

Parenting and Childhood in Contemporary Belarus

What kind of images can be brought to mind when mentioning “Belarus”? One of the former Soviet Union republics, something like “almost-Russia”... the Chernobyl catastrophe... Alexander Lukashenko’s presidency, proclaimed in the Western media as “the last dictatorship in Europe”... The black years of the Second World War, during which Belarus lost one fourth part of its population.

Belarus in Soviet times has been widely known as a “guerrilla republic” for its huge people’s resistance during the Second World War (for example, the territory of Belarus had been totally occupied in 1941 by Nazi Germany, but by the end of 1943 almost 59 % of its territory was controlled by Belarusian partisans [guerrillas]). Nevertheless, during the last decade, the new official propagandist company represents sufferings, victimization and so called “*tolerantnost*” (tolerance) as the main features of Belarusian national character, its “national idea”. As Belarusian President (unchangeable from 1994) Alexander Lukashenko expresses this officially in New York during the United Nations Session: “My people on *genetic level* has the code of understanding the threat to life.” Meanwhile the officially accepted number of victims during the Second World War was “one third part of Belarusian population”.¹

Far less famous, and of course far less accepted by the officials, are the facts from the “before-Moscow” period of the Belarusian history. (Because Belarus was incorporated in the Russian Empire in the late 18th century, all its history before counts as 900 years). For example, during the war of the Commonwealth of Poland and Lithuania (which at that time Belarus was made a part of) against Russia in the mid-17th century, Belarus lost more than 50 percent of its population.²

And a hundred years before this, in early 16th century – the East Slavic printing press has been introduced by Belarusian-born scholar Francysk Skaryna (whose doctorate was from the University of Padua, which is famous for such students as Galileo Galilei, Nicholas of Cusa, Pietro Pomponazzi, Nicolaus Copernicus, Thomas Browne, Giacomo Casanova and so many else). In addition, a hundred years after this, another one of the Belarusians, Simeon of Polotsk, invited to Moscow by Tsar Alexis, laid down the foundations of modern Russian literature and theatre. Those names are unlikely well known, while many can recognize such famous descendants from Belarus as Marc Chagal, Tadeusz Kościuszko, Adam Mickiewicz, Isaak Azimov, Kirk Douglas, Louis Mayer (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer), Irving Berlin, Ralph Lauren, and Shimon Peres.

We have been running through those pages of unknown Belarus to introduce the reader into the theatre of contemporary cultural tradition in Belarus with its complicated controversial psychological atmosphere, suffering from provinciality and inferiority complex with the point of reference always either the West (Europe) or the East (Russia). Intensive search for the national idea with evident lack of self-esteem resulted from this lack of history (lack of origins). This is a good reason, since the official history of Belarus proclaimed by the official mass media and educational system begins with the October Revolution, while the main event was the Second World War with all its sufferings and victimization. As a result, one could understand the reason for that great officially accepted “tolerance” as a feature of Belarusian character, and the crusade of Belarusian intellectuals for the quest of self. Such is a background of another history – contemporary history of childhood in Belarus – which is in reality inseparably connected with today’s cultural uncertainty and great search for Belarusian identity.

ECONOMIC BASIS OF BELARUSIAN CHILDREARING

Now let us visualize very “material” traits which help understand Belarusian childrearing realities, parenting, beginning with fertility and mortality rates. During the last decade the demographic situation in Belarus could be characterized as having very low level of fertility rate and very high level of mortality. Population size had consistently grown until the early 1990s, but then begun to increasingly drop (by 290 000 persons, so that today Belarus has approximately 9.5 million population).³

In 1960 there were born 200,000 children – the highest level in Belarus. Since that time the level has begun to fall down, with just one period of its increasing, in 1983-1986, due to the great state support, beginning of three years of paid maternity leaves, financial aid for every newborn child, etc., but after the collapse of the Soviet Union the fertility rate has decreased significantly. So, if in 1960 fertility rate (quantity of births per 1000 population) has been 24.4, in 1985 it was 16.5; in 2001 – 9.2; and in 2009 – 1.24 of births per 1000 persons.⁴ These falling numbers are self evident; Belarus today occupies 193rd place in the world statistics of fertility rates, the third from the end. (The United Nations total fertility rate rank shows data from 2005-2010, where Belarus occupies almost the last rank – for comparison, USA – 126, France –137, Russia – 177).⁵

