

Educational System Diagnosis

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The whole post-Soviet period is associated with various attempts to reform the educational system, which had the following objectives

‘De-ideologization’ aimed to emancipate the education contents from constraints of the Communist ideology. De-ideologization was originally targeted at humanities, but its application turned out to be much wider than originally designed, and affected general upbringing (role models and values) and basic objectives of the Belarusian education as a whole. It is impossible to overlook considerable success of de-ideologization.

‘Depoliticization’ was aimed at purging schools of Communist party political institutions and its branches, such as youth and children’s organizations. The objective was not attained completely, because some relicts of Communist children’s organizations, such as young pioneers, continue to function and even seek to increase their influence.

‘Belorussification’ sought transition to Belarusian-language instruction at all education establishments. Transition was expected to take 10 years. The decade saw attempts to write Belarusian-language books for all levels of education, switch to Belarusian in official documents, and improve teachers’ knowledge of the Belarusian language and culture. These efforts have been ineffective. The authorities abandoned the program.

‘Diversification’ is associated with structural changes in Belarus’ educational system. The effort resulted in the emergence of new types of schools such

as *gymnasiums*, *lyceums*¹⁹, colleges, and education conglomerates (combining vocational schools, technical schools and tertiary establishments), many institutes were transformed into universities and academies, and the curricula changed according to the education level and major subjects. On a mass scale, secondary schools began opening specialized streams for chemists, economists, lawyers, firefighters, musicians etc. The reform gave rise to private commercial establishments and thus impacted the education services market. The structural reform affected all types of schools, including the system of additional and out-of-school education.

'Computerization' was aimed at supplying all schools with computers and teaching computer skills to students and teachers alike. Despite considerable efforts, results of the initiative are negligible, especially in rural schools.

The Belarusian educational system could be described as under-reformed, while the reform could be described as stagnant. Superficial administrative innovations did not affect the essence and forms of the education process.

The educational system in any modern society, including Belarusian, is becoming less and less able to perform its fundamental functions. To redress this:

- firstly, education should foster permanent renewal of information resources needed for occupational, social and political activities of individuals and social groups;
- secondly, education should ensure replenishment of human resources in the society. In other words, each individual should find his or her place in a concrete social order and obtain access to training in various social (including occupational) techniques;
- thirdly, the educational system is a natural breeding ground for the national elite, which sets out the priorities and guidelines of the nation's development;
- fourthly, tertiary education establishments, also referred to as the Higher School, have traditionally been the area for activities of scientific and scholar communities involved in research, not merely in teaching.

¹⁹ Cf. footnotes on p. 215 (ed.).

The educational system's smooth functioning requires efficient management and self-administration mechanisms capable of ensuring its evolution in a rapidly developing post-Soviet society. The existing system is fundamentally flawed and cannot perform these functions. A thorough analysis of each of the above-mentioned points proves this.

Renewal of information resources

There are three aspects to the issue: informational (the contents of education), methodological (training techniques), and technological (access to information resources).

Practically at all levels, the contents of education is superfluous, curricula are overload with largely outdated information while lacking up-to-date and well-presented information. This seems to be an absolutely natural course of things for the Belarusian society that came to a standstill at the early stage of its 'post-colonial' existence.

In the early 1990s, a whole gamut of content and subjects taught at schools in the previous epoch was deconstructed. The perestroika idealism inspired teachers at local tertiary education establishments to creating new courses and write new textbooks. Paradoxically, the new generation of textbooks was created by 'old school' authors, practically unacquainted with the new trends in humanities, almost completely unaware of the original sources and sticking to quasi-Marxist thinking patterns.

The general inertness of thought, lack of incentives for improving professional skills, non-transparent and clannish allocation of lucrative assignments for writing textbooks and absence of adequate expertise have produced a situation where information presented at schools has turned into 'information noise'. The supply of textbooks nominally satisfies market demand. But in fact, there are no original Belarusian textbooks on a variety of subjects including philosophy, social anthropology and culture. A number of advanced textbooks, on Belarusian history for instance, has not been published due to of opposition from hard-liners. The undemocratic and non-transparent procedure of textbook pre-

paration rules out open competition among groups of authors and their ideas. The country has no textbook writing standards.

Despite a heterogeneous general informational environment, each educational establishment clings to a set of 'its own' textbooks. In general, the country may be said to lack a whole range of necessary new textbooks.

