

**THE USE OF EDUCATION SYSTEM RESOURCES BY THE
BELARUSIAN AUTHORITIES IN ORGANIZATION AND CONDUCT
OF ELECTIONS AFTER 2022**

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INTRODUCTION

The education system in Belarus plays a prominent role in the process of organizing and conducting elections at various levels, and this phenomenon was observed even before 2022. The importance of the education system in conducting election campaigns is evident at least from the fact that a huge number of polling stations in Belarus have been and are being established on the territory of educational institutions.

Until 2022, the conduct of elections in Belarus affected mainly employees of the education system. Teachers were often enrolled in initiative groups and involved in the process of collecting signatures in support of pro-government candidates, were included as observers and members of election commissions during the elections. This made it possible to promote pro-government candidates, conduct falsifications at polling stations, and ensure the result desired by the authorities in elections at various levels. The mass use of employees of the education system in the conduct of elections was often explained by their complete dependence on the state apparatus in financial and career terms. Already in 2020, there was a situation when the political regime in Belarus tried to make the election process as closed as possible at the expense of teachers. The most vivid example of such measures was the introduction of restrictions on the number of observers at polling stations under the pretext of fighting the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, only observers loyal to the authorities were allowed to the polling stations, and often these observers were teachers. At the same time, the independent media recorded a number of cases when employees of the education system forcibly removed independent observers not only from polling stations, but also from the territory of educational institutions. As a result, independent observation of elections became impossible and this created all conditions for mass falsifications.

As for the use of students, the traditional form of the authorities' influence on the election process through the education system was the active involvement of young people in early voting. Before the 2020 presidential election, early voting was one of the main mechanisms of falsification, and the authorities were extremely interested in ensuring that as large a percentage of people as possible voted early. The process of attracting students to early voting was accompanied by both threats from the university administration (creating problems in passing exams, eviction of non-resident students from dormitories) and promises of benefits for those who vote early.

Certain changes in the process of organizing and conducting election campaigns were observed during the 2022 referendum. The first notable change was the CEC's refusal to publish personal data of members of election commissions. After the massive fraud in the 2020 elections, tensions were often created among the staff of educational institutions, as the publication of the personal data of election commission members made it possible to know exactly which employees were involved in the fraud process. The refusal to publish the data allowed the authorities to continue to attract loyal people to work in election commissions who could ensure the desired result. The second change was the holding of so-called dialogue platforms throughout the country, during which people were encouraged to vote for changes in the Constitution. Employees of all budgetary spheres, including the education system, were actively involved in such dialogue platforms. Note that before the 2022 referendum, open election campaigning in educational institutions was often a local initiative. It should be mentioned that at the time of the 2022 referendum, the current authorities in Belarus had not yet recovered from the 2020 protests, and all the above-mentioned changes did not have a great impact on the education system in the organization and conduct of elections compared to previous campaigns. Significant changes in the use of resources of the education system during the organization and conduct of elections began to be observed in the second half of 2022, and the first significant manifestations of these changes occurred during the Single Voting Day in early 2024. Moreover, the beginning of the election campaign in 2025 shows that the Belarusian authorities not only strengthen the involvement of the education system in the election process, but also set strategic tasks for it. We list the key identified changes and their potential impact on the electoral process in Belarus below.

I. INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF THE INVOLVEMENT OF THE EDUCATION SYSTEM IN THE ELECTORAL CAMPAIGN PROCESS

The first significant change was the consolidation of the practice of using the education system in the process of training people to conduct elections. The first case of such practice was recorded back in September 2022, when the Academy of Management started special advanced training courses on the theory and practice of the electoral process.¹ The Academy of Management is a rather specific educational institution, whose activities are aimed, inter alia, at working with officials. For this reason, the use of the base of the Academy of Management for the training of potential election organizers and members of election commissions has not yet indicated the strengthening of the involvement of the education system in the election process. But further monitoring studies showed that the Academy of Management became an experimental base for the testing of training programs, and then these courses became a common aspect of the activity of the education system. The use of institutes of education development in the implementation of such programs has become a national practice. At the time of writing this study, we have recorded the facts of conducting advanced training courses “Theory and practice of the electoral process in the Republic of Belarus” in Brest,² Hrodna³ and Mahiliou⁴ regional institutes of education development. Such courses train potential members of election commissions and upon the results of training the students are given special certificates. Note that the task of the institutes of education development is to improve the professional level of pedagogical staff, which has nothing to do with the election procedure.

