

# Most Vulnerable: Child Welfare Services in Belarus

On 1 June children celebrate their day in Belarus. The first day of summer brings break from school, lots of free open-air concerts, markets, and other attractions. Currently, more than 1,7 million children live in Belarus and about 25,000 among them do so without parents.

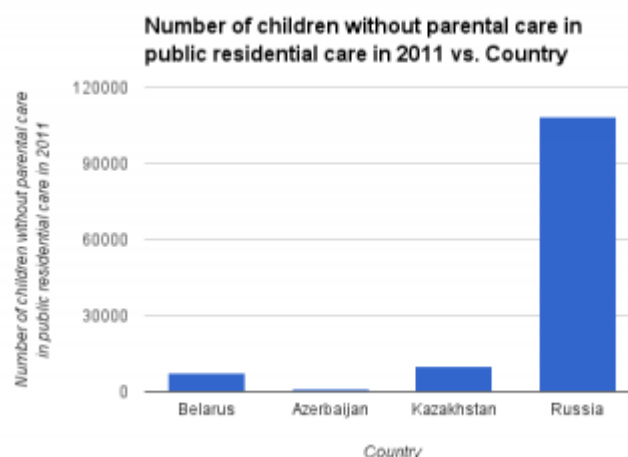
The number of children in custody stays relatively stable at 25,000 with predictable peaks in times of crises. Belarus struggled in the 1990's as the number of orphaned children tripled and resources remained scarce. Since then it has adopted some of the best international practices and national legislation improving the standards of life for orphaned children while bringing the costs of care down.

## Previous Record and Decree N 18

The term 'social orphans' describes children who live in foster care or orphanages and have living biological parents.

They amount to about 80% of all children under state custody in Belarus. Belarus looks relatively good compared to the situation in Russia, but in the EU and US orphanages have become obsolete. Since the number of such

children has steadily increased since 1993, new legislation



was drafted in 2006 in Belarus.

Referred for short as Decree No. 18, it became the single most important legislative act regulating how, when and who got to decide the fate of such children. It established a coordinating body, the Committee, between law enforcement, health care, education, and social services. The right kind of [childcare in bolton](#) should be sought for the safety and in the best interests of your children.

Now, the Committee scrutinises the lifestyle of a particular family suspected of neglect toward their children. In theory, they have to work with the families to prevent the worst case scenarios such as the lost of custody over children.

*“Ten years ago we went out to reprimand families. Now, we go out to support them.”* Child Protection Specialist, a representative of the Ministry of Education

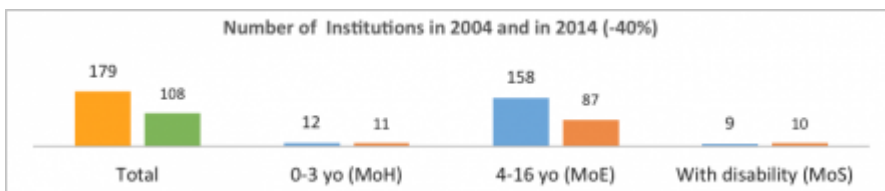
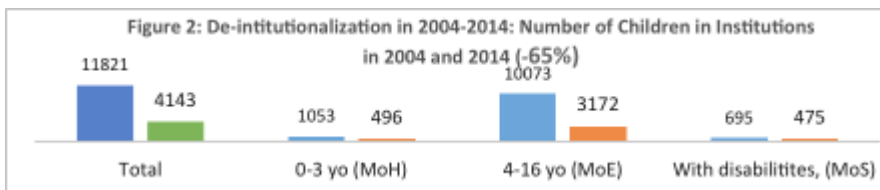
If the Committee finds the parents unfit to perform their responsibilities, the government has to step up. Most often than not the parents suffer from alcohol or drug addiction, have had incarceration history, and are constantly unemployed. But while they failed as parents, the decree states, they could still continue to work and reimburse the cost of childcare to the state. In 2014, 2644 parents lost custody of 3110 children.

The decree introduced a two-tier approach to dealing with such families. Initially if found unfit, parents may lose custody for up to six months. If there is a chance of finding a job, giving up addictions, normalising their lives there is a possibility of gaining custody back if they are in compliance with the plan designed by the Committee. After six months with no obvious improvements, the court may decide to take the children forever from such a household.