The 'distorted', locally produced information environment creates the necessary prerequisites for Russia's informational expansion: Russian textbooks, often as 'parochial' in contents as most Belarusian ones take center stage in the marketplace with their use of up-to-date scientific terminology and broader range of sources. In result, Belarusian students get 'two in one': a Russian-produced information package stuffed with the ideology of the former 'Big Brother'.

The education technologies were affected by both the education ministry's uniformity policies and chaotic experimentation by private schools of all levels.

The educational system is characterized by alleged plurality of educational technologies: state establishments stick to traditional teaching methods, some enthusiastic teachers invent new techniques, while private schools adopt Western methods.

The above-mentioned approaches are simply inadequate. Copying Soviet or Western methodologies proved absolutely inefficient, but there are still no constructive adoption mechanisms. Patchy educational techniques, conflicting in the teacher's mind and in general practice of educational facilities alike, hamper effective communication and impair education quality. At best, teachers and students have a very vague idea of how to present and learn a subject. At worst, they just 'speak different languages' due to being in parallel communicative dimensions.

The legacy Soviet system for training teachers makes it difficult for them to master advanced teaching techniques. The system openly discriminates against professionals working for private schools because they are required to pay for refresher courses, while teachers working in state establishments can take courses free of charge. Many skilled and experienced teachers quit facilities providing refresher and training courses for teachers because of low pay.

The skills of teachers and students to use information sources do not meet present-day requirements due to the following factors:

- poor knowledge of foreign languages (as well as of the Belarusian mother tongue);
- computer illiteracy;
- limited access to Web resources outside large cities;
- lack of computer hardware at most educational institutions;

The inefficient state system for training the trainers helps little in improving teaching quality, computer skills and access to information databases.

The formerly used centralized system of assigning teachers to refresher courses no longer exists; therefore, administrators of education establishments have no interest in raising the quality of teaching in their institutions. Moreover, teachers are often reluctant to sign up for refresher courses. The contents of such courses are outdated and often biased.

Even if innovative programs of retraining and further education are implemented, they conflict with the provincial teacher's real working conditions.

The general conclusion here is that the modern Belarusian school is involved in copying government-authorized standard methods and techniques, or resorts to a chaotic combination of borrowed information and methodological resources. The educational information space is heterogeneous and plagued by internal conflicts. These factors intensify the trend leading to a major crisis of Belarus' educational system.

Replenishment of human resources

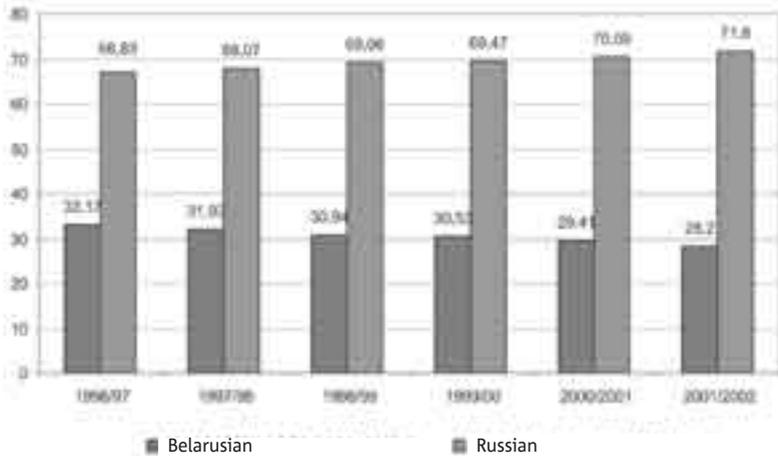
The Belarusian educational system, reliant on administrative tools, is a classical example of a system that produces 'one-dimensional people' (after G. Maruze).

In terms of influence on students and evaluating their performance, Belarusian education retains core features of the Soviet educational system, such as:

- authoritarianism;
- lack of incentives and opportunities for creative work both for students and teachers;

- ideology being an important element of the educational process;
- lack of real opportunities to receive instruction in the native languages for both the Belarusians and ethnic minorities.