Conducting such courses on a nationwide scale indicates that we are dealing with the actual institutionalization of the involvement of the education system in the process of election campaigns in Belarus. If earlier such trainings were held secretly to avoid demonstrating the facts of preliminary selection of election commission members by the authorities, now the preliminary selection has become a regular practice. We are sure that a certificate of completion of such courses will play a decisive role when considering the inclusion of a person in the election commission. It is important to realize that only a person who is loyal to the current political regime can be sent to take such courses. The very

¹ <https://rec.gov.by/special/ru/news-ru/view/kursy-povysheniya-kvalifikatsii-po-voprosam-teorii-i-praktiki-izbiratelnoogo-protssessa-538/>

² <https://tinyurl.com/4bfyux69>

³ <https://tinyurl.com/47feuu25>

⁴ <https://tinyurl.com/5avpud2v>

fact of holding such courses and having a certificate of their completion indicates that members of election commissions are turning into a professional layer, which contradicts the democratic principles of formation of such commissions. Besides, holding such courses in the institutes of education development directly indicates that teachers will be more actively involved in the activities of election commissions. In our opinion, the result of the training of people loyal to the authorities at such courses will be a situation when the organization and conduct of elections will become an even more closed process for a limited circle of people, and participation in them of citizens even with neutral political views will become impossible even on formal grounds.

II. MASS USE OF EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS TO IMPOSE PRO-GOVERNMENT INFORMATION POLICY

Already during the 2024 election campaign, we recorded a noticeable increase in cases of intimidation of students with administrative and criminal liability for any protest activity and distribution of materials of opposition media, the vast majority of which have the status of “extremist” in Belarus. We connected this with the fact that the authorities are extremely afraid of youth protests, which were massively observed in Belarus in 2020. But as the beginning of the 2025 election campaign showed, the intimidation of young people has become even more organized and has become part of a broad information campaign that the authorities are conducting in the youth environment. The elements of this campaign include the following:

1. Intimidation of young people. As we have already written above, the active intimidation of young people with responsibility for opposition activities in fall 2024 became more organized. The most vivid example of this was the marathon “Freshman Month” held in all universities of the country, a significant part of which was devoted to threatening students for interacting with resources recognized as “extremist” in Belarus.⁵ In addition, since September, colleges and universities have been constantly organizing meetings between students and law enforcement officers, where young people are also threatened with liability for various manifestations of protest views. Cases of organized involvement of young people in watching political trials, where defendants receive various punishments for their protest activities, have become more frequent. Along with

⁵ <https://edu.gov.by/news/mesyats-pervokursnika-marafon-kotoryy-dolzhen-proyti-kazhdyy-student/>

this, the official resources of educational institutions constantly publish news materials about cases of persecution of young people for protest activities. In this way, the perception of inevitability of punishment for oppositional manifestations and even interaction with the resources of independent media is formed among young people.

2. Promotion of state media. Since the beginning of the new academic year, we have been observing the active work of the authorities in conducting various classes with young people on the topic of information security. A distinctive feature of such classes is that among really useful advice on the rules of safe behavior in the information space, young people are informed about the “unprofessionalism” of the opposition media outlets that spread “fakes” about Belarus. Young people are also reminded of the punishment for interaction with opposition resources. As a rule, such classes end with an appeal to young people to use only “verified” information from the state media. It is obvious that the state media in Belarus distribute only pro-government agenda, and the authorities are interested in ensuring that this agenda is consumed by young people.

3. Instructional meetings and events. In September-November, we recorded at least three major events where representatives of educational institutions were openly instructed on how to run official resources in the context of the election campaign. Such events included the BlogBy bloggers’ forum,⁶ a seminar “Effective communication setup: modern tools for working in the educational and media space taking into account modern challenges and threats” on the basis of the Ministry of Education,⁷ and a seminar “Dialogue between the government and society through media communications.”⁸ Such events indicate the authorities’ desire to turn the resources of educational institutions into another tool for promoting pro-government propaganda among young people.

