



Non-formal Education in Belarus: Expanding the Learning Space

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Executive summary

- The Belarusian state has long perceived the system of non-formal education as a threat to the existing authoritarian political regime and created a restrictive environment for its operation. In developed democracies formal and non-formal education complement each other, while in Belarus they often confront each other.
- The authorities have established ideological control over university disciplines in which interpretation of political reality has particular significance. In this context, spreading non-dogmatic and non-politicised knowledge has become an essential task for non-formal education institutions in Belarus.
- The Belarusian authorities have relied on Soviet heritage to shape national identity rather than on the promotion of Belarusian national and European identity. Non-formal education projects play the role of strengthening these latter identities. The goal of many non-formal education institutions in Belarus is to increase the number of people with democratic views and active citizenship.
- Many activities in the non-formal education sector are still driven by the agenda of donors and by a lack of alternative funding sources. Raising funds inside Belarus for non-formal education initiatives remains challenging. This has led to the near-total dependence of non-formal education initiatives on foreign donors. In recent years, financial support for Belarusian non-formal education has been decreasing.
- To make non-formal education more attractive and relevant to the political and economic realities of Belarus, non-formal education should also promote specific skills, which are useful on the labour market, including entrepreneurial skills, creativity, and the ability to plan and manage projects.
- Non-formal education needs to introduce new business models to improve fundraising. This requires effective branding and advertisement strategies, orientation towards practical knowledge, and that those bidding are able to present and sell their offers.
- Even though recognition of non-formal education by the Belarusian authorities or higher education institutions in Belarus will remain difficult for political reasons, it could be worth exploring such recognition from education institutions abroad.
- Belarus is one of Europe's centres of offshore programming and the non-formal education sector should rely more on modern technology to increase its reach and impact in particular using distance learning.

Introduction

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.¹ 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.

According to UNESCO, non-formal education is institutionalised, intentional and planned by an education provider.² Its main role is to complement formal education within the process of lifelong learning of individuals.³ Non-formal education does not necessarily follow a continuous pathway and is usually provided in the form of workshops, seminars or short courses. In most cases it does not lead to formal education but in some cases recognised qualifications may be obtained through exclusive participation in non-formal education programmes, where it complements competencies obtained in another context.⁴

Non-formal education sector in Belarus has to survive in an unfavourable political environment, dependent on Western donors, and its reach remains very limited

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.⁵ In developed democracies formal and non-formal education complement each other, while in Belarus they often confront each other.⁶ 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.⁷

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 organizations are registered abroad due to the legal and regulatory obstacles they face inside the country.⁸

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

¹ Charnysh, Volha, 'Social Progress In Belarus: Self-Perception Versus Reality', *Belarus Digest*, 9 April 2015, <<http://belarusdigest.com/story/social-progress-belarus-self-perception-versus-reality-22278>> [accessed 16 March 2016].

² UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS) <<http://glossary.uis.unesco.org/glossary>> [accessed 16 June 2016].

³ Schneider, Silke L., 2013. 'The International Standard Classification of Education 2011', in Gunn Elisabeth Birkelund (ed.) *Class and Stratification Analysis (Comparative Social Research, Volume 30)*, Emerald Group Publishing Limited, pp. 365 - 379.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Poshevalova, Tatiana, 2009. 'Neformal'noe obrazovanie v Belarusi: resurs dlia razvitiia lichnosti o obshchestva', *Adukatar*, No. 15, P. 14-16.

⁶ Matskevich, Vladimir, Matskevich, Svetlana, Vodolazhskaya, Tatiana, 2006. 'Podkhody k standartam i standartizatsii v neformal'nom obrazovanii', *Adukatar*, No3(No. 9), 2006. P.16.

⁷ Ibid., P.17.

⁸ Freedom House, 2016. 'Nations in Transit 2015', <<https://freedomhouse.org/report/nations-transit/2016/belarus>> [accessed 17 May 2016].

with non-formal education instructors and students in Belarus alongside analysis of 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.

To understand how non-formal education works in the Belarusian context, in April-May 2016 the authors conducted interviews with the leaders of the three largest educational projects offering non-formal alternative academic programmes: the Belarusian Collegium, the Flying University and the European College of Liberal Arts (ECLAB). Interviews were conducted within three focus groups with students from these programmes to collect data. A total of 17 students were interviewed.

The paper begins with a brief overview of the history of non-formal education in Belarus. The second part analyses the actors and main goals of non-formal education in Belarus, which include shaping Belarusian and European identity, democratization and learning practical skills. The paper continues by discussing the key challenges to non-formal education in Belarus, including the unfavourable political environment, excessive reliance on Western donors and limited reach of non-formal education.

The paper concludes with recommendations on how to make non-formal education in Belarus more efficient by promoting inter-sectoral cooperation, bridging non-formal and formal education and using technology.

In the early 1990s many people ended up with no knowledge or skills to survive in the conditions of an emerging market economy and political pluralism

1. History of non-formal education in Belarus

The growth of non-formal education initiatives in Belarus was inspired by historical examples such as the activities of the Society of Filomats, established in 1817 by students of Vilnia university. Members of the society became prominent cultural figures such as Adam Mickiewicz, Jan Čačot and Ihnat Damejka.⁹ Their activities were aimed at forming a system of adult education which would secure the liberation of Belarus from Tsarist Russia.

In Soviet times, authorities organised non-formal education through the Knowledge Society (*Obshestvo Znanie*) as well as through employers and trade union organisations. At that time, non-formal education was strictly controlled by the state and was under the heavy influence of official state ideology. In the early 1990s, when the old ideology collapsed with the Soviet Union, many people ended up with no knowledge or skills to survive in the conditions of an emerging market economy and political pluralism. This is when new non-formal education providers began to operate.

In the 1990s, the People's University became one of the most visible initiatives in the area of non-formal education in Belarus. It resembled the Polish Flying University active in socialist Poland in the 1970s. The People's University had no teaching rooms and its instructors would travel to various regions of Belarus to deliver public lectures. Each instructor independently determined the content of lectures, with the only

⁹ Chernov, Victor, 2004. 'Sistema grazhdanskogo obrazovania v tretem sektore', *Adukatar*, No. 1, P. 8.

requirements being that it be interesting for the students. There were no compulsory subjects or module study guides.

Unlike the Polish Flying University, the People's University kept a record of attendance, and the participants took tests and received certificates for good attendance and satisfactory performance.¹⁰ Over 1,500 people in 31 Belarusian cities were involved in its activities.¹¹ However, the People's University initiative was not supported by the Belarusian government under the European Union funded technical cooperation programme (TACIS) and it gradually declined.¹²



The 5th Festival of Non-Formal Education in Minsk.
Photo: adukatar.net

In the early 1990s Belarusian NGOs experienced a shortage of financial and intellectual resources and were actively establishing relations with similar organisations abroad.¹³ Development of the market economy and destruction of the communist system resulted in more interest in practical skills rather than learning about democracy.

