

## National Human Rights Index

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2021

### Right to Education:

Expert Commentary

**The score: 4.3**

#### Including scores by component:

- Preschool and primary education 5
- Secondary education 4.2
- Technical and vocational education 5.1
- Higher education 4.8
- Educational opportunities and academic freedom 2.4

The main challenges to the right to education are highlighted in the 2019-2020 commentaries.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, 2021 was marked, on the one hand, by a decrease in the pace of the COVID-19 pandemic and a partial adjustment of the authorities and people to the new reality and, on the other hand, by an intensification, widespread and inventive repression aimed at teachers, lecturers and students for their political stance.

In 2021, the current regime views the educational system as a means of achieving its ideological goals: as a means of standardizing society and eroding deep meanings, making it impossible to think critically or express one's opinions. The state has monopolized the education system.

#### Preschool and primary education

According to experts, in 2021 the situation with a sufficient number of existing educational institutions equipped with the appropriate infrastructure, complying with sanitary and hygienic requirements for both sexes has not fundamentally changed compared to 2020.

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<sup>1</sup> Due to the fact that statistical data on the right to education are limited or presented by data published by Belstat, the Ministry of Education or on the website of the President of the Republic of Belarus, it is impossible to objectively assess and analyze the statistics. Therefore, the above index is primarily a subjective reflection of the experience and knowledge of experts in the field of education in Belarus.



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According to the National Statistical Committee of the Republic of Belarus (Belstat) and information from the website of the President of the Republic of Belarus:

The Year	2020 <sup>2</sup>	2021 <sup>3</sup>
Number of institutions	3 799	3 760
Number of children	4241 thousand people	4055 thousand people

However, due to the general trend of shrinking state budgets, falling real disposable income in Belarus throughout 2021<sup>4</sup>, educators' salaries became uncompetitive and were not recalculated in response to inflation. Thus, already vulnerable groups of the population suffer even more. The staffing of preschool and elementary education in 2021 was significantly depleted, according to experts, because of politically motivated dismissals of educators and teachers "disloyal" to the current regime. The practice of checking personnel files for administrative responsibility under Article 23.34 of the Administrative Code for participation in peaceful protests over hiring and denial of employment on this basis was widespread. The preschool teacher vacancy is one of the most in-demand in 2021<sup>5</sup>, there is no competition between applicants for the vacancy, especially in the regions. Salaries vary from city to city.

According to experts, several elementary school were closed in rural areas. However, on the other hand, several pre-schools were opened.

Primary education in 2021 is still not fully accessible to all, especially to vulnerable groups. The accessibility of primary education for children with disabilities decreased in 2021. The majority of children with disabilities were forced to move to home schooling due to the lack of specialists to work with children with disabilities in the field. This shortage of personnel, especially highly specialized ones, was caused by mass political persecution of dissidents, politically motivated layoffs, and forced emigration. Moreover, the state has stopped opening integration classes, also there is overcrowding in classes, which creates barriers to access to education for children with disabilities, to the quality of that education, and to the attention given to each child. It is difficult for children with disabilities to have

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.belstat.gov.by/upload/iblock/5d6/5d62c11490270d88d396c8788f28b95d.pdf>

<sup>3</sup>

<https://president.gov.by/ru/belarus/social/education/school#:~:text=%D0%9F%D0%BE%20%D1%81%D0%BE%D1%81%D1%82%D0%BE%D1%8F%D0%BD%D0%B8%D1%8E%20%D0%BD%D0%B0%205%20%D1%81%D0%B5%D0%BD%D1%82%D1%8F%D0%B1%D1%80%D1%8F,%D0%B2%D0%BE%D1%81%D0%BF%D0%B8%D1%82%D0%B0%D0%BD%D0%BD%D0%B8%D0%BA%D0%BE%D0%B2>

<sup>4</sup> <http://dataportal.belstat.gov.by/Indicators/Preview?key=127415>

<sup>5</sup> <https://mukola.net/top-rabota-belarysi-vospitateli-chto-delaut-i-skolko-zarabatyvaut/>



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access to tutors. Schools do not have enough staff, there is no separate position of "teacher's assistant" who would help the teacher in integration classes where there are children with disabilities.

At the end of December 2021, the draft law "On Amending the Education Code of the Republic of Belarus" was passed in second reading<sup>6</sup>. It does not contain the norm allowing distance education in schools, which in the event of another outbreak of the pandemic would have a negative impact on the health of pupils, teachers, and educators alike. Moreover, the blank denial of distance education (not only during a pandemic) as one of the possibilities for continuing education is a violation of the right to education. According to experts, this is a considered gap in legislation. Despite the experience of COVID-19 pandemic in 2020-2021, this is a deliberate policy of the state in violation of the right to education and the right to health.

