

Getting To Know Belarus: Impressions of Belarusian Education

Universities in the United States often bring to mind school spirit, frat parties and caffeine-fueled late nights studying at the library. I was not expecting the same situation in Belarusian universities, but I did hope for some semblance of a college lifestyle.

What I found was a somewhat bleak network of university buildings filled with students and teachers alike who expressed disappointment with the educational system and methodology of teaching. Despite their reservations, the students were bright and motivated to learn. I found myself wondering how and why a system that earned so little trust from its participants managed to be so successful in teaching its students what they needed to know.

Diving In

As a Fulbright English Teaching Assistant, I was assigned to work at the Belarusian State Economic University to serve the English teaching faculties as a reference for native English language and American culture. I worked mostly with the departments of International Business Communication and Tourism and Hospitality Management, where I presented lectures on American life, facilitated communication activities, and taught a class on English reading skills.

Getting acquainted with my students was the first challenge; some of them had never met a foreigner before, let alone a native English speaker who also happened to speak some Russian. When I introduced myself to the classes the students who, before class, had seemed so garrulous were at a loss for words and had trouble working up the courage to ask me

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Over time, they warmed up to me, but they still skipped class frequently (some groups only had two or three students attending class each week) and rarely did their homework. Though it was discouraging, I realised after some time that this was just one of the idiosyncrasies of Belarusian student culture.

How Things Work

My understanding of Belarusian student life became clear through my full immersion in the environment. Belarusian students enter the university by passing state-run exams in three subjects that determine their eligibility to enter various departments in the public universities. Once they enter their university and their department, there is virtually no flexibility in changing courses or studying topics outside their curriculum. They have their classes with the same group of approximately eighty students for the entirety of their five years in the university.

Because the government values the statistic that labels Belarus the most educated of the former Soviet republics, most of the adult population of Belarus is literate (99.6% according to the UNDP's 2013 Human Development Report). Furthermore, there is ample opportunity for Belarusians to study free of charge at the public universities, on one condition: that they complete [two years of "service"](#) in their field as assigned by the Belarusian government after graduating.

Some of my friends and younger colleagues expressed their plan to get out of the field of education as soon as their assignment was over, because it is nearly impossible to live on the salaries that teachers earn, even at the university

level. Such systems seemed reminiscent of Soviet times to me, yet I could not help but feel a bit envious that the government paid so much attention to recent university graduates, something that doesn't happen in the United States.

One on One

During the spring semester, in an effort to get to know my students better on a personal level, I implemented a tool that I called "Lunch with Monika" (coincidentally, this is also the name of my personal blog), where I would meet with my students outside the classroom to eat lunch, drink coffee, or simply to take a walk and talk. It was during such sessions that I learned about my students' dreams and plans.

Some of them already worked (which is why many of them did not manage to come to class), and, as third year students ranging in age from 18 to 22, were reconsidering their plans for life. Because most of them were on scholarships, they were on track to finish their studies and to complete their post-graduation assigned service work, but were already taking part-time courses at private technology firms or language schools to develop skills that would be useful in spheres other than hospitality management.

In essence, the students, while unhappy with the university system, decided that it was worth it to finish their studies because they weren't paying for the diploma that they would eventually get. They supplemented their studies and satisfied their curiosity by engaging in other educational pursuits outside of the university. Some students even tried to start their assigned service work early, so that they could cut short their duty to the government.

Brighter Horizons

Against all odds my students were motivated to learn and bright enough to pursue what they wanted to. Many of my students communicated in English impeccably, having started

their study of the language in early childhood. They reached out to native speakers through the Internet, and some had even traveled abroad through programs like Summer Work and Travel. It was their own initiative, and not their commitment to their university studies, that predicted their success.

In some cases, this motivation exceeded the amount of patience that the students had. Fearing their Belarusian degrees would be worthless in other countries, several of my students expressed their desire to leave the university system altogether, abandoning their studies to travel abroad or to pursue work. Some students sought ways to become eligible for European citizenships or long-term visas, hoping to enter a “real” university beyond the borders of Belarus.

Alternative educational institutions, such as the [European Humanities University](#) in Vilnius, Lithuania, welcome such students to study in Europe, but at a price higher than they would pay in Belarus, and with the occasional bit of trouble from the border patrol officers.

On the one hand, the university system in Belarus left much to be desired. Due to low salaries and scarcity of materials (one printer shared between twenty teachers and a constant shortage of chalk) at the university itself, teachers were often unmotivated, and this lack of enthusiasm was passed on to the students.

On the other, the students who managed to work through these difficulties and maintained a strong sense of drive and motivation could identify the university’s weaknesses. The deficiencies of the system motivated these students to succeed, and, as long as they keep that perspective, there is hope that Belarus will make some progressive changes to its current educational system.

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