

National Human Rights Index

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2023

Right to Education:

Expert Commentary

The score:	4	-0,1
<i>Including scores by component:</i>		
• Preschool and primary education	4,8	
• Secondary education	3,8	-0,1
• Technical and vocational education	5	
• Higher education	4,4	-0,2
• Educational opportunities and academic freedom	2,1	-0,1

A description of the baseline situation regarding the realization of the right to education can be found in the 2019 commentary. Assessing the situation in the field of the right to education in 2023, the Index experts gave lower scores than in 2022. **Among the main reasons** are:

- the continued outflow of qualified personnel, leading to a decline in the overall quality of education;
- discriminatory legislation restricting access to education in the languages of national minorities.

• Preschool and primary education

Experts noted a deterioration in the provision of preschool and primary education in 2023 compared to 2022. This is mainly due to a growing shortage of staff in kindergartens, especially in large cities, where the salaries of kindergarten teachers are incomparably low compared to the average wage^{1[1]}. At the same time, wage increases are offset by rising inflation. As a result, the trend towards a decline in the overall level of professionalism among kindergarten staff has continued. The state, for its part, is trying to solve this problem by standardizing processes, programs and materials (which, in essence, makes the personal contribution of teachers less significant). This has led to a simplification of the preschool education system.

¹ For comparison, experts cited approximate figures: the salary of a kindergarten worker is approximately 480 Belarusian rubles, while the average salary in the city is about 1,000 Belarusian rubles.



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	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Preschool education institutions (at the beginning of the school year)	3 798	3 799	3 760	3702	3750
Children enrolled (at the beginning of the school year)	436 600	424 100	405 500	378 200	355 700
Number of places (at the beginning of the school year)	389 800	385 300	379 200	366 600	354 600
Number of teaching staff (at the beginning of the school year) ²	56 900	57 500	57 300	55 800	55 700

With regard to access to primary education for all without discrimination, the experts noted a deterioration in the situation. In 2023, the experts observed a continuation of the trends of 2022, while separately noting the amendments to the Law on Languages introduced in 2023³ that discriminate against persons belonging to national minorities. According to the amendments, preschool, primary, and secondary education in national minority languages has become impossible⁴. In other words, it is now impossible to establish a school in a national minority language, but it is possible to study the language and literature of a national minority in special classes (groups) created by decision of local executive bodies in agreement with the Ministry of Education.

Education has also become less accessible for children of citizens who have been subjected to political persecution. Parents, aware of the consequences of political persecution, understand that their children are “barred” from school and are forced, among other things, to decide to emigrate or home school their children.

In 2023, experts observed an acute shortage of specialists working with children with developmental disabilities. This, in turn, hinders access to education in general, as primary education is critical for the further education of children with disabilities. If such children do not attend primary school, they remain in home schooling, and it becomes virtually impossible for them to enter secondary school. According to experts, parents previously joined forces to train teachers to work with their children with developmental disabilities. The lack of European medicines that alleviate the symptoms of diseases

² https://www.belstat.gov.by/upload-belstat/upload-belstat-pdf/oficial_statistika/2023/infografika-obrazovanie-2023.pdf, <https://www.belstat.gov.by/upload/iblock/0a7/lk1zigmat2zbcwvo3ljrfm1tow2f5zd2.pdf>

³ <https://pravo.by/document/?guid=12551&p0=H12300300>

⁴ <https://belstat.eu/ru/news/26-07-2023-v-belarusi-otmenyaetsya-pravo-na-obuchenie-na-yazykah-natsionalnyh-menshinstv>



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(such as epileptic seizures) has also negatively affected access to primary education, as the presence of such symptoms is grounds for refusing access to school. This trend has a cumulative effect: in 2023, Belarus stopped supplying another batch of psychological drugs, as a result of which another group of children with disabilities stopped attending school.

In the context of ensuring flexibility in education, experts noted a continuing negative trend towards the nationalization of initiatives and research in the field of pedagogy. Such centralization does not contribute to taking into account the educational needs of all children, but only entrenches indoctrination and creates a special atmosphere of subordination. The education system is adapting in a negative direction: towards the militarization and totalitarianization of society.

● Secondary education

At the secondary education level, experts also noted a sharp outflow of personnel in 2023, resulting in an increased workload for the remaining teachers. These circumstances logically lead to a decline in the overall level of professionalism among school teaching staff. Statistics reflect the emerging trend: in 2023, the number of students increased by almost 5,000, while the number of teachers decreased by almost 2,000.

