

## Education serves the regime. The ideologisation and militarisation of the Belarusian education system

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As the Belarusian regime has intensified its policy of repression against society since August 2020, its other domestic policy priorities have come to include an overhaul of the education system and stricter supervision over Belarusian schools. Particularly strong pressure has been put on private institutions which the authorities view as hotspots of anti-state ferment. On the basis of laws enacted in 2022, a requirement was introduced for operators of educational facilities to obtain a special licence to run their schools, which resulted in a significant reduction in the number of private schools. A major overhaul of curricula has also been launched, particularly concerning topics such as history and literature. This is intended to eliminate or marginalise topics which emphasise Belarus's European identity from school curricula. As a consequence, the content taught to students now resembles the content prevailing in the Russian narrative. Belarus's politics of memory has been subject to similar attempts to align it with Russian standards.

Since 2022, under supervision from the military and the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the authorities have been carrying out an extensive programme of military-patriotic education in primary and secondary schools. Alyaksandr Lukashenka's regime has stepped up its efforts to indoctrinate children and youth by encouraging them to serve in the army and in the state security institutions. The modifications recently introduced are far-reaching. They copy the solutions applied in Russia, and are intended to facilitate the process of unification of the young generation of Belarusians in the spirit of obedience and fidelity to the regime, close relations with Russia and distrust of democratic values.

### The new legal framework for the education system applied since 2022

On 1 September 2022, the amended act on education came into effect, which introduced comprehensive regulations regarding the operation and organisation of the Belarusian education system. The work on the amendment took several years. The amended act now serves as a legal basis for introducing specific solutions which directly increase the state's supervision of the schooling system. The requirement to obtain a state licence to run an educational facility, which was introduced on the basis of the Licensing Act signed by Lukashenka on 14 October 2022, has become the most important instrument in the efforts to combine education with the regime's policy. On the basis of this



act, all officially registered educational facilities were required to undergo an inspection procedure regarding both their infrastructure and their curricula by the end of 2022. Alongside this, in its official statement the Ministry of Education has clearly hinted that the purpose of these restrictions is to eliminate those facilities which are unable to guarantee the correct ideological narrative in their educational activities.<sup>1</sup> This interpretation reflects Lukashenka's intentions. In mid-September 2022, he demanded that 'anti-state' private schools be closed down, which almost immediately resulted in their operations being suspended.<sup>2</sup> As a consequence, most non-public schools failed to successfully complete the inspection procedure, and by the end of the year only very few facilities were issued licences. In Minsk, where most of these facilities operate (there are 35 in total nationwide), the licence was issued to just 3 of the 12 schools which had been subject to the inspection procedure.<sup>3</sup>

At the beginning of the 2022/3 school year, the State School Standard came into effect. This is a comprehensive set of rules which

**” The military-patriotic education has become a component of the state security system which openly supports Soviet-era methods.**

all Belarusian schools are required to apply. The document contains detailed regulations regarding issues such as the rights and duties of pupils and teachers and the introduction of the requirement to wear school uniforms in primary and secondary schools in the 2023/4 school year. In its commentary, the Ministry of Education stated that the most important purpose of these regulations is to improve discipline and order in schools.<sup>4</sup> It is likely that on the basis of these new regulations the already far-reaching restrictions regarding parents' access to schools (for example in order to talk to their child's teachers or tutors) will be expanded further. As a consequence, citizens who are interested in the operation of the educational facilities which their children attend will have no influence on the school's curriculum, including the ideological indoctrination of the pupils.<sup>5</sup>

Another purpose of the recently introduced legal amendments was to militarise the education system. On 29 December 2021, the Council of Ministers approved a programme for the patriotic education of the citizens of Belarus for 2022–5.<sup>6</sup> To coordinate this initiative, the Inter-Ministry Council for Patriotic Education was formed. This body is made up of 52 individuals representing state administration bodies and the propaganda apparatus. The programme will be carried out by defence minister Viktor Khrenin, the head of the KGB Ivan Tertel, the minister of internal affairs Mikalay Karpiankou – who is known for his brutality – and one of the regime's leading propagandists Alyaksandr Shpakouski, and others. According to the programme's authors, its creation was “prompted by geopolitical challenges, the need to quickly boost the state sovereignty and national security of the Republic of Belarus by consolidating its society and fostering national unity”. They also argued that since 2020 Belarus has “transformed into an arena of geopolitical confrontation between the main global political actors, and has become a target of information, political and economic pressure from Western states”.

Moreover, on 4 May 2022 Lukashenka signed a decree on the development of military-patriotic clubs.<sup>7</sup> On the basis of this decree, the Ministry of Internal Affairs was instructed to carry out an educational

<sup>1</sup> 'В Минобразования рассказали об изменениях в лицензировании образовательной деятельности', Белта, 19 October 2022, [belta.by](https://belta.by).