In the 1990s and still to a large extent today, many organisations of non-formal education focused on spreading knowledge about democracy as well as national identity and nation building, rather than providing

Belarusian adults with practical skills.¹⁴ This focus on democracy was driven by the agenda of donors as well as by a lack of alternative funding sources.

Until 1996-1997 external donors did not play a key role in the non-formal education sector, as a free political environment allowed for private funding and even state support for such initiatives. However, with the establishment of an authoritarian regime, domestic funding, not to mention support from the government, became virtually impossible to obtain. Non-formal education providers were forced to turn to external sources of funding which usually prioritised democratisation and human rights. This is one of the most important reasons why non-formal education focuses largely on human rights, self-governance, national culture, history, and democratisation.

State policy in the field of education has undergone a number of changes over the past 20 years. Between 1991 and 1994 the education system was reoriented from the Soviet model towards serving the needs of the newly independent Belarusian state. They tried to promote critical thinking, strengthen national identity and address the practical needs for survival and prosperity in a market economy.¹⁵

Between 1994 and 1997 the system started to turn back to Soviet practices by increasing the role of the state in higher education, hindering the process of Belarusification, and liquidating private education establishments or putting them under total control of the state.¹⁶ NGOs working in the area of education had to undergo procedures of registration and re-registration. The symbolic end to this period was the closure of

¹⁰ Ibid, P. 9.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² 'Adukacyja, navuchannie, asveta u trecim sektary: stan i perspektyvy razvicia', *Adukatar*, No. 1(4), 2005. P. 3.

¹³ See, generally, Vialička, Ulad, 2004. 'Niefarmaŭnaja adukacyja daroslych u bielaruskim trecim sektary: asablivasci razvicia', *Adukatar*, No. 1.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Matskevich, Svetlana, 2006. 'Istoria i aktualii grazhdanskogo obrazovania v Belarusi. Pragmatika, paradigmatika, sintagmatika', *Adukatar*, No 1(7), P. 9.

¹⁶ Ibid.

the Open Society Foundation in 1997,¹⁷ one of the main donors to Belarusian civil society, following a \$3m fine for alleged tax and currency violations.¹⁸

After 1997 the authorities started to expand their programme of patriotic education and state ideology to cultivate loyalty to the authorities. They established the Belarusian Patriotic Union of Youth (since 2002, the Belarusian Republican Union of Youth), initiated mandatory political information classes and increased the ideologisation of education. Officials asserted that patriotic education and civic education were one and the same. The state also started to include more market elements in education with mandatory educational services fees and a reduction in the number of students whose education was funded by the state.¹⁹ The year 2007 saw a symbolic return to the Soviet system of education, when President Alexander Lukashenka signed a new law on higher education that excluded provisions for academic freedoms and autonomy of universities.²⁰

After 1997 the authorities started to expand their programme of patriotic education and state ideology to cultivate loyalty to the authorities.

Today, the activities of non-formal education institutions include seminars and lectures, public discussions, university-based discussion communities, distance education initiatives, PhD programmes, and regular methodology seminars.²¹ Since 2005, Weeks of Non-Formal Education have taken place in Belarus, which usually feature seminars, round tables, exhibitions and festivals.²² Since 2006, Belarusian non-formal education providers have organised annual Festivals of Non-Formal Education. They serve as both professional and informal sites for interaction, exchange of experience and development of a common vision for non-formal education actors. These include discussions, master classes and competitions.²³

However, providers of non-formal education in Belarus are far from thriving. Some characterize the state of non-formal education as stagnating, with the number of NGOs and experts in the sector steadily declining.²⁴

¹⁷ Open Society Foundation is an international grantmaking network founded by business magnate George Soros and headquartered in New York.

¹⁸ 'Soros Closes Foundation In Belarus', 4 September 1997, New York Times, <<http://www.nytimes.com/1997/09/04/world/soros-closes-foundation-in-belarus.html>> [accessed 20 March 2016].

¹⁹ Matskevich, Svetlana, 2006. 'Istoria i aktualii grazhdanskogo obrazovaniya v Belarusi. Pragmatika, paradigmatika, sintagmatika', *Adukatar*, No 1(7), P. 9.

²⁰ Dunaev, Vladimir 'Prisoiedinenie Belarusi k evropeiskomu prostranstvu vysshego obrazovaniya: est' li nadezhda na peremeny?', *Nashe Mnenie*, 18 November 2015, <<http://nmnby.eu/news/analytics/5929.html>> [accessed 15 May 2016].

²¹ Matskevich, Vladimir, 2011. 'Universitet - eto shans prikosnutsia k poisku istiny', *Adukatar*, No. 20, 2011, P. 5.

²² Vieramiejčyk, Halina, 2010. 'Nieformalnaja adukacyja ū Bielarusi', *Adukatar*, No 18, 2010, P. 6.

²³ Istoria Festivalia neformal'nogo obrazovaniya, <<http://adukatar.net/istoriya-festivalya-neformal-nogo-obrazovaniya/>> [Accessed 08.06.2016].

²⁴ Zhurakovskii, Valerii and others, 2013. 'Analiz sektora Respubliki Belarus', subjecty kotorogo zanimaiutsia grazhdanskim obrazovaniem. Ofis evropeiskoi ekspertizy i kommunikatsii, 2013, p. 39-40.

2. Challenges to non-formal education in Belarus

2.1. Unfavourable environment

The state has treated the non-formal education sector with suspicion. The result is that it is trying to survive in unfavourable conditions without support from the state and sometimes even in spite of obstacles created by the state.²⁵ The state perceives non-formal education as a threat to the existing authoritarian political regime.²⁶

Ever since Lukashenka's first presidential term in 1994, many non-formal education initiatives have taken a critical stance towards his regime, and have often united with oppositional political actors in their struggle with the new government. It comes as no surprise that authorities began to perceive the non-formal education sector as a part of the political opposition and treated them accordingly.

What's more, the same western donors who facilitated regime change in Ukraine and other countries often fund non-formal education initiatives in the region. Belarusian legislation severely restricts foreign aid and equates foreign-funded educational semi-

nars may amount to "activities directed at changing the constitutional order of the Republic of Belarus, seizure or overthrow of state authorities" and it is forbidden to sponsor them.²⁷

Authorities began to perceive the non-formal education sector as a part of the political opposition and treated them accordingly

One of the reasons for the ineffectiveness of civic education in Belarus is legislative inequality between non-formal education initiatives and formal education institutions.²⁸ Moreover, the non-formal education sector cannot seriously compete with

the state system because of low numbers of students. State bodies treat non-formal education initiatives with suspicion even where they deal with apolitical topics, which in no way contradict the authorities.²⁹ This is in stark contrast to many other countries where the state subsidises non-formal education.³⁰

As directors of the Belarusian Collegium, Flying University and ECLAB stated in interviews, they have not had any meaningful cooperation with state institutions except for a few cases where they worked with libraries and art galleries. This was quite a complicated experience due to red tape in some cases and fear of dealing with NGOs in others. Their network of partnerships includes only Belarusian NGOs and foreign actors. The directors have not attempted to cooperate with local administrations because of the two decades of repressive policy towards civil society.