Mortality rates are also extremely high. As in the case with fertility rate, from the early 1990, the time of USSR’s collapse, the tendency for an increasing mortality rate has taken place. In 1990 there were 10.7 deaths per 1000 persons, and in 2001 it was 14.1, an increase of 32%.⁶

The most impressive from all these statistics is the list of suicide rates by country according to data from the World Health Organization from 2008. Belarus occupies *first* place with its 35.1 total rate of suicides per 100,000 people per year (for comparison: USA – 40, France – 18, Russia – 6).⁷ In 2001, the number of suicides was 3,300 persons, which is 20% of all deaths in Belarus.⁸

Nevertheless it is important to avoid biases or prejudgements: if we consider the infant mortality rate, a very important indicator of the level of health and of the level of child care in the country, then we see the situation better. Belarus occupies 175th place in the world rank of infant mortality rate with 6.34 per 1,000 live births in 2010 (for comparison, the United States have 178th place with 6.14 per 1,000; France is 216th place with 3.31). The Belarusian level of infant mortality is the lowest among the countries of the former Soviet Union.⁹

Still, economic crisis and social stress are combined with the overwhelming decline of health: only about 25% of all child births in Belarus are not complicated with pathologies, In 2006 the number of newborn children with permanent disabilities have grown up in 9.5 times in comparison with 1993,¹⁰ so consequently the number of children counted by the Ministry of Education as completely healthy is only 11%!¹¹

In sum, health constitutes a significant troubling and so to say “material” layer of the general picture of childhood in Belarus, but there is also another theme to elucidate: the parenting and education of children. Children in Belarus are guaranteed by the Constitution to get free general secondary, professional technical, and on a competitive basis free special secondary and higher education in the state educational establishments.

Necessary to remind that percentage of school coverage in Belarus is 100% for primary and secondary education (children from 6 to 15 years old); 91.4% for 3 – 6-years old children, and 27.9% for 1 – 3-years old children.¹² Accordingly, the overwhelming majority of children from 3 years old and older spend most of their time in the school. Naturally the question is how children’s rights are respected within the educational system.

While article 24 of the Belarusian Law “On the Rights of the Child” (1993) generally confirms the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child” (which Belarus ratified in 1990 along with all other UN countries except the USA and Somali), the results of opinion

poll held by the non-governmental organization Children Not for Violence among the children of 13-14 years old in Minsk (capital of Belarus) in 2002 are rather alarming. To the question “Have you ever witnessed the corporal punishments in the class?” 32.4% of the children answered « yes ». To the question “Have you ever witnessed humiliations, insults, use of abusive words toward students by the teacher?” 32.3% answered “ Yes “, 33.6% answered “sometimes”, 32.6% answered “no”.¹³ So 65,9% of students feel abused in the school. These results give the evidence that the pedagogy of force still dominates in Belarusian school, and tough, humiliating, disrespectful attitude to the personality of the child still dominates.

Let us take a look to the family. Despite the long time prevailing religious doctrines (both Catholic and Orthodox confessions equally present in Belarus), traditional relations between the parents and the child signified “simple” measures in parenting: “the man who has not been flogged is not educated”, “one that's been caned is worth two that haven't”. During the Soviet period the attitudes of parents have being changed enormously. Parents in Belarus more and more rethink the traditional principle of “I have been beaten, and grown up as good person, so my children also have to be beaten”. Empathic relationships between parents and their child become rather a desirable norm (in fact, almost unreachable in reality) than an exception. Even the very questioning on the problem of domestic violence which was impossible some ten years ago, today is at the top on the mass media agenda.

One of the last examples is the June 2010, when the heated disputes took place about necessity to adopt the new legislative act forbidding domestic violence in Belarus. Such law was adopted in neighbouring Poland, but Belarusian parents are still unpunished for spanking their children even in a public space. While the Criminal Code of the Republic of Belarus punishes certain crimes in relation to children (like incitement to suicide, intended infliction of grievous bodily injury, intended infliction of trivial bodily injury, torture) it is still very problematic to control the violent approach inside the family, and the majority of the Belarusians would not report to the criminal authorities if they see their neighbour “educating” his child with a belt.¹⁴

According to official statistics, in 2009 in Belarus there were 6,128 children victims of crime, and 82 children died (among them, 9 newborns).¹⁵ As was recognized by the Ministry of Health, 50% of all children deaths of 1 to 4 years old are caused by the “external reasons” (like domestic accidents and intoxication).¹⁶ The representative of the Ministry then voiced the necessity of legal responsibility of parents for the health of their children.