<sup>2</sup> 'Мингорисполком: все частные школы приостановили работу. Но оказалось, что есть исключения — гимназия, где учился Николай Лукашенко', Зеркало, 4 October 2022, [zerkalo.io](https://zerkalo.io).

<sup>3</sup> 'В Минске остались только три частные школы, которым выдали лицензию', Зеркало, 14 April 2023, [zerkalo.io](https://zerkalo.io).

<sup>4</sup> 'Государственный школьный стандарт для всех участников образовательного процесса', Министерство образования Республики Беларусь, 23 September 2022, [edu.gov.by](https://edu.gov.by).

<sup>5</sup> «Они копируют советскую систему и где-то креативят сами». Эксперты – об основных проблемам белорусского образования', Белсат, 1 December 2022, [belsat.eu](https://belsat.eu).

<sup>6</sup> 'О Программе патриотического воспитания населения Республики Беларусь на 2022–2025 годы', Постановление Совета Министров Республики Беларусь, 29 December 2021, [pravo.by](https://pravo.by).

<sup>7</sup> 'О развитии военно-патриотических клубов', Указ Президента Республики Беларусь, 4 May 2022, [pravo.by](https://pravo.by).

programme at military units, focused on military-patriotic topics. As part of this programme, units operated by the internal troops of the Ministry of Internal Affairs have been ordered to organise extra-curricular classes for young people. A similar form of education will soon be offered by the units of the Belarusian armed forces, the state security bodies (KGB) and the Ministry for Emergency Situations.

## A narrative shift in the school curricula

These legal amendments have triggered a series of practical measures such as continued modification of the content of textbooks to include numerous elements taken from the Russian historical narrative. For example, the discussion of the Great Patriotic War contains information on collaboration between Belarusians and the German occupiers. The white-red-white symbols which the collaborators used are presented in this context. As always, this is combined with rhetoric intended to discredit the national flag which Lukashenka's opponents use in their activities by presenting it as a 'Fascist' symbol. This rhetoric has been evident in Belarus's current historical policy.

Alongside this, the Ministry of Education has announced its intention to increase the number of lessons discussing the Second World War period in the immediate future. This will most likely be used to boost the message emphasising the USSR's victory over Nazi Germany and to highlight the comparisons between popular attitudes back then and contemporary Belarus's 'resilience' to pressure from the West.<sup>8</sup> The regime has made such comparisons on a number of occasions. Moreover, in cooperation with the General Prosecutor's Office, a programme of extra-curricular classes for teenagers aged 14–16 discussing the 'extermination of the Belarusian nation' has been launched. These are based on information collected in recent years by Belarusian investigators regarding the crimes perpetrated against Belarusians during the Second World War by the German occupiers and by Polish guerrilla fighters, as well as the crimes committed by the Polish anti-Communist underground pro-independence groups following the end of the hostilities.<sup>9</sup>

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Furthermore, information on individuals whom the regime views as inconvenient is being removed from the curricula. For example, information about Sviatlana Alexievich has been removed from the history textbook for 11th grade students (the final grade in the secondary school system) published in 2021, which discusses the 19th and 20th century, and from the literature curriculum. Sviatlana Alexievich is a Belarusian writer and Nobel Prize laureate who actively supported the 2020 protests and is a member of the opposition Coordination Council which was formed to supervise a peaceful transfer of power. Another prominent figure who has been removed from textbooks is Stanislau Shushkevich (who died in 2022), a signatory of the 1991 Belovezha Accords on the dissolution of the USSR and the first Chairman of the Supreme Council of Independent Belarus. Shushkevich had been a consistent critic of Lukashenka, and he also supported the demonstrations following the 2020 elections.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Т. Неведомская, 'Почему в белорусской школе будет еще больше ВОВ', Deutsche Welle, 11 May 2022, [dw.com](https://www.dw.com); 'БЧБ-флаг и лозунг «Жыве Беларусь». Что о них написано в новом учебнике по истории Беларуси', Зеркало, 10 September 2021, [zerkalo.io](https://zerkalo.io).

<sup>9</sup> 'С 1 сентября в школах и вузах появится новый факультатив. На нем расскажут про геноцид белорусского народа', Зеркало, 20 June 2022, [zerkalo.io](https://zerkalo.io).

<sup>10</sup> 'Из учебника по истории Беларуси для 11-х классов убрали упоминание писательницы Светланы Алексиевич', Настоящее Время, 13 September 2022, [currenttime.tv](https://currenttime.tv).