	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
General secondary education institutions (at the beginning of the school year)	3020	3009	2967	2900	2872
Number of students in thousands (at the beginning of the school year)	1031,7	1058,3	1076,0	1085,6	1090,2
Number of teachers in thousands (at the beginning of the school year)	111,2	111,4	106,7	105,1	103,3

The situation regarding access to secondary education without discrimination deteriorated in 2023 due to the ban on the establishment of schools in minority languages, as mentioned above. Experts also noted that in 2023, the consumption of tutoring services increased. Parents' recourse to paid tutoring services is dictated by their desire to maintain an adequate level of education for their children.

In 2023, the trend toward the ideologization of education continued, with a qualitative deterioration in the situation. Experts noted the following indicative cases:



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- A number of schools began to effectively promote specific war crimes (in particular, extrajudicial executions)⁵. Children are forced to “honor the memory” of Russian propagandists, presenting them as heroes⁶;
- The Ministry of Education and the Prosecutor General's Office have prepared⁷ three specialized publications on the genocide of the Belarusian people during the Great Patriotic War for schoolchildren in grades 1-4, 5-9, and 10-11⁸. Experts noted in these publications (starting with the textbook for grades 5-9) narratives that incite hatred towards Belarusians who disagree with the authorities⁹;
- At the 10th Forum of Regions of Belarus and Russia, an initiative was announced and enshrined in the final document to develop a unified approach to teaching history (“a common scientifically based historical standard containing conceptual assessments of historical events and personalities”)¹⁰;
- Educational institutions began actively seeking persons to fill the position of head of military-patriotic education¹¹;
- As part of a campaign to introduce administrative liability for promoting LGBT, gender reassignment, and childfree lifestyles, a representative of the Prosecutor General's Office stated that in 2023, schools would introduce educational programs and classes on “The Basics of Family Life”¹², but this initiative was not implemented;

⁵ For example, in March 2023, the Rechitsa Gymnasium accepted a gift for the school museum in the form of a sledgehammer from a person believed to be a member of the Wagner PMC and involved in extrajudicial executions, including with the use of sledgehammers, in Syria in 2017 <https://malanka.media/news/24259>

⁶ For example, in April 2023, schoolchildren in Gomel were taken to the Russian House for an event dedicated to the Day of Unity of the Peoples of Belarus and Russia (<https://news.zerkalo.io/life/36064.html?c>). The children were shown the film Artek: The Great Journey. Before the screening, they “honored the memory of Russian military correspondent Vladlen Tatarsky, who tragically died in a terrorist attack in a St. Petersburg café.” The students held a portrait of the deceased propagandist with the inscription “Eternal memory to the hero, the enemy will be defeated, victory will be ours.”

⁷ <https://news.zerkalo.io/life/47482.html>

⁸ <https://news.zerkalo.io/cellar/54930.html?c>

⁹ pp. 8-9, <https://trends.belhelcom.org/storage/reviews/February2024/gc1h07866DDq8G3X17sq.pdf>

¹⁰ <https://tass.ru/obschestvo/18145203>

¹¹ <https://news.zerkalo.io/life/55892.html>, pp. 29-30, <https://trends.belhelcom.org/storage/reviews/July2023/YPgwxOCkfVahLYXrpyml.pdf>

According to information from the Belarusian Investigation Center, in the three months since the beginning of 2023, the employment service has posted 182 such vacancies. Many of the vacancies list experience in the armed forces as a mandatory requirement. One Minsk school was ready to hire a “Russian citizen who fought in Ukraine as a Wagner mercenary” for such a position: <https://investigatebel.org/ru/news/minskaya-shkola-gotova-nanyat-byvshego-naemnika-chvk-vagnera>.

¹² <https://news.zerkalo.io/life/48713.html?c>



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- The Ministry of Education has developed an optional program called “My Fatherland” for students in grades 5-7¹³. According to the program, the optional classes are aimed at developing civic and patriotic qualities in adolescents. Students will study concepts such as “Motherland,” “Fatherland,” “symbols of statehood,” “state power,” etc., as well as the ideology of the Belarusian state and the constitutional rights and duties of citizens.
- The Minister of Education announced the implementation of the “School-Museum” concept, which means that every Belarusian school must have either a museum or a separate exhibition on Belarusian statehood.