# From Institutional to Family Foster Care

The biggest positive changes for children in custody came when Belarus committed to shifting from orphanages to family foster care. According to Child Fund International data, since 2004, the number of children put in institutions decreased by 65%, and the number of such institutions went down by 40%. Increased preference for foster care potentially means better quality life for children, but also fewer expenses for the state.

*Figures and data from Child Fund International Final Report 2015:*



Each year, since 2007, has seen a consistent decrease in the number of children in orphanages. For example, the numbers dropped from 34% of all children in institutions in 2004, to only 13% institutionalised in 2014 according to a UNICEF report. In 2010, President Lukashenka announced that orphanages should cease to exist, and all children must live in families.

Irina Mironova, a Chairwoman of Child Fund International in Belarus, worked at the forefront of these changes and she shares her experience:

*Attachment theory tells us that a child needs at least one reliable adult in their lives who can provide care and support for them on the permanent basis. These goals are impossible to achieve in the institution environment. Only family type care can do it. We aimed to create an alternative system to orphanages that would help parents to embrace their responsibilities, and become better at it. Or develop a system of alternative family type care for children who cannot stay with their biological parents for different reasons. We also needed to shift the attitudes among child protection specialists from punishing to empowering parents.*

Certainly orphanages continue to operate in 2016, and so do the facilities for disabled children in custody. The number of such institutions has even grown from 9 to 10 in 2015. These children require intensive care, might never graduate to independent living, rarely get adopted, and if adoption occurs, it is usually into foreign families.

## **International best practices and local implementation**

The majority of best practices introduced by international actors in child protection came from the US model called Parent Resources for Information, Development, and Education (PRIDE). This model strengthens the quality of family foster parenting and adoptive services. Simply put, everybody could become a better foster parent with a little bit of help.

But some children will never find either foster or adoptive parents, as after a certain age, namely between 10 and 17, the chances of adoption decrease significantly. In 2014, 17,234 children lived in foster family arrangement in Belarus while another 10,478 were adopted. However, only 53 children out of these 10,000 adopted in 2014 were between the ages of 14 -17.

This calls for very specific services designed for such children who have spent their adolescence in orphanages.

Only a few who start adult living independently integrate well. As data shows many of them engage in risky behaviours, and incarceration rates reach up to 80% for such children. Statistics also show that they often fail as parents too, and this leads to an 'institutional cycle', a condition where children who grew up in orphanages end up sending their kids to orphanages.

Some of the projects attempt to create a sense of belonging for adolescent kids who fall through the cracks of state and family care. They include after-classes activities, which teach them basic life skills like personal finance, self-care, and job search techniques. Most importantly they keep these children off the streets during after school hours.

Providing quality life standards for children in custody is certainly humane, but also constitutes a social and economic investment not only in children themselves but in the nations' security and stability. However, such initiatives are few, scarce, and chronically underfunded.

As Belarus struggles to provide long-term comprehensive support for such children, it seems a lot more could be done with the infusion of international funds and expertise in this field.

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# **Alcohol as a Tool of**

# Authoritarianism in Belarus

According to the World Health Organisation Belarus holds [the first place in worldwide alcohol consumption](#). Yet the authorities ignore this significant national problem; their recent policies may be making it even worse.

At the end of August, Minsk authorities lifted restriction on selling alcohol between 10 p.m. – 9 a.m. The restriction had come into force just two months earlier. But the Ministry had ordered that all stores should have the favourite drink of Belarusian alcoholics, cheap strong wine, on their shelves, which undermined the restriction.

Despite a huge problem with alcoholism in Belarus, the authorities seem unwilling to implement anti-alcohol policies consistently. They use it both as a tool to calm social discontent and the government benefits from this tremendously profitable business through tax. No wonder that on the election days polling stations are well-stuffed with cheap alcohol.

## Was It Merely an Experiment?

On 25 August Belarusians were surprised to learn that the government removed the time restriction for selling alcohol between 10 p.m. – 9 a.m., which it had introduced two month earlier.

This step took place a few days after Lukashenka's meeting with top officials to discuss the production and sale of alcohol. He criticised the government for export decreases and the growing shadow market. Alcohol has been traditionally a lucrative sector for the state budget. But it has thinned because increasingly the private sector has occupied a large share of the market. Likewise, counterfeit Russian alcohol has

infiltrated Belarus, especially into Belarus's eastern regions. The Ministry of the Interior estimated the shadow annual market of counterfeit alcohol at \$200 m.