'positive' information on Kastus Kalinouski, one of the leaders of the January Uprising.<sup>11</sup> They have proposed the replication of the Russian narrative, presenting only the 'Polish' aspect of this uprising while simultaneously highlighting Kalinouski's alleged crimes against that portion of the Belarusian population which was sceptical about the fight against Tsarist rule. Pro-regime commentators admit that they intend to undermine Kalinouski's growing popularity with some youth groups. They also propose to modify the manner in which the wave of Stalinist-era arrests and repression carried out in the 1930s is discussed, so as to avoid evoking compassion among young people for political prisoners, both those in the past and those presently detained.<sup>12</sup> It seems that these demands will form the basis for the future reforms. Since 2022, the Ministry of Education has been obliged to consult its newly developed curricula with up to eight different state institutions. Six of these are components of the law enforcement sector: the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the Investigative Committee, the State Forensic Examinations Committee, the Ministry of Defence, the Ministry of Emergency Situations and the State Border Committee.<sup>13</sup>

It is worth noting in this context that the continued process of adjusting the Belarusian school curricula to the Russian (and sometimes even the Soviet) historical narrative is going hand in hand

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with the long-term tendency to eradicate the Belarusian language from the Belarusian education system. According to official statistics compiled for the 2020/1 school year, a mere 10.2% of primary and secondary school pupils used Belarusian as the language of instruction, whereas in the 2015/16 school year the proportion had been 13.1%. It should be emphasised that the vocational and higher education systems use Russian as the sole language of instruction.<sup>14</sup>

## Political indoctrination

The 2022/3 school year saw a major intensification of activities involving the political indoctrination of young people. Following Lukashenka's proclamation of 2023 as a year of peace and creativity, schools of all types expanded their curricula to include a series of classes promoting the Belarusian political and social model, the regime's scientific, cultural and economic achievements, as well as specially selected motifs from Belarusian history.<sup>15</sup> This is intended to boost patriotic feelings in young people, that is, to increase their loyalty to the Belarusian leadership. Alongside this, memorial exhibition rooms dedicated to specially prepared narratives from the history of Belarusian statehood are being set up in schools nationwide. These mainly draw upon the Soviet era, when the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic was a component of the USSR. In line with the recommendations from the minister of education, similar exhibitions are to be organised in every school. There are reports that those exhibitions which have already been set up are dominated by anti-Western and pro-Russian historical narratives.

<sup>11</sup> In this textbook for 11th grade students, Kalinouski is discussed very briefly as a 'radical' political activist who had no major influence on the course of the uprising. However textbooks published prior to 2020, which are still being used, discuss him in a more positive context. See 'История Беларуси. XIX — начало XXI в. 11 класс and История Беларуси, конец XVIII — начало XX в. 8 класс', quoted after: scribd.com.

<sup>12</sup> Ю. Терех, 'Какую историю навязывают нашим детям', Беларусь Сегодня, 1 September 2021, sb.by.

<sup>13</sup> 'Минобразования утвердило учебные планы для школ. Основные изменения — в часах на изучение языков', Зеркало, 2 June 2022, zerkalo.io.

<sup>14</sup> 'Учат ли по-белорусски в белорусскоязычных школах?', Белсат, 7 September 2021, belsat.eu.

<sup>15</sup> 'Год мира и созидания', Нацыянальны адукацыйны партал, 4 January 2023, adu.by; 'Уроки мира и созидания прошли в средней школе № 16 и № 21', Наш край, 5 February 2023, nashkraj.by.

Another attempt to spread ideology, this time targeting students, involves an education-information project entitled 'The oral exam', launched on 30 January 2023. It comprises a series of meetings held at higher education institutions with pro-regime propagandists such as Alyaksandr Shpakouski, Vadzim Hihin, Alaksei Audonin, Alaksei Dzermant and Andrei Mukavozchyk. The topics 'discussed' during these meetings include the situation in the neighbouring countries, pressure from Western sanctions, the security of Belarus and the government's achievements in the field of socio-economic policy.<sup>16</sup>

## The militarisation of education

The regime has defined the main goals of its programme of military-patriotic education for children and young people. These are intended to boost the prestige of service in the Belarusian armed forces and in the institutions of law enforcement. The reform also involves re-organising the education system to make it capable of supporting various state security and defence initiatives. It has also enabled military units and state security institutions to assume the patronage of educational facilities (for example, this could involve the organisation of 'patriotic' and military training events and vocational counselling).

