

Analytical paper: Non-formal education in Belarus: expanding the learning space

The Ostrogorski Centre presents a study 'Non-formal Education in Belarus: Expanding the Learning Space', conducted in 2016 by Yaraslau Kryvoi and Vadzim Smok.

One of Belarus's chief strengths compared to states with similar levels of economic development is access to advanced education, a legacy of the Soviet Union rather than Minsk's independent achievement.

Unlike state-subsidised higher education, the non-formal education sector in Belarus has to survive in an unfavourable political environment, dependent on Western donors, and its reach remains very limited. This makes the situation in Belarus different from other European countries, where civil society is viewed as a partner of the state in delivering public goods and sustaining communities.

There are four groups of players in the field of non-formal education in Belarus: non-formal education in the third sector, business education, confessional education, and further education in the public sector. In developed democracies formal and non-formal education complement each other, while in Belarus they often confront each other.

Formal education in Belarus is controlled by the state and is often a part of the state. On the other hand, non-formal education constitutes a part of civil society. Understanding non-formal education is important to understanding the state of civil society in Belarus as well as its interaction with the state.

By the end of 2015 nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) in

Belarus were reporting a general improvement in conditions for civil society and human rights in Belarus. However, the conditions for their operation remain highly unfavourable. Independent civil society groups face great difficulty in registering as legal entities. Over a hundred civil society organisations are registered abroad due to the legal and regulatory obstacles they face inside the country.

The main purpose of this paper is to offer recommendations on how to make non-formal education in Belarus more efficient. The authors have relied on interviews with non-formal education instructors and students in Belarus alongside analysis of the literature on the state and the aims and trends in informal education in Belarus. The paper will offer recommendations for non-formal education providers and the donors financing them as well as state educational institutions which would benefit from cooperation with the non-formal education sector.

Recommendations

The future of non-formal education in Belarus will need to draw from these best practices while taking into account the peculiarities of Belarus.

• Building practical skills

Many Belarusian practitioners agree that the strategy of non-formal education in Belarus should take place in three consecutive phases: de-Sovietisation, Belarusisation and Europeanisation. However, it is also important to develop skills that allow people to operate successfully in a market economy.

According to one sociological survey, the main motivation for participation in education initiatives is professional interest (51.1%), while over a third (36.6%) value the

opportunity to widen their horizons and another third (34%) value the opportunity to socialise with interesting people. Along with civic participation, non-formal education should promote entrepreneurial skills, creativity, innovation and risk-taking, as well as the ability to plan and manage projects in order to achieve objectives.

▪ **Introducing new business models**

Charging fees for courses offering practical skills can partly help non-formal education providers alleviate one of their main problems: a lack of funds. The introduction of such market-based approaches requires additional transformations as well as business models. The projects need effective branding and advertisement strategies, orientation towards practical knowledge.

▪ **Teaching the teachers**

According to one view, the key needs of NGOs in the field of civic education in Belarus include the need for more and better professional trainers, better organisational development of NGOs, and networks of civic education, particularly at the regional level.⁸⁶ This is why there must be a focus on the multiplier effect; those who can spread knowledge and skills further and who have functional access to a wider audience need to be paid more attention. These groups include school teachers, university academics, social workers, doctors and so on.

▪ **Improving marketing**

A survey carried out at the 5th Festival of Non-Formal Education revealed that one of the main priorities was to work more actively with media to make non-formal education more popular, and to explain its usefulness for state institutions as well as increasing the professionalism of Belarusian educators.⁸⁸ Nowadays an effective media representation strategy plays a crucial role in the outreach of educational

projects. A modern and well-structured website and active accounts on social media are a must for any project that seeks to reach young people.

A more precise definition of a target audience and development of instruments to reach it could be a way of increasing awareness of non-formal education offerings in society. Practitioners also need to show how potential students can benefit from such studies, what practical results they will achieve and how they will be able to apply this knowledge in life.

▪ **Building partnerships**

Non-formal education providers can boost their potential through building effective partnerships with state institutions, NGOs, and business. Although the Belarusian state remains quite a reluctant and suspicious partner, emerging cases indicate that the authorities are becoming increasingly open to engagement with civil society in areas of mutual interest.

▪ **Recognising qualifications**

Even though recognition of non-formal education by Belarusian authorities or higher education institutions in Belarus will remain difficult for political reasons, it could be worth exploring such recognition with education institutions abroad, particularly those which run Belarus-related programmes. Obtaining a certificate from a recognised higher education institution may carry more prestige than non-formal education.

▪ **Using new technology**

Given that Belarus is one of the leaders of offshore software development⁸⁹ and has one of the highest fixed broadband penetration rates in Europe,⁹⁰ it would be a logical step for providers to use the internet and new technologies in education. Technology could play a particularly useful role in

shaping partnership relations with universities in the European Union, which could validate and recognise knowledge obtained in Belarus, even if official Belarusian universities are reluctant to do so for ideological or other reasons. Digital badges can also play a role in non-formal learning by recognising outcomes and attracting employers and employees from outside the formal education system.

- Read full paper: [Non-formal education in Belarus: expanding the learning space.](#)
- Чытаць даследаванне цалкам: [Нефармальная адукацыя ў Беларусі: пашырэнне прасторы навучання.](#)