4. Agitational and propaganda activities with young people. We have mentioned above that the mass holding of the so-called dialogue platforms before the 2022 referendum was the first example of a nationwide campaign to impose a pro-government agenda in educational institutions. Monitoring studies of 2023-2024 show that the practice of holding various agitational and propaganda events at various levels of education has become permanent. We have been observing a significant surge of such activities throughout 2024, which is directly related to the election campaigns. We have collected hundreds of

⁶ https://t.me/bseu_official/22835

⁷ <https://t.me/MinobrofBelarus/35280>

⁸ https://t.me/bseu_official/23571

examples of involvement of young people in agitation and propaganda activities in educational institutions, which can be seen in our monitoring studies. As a rule, such activities include imposing a pro-government view on the situation in Belarus and the world, praising Aliaksandr Lukashenka, discrediting the Belarusian political opposition, criticizing the U.S. and countries of the European Union. Separately, we should also note the fact that starting from 2024, the authorities began to intensify the activity of pro-government youth activists in educational institutions: new pro-government youth structures are created, the authorities hold instructional events with pro-government activists, projects on the topic of elections are realized in educational institutions, youth activists speak about the pro-government agenda on the resources of educational institutions and in the mass media. All this should contribute to the formation of the young people's perception that the current regime in Belarus is democratic and enjoys nationwide support, including that of the youth.

In our opinion, all the above-mentioned elements of the campaign are aimed at delivering an exclusively pro-government agenda to young people and isolating them from the materials of independent media. And as can be seen, the education system plays an active role in the realization of this campaign. The constant broadcast of only a pro-government agenda in the context of elections can affect the political mood of young people, especially in the context of potential problems for interaction with opposition informational resources.

III. INCREASED INVOLVEMENT OF EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS IN THE ELECTORAL PROCESS

The holding of the Single Voting Day and the launch of the 2025 election campaign showed that the authorities began to involve young people much more actively in the electoral procedure through the education system. Among the dozens of identified cases that can be seen in our 2024 monitoring studies, we can emphasize the following directions of the authorities' activities to involve young people in the electoral process:

1. Open involvement of young people in the processes of agitation and voting. The preparation and conduct of the Single Voting Day in February 2024 showed that the authorities began to openly use the education system to involve students in various election-related campaign activities. For example, school students in

Minsk,⁹ Shklou,¹⁰ Lida district,¹¹ Rahachou district,¹² Aktsiabrski district¹³ and other regions were involved in election-related campaign videos. School students in Homiel district¹⁴ were forced to distribute agitational materials on the streets, and teenagers in Homiel delivered invitations to the election to mailboxes.¹⁵ In Homiel, students of the local pedagogical college held a dance flash mob on city streets, which was aimed at attracting citizens' attention to the elections.¹⁶ In Pinsk Agrarian Technological College, young people were forced to give a commentary to state TV, where they talked about the importance of the upcoming elections for young people.¹⁷ In Cherven¹⁸ and Homiel,¹⁹ students of a local college were taken to the streets to distribute invitations to the election. In Lida Music College, pictures with students' statements about the importance of elections were displayed in front of the entrance to the polling station.²⁰ In Belarusian State Agrarian Technical University, students were involved in placing agitational information about the candidates²¹ and creative performances during one of the pickets of Belaya Rus.²² Students of Belarusian State University of Culture and Arts distributed election campaign materials on the streets during their pre-graduation internship.²³ Students of Vitsiebsk State Technological University were forced to campaign at pickets in support of the university rector, who was running for the regional Council of Deputies.²⁴ The examples given above are only a small part of the election campaign, the promotion of which massively involved young people through the education system within the Single Voting Day. The full picture of youth participation in campaign activities is presented in our study of January-February 2024, but even the examples given in this study clearly demonstrate the facts that youth involvement in agitational activities was carried out throughout the country and at different levels of education. In the introduction to this study, we noted that