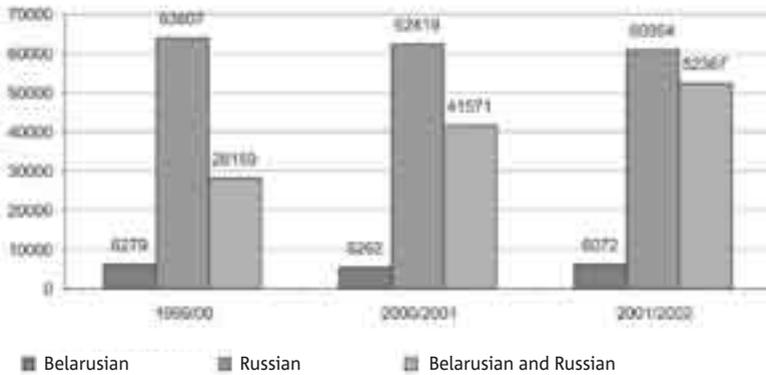
Chart 1: Language of Instruction in General Education Schools (percentage of the total number of students, National Average)



Source: Chief Information and Analytical Center of the Ministry of Education

As far as the content of education is concerned, both state and private schools tend to cram students with as much information as possible, rather than develop their creativity. Use of new sources, including texts in European languages, rearrangement of schooling hours to favor self-instruction were an additional burden on students who have not a slightest notion of what analytical work and analytical writing consist in. Crammed space, cribbing, truancy and other forms of quiet sabotage are widely used as self-defense against educational innovations of the kind.

Chart 2: Language of Instruction in Tertiary Education (thousands students)



In such a system, there is high demand for qualities such as obedience, loyalty, devotion to administrative staff, readiness to ‘follow the general party line’ rather than independent thinking, critical mind and ethnic identity. In fact, it indicates the retrospective orientation of the educational process: instead of raising free citizens of an independent European state, schools produce timid conformists, new soldiers for a non-existing empire. Mentally, these are the people of the past, completely incapable of living in a post-industrial society.

Absence of distinct national priorities in education policies reveals itself in attempts to tie the Belarusian and Russian systems together by introducing uniform educational standards. In fact, it implies the transformation of the Belarusian educational system into an ideological and informational appendix to Russia’s educational institutions. The Belarusian educational establishments produce either potential intellectual émigrés, i.e. labor force for Russia and – to a lesser extent – for Europe, or human resources for preserving the status quo. In both cases, the educational system objectively encourages a ‘cleansing’ of the Belarusian culture from potential reformers, i.e. those creatively thinking intellectuals who advocate European values.

It is also necessary to mention low prestige of the teacher's profession. A drastic decline in teachers' living standards in mid-1990s caused fragmentation of this once well-off social group, followed by the outflow of most active and enterprising people to private companies and schools. The teachers may be divided into well-off administrators with direct access to financial resources, involuntary workaholics doomed to work hard for multiple educational establishments, and 'serfs', or misfits in terms of either category because of age or character.

On the one hand, spontaneous social divisions affect students' outlook and level of education, and contribute to plurality of lifestyles and behavioral models. On the other, there have been similar divisions among teachers who form various groups as diverse as the administrative elite that combine education with business, and 'intellectual shuttle workers' who rush from one educational institution to another in pursuit of additional income. At the same time, existing uniform models and standards in education are not adjusted to this stratification.

The present forms of education cannot offer adequate training to new generations of Belarusians to make them a competitive labor force in Europe. They cannot teach them to survive in a post-Soviet society or absorb ethnic and cultural identity principles. Thus, a possible conclusion is that the educational system in Belarus in its present state is largely decorative, and cannot supply the Belarusian nation with what is required of modern-day human resources.

Forming a new national elite

The educational system traditionally generates human resources for the national elite. In Belarus, it implies training highly-educated professionals and managers capable of making decisions with due regard for local conditions.

The current situation in the education sector is characterized by tight administrative controls, uniform standards and methods coupled with declining quality, lack of efficient international contacts, and inadequate informational support for the education process. The system is focused on providing knowledge

rather than stimulating thinking; it makes little use of advanced education and information technologies and is under-funded. All these factors prevent it from working efficiently to sustain the national elite.

Also, it should be understood that the whole Belarusian elite is not interested in renewal, primarily because of the traditionally clannish organization of the top strata in the Belarusian society keen to maintain their leading roles. In a society without democratic traditions, the elite of all kinds – from artillery generals to theater managers – ignore people’s interests and are guided by the self-preservation instinct only. Belarus has never seen a natural dynamic change in generations of the elite or expanded creation of new jobs, especially in administration, which is unnatural for a growing society. It means that each subsequent generation has a chance to realize their ambitions through conflicts only, i.e. by ousting representatives of the older generation from their positions.