However, recent changes in Belarusian foreign and domestic policy³¹ suggest that Belarusian officials could change their attitude towards civil society actors if they cooperate in areas of mutual interest. For instance, in March 2016, an expert conference

²⁵ Vialička, Ulad, 2004. 'Niefarmalnaja adukacyja daroslych u bielaruskim trecim siektary: asablivasci razvicia', *Adukatar*, No. 1, P. 5-6.

²⁶ Zhurakovskiy, Valeriy, 2006. 'O zadachakh grazhdanskogo obrazovania v Belarusi', *Adukatar.*, No. 7, 2006, P. 5.

²⁷ Edict of the President of the Republic of Belarus No.300 of 1 July 2005.

²⁸ Matskevich, Svetlana, 2006. 'Istoria i aktualii grazhdanskogo obrazovania v Belarusi. Pragmatika, paradigmatica, sintagmatika', *Adukatar*, No. 7, P. 9.

²⁹ Karpiyevich, Dmitriy, 2009. 'Sub'ekty neformal'nogo obrazovania: kliuchevyie igroki i vozmozhnyie napravlenia dlia sotrudnichestva', *Adukatar*, No. 16, P. 9.

³⁰ See, for example, cases of developing countries in Mehboob, Dada and others, 2006. *Synergies between formal and non-formal education: an overview of good practices*, UNESCO.

³¹ Shraibman, Artyom. 'Belarus Without Sanctions: What Now?', 25 February 2016, <<http://belarusdigest.com/story/belarus-without-sanctions-what-now-24741>> [accessed 11 May 2016].

on regional security, Minsk Dialogue, was organised by the Ostrogorski Centre and Liberal Club with participation of the Belarusian Foreign Ministry.³²

Another recent example is the *Kastrynicki Ekanami ny Forum* (October Economic Forum), initiated by the Research Centre of the Institute for Privatisation and Management in association with the Belarus Economic Research and Outreach Center (BEROC) and CASE Belarus. In November 2015 the forum brought together representatives of the public authorities, academic community, think tanks and international organisations as well as international experts and other stakeholders.³³

Those who work in the area of non-formal education have to rely increasingly on foreign aid

In reality, the state can benefit from cooperation with the non-formal education sector in many ways. The practical skills non-formal education provides can help to relieve the growing unemployment problem and make citizens more competitive in the labour market. The state should be particularly interested in encouraging civic activity. This will help citizens get rid of their paternalistic mind-set and high expectations about what the state can and should provide that have persisted since Soviet times. Furthermore, a sense of national unity and shared identity is what the Belarusian state clearly needs for steady development. Non-formal education can play a major role in these things, if only the authorities would show it some support.

2.2. Excessive dependence on Western donors

Another problem which all three institutions face relates to funding. Raising funds inside Belarus is extremely difficult because of the restrictive political environment. Those who work in the area of non-formal education have to rely increasingly on foreign aid, and in light of the authorities' very unfavourable treatment of gratuitous foreign aid, their activities often remain non-transparent.

Until 1996-1997 external donors did not play a key role in the non-formal education sector, as the free political environment allowed for private funding and even state support of such initiatives. However, with the establishment of Lukashenka's authoritarian regime, domestic funding, not to mention support from the government, have become virtually impossible. The Belarusian diaspora also contributes funding to Belarusian civil society projects, but this support meets only a small part of the total need. This hinders cooperation between various institutions working in non-formal education.³⁴

According to some experts, control by Western donors over education projects rather than a partner relationship has contributed to the ineffectiveness of non-formal education in Belarus.³⁵ It has been suggested that partner relationships rather than relationships of control and subordination would have facilitated stronger civic education in Belarus. Approaches of developed democracies do not necessarily work in Belarus and made Belarusian organisations adapt to the priorities of Western donors without pushing their own vision.

According to other representatives of the non-formal education sector, the role of donors should not be overstated. First, much depends on the individual donor, as many

³² Kryvoi, Yaraslau. 'Minsk Dialogue conference: Belarus to become a regional hub for expert diplomacy', 23 March 2015, <<http://belarusdigest.com/story/minsk-dialogue-conference-belarus-become-regional-hub-expert-diplomacy-22015>> [accessed 11 May 2016].

³³ About KEF, <<http://eng.kef.research.by/about/>> [accessed 6 July 2016].

³⁴ Vialička, Ulad, 2004. 'Niefarmalnaja adukacyja daroslych u bielaruskim trecim siektary: asablivasci razvicia', *Adukatar*, No. 1, P. 5-6.

³⁵ Matskevich, Svetlana, 2006. 'Istoria i aktualii grazhdanskogo obrazovania v Belarusi. Pragmatika, paradigmatika, sintagmatika', *Adukatar*, No 7, P. 10.

do not interfere with the carrying out of projects. Secondly, donor policies in this area have changed substantially. The claim of manipulation and control by donors was very sensitive between 2000 and 2006, but even then only a few Western supporters took an “active role” in non-formal education projects.

A related concern is that it is easier for donors to organise their activities outside of Belarus. Even for basic training participants travel to neighbouring Lithuania or Poland, which limits the reach of non-formal education projects.³⁶ Importantly, donors allocate considerable grant funds for implementers’ own support, which are usually EU-based organisations run by EU nationals.

Because organisations are paid to a large extent for conducting educational events, seminars are sometimes organised merely for the sake of organising without any tangible results.³⁷ However, this generally does not hold true for educational initiatives specialising in non-formal education, including the three described in this paper.



The 5th Festival of Non-Formal Education in Minsk.
Photo: adukatar.net

In recent years, financial support for Belarusian civil society has been decreasing, and the representatives of non-formal education projects interviewed for this paper have clearly felt the impact of this. All three projects – the Belarusian Collegium, Flying University and ECLAB – mentioned a lack of financing as the primary challenge to their existence. Project leaders refused to give precise figures, but noted that funding has become more difficult to come by in recent years. The projects are constantly seeking additional funding and have to apply for grants from multiple sources. No project has

long-term institutional funding that would allow for stable administrative positions and long-term planning.

Interviewees said that donors usually expect immediate results, but education is a long-term process, which does not quickly lead to tangible output. Last but not least, it is very difficult to find financial support for research activities, which are important for the professional development of academics.

ECLAB is the only project offering paid education, although this makes up only a small part of the project’s budget. It admits 20 students free of charge and 40 more with tuition fees of 30 euros per course (the course consists of 20 academic hours).

It is important to note that all students interviewed confirmed that they are prepared to pay a reasonable fee for non-formal studies. Furthermore, ECLAB leader Vo ha Šparaha indicated that students who pay fees seem to take their studies more seriously and responsibly, as they have made a conscious investment in them. These facts indicate that the introduction of a fee system would be a natural step for the Flying University and Belarusian Collegium. It would create a small yet important means of self-financing while increasing students’ motivation to study.

However, the introduction of such market-based approaches requires additional transformations and new business models. The projects would need effective branding and advertisement strategies, orientation towards practical knowledge, and that those

³⁶ Ibid, P. 12.

