

Social Orphans in Belarus: Alcohol Takes Its Toll

The number of cases of parents being deprived of their parental rights in Belarus is very high compared to other European countries.

On the whole, Belarus brings up more than 25,000 boys and girls in children's institutions of various types. That is about 1.4 per cent of all children, or every 70th child in Belarus.

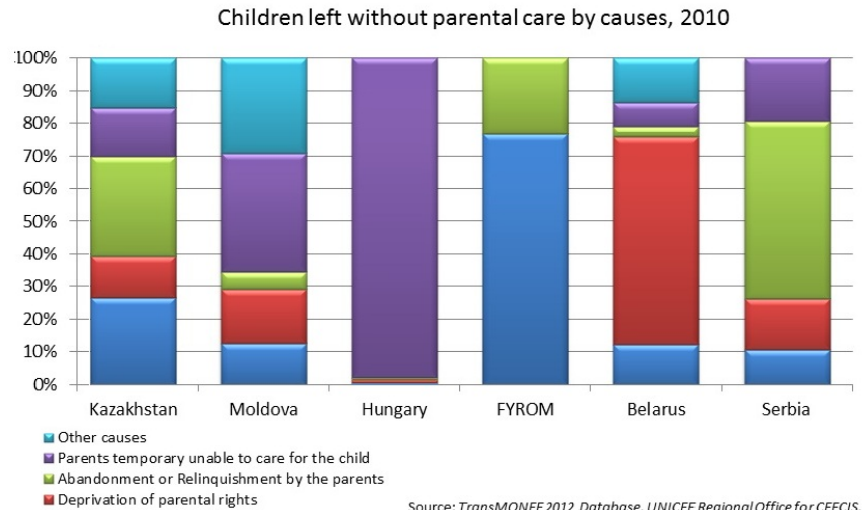
Every year state authorities send to children's institutions about 4,000 of children deprived of parental care. True orphans make up a small fraction of the total number.

Deprivation of parental rights because of alcohol abuse is one the most common reason for this.

Childhood's Cruel Rival

In an absolute [typical day in rehab](#) of cases when children are sent to orphanages, their parents, or at least one of them, are alive. But at some point they found their small offsprings to be an unbearable burden, an obstacle to an easy life, or simply forgot about their existence. Whatever the wording, too often children lose out in the competition with vodka for the

adults' hearts.



According to the World Health Organisation, Belarus is in the top 10 countries for alcohol consumption. More than 10 per cent of the entire population abuse it.

Alcohol is among the main causes for high mortality, suicides, and violence. And still... [the state increases the sale of alcohol](#) and [its cost stays low](#).

Alcohol-addicted people rarely refuse children themselves. Usually, state officials come and take the unfortunate small human beings away.

The state deprives unaccomplished parents of parents' rights. For a child, the immediate result of such a change is usually the same: being placed in an orphanage.

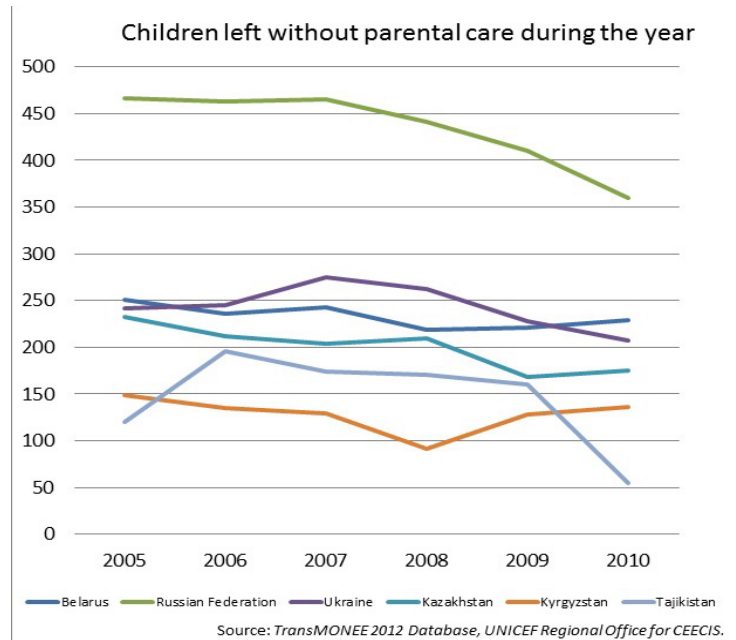
Belarusian state authorities use a broad term with regard to children with living parents who are deprived of their care: "social orphans". In fact, that usually means "victims of the [nation's alcoholisation](#)".