The Ministry of Trade's shortly thereafter ordered all alcohol stores to sell Belarusian the lowest quality wine that is produced in Belarus (known as *charnila*). For a long time the Ministry of Interior and the Health Ministry have long struggled to ban this product.

Moreover, at the end of September the deputy Minister of Trade Viačaslaŭ Drahun revealed that restrictions on the Internet sale of cigarettes and alcohol may end in the near future. "This restriction narrows the possibilities of citizens who prefer online purchases, and also impedes trade for domestic producers of alcohol", the official said. Since 2005 Internet trade of cigarettes and alcohol has been illegal in Belarus.

## Alcoholism Still a Big Problem

In 2014 the World Health Organisation reported that Belarus has maintained the first position in the world on alcohol consumption, with 17,5 litres of pure alcohol per capita. 170,000 alcoholics are officially registered, accounting for 1,8% of the whole population. But health experts say the actual number of abusers could be ten times that number.



According to the General Prosecutor's office report **in** 2014, intoxicated offenders commit 80% of murders in Minsk region. In May 2015 the police reported that the number of domestic murders rose by 67% compared to 2014, and in 90% cases it happened as a result of drinking. The statistics **for** grave injuries also show that in 80% of cases the offenders consumed alcohol.

Alcohol remains one of the major reasons for [high suicide rates](#), as Belarus traditionally is close to the top position of number of suicides worldwide. It also causes high rates of [orphanage](#), because the authorities tend to take children from alcoholic parents in most cases. Obviously a huge problem for the whole nation, alcoholism requires immediate and serious measures. But the policies to combat alcoholism look very inconsistent in Belarus.

## **Controversial Alcohol Policies**

The Ministry of Interior, the General Prosecutor's office and the Health Ministry lobbied firmly for anti-alcoholism policies, while producers insisted on the opposite.

In 2011-2015 the government has been implementing the national programme for combating alcoholism. The official statistics claim the programme has yielded visible results: the annual consumption of alcohol fell from 12,22 to 10,47 litres of pure alcohol per capita (the official statistics differ from the WHO as it counts all the population, while the WHO counts only people aged over 15).

Belarus bans sales of alcohol during graduation ceremonies at schools and harvesting time in villages. Companies cannot advertise alcohol except beer in the media and in public places, and drinking in public is an offence. Domestic alcohol



prices are only slightly lower than in Poland and Lithuania, and higher than in Russia and Ukraine.

However, easy access to alcohol makes these policies ineffective. While Belarus has one alcohol sale point for 550 people, Poland has one for 12,000 and the Scandinavian countries one for 25,000. *Charnila*, a cheap strong wine made from apples, remains very popular and protected by the government.

The government has attempted to ban *charnila* since 2013, but producers apparently persuaded Lukashenka to block the implementation of this measure. "This ban will not work, just think about its consequences", Lukashenka said in November 2012. Now, every store must have this particular wine on its shelves according to a Ministry of Trade August decree. It means thousands of Belarusians will continue to destroy themselves with low quality alcohol.

## The Alcohol Calculation



It appears that the government lifted alcohol restrictions a month before elections and flooded the stores with wine as a conscious political step to calm the population during the ongoing [economic crisis](#).

Belarus's authorities have always applied minimum pressure on society before elections and during economic difficulties. For

instance, at the time of 2011 economic crisis alcohol was [one of the few products](#) not to increase in price.

Strikingly, unlike countries which ban alcohol sales during elections, in Belarus rich buffets with ridiculously cheap alcohol and food became a tradition at polling stations (photo from the 2015 presidential election).

Political reasons for such a policy seem clear, but the revenues from selling alcohol may play an even greater role. Alcohol producers remain among the top 15 taxpayers in the country, along with oil potash and tobacco companies. 7% of the budget of Minsk comes from alcohol sales. Needless to say this business is extremely profitable and looked after at the highest level of government. Most distilleries are state owned and those few that are private belong to people closely associated with Lukashenka, like [Uładzimir Piefcijeŭ](#).

No wonder that in a currently shaky political and economic environment the authorities use alcohol to its full extent to help Belarusians forget their problems. As usually happens in Belarusian politics, short term benefits prevail over long-term calculation. In this case health and human potential of Belarusians suffer to keep the political *status quo*.