⁹ <https://t.me/uchitelstolicy/42208>

¹⁰ <https://t.me/shklovobrazovanie/25285>

¹¹ https://t.me/obrazovanie_Lida/66030

¹² <https://t.me/oorogachev/76481>

¹³ <https://t.me/Oktobraz/40291>

¹⁴ <https://t.me/obrazovaniegomelskiyrik/1848>

¹⁵ https://t.me/Novobelica_Obrazovanie/36316

¹⁶ https://t.me/krestyanskaya_14/9642

¹⁷ <https://tinyurl.com/4mytx63x>

¹⁸ <http://chpsl.by/ru/main.aspx?guid=102543>

¹⁹ <https://tinyurl.com/ev5xk3k8>

²⁰ <http://tinyurl.com/3vs2x5zh>

²¹ <https://www.bsatu.by/ru/edinyy-den-golosovaniya-aktivisty-brsm-volontory>

²² https://t.me/bsatu_orvm/6938

²³ <https://t.me/bquki/17925>

²⁴ https://t.me/VSTU_VITEBSK/6404

the mass involvement of students in early voting was carried out in Belarus long before the events of 2024. But the distinctive feature of the Single Voting Day was the fact that the authorities no longer hesitated to show these facts, but, on the contrary, tried to demonstrate the nationwide nature of involvement of students in early voting in every possible way. In the February monitoring study, we noted more than 70 facts of organized participation of young people in early voting, and in some cases (HSMU,²⁵ HSTU,²⁶ Pinsk College of BrSU²⁷) educational institutions did not even hide the fact that voting of students took place under the control of teachers and officials. The involvement of young people in campaign activities through the education system continued after the start of the 2025 election campaign. Throughout the country, college and university students were massively involved in recording videos where they called on Aliaksandr Lukashenka to run for a new presidential term, and in a number of cases teachers engaged kindergarten pupils and school students in such videos (kindergarten No. 3 in Pruzhany,²⁸ sanatorium kindergarten No. 3²⁹ in Kalinkavichy school of Pinsk district,³⁰ school No. 11 in Lida³¹). In Hrodna Music College, students recorded a video clip fully dedicated to praising Aliaksandr Lukashenka.³² Already in the first week of the collection of signatures in support of candidates, we recorded facts of involving young people in this process in BelSUT,³³ Homiel College of Design and Computer Graphics,³⁴ Zhytkavichy College,³⁵ and in Minsk College of Innovative Construction Technologies, they recorded a video of a student giving a signature in support of Aliaksandr Lukashenka right in the educational institution.³⁶ We are convinced that the whole election campaign up to the elections in late January 2025 will be filled with a huge number of cases of involvement of young people in the campaign process through educational institutions.

2. Volunteer activities on election day. The Single Voting Day in late February showed that the authorities started to use the education system on a massive scale to involve young people as volunteers at polling stations. In most cases,

²⁵ https://t.me/GSMU_main/9078

²⁶ <https://www.gstu.by/news/2024-02-22-145392>

²⁷ <https://tinyurl.com/2ap86sx8>

²⁸ https://t.me/pruzhany_schools/11704

²⁹ <https://t.me/doshmir1/14776>

³⁰ <https://t.me/otdelobrpinsk/13014>

³¹ https://t.me/obrazovanie_Lida/82118

³² <https://tinyurl.com/bdfv24xz>

³³ https://t.me/bsut_oms/6434

³⁴ <https://t.me/ggkdikg/2949>

³⁵ <https://t.me/lizei/2728>

³⁶ <https://t.me/uchitelstolicy/49299>

this activity consisted of helping elderly and mobility-disabled voters at polling stations. But in a number of cases we found examples of involving young people in openly ideological actions. In Petrykau³⁷ and Homiel,³⁸ students of schools and Homiel Pedagogical College³⁹ showed creative performances with official flags, and in Rahachou Gymnasium, students greeted voters with official symbols.⁴⁰ In Hantsavichy district, school students distributed propaganda products about the Single Voting Day.⁴¹ In Homiel, school students met voters with an ideological stand “With love to you, Belarus!,”⁴² and students of the local pedagogical college – with a stand “Let’s choose TOGETHER.”⁴³ We are sure that the involvement of young people to work as volunteers at polling stations will increase and the directions of such activities will be expanded.