³⁷ Ibid, pp. 12-13.

bidding have the skills to present and sell their offers. It is also obvious that while some areas (business, IT, design etc.) can easily become commercially successful, others, which are usually funded by states or private funds, can hardly count on grassroots funding.

Fundraising inside Belarus and obtaining aid from businesses and state institutions is complicated by the still strained relations and politicisation of non-formal education providers. This is the case not only because of the authoritarian political regime. Although many donors have allocated funds for social projects, democratisation and political activism have often received more attention and resources, especially in 1997-2007. Western donors have had a rather short sighted approach to democratising Belarus and have usually been focused on bringing about political change through regime change or training political activists and parties.

This has resulted in funding being allocated to the political sector of civil society. However, this approach has proved ineffective, as political activity has gradually diminished despite these efforts. Meanwhile, activity oriented towards long-term change, such as education and identity building, remains undervalued and underfunded. In Belarus, however, it seems to be the only path to democracy, albeit a slower and less evident one, and hence needs the investment of stakeholders in democratisation. Nowadays, support for political activity seems to be declining and donors have redirected their attention to human rights and social and environmental issues.

However, activity in projects that are not overtly political and benefit all stakeholders equally could still yield results. To do that, non-formal education providers should clearly understand how they can benefit state and business partners and become more flexible in their views and perceptions.

**In 2008-2013
no more than 100,000 people
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or 1.2% of the total population**

2.3. Low reach of non-formal education

According to some estimates, in 2008-2013 no more than 100,000 people were involved in non-formal education in Belarus, or 1.2% of the total population, which is a very low number for a country of almost 10 million inhabitants. The 40 major non-formal education providers surveyed educated only a few thousand people annually.³⁸ Meanwhile, ideological institutions of the state encompass around 70% of young people and 40% of the economically active population.³⁹

The leaders of the initiatives mentioned reaching the target audience as their main challenge in the future. Moreover, in the interviews two out of three project-organisers defined their target audiences rather generally, saying that they welcome anyone interested in studying. A more precise definition of a target audience and development of instruments to reach it could be a way of increasing awareness of their offering in society. They also need to show potential students how they can benefit from the studies, what practical results they will achieve and how they will be able to apply this knowledge in life. None of these initiatives explain on their websites the benefits of studying there.

³⁸ Zhurakovskiy, Valeriy and others, 2013. *Analiz sektora Respubliki Belarus', subjecty kotorogo zanimaiutsia grazhdanskim obrazovaniem*. Ofis evropeiskoi ekspertizy i kommunikatsii, Minsk, P. 33.

³⁹ Ibid., P. 37.

Websites in the modern world have become a front door for organisations, and the quality of a website is an essential factor for the project's appeal. ECLAB students said that they preferred this project partly because it has a well-designed modern website with structured information on its activities.

A mass media presence is key to reaching an audience, and the projects are seeking to improve visibility. However, their media activity differs significantly. A comparison of social networks and publications that include the projects' names shows that while some of them put serious effort into representation, others do it less intensively. The diagrams in Annex 1 show quantitative data on their online activity collected for the period of 1 September 2015 – 15 April 2016.

While the Flying University and ECLAB demonstrate high activity on social media, the Belarusian Collegium lags behind significantly. The number of videos posted by the Flying University on youtube.com is particularly notable.

When choosing between educational initiatives, students appear to possess insufficient information about their options. The interviews showed that the Belarusian Collegium appears to be the most well-known project, as 10 out of 12 interviewed students of ECLAB and the Flying University had heard about it. ECLAB appeared the least known among Flying University and Belarusian Collegium students despite well-organised media representation. However, the share of ECLAB students who know about the other two projects was the highest among the three groups.

Table 1. Number of students knowing/not knowing about other educational projects

	Know about BC	Do not know about BC
Flying University (FU) students	5	2
ECLAB students	5	0
	Know about FU	Do not know about FU
Belarusian Collegium (BC) students	2	3
ECLAB students	4	1
	Know about ECLAB	Do not know about ECLAB
Flying University students	1	6
Belarusian Collegium students	0	5

One problem with non-formal education reach in Belarus is its concentration in the capital. Most activity occurs in Minsk, while even regional centres with a few hundred thousand inhabitants have almost no opportunities for such study. The project leaders mentioned lack of financing and human resources as the major hindrance for activity in the regions. For example, the Flying University has been attempting to establish stable groups in Brest, Mahilioŭ and Viciebsk for a number of years. In Brest and Viciebsk it once held lectures twice a month and in Mahilioŭ five courses were held each weekend. Subsequently, however, the possibility for regional activity disappeared due to the lack of local activists and resources.

3. Key contributions of non-formal education in Belarus

3.1. Offering an academic alternative to official education

In the late 1990s, the social sciences and humanities in Belarus saw a steep decline as the authoritarian regime consolidated power. The authorities established ideological control over university disciplines in which interpretations of political reality had particular significance, such as political science, history, sociology, philosophy, journalism and economics.⁴⁰ Purges of dissenting academics became common in universities in the 2000s,⁴¹ and ideological classes were introduced throughout the educational system.

In this context, spreading non-dogmatic and non-politicised knowledge became an essential task for non-formal education institutions in Belarus. While non-formal education in Belarus is not limited to non-formal academic programmes and also includes organisations working on human rights, legal education and faith-based education,⁴² this section of the paper will focus primarily on organisations attempting to be an alternative to state higher education. These academic non-formal education providers also act as safe-harbours for academics dismissed from their universities for political reasons.⁴³ With very limited resources, particularly compared to state universities, non-formal education providers have managed to make education outside state-run institutions attractive.⁴⁴

This paper mostly focuses on the three largest educational projects offering non-formal alternative academic programmes of Belarusian Collegium, Flying University and the European College of Liberal Arts (ECLAB).

The Belarusian Collegium was established in 1997 and has four departments: Journalism, Contemporary History, Philosophy and Literature, and European Studies.⁴⁵ The curriculum is fixed for each department and students cannot select courses. Each department usually has many short courses, aiming to provide the most comprehensive overview of a particular discipline. The Belarusian Collegium used to have two-year and three-year options, but is now gradually moving towards a one-year model. All departments, except European Studies, offer theory as well as applied knowledge, which students can use in their professional development. The Belarusian Collegium offers a more classical academic approach with disciplinary boundaries.

Spreading non-dogmatic and non-politicised knowledge became an essential task for non-formal education institutions in Belarus

⁴⁰ Kazakievič, Andrej, 'Empiryčnyja dasledavanni Bielarusi dazvoliać pieraadolieć situacyju pieryfieryi', 13 August 2011, <http://neurope.eu/tables/2011/07/13/andrei_kazakevich_%E2%80%9Cempirychnyya_dasledavanni_belarusi_dazvoljats_peraadolets_situa> [accessed 15 May 2016].

⁴¹ Smok, Vadzim, 'Belarusian Academics Sacked For Writing Books And Fairy Tales', *Belarus Digest*, 12 October 2012, <<http://belarusdigest.com/story/belarusian-academics-sacked-writing-books-and-fairy-tales-11658>> [accessed 15 May 2016].

