

# Does Belarus' mandatory work placement scheme exploit or benefit university students?

Saturday 11 May 2019, by [RAMIREZ Loïc](#) (Date first published: 15 April 2019).

**Anastasia Tretiak arranges to meet us in the cafeteria of the Minsk State Linguistic University, where she spent several years as a student of French. After completing her studies, she was assigned to a two-year teaching position at a public school. Her employment was mandatory and entirely financed by the Belarusian state as a means of reimbursing the cost of her studies.**

"At the end of my fifth year, I had to give my assignment preferences. The better your marks the more options you have," she explains. "But since I was planning to continue my studies, I didn't pursue my options. I was convinced that I could get out of the placement. Unfortunately, I didn't pass my doctoral entrance exam and I was assigned to a post in a tiny village in the Gomel region [in the country's south-east]."

Dreading the thought of living far away from her family and friends, Anastasia moved quickly to find an alternative. "I applied to several schools in the capital. Finally, by some miracle, one of them accepted me." Changing workplace assignments is only possible if all three parties involved agree : the initial employer, who agrees to waive the applicant's hiring, the new employer, who certifies the applicant's hiring, and the university where the applicant was educated. It's an obstacle course that requires approaching every party individually in order to obtain the official documents required for transfer.

"Fortunately the dean of my faculty intervened on my behalf," she explains. Relieved, Anastasia was ultimately able to complete her post-graduate work period, known as the raspredelenie, at school no. 38 in Minsk.

The raspredelenie (распределение), which in Russian literally translates to 'distribution,' is a compulsory placement system for scholarship students currently in place in the Republic of Belarus. The country, which gained its independence in 1991 following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, has been run since 1994 by Alexander Lukashenko (currently finishing his fifth term), who is regularly accused of authoritarianism and whose government has [come under fire from critics](#), particularly the International Labour Organization (ILO), for repeated violations of workers' and trade union rights.

A holdover from the education system of the USSR, whose higher education institutions responded to the demand of state-owned companies, the raspredelenie was re-established in Belarus in the early 2000s. It applies to all sectors including medicine, languages, social sciences and law. Only students who pass their university entrance exam at the end of their secondary education have access to this scholarship system, if they so desire. For everyone else, the only option is to pay for their education themselves.

The International Federation of Human Rights (FIDH) considers the system to be a [form of forced labour](#), defined by the ILO as “all work or service which is exacted from any person under the threat of penalty and for which the person has not offered himself or herself voluntarily.”

The Belarusian authorities deny this accusation. “It’s first and foremost the student’s choice,” insists Irina Starovoytova, Deputy Minister of Education. “When students complete their secondary schooling, they can choose to pay for their own higher education or not. After that, it’s a way for them to get their first jobs. Even students who pay for their studies turn to their university administrations to find a job through *raspredelenie*. The system offers advantages – the state is obligated to provide housing and graduates enjoy the status of ‘young specialists’ with an accompanying salary bonus.”

The reality, however, is not so rosy. “A friend of mine had to live with an old woman in a village cut off from everything,” says Aliona P., a journalism student. Numerous testimonies published in a [2013 report](#) by the FIDH and the NGO Viasna (Belarusian human rights organisation) confirm the precarious conditions faced by graduates during their *raspredelenie* : dormitory housing without hot water located several kilometres away from their workplaces in villages with insufficient train or bus services, low wages and unpaid overtime.

“The idea of being sent to some remote hamlet used to be considered a nightmare,” jokes Pavel Ferenetz, a young musician living in the city of Brest, near the Polish border. But as he explains, a new ‘trend’ is emerging amongst young city dwellers, which is giving rise to renewed interest in *raspredelenie*. “Today, a lot of people see it as a challenge, a back to nature kind of thing.” Evidence of this new trend can be found at the private news site Tut.By, usually hostile to the regime, which has published several reports on young graduates delighted to perform their *raspredelenie* in remote areas of the country. “Of course it’s not uncommon for some people to be dissatisfied with their assignments,” admits Pavel, “but it’s not the fault of the people who host the new specialist.”

### **Placement as a means of avoiding unemployment and “parasites”**

The system is essentially a means of dealing with countrywide demand for professionals while ensuring that certain populations are not neglected. Seen in this light, the state is fulfilling its responsibility to provide functioning public services, including clinics, schools, post offices and police stations throughout the country. However, the *raspredelenie* doesn’t only apply to public institutions.

Anastasia Kondratskaya, who holds a degree in translation from the Linguistic University, completed her two-year mandatory placement at a private IT company. “I found the job myself. It had to be connected with my degree and having to work with English was enough,” she explains. “The important thing is to pay your taxes. Finding a rich husband and staying home wasn’t an option,” she says with a smile. “At that time I would have had to pay a tax for not working.”

She is referring to Decree no. 3 concerning “parasites,” which provoked several demonstrations in the country in 2017. The law fined people US\$200 for working less than six months a year (the average monthly salary in Belarus is US\$300). The government’s aim was to combat illegal activities and undeclared work (according to the [Belarusian authorities](#), there are 350,000 unemployed people in the labour market) that escape taxation. But the measure also impacted many people living in precarious circumstances. Faced with popular discontent, the government ultimately gave in and the decree was repealed in 2018.

“Around 54,000 young people enter the university system every year in this country,” says Starovoytova. “About half of them will participate in the raspredelenie.”

These students generally come from families of modest means, most of whom agree to pay their ‘debt’ in this way to the state, rather than to a bank – as is the case in many Western countries – for the opportunity to study.

But leaving the system during raspredelenie can prove complicated, as the money then has to be ‘reimbursed’. The FIDH considers the calculation of these sums to be ‘opaque’.

However, the government sees significant economic benefit in the system. In order to reduce the risks of unemployment, the Ministries of Economy and Education are coordinating their efforts to provide jobs to young university graduates. Belarus’s official unemployment numbers are extremely low – 0.8 per cent in 2016 according to the national statistics agency. [Private media sources](#) have frequently called these numbers into question, accusing the government of falsifying data. The ILO estimated the number of unemployed and underemployed at to be around [5.7 per cent in 2017](#).

### **Restricted freedom of choice**

In a [2012 article](#), Yauheni Preiherman, director of the Minsk-based think tank Liberal Club, writes that the raspredelenie system is “inefficient” and that “a growing number of Belarusian families are choosing to evade this communist system of assignment.” How are they doing this ? “The first option is to pay for university education, which is problematic for a large part of the population.” The second option is to “leave the country to study abroad.”

Anna Makeenko, a native of Vitebsk in the north of Belarus, completed her raspredelenie about a year ago at the luxurious Beijing Hotel in Minsk, where she worked as a receptionist. “I didn’t want to work as a school teacher, it wasn’t for me. I had to convince the administration of the Linguistic University to accept the hotel job,” she explains as she pours herself a cup of tea.

Anna was a good student and is gifted in languages. She would have preferred to find work abroad after her studies, but foregoing her post-graduate work assignment would have required her to reimburse her five years of study. “It was about US\$6,000. I couldn’t pay that !” Still, she adds, “it’s true that you have the advantage of a job at the end of your studies. But two years is a long time. You don’t feel very free.”

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### **Loic Ramirez**

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