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FOUR-LEGGED FRIENDS OR DANGEROUS ENEMIES? THE ISSUE OF STRAY ANIMALS (ON THE EXAMPLE OF BELARUS AND THE USA)

Companion animals, especially cats and dogs have always been there for us. Without them life is not the same. However, for different reasons many of these beloved animals lose their homes and wander the streets, suffering from malnutrition, disease, and injury. Encountering these street animals, we have a natural sense of compassion and think of offering them food or playing with them. However, it may be dangerous, especially for unsuspecting children or elderly people. As it has been highlighted by the World Health Organization, there are hundreds of millions of stray dogs and cats globally. Therefore, struggling with stray animals is a prevalent and urgent issue in many regions worldwide.

Researching the issue of stray animals in both the United States and Belarus is **highly relevant** due to the similarities in the challenges both countries face in controlling their stray animal populations. Through a comparative analysis of their respective approaches to managing stray animals, we can find valuable insights and potential solutions to the problem. By examining the differences in how these countries address the issue, we can learn about the effectiveness of various strategies. It can also highlight areas for improvement, fostering more compassionate and sustainable methods of managing stray animals on a national scale.

The **novelty** of this research lies in the comparative analysis of two distinct geographical regions with different cultural, economic, and legal landscapes. This analysis sheds light on the various factors at play in both countries and explores potential strategies for addressing the issue effectively.

Therefore, **the aim** of this study is to systematize the existing knowledge about the stray animals' issue and to make a comparative analysis of the peculiarities of stray animals' management in Belarus and the USA.

Our **hypothesis** is that the prevalence of stray animals in Belarus is higher compared to the USA due to different effectiveness of animal welfare policies and programs.

As the material of this research, we used articles from Belarusian and American websites, newspapers, animal welfare organizations describing actual state of affairs in the field of our research, statistical data from both countries and academic researches by S.D. Balones, Y. Zhang, A. Abdulkarim (26 references totally).

During the research the following **methods** were used: theoretical, comparative, analytical, statistical.

“Stray animals are unowned domestic animals, particularly pets, such as cats and dogs. They mostly live independently of human care, reproduce uncontrollably, overpopulate the environment, and often become a source of nuisance and global challenge to public health and environmental safety”.

Stray animals can be categorized into **four types** based on their circumstances:

1. *abandoned/lost animals* – they do not know how to survive in the streets so most of them die very quickly if they cannot adapt or are not taken into a shelter.

2. *real homeless animals*, most of which are born in the streets. Usually, they do not trust people but know how to use them when they scavenge for food.

3. *unsupervised animals* have lazy or irresponsible owners letting them walk freely without a leash.

4. *community owned animals* do not have a particular owner so are often neglected.

We discovered that **key factors contributing to the increase** in stray animal populations include

1. *pet loss* (mostly because they do not have microchips or collars with information about the owner);

2. *pet abandonment and neglect* (mostly because people lack of knowledge about how to care about a pet, purchase one on a whim and then do not have enough time, money or forces to care for it);

3. *quick breeding of unsterilized pets* (research shows that if unchecked, a pair of adult cats and their offspring could produce up to 370,000 kittens in 7 years);

4. *inadequate resources for shelters* (no matter how many shelters are available in one country or another, there will never be enough of them as their collection capability is limited if no sterilization efforts are taken).

In our research we have highlighted that stray animals *pose challenges to society and the environment* through noise, disease transmission to people or other animals, and ecological disruptions, although they can also help control mice and rats' populations.

There are various ***approaches to stray animals' management***.

1. *Shooting* is definitely the fastest way to exterminate rabid animals, but outside of these cases it is considered as cruelty, needs well-trained professionals having governments' authorization and may be dangerous.

2. *Poisoning* is cheap and can be used in large populations, but this method raises significant ethical concerns due to the cruelty inflicted upon the animals, leading to a slow and agonizing death.