In 2023, the state expanded its work on standardizing programs and materials and “pushing down” uniform methods to be used by teachers through the Ministry of Education¹⁴. Overall, according to experts, this exacerbates the practice of substituting concepts and values in education. Other methodologies are implemented in classrooms using “guerrilla” methods, with such teachers being isolated. The websites of educational institutions have removed their work on adapting educational methodologies to a changing society, which, according to experts, may also indicate the centralization of research efforts in the field of pedagogy.

The situation with ensuring flexibility in secondary education worsened in 2023. First, the formats of military-patriotic education expanded and ideologization took root. Second, the verticalization of education had a negative impact on the flexibility of education. Third, experts noted the inadequate ability of the education system to adapt locally: some teachers and principals initiated odious forms of control and ideologically oriented activities, that is, they became voluntary conduits of totalitarian tendencies (although their motivations may have varied, including the desire to obtain social benefits). Fourth, there has been a reduction in extracurricular or supplementary education: many classes and clubs have been transferred to the school curriculum. The authorities present this trend as expanding access, but in essence, it is centralizing secondary education.

• Vocational and technical education

	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023

¹³ <https://pravo.by/document/?quid=12551&p0=W22440927p>, <https://www.belta.by/society/view/moe-otchestvo-chto-dolzhen-znat-i-ponimat-shkolniki-posle-izuchenija-fakultativa-612404-2024/>

¹⁴ At the beginning of the 2023-2024 academic year, a number of educational institutions were visited by inspectors, who threw out all old textbooks and manuals from classrooms and libraries, and removed references to other countries from foreign language classrooms (stands with symbols of foreign countries, flags, photographs of landmarks). The “purges” also affected various anthologies that teachers used to give children assignments. According to the inspectors, teachers are not allowed to bring old textbooks to class for any subject, as they may contain works that are not included in the curriculum. In addition, the Minister of Education announced major changes to school textbooks. According to the minister, by 2027 they must be updated to reflect changes in state ideology <https://news.zerkalo.io/Life/48862.html?c>

Vocational and technical and secondary specialized education institutions (at the beginning of the school year)	400	399	393	391	390
Number of students in thousands (at the beginning of the academic year)	175,9	171,2	167,4	169,4	175,8

At the level of vocational and secondary specialized education, experts noted a deterioration in the quality of education due to the spread of indoctrination and the reduction of the duration of education from one or two years to six months or one year (in some cases by excluding humanities and general education subjects from the curriculum). In addition, in 2023, a form of character reference¹⁵ was approved, which must be provided upon admission. It now requires information about the applicant's "attitude towards state and public institutions and the constitutional order," participation in public events and youth organizations, disciplinary measures taken during the last year prior to the issuance of the form, and individual preventive work with the applicant. According to experts, this requirement will have a negative impact on the conditions in which students find themselves and how they are treated in educational institutions.

The situation with adult retraining also worsened in 2023. As experts noted, due to natural causes, the adult population in Belarus is growing and the need for adult retraining has increased, but adults are not the focus of the vocational and secondary specialized education system. Moreover, the authorities have made no attempt to adapt it to the changing realities.

• Higher education

In the higher education system, experts have noted an increase in politically motivated dismissals, followed by bans on certain professions and the continued outflow of qualified personnel. As a result, according to experts, the overall quality of higher education has declined. In addition, experts noted the closure of one private university in 2023.

	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Higher education institutions (at the beginning of the academic year)	51	50	50	50	49
Number of students in thousands (at the beginning of the academic year)	260,9	254,4	243,0	228,0	232,9

¹⁵ <https://pravo.by/document/?guid=12551&p0=W22339639&p1=1&p5=0>

Number of core (full-time) staff (at the beginning of the academic year)	19 943	19 671	19 075	18 121	17 600
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In 2023, the state created conditions that hindered access to higher education. In this regard, experts noted the following factors contributing to the deterioration of the situation:

- the introduction of a requirement to include information in the character reference that is not related to academic selection criteria, such as attitudes toward state and public institutions and the constitutional order;
- threats to recognize the European State University as an “extremist” organization;
- plans to introduce compulsory work experience for students, including those paying for their education¹⁶;
- the abolition of deferral from military service for students studying abroad¹⁷;
- the creation of a situation of constant control and subordination, which applicants cannot fail to take into account when deciding whether to apply¹⁸.

In 2023, the authorities reduced the number of state-funded places in higher education institutions. Experts link this measure to the authorities' desire to redirect applicants to vocational and technical education.