In this sense, important skills are those of scheming, dirty backstage games, bribery, guessing the momentary balance of conflicting forces to curry favors with those at the top, or finding ways to defame perceived competitors, i.e. qualities that have nothing to do with education. The ruling circles in today’s Belarus are in great demand of behavioral patterns of a ‘provincial charismatic figure or ‘cautious trickster’. Mid-level positions are usually occupied by ‘one track ponies’ devoted to their bosses.

In current setting, the new elite either keep a low profile (the newly rich Belarusians conceal their profits and assets abroad, new media- and advertising executives etc.) or function within the government system. Emergence of the new elite obviously contradicts interests of the political regime that exercises monopoly over the evolution of society and the inert, Soviet-style mass mentality. New, active minorities have almost no career opportunities and have to sell their intellectual potential abroad, mainly in neighboring countries.

Conclusion: Belarus’ national elite does not evolve or revitalize the way it would in an ‘open’ society (K. Popper). Consequently, the Belarusian society faces a natural identity crisis. The current outmoded elite are neither able to adjust themselves to societal processes nor elaborate and carry out an effective social development scenario.

One of the key factors that keep the society stagnant is the absence of a well-developed system for educating elites that would be capable of supplying top levels of social structures with competent executives.

Academic research

Research is a traditional function of the educational system, mainly characteristic of tertiary education facilities. A combination of teaching and research creates a real opportunity for testing new products in the process of teaching.

Belarus' educational system, however, doesn't offer incentives for productive research, especially and chiefly in departments specializing in humanities.

Teachers are burdened by excessive workload and a very complicated reporting system. Besides, they need to pursue additional sources of income. State sector's research assignments, with the exception of those based in ideology, are not funded properly. Most frequently, results of research made on these assignments do not find practical application and are shelved in the form of reports. The so-called research plans are carried out on paper only, while scheduled research themes are replaced with available publications.

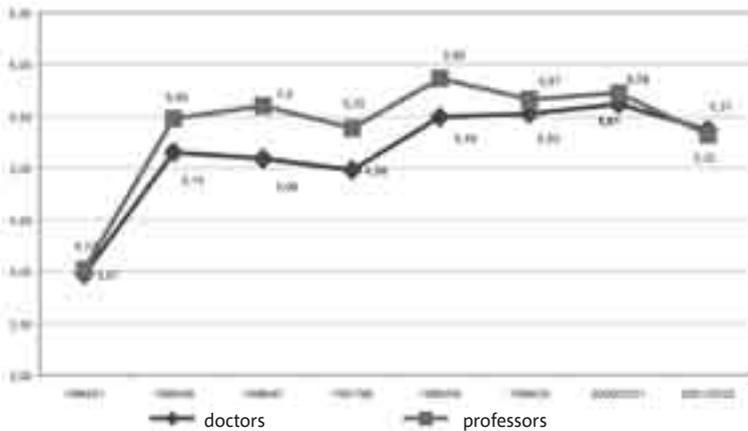
Academic research has been sidelined in result of reduced publishing activity in scientific literature and lessened international contacts, 'window dressing' seminars, readings, and conferences. The State finances science (including tertiary schools) according to the 'residue' principle, where funds are made available when left over from other top priority allocations, with very small percentage of commercial assignments and absence of visible achievements. Academic research programs attract scribblers, aficionados, or academic bureaucrats.

One of the main reasons of the academic crisis is in the lack of equipment and supplies for research work, especially at in-field institutions, irregular renewal of library stock and electronic databases. Research teams have no opportunity to work on commercial basis and use the proceeds to finance further research.

The existing system of awarding scientific degrees and titles also restrains growth of the research potential. The ageing of academicians pursuing doctor's

degrees and shrinking numbers of post-graduate students is linked, to a certain extent, with lack of career and pay prospects. Scholars are reluctant to spend several years on *kandidat* or *doktor's* dissertations²⁰. The reluctance also stems from unfair treatment of researchers by the Supreme Commission of Evaluation, known for its severe criticism of truly innovative and interesting works. Surprisingly, it appears to be much easier to defend a *doktor's* thesis in Moscow or St. Petersburg than Minsk. These problems discourage PhD. and *kandidat* degree holders from working creatively. While older generations abandon academic science on retirement, younger generations prefer business to science. As a result, the instruction and research level has become mediocre.