3. The use of Youth Law Enforcement Units (YLEU) to guard polling stations. Another innovation during the Single Voting Day was the mass use of YLEU units to assist law enforcement officers at polling stations. Usually such squads consist of students who act as a volunteer squad in their educational institutions. But in conditions when the authorities are afraid of any manifestations of protest activity during the elections, these squads began to fulfill police functions. Even before the Single Voting Day, YLEU members were gathered for special seminars, where law enforcement officers experienced in suppressing mass protests conducted paramilitary exercises with young people. On the examples of the students of VSMU,⁴⁴ as well as students of Hrodna College of Arts⁴⁵ and Agrarian-Technical College in Maryina Horka,⁴⁶ it can be seen that YLEU was indeed involved in the protection of law and order at polling stations. We are sure that during the elections on January 26, 2025, we will see similar examples of involvement of students in performing law enforcement functions at polling stations. This thesis is confirmed by the facts of holding special seminars with YLEU members in October-November 2024. Examples of students’ participation in such seminars can be seen in the Academy of Management⁴⁷ and BSMU,⁴⁸ and it was officially announced in BSATU⁴⁹ that the seminar was

³⁷ https://t.me/krestvanskaya_14/10224

³⁸ https://t.me/Novobelica_Obrazovanie/36531

³⁹ <https://www.gpk.by/23144-molodezhnyi-fleshmob-vybiraem-vmeste>

⁴⁰ <https://t.me/oorogachev/77792>

⁴¹ <https://t.me/Gantsevichi/30729>

⁴² https://t.me/Novobelica_Obrazovanie/36453

⁴³ <https://www.gpk.by/23162-molodezhno-imidzhevaya-aktsiya-vybiraem-vmeste>

⁴⁴ https://t.me/mediacenter_vqmu/8585

⁴⁵ <http://artcollege.by/news/edinyj-den-golosovaniya-3/>

⁴⁶ <https://mgatk.by/edinyj-den-golosovaniya.html>

⁴⁷ <https://www.pac.by/press-center/news/aktivisti-brsm-au-prinyali-uchastie-v-otkritom-dialoge-moop/>

⁴⁸ https://t.me/BSMU_official/41586

⁴⁹ https://t.me/bsatu_orvm/12639

dedicated to the upcoming elections. The beginning of work of law enforcers with YLEU in preparation for the elections can also be evidenced by the regional seminar at Mahiliou State University, where a riot police officer taught young people hand-to-hand combat techniques.⁵⁰

After the 2022 referendum, the authorities in Belarus began to openly use the education system to solve several tasks in the election process at once: assistance in agitation, assistance in the work of polling stations, and assistance to law enforcers on election days. If earlier the involvement of young people in early voting was a non-public process, in 2024 it became an open and even demonstrative phenomenon in the education system. In our opinion, the involvement of young people in the electoral process by the authorities through the education system will increase and we may see new forms of organized participation of young people in the 2025 elections.

IV. DEFINING STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES FOR THE EDUCATION SYSTEM IN THE CONTEXT OF ELECTIONS

The launch of the 2025 election campaign showed that the authorities not only use the education system to solve current electoral tasks, but also form strategic goals for it. An important example of this phenomenon was the holding of a seminar-meeting for teachers in mid-October. At the meeting, the head of the CEC, Ihar Karpenka, urged teachers to conduct explanatory work with children on the topic of elections,⁵¹ told about the shortcomings of the electoral process in the Western countries and the “openness” of the Belarusian electoral system.⁵² During the event, Ihar Karpenka gave a comment for the mass media, where we revealed two interesting theses. First, the head of the CEC said that by 2029-2030, the current school students should have an idea about the democracy of the electoral system of Belarus.⁵³ Secondly, the possibility of establishing the concept of electoral volunteering in the electoral legislation was announced in the interview.⁵⁴ In our opinion, formation of a positive view of the electoral process in Belarus among today’s children and teenagers is a strategic goal of the authorities. It is obvious that to achieve this goal, the authorities are going to use teachers as actual agitators. This goal is also evidenced by the