The form and content of higher education have undergone a number of changes that directly affect its adequacy, flexibility, quality, and ability to adapt to the needs of the modern world. The ideologization of education had a major negative impact, which in 2023 was characterized by direct Russian involvement in propaganda aimed at students of military and law enforcement universities¹⁹. The

¹⁶ In September 2023, amid the continuing outflow of university graduates from the country, the Minister of Education expressed the idea that compulsory work (distribution) after graduation should be provided not only for students on state-funded programs, but also for those paying tuition fees. According to the minister, relevant amendments to the Education Code are being prepared. <https://news.zerkalo.io/life/49492.html>

¹⁷ <https://www.belta.by/society/view/otsrochku-ot-sluzhby-dlja-obuchajuschih-sja-za-rubezhom-belorusov-otmenili-566727-2023/>

¹⁸ This atmosphere is created in part by periodic meetings with Lukashenko, which take place in a very critical and tense atmosphere: <https://www.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-dokladyvajut-o-nalichii-rjada-problem-v-funktsionirovanii-bgu-584399-2023/>, <https://www.belta.by/president/view/serjeznyj-razgovor-posle-raboty-nad-oshibkami-lukashenko-sobral-bolshoe-soveshanie-po-obrazovaniju-589390-2023/>

¹⁹ For example, at the end of February, the Embassy of the Russian Federation in the Republic of Belarus, together with the International Fund for Social and Economic Support of Cultural and Artistic Figures of Belarusian People's Artist Vladimir Gostyukhin, organized a screening of the feature film “Where is the Border?” in Minsk. The screening was organized for cadets of the Border Guard Service Institute, Belarusian academies of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the Ministry of Emergency Situations, and the military faculty of Belarusian State University. This film justifies Russia's aggression against Ukraine and was made with the support of the

militarization of education manifested itself in 2023 at the top of the higher education system: university leaders participated in pistol shooting competitions at the Uruchye training ground as part of firearms training²⁰. According to experts, this fact also indicates a loss of independence by higher education institutions. Overall, experts noted a deterioration in the quality of higher education, the prevalence of concept substitution in the educational process, and cases of lectures with unscientific and politicized content. The ideologization of education was also evident in the introduction of rules facilitating admission to universities for the security forces²¹, as well as for graduates of military-patriotic clubs²².

In 2023, the university entrance campaign was held for the first time under the new rules. Schoolchildren took a centralized exam (CE) in Russian and Belarusian for the first time in May 2023. The results of the CE in Russian and Belarusian outraged²³ many, who considered them unfair: the scores were calculated using a new system, and as a result, the price of a mistake for those who made only one was much higher than for those who gave many wrong answers²⁴. On the same day, representatives of the Republican Institute for Knowledge Control (RIKZ) stated that the results were correct, there had been no technical malfunction, and there would be no recalculation²⁵. The scandal attracted the attention of Lukashenko, who ordered²⁶ the results to be recalculated. The RIKZ's decision

Russian Presidential Fund for Cultural Initiatives. <https://sputnik.by/2023/02/28/nuzhna-li-svo-v-minske-pokazali-film-ob-etom-1072751018.html>

²⁰ <https://www.grsu.by/component/k2/item/45085-rektor-grgu-imeni-yanki-kupaly-irina-kiturko-zanyala-1-mesto-po-rezultatam-strelby-iz-strelkovogo-oruzhiya.html>

²¹ Thus, in 2023, changes were made to the Rules for the admission of persons to general higher and special higher education (<https://pravo.by/document/?guid=12551&p0=P32300002&p1=1&p5=0>). In addition to the characteristics mentioned above, there are simplified conditions for admission to universities of the security forces:

enrolment without competition of children of military personnel, employees of internal affairs agencies who became disabled while performing their duties, and pupils of military-patriotic clubs when entering universities of the Ministry of Defense, the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the State Border Committee, and military faculties;

introduction of special admission conditions for specialties in the Armed Forces, transport troops, and border guard services. Applicants for these specialties will only have to take two subjects (language and one specialized subject in the form of a centralized exam or centralized test) (<https://pravo.by/novosti/novosti-pravo-by/2023/january/72688/>)

²² <https://pravo.by/document/?guid=12551&p0=P32300416>
<https://pravo.by/novosti/analitika/2024/february/76805/>

²³ <https://news.zerkalo.io/life/40239.html>

²⁴ <https://news.zerkalo.io/life/40319.html>

²⁵ <https://news.zerkalo.io/life/40245.html>

²⁶ <https://news.zerkalo.io/life/40286.html>



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was changed, despite the prohibition in the legislation, and the scores were recalculated²⁷. The RIKZ set up a hotline for questions about the CE results²⁸.