Chart 3: Doctoral Degree Holders and Professors as Percentage of Tertiary Schools' Core Personnel



Source: Chief Information and Analytical Center of the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Belarus

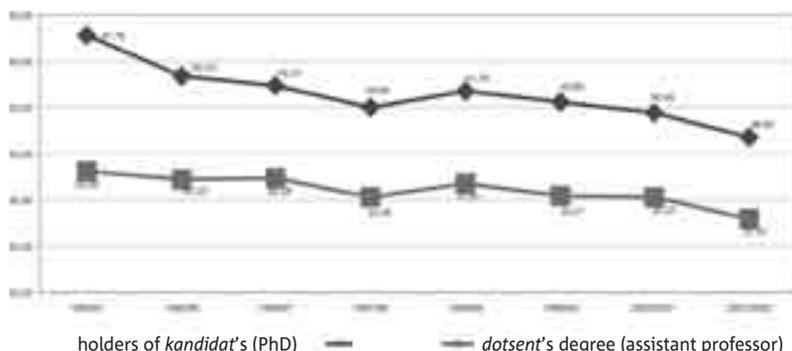
Due to reasons beyond their control, major players in the educational system are old conformists rather than active young scholars. Quite often, these

²⁰ Cf. footnotes on p. 220 (ed.).

are people with an ‘ideological background’, who obtained their degrees for work on ‘scientific Communism’ and Marxist-Leninist philosophy.

The system of academic degrees and titles is at variance with European standards and, unlike in Europe, degree awarding is centralized.

Chart 4: Kandidat (PhD) and Dotsent (Assistant Professor) Degree Holders as Percentage of Tertiary Schools’ Core Personnel



Source: The Main Information and Analytical Center of the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Belarus

Another obstacle to academic research is in the increasing standardization of education and control over the education process. Administrators demand that teachers follow canonic rules at work; their critical and suspicious attitude to innovations and experiments rules out creativity.

Under the existing system of annual evaluation of teachers, their pay and career do not depend on their academic performance. Many active scholars conduct independent research, while passive ones feign creative work, plagiarize and compile others’ ideas. Both types of scholars work outside of the system, and tackle their individual problems within the framework of global educational cycles.

This means that, in the Belarusian educational system, the notion of a ‘scientific community’ can be applied to tertiary schools with certain reservations. In practice, there is a certain corporate unity devoid of sustainable inner motivation for creative development and improvement of research potential. To the external eye, the system seems to offer incentives such as state assignments, bilateral and multilateral programs within the CIS, and Western grants. Creativity has been substituted by accountability, while scientific research has been replaced by the desire to guess the customer’s wish. Consequently, tertiary education establishments, former think tanks and research laboratories have transformed into service providers, with servility being their principal merit.

Administration and self-management²¹

Article 44 of the education law stipulates that the educational system is administered by central and local government. However, regulations regarding local government bodies are adopted by the Ministry of Education, which guarantees total governmental control over local educational authorities.

The Belarusian educational system remains largely centralized and unaccountable to the public. The government has curtailed reforms and programs launched immediately after the country’s declaration of independence. The government’s reform efforts included switchover to 12-year primary and secondary education, 5-day schooling week, 10-grade performance rating system and, at tertiary education establishments, a multi-level teaching system (courses for bachelor’s and master’s degree and subject specialization). These reforms were superficial.

Current legislation on education is anachronistic. New laws replicate the basic principles of command and administrative control of education establishments. A new version of the Education Act contains no article allowing education establishments to pursue provision for a fee. Under the law, the Ministry of Education is not accountable to the parliament. The law is quite vague on academic freedoms in education establishments and hampers real educational reforms.

²¹ Svyatlana Krupnik and Uladzimer Matskevich contributed to this section.

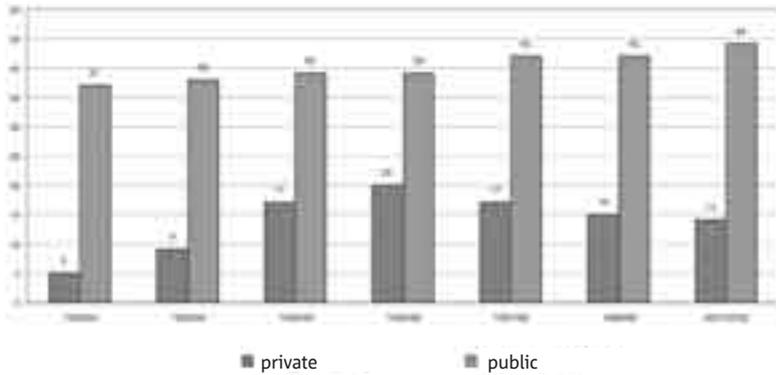
In fact, it has re-established the Soviet-era classification of educational stages (technical secondary education, vocational education etc.), provides no opportunities for extramural studies and lacks precision regarding master's degree studies. Current classification of education establishments is not in line with European standards and does not ensure continuity of education.