Such tragic numbers can be completed with the bitter results of opinion poll among the adolescents. To the question “Do your parents use corporal punishments toward you?”: “yes” say 1.6%, “sometimes” – 31%, “no” – 65.3%. Therefore, 32.6% of children are subjects of corporal punishments in the family. But what is most troubling, is that 77% of punishing physically children think that they are punished fairly.¹⁷

The same way, as reproduction of violence in society continues, only 13% of adolescents who experience humiliations and abuses from their compeers in the school think that it is violence, the rest name it as a “normal school routine”.

But what is the most widespread pretext of parental punishments? 36% of adolescents replied that parents punish them for “bad reports” (the “bad report” are considered as all writings except the excellent ones). As a matter of fact, the “reports race” is very much characteristic for contemporary schooling in Belarus. Students of secondary school have no free time even at home (6-7 hours in school, and obligatory homework after that). The “reports race” is highly understandable: the diploma of higher education has been for a long time and still is the symbol of future success and prosperity. The respect almost to the degree of veneration of the “Written Word” has a long history in every patriarchal society, and Belarus is not an exception. Such idolization of everything written, of literacy and education

in Belarus could be also explained by very sharp and fast transition of Belarusian patriarchal traditional society toward the industrialization during the first Soviet period in the early 20th century.

In the late Soviet epoch, Belarus has been always regarded in the former Soviet Union as an “intellectual basis”, and the main “products” of Belarus were intellectual cadres. To have the diploma of higher education was extremely widespread, almost like a *sine qua non* in Belarus. Nor accidentally, according to the UNESCO statistics, Belarus occupies the first place among the countries of Central and Eastern Europe for criteria of youth literacy rate (15-24 years old) – 99.8%,¹⁸ and the 5th place in the world by total literacy rate (according to the Report of United Nations Development Programme).¹⁹

The situation with the diploma in Belarus today is not the same as in the Soviet time. The competition to enter a higher establishment is very tough in comparison with the Western ones, and many applicants have to enter into the university on payable basis (education in Belarusian state higher establishments is free but from the late 1990 it is permitted for the universities to take payment from those applicants who could not go through the competitive tests but still would like to be enrolled). Many parents are ready to pay even for the single purpose to defend their child from the military service, which is obligatory for all young men of 18 years old in Belarus (and which is famous by its abuses, humiliations, lack of sanitary facilities etc.).

Another highly important axis of contemporary school discussions in Belarus is the theme of patriotism, and notably here is a stumbling block and source of contradictions between many parents and school theoreticians (there are several scientific establishments specialized entirely on theory and methods of school education in Belarus).

As a matter of fact, we return here to the beginning of this article: debates on so called “patriotic education” in Belarus result directly from political necessities of the government on the one hand, and from the intensive desperate “search for self” of an active part of Belarusian society on the second hand. Consequentially, history is the principal subject of all discussions, and children are the principle object of all kind scholastic educatory abuses.

According to the study “Genealogy of historical memory of the Belarusians in the context of the educational practices”²⁰ over a period of less than 20 years, institutional strategies how to instruct Belarusian history have been changed dramatically: national symbols, national heroes, central events of national history and so on. For example, during three approximate periods of “national education” (1993–1995 – anticolonial, nationalistic; 1996–2001 – panslavistic/pro-Russian with elements of Soviet demagoguery; 2002–2009 – governmental efforts of constructing Belarusian state ideology), the interpretation of such figures of Soviet history as Stalin has been moved from negative toward neutral or even positive!²¹ Also symbolically, recent Belarusian manuals of history show no national heroes, no significant names in history in order to avoid certain contemporary parallels and comparisons. Such diluted emasculated history taught in Belarusian schools gives to the children low self-esteem, non self-respect, a “lost self”. As a result, not accidentally, 20% of all Belarusians would like to leave the country²² permanently according to the Gallup organization opinion poll in Belarus.

