: 'The achievement of the goal of reform envisages:

- preservation and development of the best qualities of the educational system that emerged in the Soviet period;
- the educational system's advancement and adequate reaction to social and cultural transformations;
- formation of an educational and upbringing system that would meet the aims of the new stage of societal development¹⁷'.

The expressions 'advancement and adequate reaction to social and cultural transformations' and 'new stage of societal development' were not clarified.

Stage 4 (since 2000). The state and unofficial education sectors completely separated. The 'reformed' education sector and the new education law leave no room for private and unofficial education, Belarusification, or real reform.

The current period in education is officially called 'reform'. The Council of Ministers' Development Guidelines for the National Educational system provide for a number of activities and measures to preserve the current state of affairs.

¹⁶ Пастанова Рады Міністраў Рэспублікі Беларусь ад 12 красавіка 1999 г., № 500 *Аб асноўных кірунках развіцця нацыянальнай сістэмы адукацыі.*

¹⁷ Ibid.

Considering that no real reform has taken place, some concepts and ideas proposed in previous years continue to be relevant. Among them are:

The 1993 Concept of the National School of Belarus. It is still the basis of activity for the Center of Education Development Issues at the Belarusian State University, which employs some of the members of the National School of Belarus group.

The 1995 Organizational Scheme of Educational Reform in the Republic of Belarus. This organizational scheme was designed as a basic framework to incorporate all thoughts and ideas concerning the development of the educational sector. It envisages interactions between entities of the civil society in reforming the education and state systems. The National Institute of Education and the Academy of Post-Graduate Training were guided by this scheme in their work. Provisions of the scheme are used in training education managers at the Academy of Post-Graduate Training and the Institute of Vocational Training (IVE), and in training for master's and *kandidat's* degrees. The theme of 'functional literacy' was elaborated in the framework of this scheme – in the IVE laboratory of vocational education methodology since 1997, later in the Education Ministry's department of analytical and legal work, and then in the sociology department of the Academy of Post-Graduate Training that employs experts or trainees of the Academy of Human Technologies, which has been an 'invisible college' rather than an official organization since 1997. A report on 'Functional Literacy in Belarus' was commissioned by UNESCO. The report, presented at the UNESCO annual conference in Warsaw in 2000, included the 'possible scenario of eliminating functional illiteracy in the event of changes of external political and economic factors' as an integral part of the educational reform in the country¹⁸.

The 1996–1997 Concept of Updating Liberal Education. Designed for implementation through the Belarusian Soros Foundation, this concept, after the Foundation's closure, laid the foundation for activities of several NGOs (for instance, the Association for Updating Liberal Education and the Belarusian Associa-

¹⁸ В. В. Мацкевич, С. А. Крупник, *Функциональная грамотность в системе образования Беларуси*, Мн., АПО, 2003.

tion of Innovative Schools). This has been the most radical concept ever proposed in Belarus.

Political parties have been mentioning education in their programs, but none of them elaborated on education issues. Nevertheless, political parties and non-governmental organizations have supported specific projects, in civic education above all. For instance, the Khartiya-97 group provided assistance in setting up the people's university 'Society of Philomats' which teaches courses in all regional and many district cities and towns. Independent and free trade unions also organized courses not only on specific topics, but also on basic subjects such as law, computer training and environment. A number of NGOs specializing in civic education were established with support from the Belarusian Popular Front (BPF), United Civic Party (UCP) and other parties. But, neither political parties nor public movements have a comprehensive concept or a plan of actions in the area.