⁴² Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum, 2012. 'Non-formal education for regional democratic transformation', P. 40, <<http://adukatar.net/en/neformal-noe-obrazovanie-dlya-regional-ny-h-demokraticheskikh-transformatsij/>> [accessed 6 May 2016].

⁴³ For example, a number of academics dismissed from official universities for political reasons work at the history department of the Belarusian Collegium <http://belcollegium.org/departments/history/> [accessed 15 May 2016].

⁴⁴ Borowska, Paula, 'Non-Formal Education In Belarus: Unleashing The Civil Society Potential', 18 November 2014, *Belarus Digest*, <<http://belarusdigest.com/story/non-formal-education-belarus-unleashing-civil-society-potential-20186>> [accessed 10 April 2016].

⁴⁵ Departments of the Belarusian Collegium, <<http://belcollegium.org/departments/>> [accessed 10 April 2016].

The Flying University was established in 2009 and offers study programmes on two levels. The first comprises a number of courses in the humanities, mainly history and philosophy. The second level offers four schools for advanced studies: history of ideas, methodology, the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, and social and philosophical analysis.⁴⁶ Students can select courses without any restrictions. The Flying University focuses on experimental thinking, which makes it different from the classical approach of the Belarusian Collegium.

The European College of Liberal Arts in Belarus (ECLAB) is the youngest organisation, established in 2014. It has six interdisciplinary departments in arts, humanities and social sciences: contemporary art and theatre; internet and society; gender studies; public history; modern society, ethics and politics; and mass culture and media.⁴⁷ Initially, students take three introductory courses which help them choose a department to focus on. After choosing, they take six compulsory courses and three of their own choice. ECLAB focuses on teaching contemporary problems.

Students interviewed for this paper primarily studied history. The choice of history was driven by the fact that this is the only discipline with separate departments/programmes at all three providers. The students indicated that they undertook non-formal studies to improve their knowledge of Belarusian history, which is unavailable in official public discourse and formal education. Flying University students said that the alternative history studies are important for forming their historical memory, identity, and responsibility towards the country and society.

The interviewed students valued non-formal education because lecturers are free to discuss issues forbidden in official institutions for political and ideological reasons. Moreover, many academics and intellectuals have to work outside official academia for the same reasons, and meeting them in state institutions is simply impossible.

Belarusian Collegium students gave very similar reasons – history in official institutions was seen to be politicised and one-sided. In addition, they identified certain methodologies taught at the Belarusian Collegium which were absent in official university programmes.

ECLAB students came from various departments and therefore held slightly different interests in non-formal education: gaining new knowledge and structuring the acquired knowledge earlier and meeting interesting people.

3.2. Shaping identity

Although some non-formal education sector activists claim that democratic institutions in Belarus should be built without any reference to identity and language, many Belarusian intellectuals believe that strengthening of national identity and fostering Belarusian language as a part of western civilisation will help to build democratic institutions and civil freedoms.⁴⁸ Others think that both processes should go hand in hand for maximum effect.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Educational Programme of the Flying University for 2015-2016, <<http://fly-uni.org/content/adukacyynaya-pragrama-2015-2016-god>> [accessed 10 April 2016].

⁴⁷ Concentrations of ECLAB, <<http://eclab.by/concentrations>> [accessed 10 April 2016].

⁴⁸ Kuzminič, Ihar, 2009. 'Nacyjanalnaja sviadomaść i hramadzianskaja adukacyja', *Adukatar*, No. 12-2009, pp. 16-20.

⁴⁹ Matskevich, Vladimir. 'Belorusizatsia: ramki i sodержatelnoie napolnenie. Istoricheskaia determinatsia', <<http://methodology.by/?p=4194>> [accessed 05 May 2016].

As Uladzimir Mackievič puts it, to be European does not just mean to live in Europe, but to have a European identity as well, to define oneself as a Eurosceptic or a Euro-enthusiast.⁵⁰ The authorities, however, try to cultivate Soviet traditions, preserve the status quo rather than reform, and strengthen ties with Russia rather than the European Union. Non-formal education represents one of the few tools, which Belarusian civil society has to strengthen Belarusian identity and to make it more attractive.

The argument goes that if Belarus is to succeed as a modern nation, it must first establish its national identity before moving to the next level and integrating with the Russia-dominated Eurasian Union or the European Union.⁵¹ Some describe this conflict of identities as a conflict between national and “creole” projects, the former being based on one’s own historical legacy and cultural achievements and the other on appropriation of neighbouring cultures. They argue that national self-identification leads to the development of an active civic outlook.⁵²

This is why many think that civil society in Belarus should cultivate a new Belarusian civic identity on a national level, promoting the study of Belarusian history, wider use of the Belarusian language and understanding what makes Belarus different from other countries in the European context. There is also an unmet demand for Belarusian-language education, according to education experts.⁵³ According to one survey, nearly half of the Belarusian population has no opportunity to use the Belarusian language.⁵⁴

In an environment where the state does little to shape national identity and until recently rather pursued a clear policy of Russification, non-formal education projects play the role of transmitters of pro-Belarusian national and European identity.

Non-formal education projects play the role of transmitters of pro-Belarusian national and European identity

3.3. Promoting democratic values

Although Belarusian society is relatively homogeneous when it comes to ethnic and racial composition (over 80% of people are Belarusians), there is no consensus about basic values. One section of society is in favour of a strong state and does not appreciate the role that democracy and the market economy can play in society. They feel that the country should build closer ties with Russia and be cautious of Western countries.⁵⁵

The other strongly believes in democratisation, integration with the European Union and liberalisation. The main goal of many non-formal education institutions in Belarus is to increase the number of people with democratic views and to give people the necessary skills to live in contemporary society.⁵⁶

⁵⁰ ‘Nasha zadacha - zapustit proces...’, 2007. *Adukatar*, No. 12, P.4.

⁵¹ Ibid. P. 5-6.

⁵² Kuzminič, Ihar, 2009. ‘Nacyjnalnaja sviadomašć i hramadzianskaja adukacyja’, *Adukatar*, No.2(12), 2007., P.17.

⁵³ Dunaev, Vladimir, 2009. ‘Perspektivy sozdaniya nezavisimogo universiteta v Belarusi’, *Adukatar*, No. 16, 2009, P. 19.

⁵⁴ Budźma Bielarusami, 2012. ‘Bielaruskaja mova - mova elity i apazicyi’, 31 May 2012, <<http://budzma.org/news/belaruskaya-mova-mova-elity-i-apazicyi.html>> [accessed 10 May 2016].

⁵⁵ See for example IISEPS polls: Krizis sokratil chislo storonnikov peremen, <<http://www.old.iiseps.org/12-15-06.html>> (Accessed 09 June 2016); Dinamika belorusskogo obščestvennogo mnienia <<http://www.old.iiseps.org/trend.html>> [Accessed 09 June 2016].

⁵⁶ Vialička, Ulad, 2004. ‘Niefarmalnaja adukacyja daroslych u bielaruskim trecim siettary: asablivasci razvicia’, *Adukatar*, No. 1, P. 4

As a result of the uniqueness of the current political situation in Belarus, two basic approaches to the purposes and principles of democratic civil education have emerged: urgent and long-term.