All these numbers and statistics are only the signs for further interpretation. Belarus is not very specific among the other more or less “safe” countries in the world. We all understand that domestic violence, humiliations in the school and child abuse are horrors that must be eliminated, and still the evolution of childhood into the empathic stage rests the desirable but very difficult in practice aim everywhere. They are especially difficult when we take into account the identity problems which are so acute in Belarus.

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¹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the republic of Belarus: <http://mfa.gov.by/ru/press/official-releases/cb51d92653c36f36.html>

² Pavel Tereshkovich, “The Belarusian Road to Modernity”, *International Journal of Sociology*, vol. 31, no. 3, p. 81 (Fall 2001).

³ According to current statistics and taking into account the preliminary results of the 2009 population census, the population size of the Republic of Belarus was 9465,8 thsd. at October 1, 2010 meaning a decrease by 14.4 thsd. persons as compared with January 1, 2010. The population decrease is determined by the surplus of deaths over births by 21606 persons with the positive migration gain amounting to 7229 persons. Data are compiled based on current statistics and taking account of preliminary results of the 2009 population census by National Statistical Committee of the Republic of Belarus.

<http://belstat.gov.by/homep/en/indicators/press/demogr1.php>

⁴ Stephania Lukashovich, “Sovremennaiia demograficheskaia situatsia v Respublike Belarus” [Contemporary demographic situation in the Republic of Belarus], *Ustitsia Belarusi* [Justice of Belarus], №6 (2002).

⁵ ² United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division. [“United Nations World Population Prospects: 2006 revision, Table A.15”](#). New York: UN. (2007).

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ According to the World Health Organization, http://www.who.int/mental_health/prevention/suicide_rates/en/index.html

⁸ Stephania Lukashovich, op. cit.

⁹ CIA The World Factbook, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/rankorder/2091rank.html> ;

See also Stephania Lukashovich, op. cit.

¹⁰ Natsionalnaia programma demograficheskoi bezopasnosti Respubliki Belarus na 2007-2010 gody, Podprogramma “Ohrana zdorovia materi i rebenka” [National Programme of Demographic Security of the Republic of Belarus, Sub-Programme “Health Care of the Mother and the Child”], 2007-2010.

¹¹ Postanovlenie Mingorispolkoma “Ob effektivnosti upravleniia kachestvom doshkolnogo obrazovaniia” [Resolution of Minsk city government “On affectivity of governing the quality of pre-school and primarily school education”]. Minsk (2009).

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Analytic inquiry on results of the opinion poll “Children not for violence, *Sotsialno-pedagogicheskaiia rebota* [Socio-Pedagogic Work], Vol. 5 (2003).

¹⁴ Argumenty i facty in Belarus, <http://mir.pravo.by/library/news/different/news-05-08-2010>
<http://news.open.by/country/30119>

¹⁵ Mogut li v Belarusi zapretit bit detej po zakonu? [Could be forbidden to beat up the children in Belarus by the law?], *Zavtra tvoej strany* [Tomorrow of your country], № 3, June 23, 2010.

¹⁶ <http://news.open.by/country/30119>

¹⁷ Analytic inquiry on results of the opinion poll “Children not for violence, *Sotsialno-pedagogicheskaiia rebota* [Socio-Pedagogic Work], Vol. 5 (2003). See also: http://nonviolence.iatp.by/specialist/opros/Analit_inf.htm

¹⁸ http://stats.uis.unesco.org/unesco/TableViewer/document.aspx?ReportId=125&IF_Language=eng&BR_Fact=LTRYT&BR_Region=40530

¹⁹ United Nations Development Programme. Human Development Report 2009. P. 171

http://hdr.undp.org/en/media/HDR_2009_EN_Complete.pdf

²⁰ Tatiana Ostrovskaiia, *Genealogia istoricheskoi pamiati belorusov v kontekste obrazovatelnykh praktik* [Genealogy of historical memory of the Belarusians in the context of the educational practices] ; Belarusian Institut of Strategic Studies (BISS), Lithuania (2010).

²¹ “I absolutely disagree with those officials from Russia who say that Stalin is an enemy and Lenin is a criminal”, told at the press-conference 1.10.2010 in Minsk Alexander Lukashenko, according to official Belarusian Information Company BELAPAN, http://naviny.by/rubrics/society/2010/10/01/ic_news_116_352976

²² <http://www.gallup.com/poll/141746/Million-CIS-Migrate-Temporarily-Work-Study.aspx>