Moreover, the state did nothing in 2021 for children who were forced to leave with their parents to other countries. No distance learning opportunities were provided for such children, as is done, for example, in Ukraine.

In 2021, state authorities continue to persecute students, their parents, educators, and teachers who do not support the current regime. They continued to harass the Polish national minority, close down Polish language courses, and keep track of those who attend them.

The issue of discrimination against children who study in the Belarusian language or those who would like to study in the Belarusian language, their access to education in 2021 is still not resolved. Belarusian-language schools in rural areas are closing; children are forced to go to Russian-language schools. According to statistics, in 2021, compared to 2020, 28 thousand fewer children were taught in the Belarusian language.

The issue of a shortage of places in preschools or schools in 2021 has not been resolved. Parents are forced to wait in line from the birth of their child to get a place in kindergarten.

The situation with safe physical access to primary education and access to modern educational technology, according to experts, worsened in 2021.

Rural school closures continue in 2021. Along with the impossibility of switching to distance learning, and due to information and economic inequality, the closure of schools in rural areas, according to experts, equates to the impossibility of learning in principle, which is a violation of the right to education by the state.

Physical accessibility for children of Belarusian-speaking schools in both cities and regions and rural areas is significantly limited due to the small number of such schools.

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.belta.by/society/view/deputaty-podderzhali-izmeneniya-v-kodeks-ob-obrazovanii-475889-2021/>



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Primary education is free for all, but still entails indirect costs for parents. Thus, in 2021, on the one hand, "levies" continued to be collected<sup>7</sup>, but at a lower scale. According to experts, this is related to August 2020 and the ensuing growth of discontent with the regime and public institutions, including schools, which have gained a reputation as "election riggers". Parents began to refuse such requests. On the other hand, due to the erosion of personnel for political reasons, the cost of tutors increased.

In 2021, according to experts, the education system in general, and the primary education system in particular, adapted not to the needs and demands of children, but to the demands of the current regime. The "ideological education" is being intensified<sup>8</sup>. After 2020 ideological control has been significantly strengthened, the teacher and/or educator cannot be flexible in such realities, they adapt or quit.

In 2021, Belarusian-language clubs, classes, and schools were widely closed down. The current regime associates the Belarusian language with the language of protests, the language of the "disloyal". The same happened with the Polish language, clubs and schools.

## Secondary education

According to Belstat and information from the website of the President of the Republic of Belarus:

The Year	2020 <sup>9</sup>	2021 <sup>10</sup>
Number of educational institutions	3009	2967
Number of students	1,058,300 persons	1,063,500 persons

As in the system of primary education, in 2021 secondary education is characterized by repression<sup>11</sup>, staff erosion, the practice of dismissals for political reasons. The level of education fell due to the lack

<sup>7</sup> <https://charter97.org/ru/news/2021/9/11/436606/>

<sup>8</sup> [https://belhelcom.org/sites/default/files/dzieci-2022\\_v5.pdf](https://belhelcom.org/sites/default/files/dzieci-2022_v5.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.belstat.gov.by/upload/iblock/5d6/5d62c11490270d88d396c8788f28b95d.pdf>

<sup>10</sup>

<https://president.gov.by/ru/belarus/social/education/school#:~:text=%D0%9F%D0%BE%20%D1%81%D0%BE%D1%81%D1%82%D0%BE%D1%8F%D0%BD%D0%B8%D1%8E%20%D0%BD%D0%B0%205%20%D1%81%D0%B5%D0%BD%D1%82%D1%8F%D0%B1%D1%80%D1%8F,%D0%B2%D0%BE%D1%81%D0%BF%D0%B8%D1%82%D0%B0%D0%BD%D0%BD%D0%B8%D0%BA%D0%BE%D0%B2.>

<sup>11</sup> **Case 1:** On November 2, 2021, the history teacher A. Eshbaev was detained. Previously he had been detained twice under political articles, having been sentenced to a fine and administrative arrest. The third time he spent four months in custody, and after the sentence he was released in the courtroom, as he was sentenced to three years of restriction of liberty. After some time the man left the country.

**Case 2:** On August 25, 2021, a criminal case under part 1 of Article 367 of the Criminal Code (defamation against the President) was brought against A. Petrovsky, a 46-year-old former teacher of history and social



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of personnel<sup>12</sup> and the level of professional competence of those who stayed or came to replace them. The drop in the real disposable income of the population in Belarus throughout 2021<sup>13</sup> led to the fact

sciences from a gymnasium in Smorgon. He was sentenced to 1.5 years in a general regime penal colony for showing a video clip with an "extremist" logo in his class. According to the prosecution, the video "contains knowingly false information defaming the president". Petrovsky was detained in the courtroom after the announcement of the sentence, before that he was under house arrest.