3. *Euthanasia* is a humane and painless method of killing animals suffering from incurable illness, injury, old age or behavioral issues through medical measures. However, it is quite expensive, needs well trained professionals and medications, may have a negative impact on the environment (predators might eat euthanized carcasses if they are not buried well enough) and is considered as cruelty when used on healthy animals.

4. *Fertility control* usually needs taking repeated doses of chemicals under the veterinarian's control and may have various side effects on pets' health, so it is simpler to spay or neuter pets and stray animals to prevent them from quick breeding.

5. *Shelters* provide a safe haven for homeless animals, offering them food, a roof over one's head, and medical care. Nevertheless, maintaining shelters can be financially demanding, as it requires funding for trained professionals, facilities, veterinary care, and supplies. Also, is just but impossible to put all the stray animals in the shelters because there are too many of them.

6. *TNR (Trap-Neuter-Return) approach* is the most recognized stray animal control method today. It consists in capturing strays, sterilizing and vaccinating them, and then releasing back into their familiar environment. It is done by skilled veterinarians and helps maintain the ecological balance while reducing the incidence of certain health issues.

We have concluded that a complex strategy involving multiple methods is needed to effectively manage stray animal populations while prioritizing animal welfare and community involvement.

Having analyzed the stray animals' management in Belarus and the USA we have compared and contrasted it to find the common and different features.

Common Features:

Challenges: Both countries face challenges in managing stray animals due to irresponsible pet ownership, abandonment, and a lack of effective laws.

Statistics: Both countries lack accurate records of the number of stray animals, making it difficult to assess the extent of the issue.

Animal Welfare Organizations: Both countries have established animal welfare organizations that work to address the welfare of stray animals and promote responsible pet ownership.

Legislative Background: Both countries have laws and regulations governing the treatment of animals, although enforcement may be lacking or inconsistent.

Contrasting Features:

Capture and Euthanasia: Belarus has a higher rate of capturing stray animals with many facing a grim future of euthanasia due to limited adoption opportunities. However, in both countries efforts are made to reduce euthanasia rates through increased adoptions and spaying/neutering.

Community Engagement: The USA has a more widespread community engagement and education approach in managing stray animals compared to Belarus.

Trap-Neuter-Return Programs: While TNR programs are recommended in both countries, Belarus faces challenges in implementing them effectively due to various constraints such as lack of trained professionals, lack of funding.

Proposed Solutions: The USA has seen initiatives like mandatory microchipping, adoption drives, and partnership with animal welfare groups, while Belarus has recently enacted a comprehensive Animal Welfare Law focusing on humane treatment, responsible ownership, and stricter regulations.

Legislation: Belarus is in the process of enhancing legislation with the introduction of a new law to address animal welfare comprehensively, while the USA has a more established legislative framework with federal and state laws protecting animal rights.

We could not prove that the prevalence of stray animals in Belarus was higher compared to the USA because of the lack of accurate statistics in both countries. Nevertheless, our research shows that less animals are euthanized in the USA (15% compared to 70% in Belarus); more of them are adopted from shelters (65% compared to 20% in Belarus); there are various local and federal animal protection laws in the USA, while in Belarus this legislation has just been elaborated; there are various animal welfare organizations on the local and on the national scale in the USA, whereas in Belarus there is only one national organization and numerous local initiatives who do not cooperate enough with each other. This is why we have drawn a conclusion that animal welfare policies and programs were more effective in the USA than in Belarus. Thus, our hypothesis has been proved partially true.

However, we have shown that our country is working on this problem and is in the process of enhancing legislation with a new Animal Welfare Law focusing on humane treatment, responsible ownership, and stricter regulations. This law came into force in the beginning of 2025 and will definitely be updated in the future for better animal protection.

By actively addressing the needs of abandoned animals we can foster a more compassionate society where every living being is valued and protected. It is our moral duty to provide them with care, love, and a safe environment. In order to promote public awareness of this problem, and to teach future generations to be responsible pet owners, we have created an educational video for them (see the QR code). This video and other results of our research may be used during the English lessons and the elective courses while speaking about pet animals and our responsibility to them. Thus, our research has also a **practical relevance**.