⁵⁰ <https://t.me/BRSMSU/3291>

⁵¹ https://t.me/krestyanskaya_14/21895

⁵² https://t.me/krestyanskaya_14/21911

⁵³ <https://lidanews.by/news/life/37338news.html>

⁵⁴ <https://rec.gov.by/ru/from-telegram-ru/view/elektoralnoe-volonterstvo-mogut-zakrepiť-v-izbiratelnom-zakonodatelstve-1905-2024>

publication of special manuals on elections for teachers⁵⁵ and students,⁵⁶ as well as the launch of special information hours on elections in all schools of the country.⁵⁷ We see another strategic goal of the authorities in the desire to make the election process as closed as possible, where only a limited circle of loyal people can be allowed to participate. The authorities are concerned that the list of loyal people should be renewed at the expense of young people and this explains their interest in the topic of electoral volunteering. We have already seen examples of the use of volunteers in elections during the Single Voting Day in early 2024, and in the future, the list of volunteer functions may be expanded. The authorities can use Russia's experience as a model for creating the institution of electoral volunteering.⁵⁸ In the long term, electoral volunteers can be involved in the process of signature collection and election observation on a permanent basis and then even become members of precinct election commissions. In our opinion, attracting young people to electoral volunteering and identifying the most loyal people among them will be the task of educational institutions. Thus, through the activities of the education system, the process of renewal of personnel that the authorities need for the elections will be ensured.

⁵⁵ <https://lidanews.by/news/life/37338news.html>

⁵⁶ <https://tinyurl.com/psd2wynj>

⁵⁷ <https://news.zerkalo.io/life/78917.html>

⁵⁸ <https://rfsv.ru/breaking-news/volontery-na-vyborakh-kt-o-oni>

CONCLUSION

As a result of our study, we concluded that after the 2022 referendum, the authorities began to involve the education system much more intensively in the process of organizing and conducting elections:

First, the participation of the education system in the electoral process was formalized by turning institutions of education development into platforms for training future members of election commissions.

Secondly, after the 2022 referendum, educational institutions turned into platforms for distribution of pro-government propaganda, and this phenomenon is especially intensified during election campaigns. We especially note the desire of the authorities to create a pro-government youth activism group in educational institutions that disseminates the theses of pro-government propaganda among their peers and conducts pre-election agitation with them.

Thirdly, while until 2022 the involvement of the education system in the election process was at the expense of teachers, in 2024 there is an open involvement of students of educational institutions at various levels. Young people are actively involved in the process of signature collection in support of the candidates required by the authorities, conduct of pre-election agitation both in educational institutions and in settlements, work at polling stations on voting days, and assistance to law enforcement agencies at polling stations. As the events of fall 2024 have shown, the authorities plan to continue using young people in the process of conducting elections through the consolidation of the concept of electoral volunteering. In our opinion, when defining the functions of electoral volunteers, Russia's experience will be adopted, and the training of such volunteers will be carried out by educational institutions.

Fourth, the use of teachers in election campaigns has become open and demonstrative. As the events of 2024 have shown, the official resources of educational institutions openly demonstrate the facts of involvement of students by teachers in early voting and signature collection in support of the candidates required by the authorities. At the same time, employees of educational institutions are still actively involved in the initiative groups of pro-government candidates, observers and members of election commissions. As in the case with students, the authorities plan to widely use teachers throughout the country in the process of disseminating the theses of the pro-government propaganda concerning the character of the elections in Belarus. Moreover, the teachers are

tasked to form the ideas about the democracy and openness of the Belarusian electoral system in the minds of today's school students by 2030.

In our opinion, the consequence of the involvement of the education system in the process of election campaigns will be a situation when the entire procedure of organizing and conducting elections will be fully controlled by the authorities. Only a limited number of people who have proven their loyalty to the authorities, including through participation in electoral volunteering and the work of youth pro-government initiatives, will be allowed to participate in any of the stages of this process. It will be almost impossible to include outsiders in the electoral commissions because of the certificates of special courses taken by the activists agreed with the authorities. At the same time, children in educational institutions will be actively imposed the idea of honesty and democracy of the Belarusian electoral system despite the total cleansing of the political field in the country and the impossibility of participation of the real opposition in elections. All these measures will contribute to the fact that with the active participation of the education system, the elections in Belarus will not just be rigged, but will be of imitation nature in general.