**Case 3:** On August 25, 2021, A. Minov, a teacher of the Belarusian language and literature, was detained. The day of detention was supposed to be the first day of work in the Lyceum of the Belarusian State University, where he had been reassigned for the last year of his mandatory placement work. He was charged under part 1 of article 342 of the Criminal Code (group actions that grossly violate public order) and transferred to the investigative isolator. Alexei was found guilty of taking part in an unauthorized mass event in Minsk on August 9-10, 2020 - including on the roadway on Pobediteley Avenue. According to the text of the charge, he took part in group actions that grossly violated public order, disobeyed the demands of police officers, and interfered with transportation and businesses. He also shouted slogans, clapped his hands and used a "white-red-white-colored cloth." On November 25, 2021, he was sentenced to three years of restriction of liberty in Leninski district court of Minsk. At the moment Alexei is outside of Belarus.

**Case 4:** On June 30, 2021, Svisloch District Court sentenced an English teacher of Svisloch Secondary School № 2 V. Korotkevich to one year and six months in a general regime prison for slandering the president at a meeting with the leadership of the Svisloch Executive committee in August 2020. The man was taken into custody in the courtroom.

**Case 5:** On September 30, 2021, O. Kaspiarovich, a teacher at a music school in Lida, was detained in a criminal case opened for comments on the Internet after the death of KGB officer D. Fedosyuk and IT -specialist A. Zeltzer in a Minsk apartment.

**Case 6:** On June 2, 2021, N. Isayenko, a philologist and teacher of the Belarusian and Russian languages and literature from Zhlobin, was detained as part of a criminal case of group actions that grossly violate public order. He had been previously detained on August 10, 2020, and severely beaten during his detention. Nikolai ended up in the hospital with a head injury, where he spent two weeks. He was then summoned twice for interrogation on criminal charges of insulting the flag and on mass disorderly conduct. On August 6, 2021, the Zhlobin district court sentenced Isayenko to one year and six months in a minimum security penal colony.

**Case 7:** On September 29, 2021, geography teacher R. Sadovnichy was detained. He was accused of writing numerous insulting messages to police officers and their relatives while "feeling hatred for the current authorities". Ruslan was sentenced to 3 years and 6 months in a strict regime penal colony and ordered to pay a fine of 1,600 rubles. The court decided to pay three thousand rubles as moral compensation to the policemen.

Information from the monitoring of the International Center for Civil Initiatives "Our House" <https://nash-dom.info/110195>

<sup>12</sup> According to the monitoring of the International Center for Civic Initiatives "Our House", by the beginning of the academic year 2021/2022 there are 361 vacancies for teachers in the Republican Bank of vacancies and CVs. Moreover, according to the report of Belstat in 2020 the number of teachers was 111.4 thousand, and in 2021 - 106.7 thousand. The Ministry of Education presents different statistics: in 2020, 117.3 thousand teachers worked in the country (possibly, part-time teachers were counted). In 2021, they counted 106.7 thousand. That is, for the year the number of teachers decreased by 10.5 thousand people. <https://nash-dom.info/110195>

<sup>13</sup> <http://dataportal.belstat.gov.by/Indicators/Preview?key=127415>



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that teachers' salaries became uncompetitive. Salaries no longer matched expenses and were not indexed in response to inflation. In 2021, the practice of a teacher taking multiple jobs continues, leading to burnout and a decrease in the quality of teaching.

In 2021, the state began a campaign against private schools: the private school "City of the Sun" was closed in Minsk<sup>14</sup>.

Secondary education in 2021, according to experts, is still not accessible to all<sup>15</sup>, especially the most vulnerable groups. On the one hand, the problems in secondary education caused by the COVID-19 pandemic have been leveled. On the other hand, despite the formal accessibility of secondary education for all, the systemic problem, when children with disabilities do not reach secondary education for the most part, has remained unchanged. The state turns a blind eye to this group and, as in previous years, does not work to eliminate this systemic problem.

Other vulnerable populations also remain in the gray area in 2021, as the system is still set up and works for the average child who fits the norm. The state systematically ignores the individual needs of certain social groups<sup>16</sup>.

At the end of December 2021, they began closing lyceums across the country, closing admission to 10th grade, calling it "optimization"<sup>17</sup>. Thus, talented children lost the opportunity for in-depth education without the provision of an alternative by the state.