On 31 March 2023, Lukashenka urged state officials to step up the activities in the education sector. He emphasised that it is necessary to launch a procedure for screening individuals who teach young

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people (saying "a patriot can only be raised by another patriot"). In spring, Igor Lutsky, the head of the Inter-Ministry Council for Patriotic Education and deputy head of the Presidential Administration, admitted that the defence ministry, the law enforcement bodies and units of the 'mass mobilisation' movement, a volunteer organisation formed at the local level, are of key importance in ensuring the patriotic education of young people. He also said that schools have hired instructors in military-patriotic education, and new classes involving pre-conscription and medical training have been included in the secondary school curriculum. These initiatives are being accompanied by an information campaign intended to instil "historical truth and memory of the heroic past of the Belarusian nation and its fidelity to the duty to defend its homeland" in people's minds.<sup>17</sup>

Military-patriotic education has become a component of the state security system. Its development is being supervised not only by the inter-ministry council, but also by Alyaksandr Valfovich, Secretary of the State Security Council, who openly supports the use of methods practiced during the Soviet era. During a meeting with rectors of Belarusian universities held in April 2023 in Minsk, he proposed a return to the Soviet-era practice of calling up students for one year in the army prior to their graduation.<sup>18</sup>

In line with Lukashenka's decision to increase the activity of military-patriotic education clubs for children and youth, in late spring 2022 efforts were made to organise more than 60 special summer camps for 18,000 children and teenagers aged 7–14 under the supervision of the military and the Ministry of Internal Affairs.<sup>19</sup> These camps are organised in the form of 'survival camps' familiarising young people with the conditions of military service, and are combined with ideological indoctrination.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>16</sup> 'Информационно-просветительский проект для молодежи «Зачетный разговор» стартует в Беларуси', *Белта*, 30 January 2023, [belta.by](https://belta.by).

<sup>17</sup> 'Луцкий: в патриотической работе не должно быть случайных людей', *Белта*, 19 April 2023, [belta.by](https://belta.by).

<sup>18</sup> 'Вольфович: сегодня по всему миру идет борьба за молодые умы', *Белта*, 10 April 2023, [belta.by](https://belta.by).

<sup>19</sup> 'Около 60 детских спортивно-патриотических лагерей будут работать летом', *Белта*, 18 May 2022, [belta.by](https://belta.by).

<sup>20</sup> 'Милитаризация детей в Беларуси и подготовка детей к участию в военных действиях на стороне России', *Наш Дом*, 5 September 2022, [nash-dom.info](https://nash-dom.info).

They will continue to be organised in the coming years. Furthermore, special clubs for children and youth operate all year round at the premises of military units, the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the State Border Committee. One such club, known as Lynx, which groups around a hundred children, has been formed at the HQ of Internal Troops Unit no. 3214, whose soldiers took part in the brutal pacification of anti-regime protests back in 2020.

Aside from historical indoctrination, children are being instructed how to use various types of weapons. In November 2022, interior minister Ivan Kubrakou presented another approach to the militarisation of education to Lukashenka: he emphasised that due to the fact that his ministry had taken patronage of some of these clubs, children as young as 9 could now begin educational activities focused on the military and the state security bodies. Once they graduate from primary school, they will be transferred to a Minsk-based general secondary school supervised by the Ministry of Internal Affairs. He announced that another secondary school supervised by the ministry would be opened in Mahiliou in 2024. However, Lukashenka views the ministry's activity in the education sector as insufficient, and has requested that Kubrakou set up similar general secondary schools in each region of Belarus.<sup>21</sup>

### **Is the education system becoming totalitarian?**

The developments recorded in the Belarusian education system should be considered in the context of the evolution of the state model as a whole, which has been ongoing for almost three years. In the situation of mounting repression against both the regime's opponents and ordinary citizens who are not involved in political activity, combined with the state's increasing intervention in the economy, and a foreign policy based on confrontation with the West, Belarus is transforming from an authoritarian state into one which could be described as at least semi-totalitarian. This is also affecting the education sector, which is no longer expected to teach children and teenagers but to form citizens who are fully obedient to the authorities, distrustful of the West, and convinced that the policy pursued by the Belarusian regime is correct. In line with the propaganda narrative, this policy is viewed as the correct response to an alleged direct threat to Belarusian statehood.

The regime places great emphasis on the militarisation of education in the context of an alleged threat from NATO. The authorities believe that this will enable them to build a loyal, anti-Western social base. In the aspect of social engineering, the military-patriotic education offered by these modern-day 'schools for janissaries' is intended to train future members of the military and other law enforcement bodies. It is worth noting that the main message contained in the curriculum and instilled in young people's minds – that is, hostility towards the Western states – resembles the Russian vision of the confrontation with the West, while the support Belarus has offered Russia in its invasion of Ukraine has further increased the level of 'militarisation' of the education system.

In this context, it should be emphasised that the Russian narrative in Belarusian school curricula, in particular in fields such as history and literature, has been expanded. This results from Russia's growing political domination, which is intended to result in the *de facto* total subjugation of Belarus to Russia within the Union State. As a consequence, the Belarusian education system is increasingly affected by militarisation and ideologisation. Moreover, it is permeated ever more deeply by the Russian narrative which, contrary to what the regime maintains/states, actually undermines Belarus's sovereignty.

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<sup>21</sup> 'Лицеи МВД хотят открыть во всех областях Беларуси', Зеркало, 14 November 2022, [zerkalo.io](https://zerkalo.io).