Representatives of the urgent approach believe that in today's conditions traditional methods and forms of civic education born in countries with liberal political systems are impossible and useless. In modern Belarus, the scarce and insufficiently



Students of the Belarusian Collegium at the Office of the EU Delegation to Belarus. Photo: belcollegium.org

systematic efforts of NGOs do not have a serious impact on society. This is the result of strong pressure on these organisations from the regime, which has effectively paralysed all activities not only in this sphere, but in public life in general. Hence, the sole purpose of civic education at this stage of Belarusian development must be social and political activity, which will help to bring the country back to a democratic path.⁵⁷

The long-term approach prioritises a deep change in the mentality and behaviour of Belarusian citizens, which should facilitate the adoption of democratic values. The question of time does not play a key role in this approach, and the current socio-political situation in the country is of secondary importance. Proponents of this approach are ready to continue to work in adverse

conditions, as they believe that society should initially be well prepared for the transition to democratic life.⁵⁸

To sum up, non-formal education in Belarus plays an essential role in a number of important sections of society. It facilitates spreading non-dogmatic and non-politicised knowledge and the development of an alternative national identity despite state policies, and promotes democratic values within an authoritarian political system.

4. Best practices of non-formal education

Better positioning and governance of non-formal education are crucial for any country. Among other measures, experts recommend bringing together non-formal education and formal education within the education system, promoting inter-sectoral cooperation, and strengthening collaboration among different levels of the education system – the central government, decentralised authorities, schools and communities.⁵⁹

The first two suggestions are particularly relevant for Belarus, and will be considered in the following section. These can be supplemented by advances in Internet technologies that are becoming increasingly important for human life, including education. The section will put forward some best practices from other countries.

⁵⁷ Vialička, Ulad, 2006. 'Na sučasnych rostaniach bielaruskaj hramadzianskaj adukacyi', *Adukatar*, No. 7, P. 14.

⁵⁸ Ibid, P. 15.

⁵⁹ Yasunaga, Mari, 2014. *Non-Formal Education as a Means to Meet Learning Needs of Out-Of-School Children and Adolescents*, United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), P. 7.

4.1. Promoting inter-sectoral cooperation and partnership

In Belarus, certain non-formal education providers have built partnerships with other NGOs as well as universities. This helps them reach a wider audience and develop new educational programmes.

For example, in 2011 the coordinator of PhD programmes in Belarus, the Political Sphere Institute of Political Studies, created a broad coalition of Belarusian institutions for sustainable development and protection of the rights and needs of members of expert, scientific and educational communities in Belarus outside state institutions. The consortium included EuroBelarus and the Flying University, the Political Sphere Institute of Political Studies, the Belarusian Collegium, and the Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies. It also established partnerships with Warsaw University (Poland) and Vytautas Magnus University (Lithuania) to facilitate opportunities for Belarusians to obtain formal PhD degrees.

In 2016, the School of Young Managers in Public Administration (SYMPA) think tank and the Department of Social and Political Sciences of the European Humanities University (Vilnius, Lithuania) launched a joint online course called “Administration and Public Policy: Modern Practices and Transformations.”⁶⁰ It complements their regular program at SYMPA and is open to those who cannot participate in the offline course. Since all course materials are in Russian and Belarusian, it engages a wider circle of applicants than SYMPA alone, which requires a good command of English. Over 12 weeks the participants learn about theoretical concepts and practical cases in public administration, public policy, ethics, transparency, and gender-based and human rights-based approaches to public administration. Students participate in online discussions for each topic and complete tests under the guidance of the course’s instructors.



Belarusian Collegium summer school in Poland.
Photo: belcollegium.org

The Flying University recently launched a programme called City: Environment, Community, Modus Operandi in partnership with the environmental NGO Green Network and the urban activism journal *City Tactics*. The programme produces and promotes modern approaches to the development of Belarusian cities and is based on three concepts: urban studies, sustainable development and environmentalism. The programme of the programme includes an intensive theoretical course with various forms of learning (three months), research practice (two months), and a final seminar (three days).⁶¹

4.2. Bridging non-formal and formal education

The effectiveness and appeal of non-formal education may increase if qualifications are recognised by other education institutions or the state, so that it can help students on the labour market.⁶² The main outcomes of formal validation of non-formal learn-

⁶⁰ ‘First graduation of SYMPA/EHU online course’, <<http://sympa-by.eu/en/articles/first-graduation-sympaehu-online-course.html>> [accessed 16 May 2016].

⁶¹ ‘Adukacyjnaja škola: “Horad: asiarodak, supolnasc, vobraz dziejannia”’, <<http://fly-uni.org/content/adukacyynaya-shkola-gorad-asyarodak-supolnasc-vobraz-dziejannya>>, [accessed 20 May 2016].

⁶² Werquin, Patrick, 2010. *Recognising Non-Formal and Informal Learning*, OECD, 2010, p. 6 <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264063853-en>>

ing are more structured career progression and greater equality, increased motivation, better skills training, and a higher profile for the organisation as a whole.⁶³

Accreditation can thus be seen as one of the key instruments in national policies to make lifelong learning a reality, making it possible to combine learning outcomes from different contexts and stages of life.⁶⁴ In some countries, such as Ireland, professional qualifications can be given on the basis on non-formal and informal learning without restrictions. In other countries additional requirements such as examinations must be fulfilled.⁶⁵

The effectiveness and appeal of non-formal education may increase if qualifications are recognised by other education institutions or the state

To evaluate the effectiveness of non-formal education, various countries use education or electronic portfolios, simulations, questionnaires, or testing in real life situation. For example, in

Flanders (Belgium), they first evaluate electronic portfolios and then test these in real life. Since non-formal education usually has a more structured character, using tests and exams seems an appropriate way to evaluate the quality of non-formal education.⁶⁶

In Belarus, the joint online course of SYMPA and the European Humanities University, while has been partially developed by non-university teachers, gives successful graduates three credits in the ECTS system.⁶⁷

The PhD programme of the Political Sphere Institute is a good example of successful cooperation of non-formal and formal academic institutions. The independent academic and research community of Belarus, unaffiliated with official Belarusian universities, admits a small number of students who want to write a doctoral thesis. Each student has a supervisor, and participates in public presentations and discussions of their progress on a regular basis. This involves specialists in the field of a particular thesis as well as their programme peers. As soon as a student prepares a complete thesis, he is on his way to defend a doctorate in partner universities in the European Union.

4.3. Learning practical skills

The state higher education system in Belarus is often detached from the real needs of the market; this is where non-formal education can fill the gap.⁶⁸ Helping to develop new skills would be a logical aim for non-formal education providers.

The European Council has outlined eight key competences, which individuals need for personal fulfilment and active citizenship, social inclusion and development.⁶⁹ They include native-language communication and foreign languages; mathematical competence and basic competences in science and technology; digital competence;

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Bjornavold, Jens, 2009. 'Validation of nonformal and informal learning in Europe: key developments and challenges', *Aukštojo mokslo kokybė*, No. 6, P. 38.

