

Humanity has often faced various challenges throughout its history. In 2020, we faced the COVID-19 pandemic, which affected almost all countries and forced many to go into long-term self-isolation.

All of a sudden, we found ourselves in a situation when we cannot move freely or visit places we are accustomed to, we cannot communicate with relatives and friends like before. Any training, cultural or sports events (other than online) became inaccessible. All this affects our mental and emotional state because we were deprived of our freedom, so familiar to us.

Similar social, intellectual and physical limitations are usual for convicts – people who end up in correctional institutions (detention facilities). Yet, amidst COVID-19 we still have the right to choose what to watch, who and when to call, etc., while the convicts don't. Such limitations cannot but affect mental health and result in loss of professional qualifications and social skills.

Education and training can mitigate these effects. They help convicts to master a new profession or acquire new professional skills, thereby maintaining their competitiveness in the labour market, contribute to acquisition or restoration of life skills, formation of social competencies, personal growth and development.

The number of convicts in Belarus exceeds 30,000, thus making it a country with a fairly high number of convicts as compared to other European countries. Therefore, the education of the convicted and released is a matter of grave concern for both the convicts and their immediate environment, i.e. families, relatives, acquaintances, and society in general.

EDUCATION FOR CONVICTED AND RELEASED



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PRIORITY GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

While promoting the importance, relevance and accessibility of education for convicts, implementing its own programs or supporting the projects of its partner organizations, DVV International Belarus pursues the following objectives:

- **Expanding access to education for convicts** through increasing the number and scope of educational programs, e.g. professional education programs (offering participants a new profession that is much-in-demand in the labour market or professional skills that ensure self-employment after release); programs that facilitate personal growth and building social capital (for faster and more effective rehabilitation in society after prolonged isolation); volunteer programs (that offer training and engagement of convicts as leaders of educational and social programs).

According to the 2016 survey of convicts (the Education Opens Doors project): About 80% of the respondents would like to improve their educational level, acquire a profession, raise their qualifications while serving their sentences in correctional institutions.

The majority of convicts believe that education in penal institutions is “an opportunity to gain knowledge useful in life after release” (75%), “an opportunity to maintain cognitive function at the proper level” (65%).

- **Professional development of specialists** (employees of the penal system, representatives of civil society organizations) through developing and holding various facilitated workshops, trainings, task meetings, conferences, study tours dedicated to the theory and practice of adult education, international practice and legal standards in the field of education of the convicted and released, modern approaches and forms of working with them.
- **Promoting close cooperation and exchange of experience** between organizations and experts whose activities are aimed at both exercising the right to education for the convicted and released and advancing the theory and practice of education as an effective means of reintegrating convicts into society.
- **Inviting the attention** of state institutions, civil society, the public and the media to the convicts' right to education: both the very existence of this right, enshrined in a number of Belarusian and international legal acts, conventions, recommendations, and its exercise, as well as a shift in public opinion towards understanding the importance and relevance of education for successful reintegration of persons held in penal institutions.

According to the 2019 Online Public Survey (Active for Education in Prison 2.0 project):

94.4% of the respondents believe that convicts need education, but only 57.7% of the respondents agree to study with the convicted/released.

92.1% of the respondents believe that convicts need to be assisted in social rehabilitation after release, but only 58% of the respondents are ready to contribute thereto (including their employment, use of the services provided by the released).

SUCCESS STORY



Higher Education for Convicts

In Belarus, the 'higher education in prison' dates back to 2015, when a pilot project was launched in women's Correctional Colony No. 4 in Gomel within the framework of the Education Opens Doors project and in partnership with the Minsk Innovation University; the project was aimed at creating an Electronic Educational Environment Remote Access Centre that would allow convicts to receive higher education remotely.

Two years later, the first graduate (having resumed her studies when such an opportunity appeared) successfully passed the final exams in Accounting, Analysis and Auditing and received a diploma of higher education, thereby becoming the first convicted person in the history of the penitentiary system of the Republic of Belarus to receive a higher education in a detention facility. The diploma delivery ceremony took place on 13 October 2017, the International Day of Education in Prison.

After a successful experiment in Correctional Colony No. 4, the Department for the Execution of Punishment within the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Republic of Belarus decided to apply this experience in other correctional colonies. Specially equipped classrooms were created in these institutions, while higher education is currently being received on a paid basis from educational institutions that have the necessary technical and organizational resources for the implementation of distance higher education programs.