The administration system is similar to Alyaksandr Lukashenka's 'vertically integrated' presidential administration which rules out feedback. Its bulky structure contains elements such as municipal, district and regional Public Education Authorities, which give priority to control and ideology rather than provide expertise and support in methodologies of provision. Also, the existing system doesn't envisage elements of self-management. The notion of academic freedoms still remains a far-off prospect and makes no sense for most education administrators.

Excessive centralization of the educational system, lack of transparency coupled with a sharp fall in teachers' living standards and the emergence of an authoritarian educational elite created conditions for rampant corruption, extortion under the guise of 'payable services' and 'voluntary donations,' and expansion of the shadow sector in education. The practice of taking bribes in exchange for high grades at entrance exams or supporting students in education has become widespread recently, as is the case of administrators redistributing proceeds in their favor. Corruption may be said to have skyrocketed in tertiary schools.

The government's desire to establish full control over all forms of education reveals itself in discrimination against private schools (refusal to issue licenses, inspections, class-room rent denials etc.). The political regime seeks by all means to limit private schools' influence and to subordinate them to authorities.

Meanwhile, a number of private education projects cropped up in the early 1990s. Projects like the European Humanities University, the Institute of Parliamentarianism and Enterprise, the Institute of Modern Knowledge etc. combined new market-based mechanisms with the interests of the 'revamped' *nomenklatura* of the old educational system. This marked the emergence of an education services market and competition among education institutions. However, the State sector prefers administrative pressure over fair play.

Chart 5: Number of Education Establishments

Source: Chief Information and Analytical Center of the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Belarus, the National Supervisory Center

The under-reformed educational system is characterized by co-existence of educational establishments and methodology research centers of different generations, with Soviet-style vocational and secondary schools on the one hand, and Western-style *gymnasiums*²² and colleges on the other; traditional teacher training colleges and new marketing and management schools, the National Institute of Tertiary Education and independent analytical groups. The educational system is superfluous, overloaded and needs to be cleansed of inefficient components. There is a need to arrange the system so as to ensure its integrity, transparency and proportionality of all forms of education.

The current educational system is not run by specially trained administrators. The notion of 'managing the educational sector' is absent from Belarus as there are no education establishments that train education managers. Also, there is no mechanism for selecting candidates for administrative positions. Administrative positions in education are held by non-professionals: either job-hunters,

²² Cf. footnote on. p. 215 (ed.).

seeking to achieve personal gains regardless of means or end, or people loyal to their superiors, holding no personal opinions, or else individuals from outside of the professional community. At any rate, accidental persons appointed to administrative positions in education are unable to work efficiently.

The educational establishments' growing fee-paying business stems from their administrators' ambitions rather than their actual needs. 'For fee' projects usually have nothing to do with the educational process and do not attract funds. Quite on the contrary, they feed 'parallel budgets.' For example, the Belarusian State University has been involved in a variety of commercial projects, from beauty contests to running the Unistar radio station. Simultaneously, funding for educational activities, support of the educational process with information resources, and lecturers' salaries fall short of the affirmed 'top university' status.

The system of statistical accountability does not provide correct representation of the educational system's actual state.

There are no clear guidelines on teaching workload standards. The current standards (550 academic hours at tertiary education establishments vs. 150 academic hours in the US) are too high for both lecturers and students, and are at variance with European standards. This proves that the Belarusian educational system is costly and pursues inefficient personnel management policies.

Current educational administration is a combination of 'window dressing' bureaucratic activity and improvised authoritarian management style, waste of scarce budget resources and chaotic business experimentation. In fact, the administration of Belarusian education cannot ensure efficiency or stimulate the development of the system. Within strict State policy limits, administrators can hardly manage to keep their institutions afloat, yet they cannot substantially improve quality of education. The educational system appears to be inefficient not only in methods and informational support, but also in administration and business management.

General Conclusions

The Belarusian educational system is in deep crisis. Instead of offering information support, it offers information noise; instead of encouraging creative thinking, it produces either conformists or intellectual émigrés; instead of raising the new elite it replicates bureaucrats. It disperses and socially degrades the teaching personnel. The Belarusian educational system's inefficiency lies not only in low quality of its final product, but also in complete inability of administrators to ensure effective operation of this bulky and outdated system. Mechanisms of education function beyond their service life, therefore they continue creating 'people of the past'.