⁶⁵ Werquin, Patrick, 2010. *Recognising Non-Formal and Informal Learning*, OECD, p. 6 <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264063853-en>>.

⁶⁶ Zhelezov, Boris, 2010. 'Analiz politiki stran – chlenov OEHSR v oblasti priznaniya rezul'tatov neformal'nogo i informal'nogo obrazovaniya', *Vestnik mezhdunarodnykh organizatsiy*, No. 27, P. 51–62.

⁶⁷ 'First graduation of SYMPA/EHU online course', <<http://sympa-by.eu/en/articles/first-graduation-sympaehu-online-course.html>> [accessed 16 May 2016].

⁶⁸ 'Adukacyja, navučannie, asveta ū trecim sektary: stan i perspektyvy razvicia', 2005, *Adukatar*, No. 4, P. 3.

⁶⁹ European Council, 2006. 'Recommendation of the European Parliament and the Council of 18 December 2006 on Key Competencies for Lifelong Learning', *Official Journal of the European Union*, P. 10–18 <<http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:L:2006:394:0010:0018:en:PDF>>.

learning to learn; social and civic competences; a sense of initiative and entrepreneurship; and cultural awareness and expression.

It can be argued that social and civic competences and commitment to active and democratic participation need particular attention in Belarus given its heavy post-Soviet legacy. Civic competence is based on knowledge of the concepts of democracy, justice, equality, citizenship and civil rights:

Skills for civic competence relate to the ability to engage effectively with others in the public domain, and to display solidarity and interest in solving problems affecting the local and wider community. This involves critical and creative reflection and constructive participation in community or neighbourhood activities as well as decision-making at all levels, from local to national and European level, in particular through voting.⁷⁰

After decades of a command economy and with the state still dominating many sectors of the Belarusian economy, Belarusian adults also need entrepreneurial skills defined by the European Council as follows:

Sense of initiative and entrepreneurship refers to an individual's ability to turn ideas into action. It includes creativity, innovation and risk-taking, as well as the ability to plan and manage projects in order to achieve objectives. This supports individuals, not only in their everyday lives at home and in society, but also in the workplace in being aware of the context of their work and being able to seize opportunities, and is a foundation for more specific skills and knowledge needed by those establishing or contributing to social or commercial activity.⁷¹

Other skills needed in Belarus include critical thinking, the ability to seek and find truthful information in the face of state propaganda, language competences to escape the illiberal Russian-language information sphere, cultural self-identification, and immunity to attempts to divide society.⁷² Academic non-formal educations, as well as other civic education providers, seem to successfully provide these skills.

It should be noted that third sector organisations in Belarus are more focused on civic education, social services, and sustainable development than on developing personal skills and qualifications related to economic activity and competitiveness.⁷³ Meanwhile, non-formal business education providers usually target managers who are already working and charge fees, which ordinary Belarusians can hardly afford.⁷⁴ In Belarus, the state totally dominates this sector in terms of providing formal further training and retraining for 530,000 participants annually. However, the state system has significant drawbacks: it lags behind in trends and technologies, tends to be too conservative, emphasizes theory over practice etc.⁷⁵

Third sector organisations in Belarus are more focused on civic education, social services, and sustainable development than on developing personal skills and qualifications related to economic activity and competitiveness

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Mackievič, Tamara, 2012. 'Hramadzianskija kompetencyi: što treba viedac bielarusu, kab stac hramadzianinam, *Adukatar*, No. 22, P. 19.

⁷³ Karpiyevich, D., Usatenko, G. and others, 2012. *Neformalnoye obrazovaniye dlya regionalnykh demokraticeskikh transformatsiy*, Europe Fund, Kiev, P. 43-44.

⁷⁴ Ibid, P. 48-49.

⁷⁵ Ibid, P. 54-55.

4.4. Using new technology

Traditional educators increasingly feel the need to incorporate online and mobile technologies into their work. Because new media is not controlled by the state, the young are better able to get their message heard by different audiences. The sheer volume of information presents a considerable challenge to existing educational institutions.⁷⁶

Although in Belarus non-formal education is seen as actively using innovative educational practices,⁷⁷ not much is being done to increase the presence of educational initiatives online and focus on distance learning. Experts note the “disappointingly low level of development of distance learning and relatively high demand for e-learning among the Belarusian youth”.⁷⁸

As a result of the emergence of open educational resources and the development of the Web 2.0 in the first decade of the 21st century, mass open online courses (MOOCs) have become widespread. Web 2.0 technologies have led to the creation of a personal learning environment which is built by students in the global network and permits



The 6th Festival of Non-Formal Education in Minsk.
Photo: adukatar.net

personal management of all related services and information (as opposed to virtual environments, created and administered by educational institutions).⁷⁹ The emergence of MOOCs in non-formal education has made purposeful production of open educational resources by learners a key instrument of education. MOOCs are based on the active involvement of an unlimited number of participants in a self-organising distance learning process that combines social media interaction, feedback from experts, and access to the production of open educational resources.

One study suggested organising short courses on the principles of connective MOOCs involving a small number of participants for a short duration. Active participation in one of the courses included watching webinars, studying and discussing the proposed material, carrying out independent searches for additional sources, making notes and formulating thoughts in personal blogs, as well as reading and discussing entries in classmates’ blogs. Apart from blogs, they organised discussions via Skype and Google+ services.⁸⁰

Mobile hand-held devices, namely smartphones and tablets, offer a highly convenient way to integrate digital technology as part of the learning process. The huge growth in ownership of such devices amongst the student population means that access to online content, especially through mobile applications, has harnessed their potential for learning. In 2015, with approximately 1.5m different apps available to download via app stores such as Google Play and iTunes, institutions, instructors and students have the opportunity to apply new identified forms of mobile assisted learning.⁸¹

⁷⁶ Kiilakoski, Tomi, 2015. ‘Youth work and non-formal learning in Europe’s education landscape and the call for a shift in education’, in *Youth work and non-formal learning in Europe’s education landscape*, European Commission, P. 30-31.

⁷⁷ Karpiyevich, Dmitriy, 2009. ‘Sub’ekty neformal’nogo obrazovaniya: kliuchevyye igroki i vozmozhnyye napravleniya dlia sotrudnichestva’, *Adukatat*, No. 16, P.9

⁷⁸ Dunaev, Vladimir, 2009. ‘Perspektivy sozdaniya nezavisimogo universiteta v Belarusi’, *Adukatat*, No. 16, P. 18.

⁷⁹ Ibid, P. 4-5.

⁸⁰ Ibid, P. 9-13.

⁸¹ Bärkena, E. et al. (2015). ‘State of the art of language learning design using mobile technology: sample apps and some critical reflection’, in F. Helm, L. Bradley, M. Guarda, & S. Thoušny (Eds), *Critical CALL – Proceedings of the 2015 EUROCALL Conference, Padova, Italy* (pp. 36-43), Dublin: Research-publishing.net, P. 37.