Bleak Prospects

Depending on the type of orphanage, it can host from between 20 and 100 children. The children receive medical care, special education if needed, and nice toys.

Yet the consequences of upbringing in an orphanage are

doleful. Developmental delays and physical stunting are common. Only about 10 per cent of orphanage graduates settle well in their future life. Violence, drugs, and, again, alcohol and abandoned children are far more common among orphanage graduates than among other youth.



This can hardly be blamed on the orphanages' staff. They are simply unable to provide children with decent socialisation skills and, even more importantly, with parental love.

For the state authorities, the detrimental results of upbringing in orphanages are clear enough. They are now making efforts to put children into alternative forms of family care instead.

Professional families, family-style children's homes, and patronage are relatively new institutions for Belarus, but they are gaining popularity and increasing in number.

In order to prove the success of alternative forms of family care, the state media like to point to the decrease in the number of orphanages in the country.

Compared to 2005, the number of children in orphanages has declined twofold. But one should be very careful with such statistics: during this time, the number of children has also

decreased in Belarus by 30 per cent because of demographic trends.

Thanks to these positive changes, children can live in an environment much closer to what they would get in a family. Still, the alternative family forms are not real ones.

Red Light for Foreign Adopters

Adoption gives a second chance for both real and social orphans. Being adopted as babies, children may never know that their parents are not their biological ones. Even if they learn this later, they will have already received parental love, which is of crucial importance for the formation of a person.

On the one hand, the statistics on adoption reveal progress: while in 2006 Belarusians adopted only 337 children, in 2011 this number was already 510. On the other hand, Belarus has drastically minimised the possibilities for international adoption.

For years, adoption by a foreign family loomed among the brightest wishes of small Belarusian orphans. The practise used to be quite popular and the number of cases of such polar shifts in children's lives could exceed 700 a year (in 2003).

Not taking into account children's interests, the state has decided their fortune in another way. In 2006, the Belarusian Parliament amended the Code of Marriage and Family's provisions on international adoption. Foreigners became able to adopt a Belarusian child only if state authorities found his or her adoption within Belarus impossible.

Of all foreigners (excluding Russians), only Italians can adopt Belarusian children, following a simplified procedure. Belarus and Italy have launched an effective cooperation on adoption issues which includes monitoring the life of adoptees

abroad.

Foreign adoption cases have decreased almost five times, together with children's chances for a proper life.

Reasons for State Concern

The state can provide good arguments supporting its position with regard to foreign adoption. In 2004, Lukashenka claimed adoption of Belarusian children by foreigners was Belarus' shame. A year later, the state claimed that international adoption was one means for trafficking of people.

The culmination came in September 2006 when an Italian couple refused to return a Belarusian orphan – Vika Moroz – to Belarus after she had spent a summer in Italy. The Italians claimed that at her orphanage in Belarus the small girl suffered from physical and moral violence. They hid the girl for 20 days. Finally, Italian police found Vika in a monastery and returned her to Belarus.

News from Russia exaggerated the tension. Exceptionally violent treatment of about 18 Russian children adopted by foreigners got significant attention in Russian media outlets which are popular in Belarus. The cases enforced the negative attitude of state officials towards international adoption. Even more, it helped the tough state policy to get ordinary Belarusians' support.

The state had its reasons for limiting international adoption. But it is impossible to agree with Lukashenka that adoption of Belarus by foreign citizens is Belarus' shame. The need for international adoption is only a consequence of a real cause for Belarus' shame: the alcoholisation of the rapidly declining population.