• Educational opportunities and academic freedom

Experts noted a deterioration in the situation regarding educational opportunities and academic freedom in 2023: the choice of educational opportunities was reduced due to a ban on the establishment of schools in minority languages and changes to legislation on religious organizations, according to which the activities of religious schools are no longer considered educational²⁹. The amendments to the Language Act mentioned above also restricted the freedom to establish educational institutions.

In 2023, the authorities focused on educational institutions that provide Polish language courses. Such courses are often marketed as preparation for admission to Polish universities and for obtaining a “Polish Card”. In September, it became known that a foreign language center had its license extended on the condition that it close its Polish language courses, on the grounds that “people are leaving the country.”³⁰ In October 2023, the Ministry of Education conducted inspections of Polish language courses in Grodno and Minsk³¹. In December, law enforcement agencies detained and searched employees and managers of several Polish language schools. Some of them were forced to record “confession videos.” Employees of “certain special services” offered to voluntarily close the courses. The owners were also required to provide lists of all the schools’ clients³².

Pressure on students and teaching staff continued to grow. In May 2023, BSU replicated the illegal practice of security forces of filming and distributing “confession videos.” The official Instagram account

²⁷ <https://news.zerkalo.io/life/40551.html?c>

²⁸ <https://www.belta.by/society/view/v-rikz-zarabotala-gorjachaja-linija-po-voprosam-rezultatov-tsentralizovannogo-ekzamena-569100-2023/>

²⁹ Thus, religious organizations have the right, in accordance with their statutes, to establish Sunday religious schools and religious education groups for adults for the religious education of children, using premises belonging to them and/or provided to them for use, except for premises belonging to state educational institutions, other organizations, individual entrepreneurs who, in accordance with the law, have been granted the right to carry out educational activities. This activity is considered religious education. According to amendments, religious education is not considered educational activity (<https://pravo.by/document/?guid=12551&p0=H12300334>). The content of religious education programs implemented in Sunday religious schools and religious education groups for adults must not contradict the ideology of the generally recognized traditional values of the Belarusian people and the ideology of the Belarusian state. These programs must not contain propaganda of war, social, national, religious, or racial hatred, or other extremist activities.

³⁰ <https://udf.name/news/society/261164-kursam-polskogo-jazyka-prishel-kapec.html>

³¹ <https://mostmedia.io/2023/10/19/proverka-kursov-polskogo-v-belarusi/>

³² <https://reform.by/siloviki-prishli-v-shkolu-polskogo-jazyka-polskipro>, <https://reform.by/po-trebovaniyu-silovikov-zakryvajutsja-kursy-polskogo-jazyka-panprofe sor>, <https://reform.by/direktor-kursov-polskogo-jazyka-rasskazal-ob-oblave-trebujut-spiski-vseh-klientov>



of the law faculty posted a video in which a student “confessed” to spreading “discrediting information about the administration of the law faculty, as well as information discrediting the BRSM of the law faculty.” Later, a second video was published in which the student was apparently forced to say that he had filmed the first video voluntarily³³.

In June, two cases of show trials held directly at universities came to light (until 2023, show arrests had taken place in educational institutions). On the initiative of the Baranovichi Interdistrict Prosecutor’s Office, a show trial was held at Baranovichi State University, at which a student was convicted for an offensive comment about Lukashenko that she had made on the internet³⁴. Also, at the Belarusian State Technological University, two students were tried under an article on propaganda or public display, production, and distribution of Nazi symbols and paraphernalia³⁵. There were also reports of a show trial of a schoolboy in a secondary school in the Dobrush district³⁶.

There were also reports of the introduction at Belarusian State University of a practice requiring teachers to fill out extensive questionnaires upon returning from abroad (including questions such as: who they met with, what they talked about at the meeting, what persons were mentioned in the conversation, etc.).

³³ <https://belhelcom.org/ru/news/sovместnoe-zayavlenie-belarusskih-pravozashchitnyh-organizaciy-po-povodu-rasprostraneniya>

³⁴ <https://nashaniva.com/ru/318578>

³⁵ <https://nashaniva.com/ru/319132>, pp. 19-20,
<https://trends.belhelcom.org/storage/reviews/July2023/YPgwxOCkfVahLYXrpmyl.pdf>

³⁶ <https://news.zerkalo.io/life/55388.html>