Discrimination against Belarusian-speaking schoolchildren and limitation of their access to education in the Belarusian language persists in 2021. The closure of Polish schools, persecution of the Polish national minority and everything "Polish" intensified.

Among the positive aspects, experts noted the creation in 2021 of an online educational resource where pupils can catch up on missed lessons<sup>18</sup>.

However, as for the children of politically repressed parents, or those who left on their own after 2020, there is no possibility for them to continue or complete education via distance learning. Moreover, as noted above, in December 2021 the Law on Amendments to the Education Code was passed, which does not contain distance learning opportunities for secondary schools, which negatively affects the right to education.

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<sup>14</sup> <https://officelife.media/news/27305-mingorispolkom-reshil-likvidirovat-chastnuyu-shkolu-gorod-solntsa/>

<sup>15</sup> "The results of PISA demonstrated monstrous social inequality in access to quality secondary education," Konstantin Nemanov (<http://surl.li/bfrmu>).

<sup>16</sup> See the 2020 Right to Education Index explanatory note for details.

<sup>17</sup> <https://nashaniva.com/?c=ar&i=281335&lang=ru>

<sup>18</sup> <https://eior.by/>



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Secondary education is formally free for all, but the indirect cost of tutoring was rising in 2021 as many teachers faced reprisals from detention to dismissal and forced relocation, leading to a drop in the quality of schooling.

In 2021, according to experts, there is an increase in "ideological" and military-patriotic education. History textbooks are being rewritten to fit the ideology of the current regime. Repressions against teachers who disagree with the ideology of the regime are expanding. Censorship and self-censorship reign in schools.

The curriculum remains standardized, with an inability and unwillingness to develop flexible programs tailored to the needs of students. In general, according to experts, the existing curricula do not meet today's needs, the needs of students and the challenges of the time. Secondary education in 2021 is still not flexible and adaptive to the needs of a changing society and students. The education system in general, and the secondary education system in particular, adapts not to the needs and demands of children, but to the demands of the current regime. With the ideologization of programs, dissent is forbidden for both teachers and pupils.

In 2021, history lessons have turned into ideological lessons. The current regime works with children through the planting of a certain ideology, using propaganda and hate speech<sup>19</sup>. The state began to actively promote "traditional values" in its rhetoric and at the school level, an elective on marriage and family was approved, which, according to experts, illustrates the systemic policy of denying gender equality and refusing to promote it.

### Technical and vocational education

According to experts, the number of vocational and specialized secondary educational institutions, as well as the number of students at such institutions, decreased in 2021. This trend, according to experts, suggests that the state is failing to cope with the development and maintenance of this sector of education.

Formally, access to vocational and specialized secondary education exists. However, people with disabilities do not reach this level/sector of education, which is a systemic rooted problem that the state does not notice and does not want to solve. This is a violation of the right to education of people with disabilities, since the state does not create conditions for such people to access education at various levels.

There continues to be a gender imbalance in this sector of education that the state is not addressing: fewer young women than young men are enrolled in these institutions.

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<sup>19</sup> [https://belhelcom.org/sites/default/files/dzieci-2022\\_v5.pdf](https://belhelcom.org/sites/default/files/dzieci-2022_v5.pdf)



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Vocational and specialized secondary educational institutions do not provide quality education comparable to that given in secondary schools in grades 10-11. There are problems with the curricula in such institutions and the level of professionalism of teachers. This education is aimed not so much at personal development as it promotes employment, often not in Belarus, but in neighboring countries.

In 2021, experts note a tendency to train school teachers in two years at such institutions, which, according to experts, leads to the degradation of the education system. For comparison, 4 years are studied for the specialty of teacher in higher education institutions, and even in such cases graduates of higher education institutions are not immediately able to teach children in schools of high quality, as the level of training of university students also leaves much to be desired. As a result, the education system today rather destroys itself and future generations, because the socially significant profession of teacher is not in demand among school graduates; the state does not create a positive image of such a profession, does not promote its prestige by increasing salaries.

Vocational and specialized secondary education does not fit into the Bologna process. In the Education Code and its revision in 2021 this point was not taken into account.

In 2021, the state took no action to improve the situation in the field of professional retraining of adults. The share of adults who are retrained has not changed compared to 2020.

### Higher education

2021 was a year of mass repressions against teachers who did not support the current regime. Many teachers were sentenced to administrative arrest, some were detained in fabricated criminal cases, many were forced to resign or their contracts were not renewed (often in violation of the law)<sup>20</sup>.

The quality of teacher training, especially in the social sciences and humanities, lags behind in contrast to the natural sciences.