In 2019, the relevant amendments were made to the Penal Code of the Republic of Belarus that facilitate the creation of the environment that "enables obtaining vocational secondary and higher education in a distance form, as well as additional education".

During the period from October 2015 to 2019, several hundred convicts were able to enrol in higher educational institutions (mainly in economic specialities). Most of them continued their studies after their release, a number of convicts successfully completed their course and received diplomas of higher education while still in custody.

I have been in correctional institution for a long time, and this project has become a breath of fresh air for me. I have been waiting for a long time for people in these places to also be given an opportunity to study and receive decent education in their preferred profession.

I can say that I enjoy studying very much, because the speciality I have chosen turns my crank, and I keep discovering something new all the time. My current goal is to get as much knowledge in the chosen profession as possible.

I believe that convicts need to receive education in correctional institutions, because this creates prospects for their development, gives them a chance to find their path in life after release. I am also convinced that the convicts who master special skills and competencies are more likely to rehabilitate in the society and become valuable members thereof.

From the feedback of a distance learning course participant



PARTNERS AND OUTCOMES

Our key partners who help us promote education for convicts are:

- Structural subdivisions of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Republic of Belarus: the Department for the Execution of Punishment and its regional departments, the Supervision and Enforcement Department, correctional institutions of various types, educational institution “Academy of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Republic of Belarus”;
- Civil society organizations, including: Gomel Regional Public Association “Community Development Projects”, NGO “Amrita”, Mozyr Social Public Association “Tree of Life”, NGO “Club of Business Women” (Brest), International Public Association “ECOPROJECT”, Vitebsk City Public Association of Women “Ulyana”, International Public Association “Education Without Borders”, Public Association “Belarusian Association of Journalists”, National Human Rights Public Association “Belarusian Helsinki Committee”;
- International partners: member organizations of the International Network of Penitentiary Education in the Countries of Eastern Partnership and Central Asia, the European Prison Education Association, the Latvian Prison Administration (Latvia), the Ministry of Justice of Land Brandenburg (Germany).

This partnership enabled us to achieve the following in 2010-2019:

- Implement **three large-scale partnership projects**, namely “Education Opens doors” (2015 - 2017) (with the support of the European Union), “Active for Education in Prison” (2018), “Active for Education in Prison 2.0” (2019-2020) (with the support of the Federal Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Germany). About **15 local mini-projects** were granted support.
- More than **1,150 convicted** (535 women and 625 men) and about **60 released** individuals got a chance to receive training in various subjects and areas. More than **750 specialists** in various fields from the state and public sector indulged into the theory and practice of training in penitentiary institutions.
- The **Gomel Recommendations** on Developing Education in Penitentiary Institutions of the Republic of Belarus were developed in cooperation with experts (2016).
- **3 survey studies** were carried out in the field of education of convicts serving sentences in correctional institutions (2015, 2016, 2019).
- **A number of activities** were held to commemorate 13 October – the International Day of Education in Prison, e.g. “An Honest Conversation on the Rights of Convicts” held in the Living Library format (2018) or the diploma delivery ceremony for the first convict to receive higher education in penal institution (2017), etc.

On 13 October 1989, the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe adopted Recommendation R(89) 12 “On Education in Prison”, which states that all convicts should have the opportunity to participate in educational activities that contribute to their self-development and successful rehabilitation in society, as well as mitigate the risk of repeated violations. This Recommendation formed the basis for the activities of the European Prison Education Association (EPEA) and was incorporated into the educational legislation of several European countries. In 2014, on the 25th anniversary of its adoption, the EPEA came up with a proposal to declare 13 October as International Day of Education in Prison.



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- **The International Network of Penitentiary Education** in the Countries of Eastern Partnership and Central Asia (2017) (<http://prison-off.com/>) was created. The network is a voluntary association that consolidates the efforts of organizations and experts in promoting the right to education in the penitentiary and post-penitentiary spheres, as well as in promoting education as an effective means of rehabilitation of (former) convicts in the society. At the end of 2019, it included 30 members from 7 countries (Armenia, Belarus, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Ukraine).
- A number of **articles** on the education of convicts were published, including the proceedings of scientific conferences, examples of training courses for specialists, collections of scholarly works and methodological recommendations on the topic of education of convicts, Roadmap after Release. All these materials, as well as the research findings and the Gomel Recommendations are available on the website of DVV International Belarus in the Publications section (www.dvv-international.org.ua/ru/belarus/publikacii).