The concept of the flipped classroom is gaining popularity among various education providers. The flipped classroom is a unique educational environment in which students learn the course content (via online videos, materials, etc.) before coming to class, where they then spend the bulk of time asking questions and engaging in interactive discussions.⁸² The success of this model lies in the fact that it helps to establish approaches and blended learning technology and traditional classroom practice, with great potential to engage non-formal learning.

The digital badge – an online representation of a skill one has learned – is becoming a new online standard to recognise and verify learning.⁸³ Digital badges allow verification of skills, interests and achievements through credible organisations. For example, Open Badges offered by Mozilla are not proprietary — they use free software and an open technical standard. This means that any organisation can create, issue and verify digital badges, and any user can earn, manage and display these badges all across the web.

Because the system is based on an open standard, one can combine multiple badges from different issuers to tell the complete story of his or her achievements — both online and off. People can display badges wherever they want on the web, and share them for employment, education or lifelong learning.

Modern technologies offer a variety of other tools that can be incorporated into non-formal learning and increase its reach and impact. Mass open online courses, mobile devices, flipped classrooms and digital badges suggest promising innovations in Belarusian non-formal education and require the thorough attention of education providers.

**Mass open online courses,
mobile devices, flipped classrooms
and digital badges suggest promising
innovations in Belarusian
non-formal education**

⁸² Ibid, P. 38.

⁸³ See Mozilla Open Badges, <http://openbadges.org/about/>

5. 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: se-Sovietisation, Belarusisation and Europeanisation.⁸⁴ 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.⁸⁵ 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, and that those bidding are have the skills to present and sell their offering.

• 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.⁸⁷

• 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

⁸⁴ Kalitenia, Leonid, 2012. 'Perezagruzka grazhdanskogo obrazovania, kratkoe osmyslenie programmy "Grazhdanstvennost.by"', *Adukatar* No. 22, P. 22-23.

⁸⁵ Nikulina, Yulia, and Ryabova, Natalia, 2010. 'Dopolnitel'noe obrazovanie vzroslykh: gotova li sistema obrazovaniya otvetit' na novyj zapros obshchestva?', *Adukatar*, No. 18, P. 17.

⁸⁶ Zhurakovskiy, Valeriy and others, 2013. *Analiz sektora Respubliki Belarus', subjecty kotorogo zanimaiutsia grazhdanskim obrazovaniem*. Ofis evropeiskoi ekspertizy i kommunikatsii, Minsk, P. 45.

⁸⁷ Chernov, Viktor, 2004. 'Regionalnye uchitelskie iniciativy kak subjekt grazhdanskogo obrazovania v Belarusi,' *Adukatar*, No. 2., P. 19.

⁸⁸ Rud, Olga, 2015. 'Otchiot po rezultatom anketirovaniya uchastnikov V Festivalia neformalnogo obrazovania. Kratkie rezultaty issledovania', *Adukatar*, No. 24-25, P. 2.

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.



ECLAB classes. Photo: ECLAB facebook

• 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.

⁸⁹ Belarus is Ahead of India and the USA in Computer Services Exports per Capita, <<http://www.park.by/post-819/>>, [accessed 19 May 2016].

⁹⁰ 2014 International Telecommunications Union, 'ICT Facts and Figures 2014', <<https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Documents/facts/ICTFactsFigures2014-e.pdf>>, [accessed 19 May 2016].

About the authors

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Ostrogorski Centre

The Ostrogorski Centre is a private, nonprofit organisation dedicated to analysis and policy advocacy on problems which Belarus faces in its transition to market economy and the rule of law. Its work is nonpartisan and dedicated to achieving practical results.

Its analysts working in Minsk, Kyiv, London and Berlin understand the challenges of transition in the region because they have lived through it. Educated at the world's leading universities, the centre's experts have cultivated the culture and technical skills required to deliver Western-style analysis.

The mission of the Ostrogorski Centre is to contribute to better understanding of transition processes in Belarus and learn from experience of other countries. The Centre aims to promote reforms and thinking which helps the economy become more competitive, governance more efficient and integrate Belarusian scholars and analysts in pan-European and global networks.

The web site of the Ostrogorski Centre is www.ostrogorski.org.

Annex 1. Infographics

Figure 1

Number of likes on Facebook, 15 April 2016

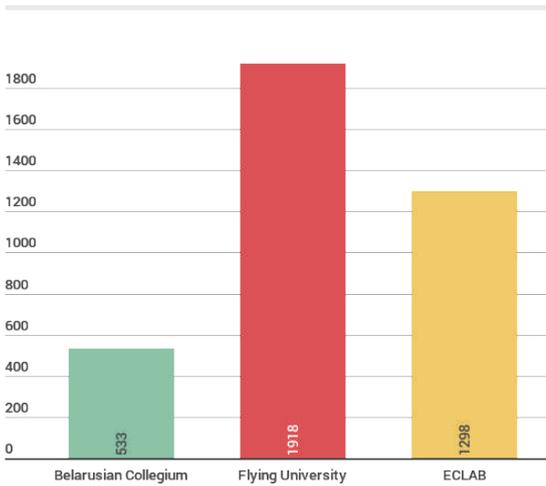


Figure 2

Number of subscribers Vkontakte, 15 April 2016

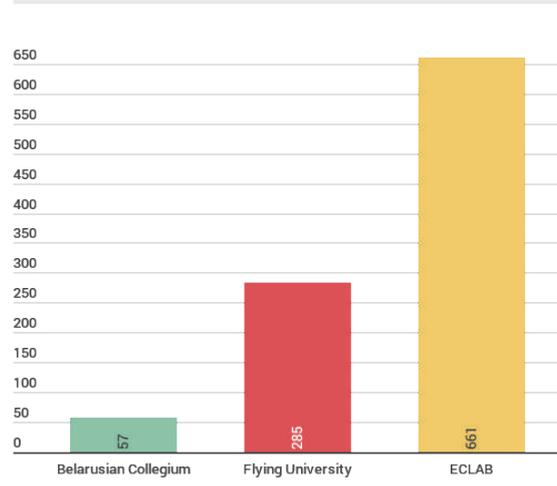


Figure 3

Number of videos on Youtube, 15 April 2016

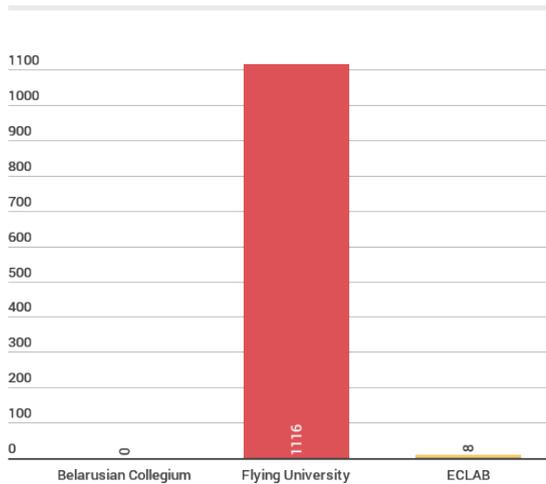


Figure 4

Number of media references, 15 April 2016