Higher education is not available to everyone. In 2021, according to experts, a system of suppression of political dissent was formed. The "student case"<sup>21</sup>, when student activists and members of a student organization detained and convicted in a trumped-up case could not study while in custody, detained, tried in court, and incarcerated.

In 2021 social and humanities professions began to practice admission interviews, where applicants were tested for loyalty to the current government and ideology. The ideological pressure on higher educational establishments is increasing. The inability to graduate and obtain a diploma from a Belarusian university in forced emigration.

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<sup>20</sup> For more on cases, see <https://nash-dom.info/110195>

<sup>21</sup> <https://zbsunion.by/studpolitze/ru>



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People with disabilities formally have access to higher education, but due to systemic state policy (ignoring this group and its special needs, not providing conditions for these children to study in secondary school), an extremely small percentage (less than 1%) of persons with disabilities receive higher education.

In general, there is no free higher education in Belarus: compulsory work for 2 years after graduation is disguised as free education. All students who study for free voluntarily conclude an agreement with the university, under which they must work for 2 years after graduation (which is forced labor). In 2021 some institutions (for example BSU FIR) report that it is only possible for a graduate to be placed to state organizations. Also in 2021 the number of budgetary and paid places on a number of specialties was reduced, especially on those that the current regime considered "unnecessary", for example, on the specialty "international law" at BSU - from 100 persons to 40. The cost of higher education increased throughout the country<sup>22</sup>.

The gap between urban and rural populations and the quality of secondary education and admission preparation, access and financial opportunity for tutoring remain.

In 2021, the introduction of ideological talks and information hours at universities intensified. The "History of Belarusian Statehood" began to be taught as a compulsory discipline in the first year of each specialty, in a heavily censored (self-censored) form, twisting or omitting facts, using information that did not contradict the official position of the current government, especially in terms of white-red-white national symbols. The curricula were hastily revised and adopted, which will affect the quality of education in the future.

### **Educational opportunities and academic freedom**

In 2021 the pressure on gymnasiums began to intensify. In December 2021 the authorities began to close lyceums, inspect private schools<sup>23</sup>, which affected the ability of parents and guardians to freely choose a school for their child. The choice of places is limited.

In late August 2021, Education Minister Igor Karpenko stated that "semi-legal private kindergartens and schools under the guise of individual entrepreneurs, public or religious associations were mostly used for political purposes, becoming strongholds for the color revolution."<sup>24</sup>

On the other hand, parents of children with disabilities have no difficulty changing and choosing schools on medical grounds, communicating with state agencies.

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<sup>22</sup> <http://sur.li/bgcyv>

<sup>23</sup> <http://sur.li/bgcyv>

<sup>24</sup> <https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2021/08/24/opornye-tochki-tsvetnykh-revoliutsii-vlasti-belarusi-obvinili-chastnye-detskie-sady-v-presledovanii-politicheskikh-tselei-news>



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2021 was marked by the repression of civil society, including non-formal education organizations<sup>25</sup>. Ideological pressure intensified, including inspections and pressure on the heads of various educational institutions, leading to dismissals for disloyalty.

Academic freedom in 2021 exists only formally, but not in practice. The autonomy of higher education institutions has been greatly reduced. Each university has a "security pro-rector," usually a former KGB officer.

In 2021, a significant reduction in international cooperation with European and EU countries in the field of education continued. Almost ceased interaction at the level of universities and other educational institutions, the number of international projects was reduced, the offices of DAAD (German Academic Exchange Service), Goethe Institute, DVV, etc. were closed. This has affected the quality of educational activities (significantly reduced analytics on a number of topics and directions, we can say that the platforms for discussion and exchange of experience, etc. have ceased to operate). The trend towards orientation to the Russian educational space has clearly become noticeable.

In 2021, the system of scholarships continues to function effectively, which is aimed, among other things, at increasing access to education for disadvantaged groups. State universities have the opportunity to receive scholarships, while commercial ones do not. The existing model of payment for education leads to the fact that the state does not introduce a system of benefits/scholarships for low-income families, if the student is studying on a fee basis.

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<sup>25</sup> According to Lawtrend, since July 2021 the Belarusian authorities have liquidated more than 300 non-profit organizations, regardless of the nature of their activities (cultural, educational, human rights, social, charitable, etc.). The official grounds for liquidation were out-of-statute activities, receiving two warnings from the Ministry of Justice during a year, or failure to carry out business activities for 24 months. The liquidation was not applied to pro-governmental NGOs. About 200 other civil society organizations decided to liquidate themselves. <https://www.lawtrend.org/liquidation-nko>



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