



**Joint submission to the Universal Periodic Review of the  
Republic of Belarus by PEN Belarus,  
PEN International and PEN America**

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## I. Executive summary

1. PEN Belarus, PEN International and PEN America welcome the opportunity to contribute to the fourth cycle of the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) of the Republic of Belarus (Belarus). This submission evaluates the implementation of recommendations made in the previous UPR and assesses the Belarusian authorities' compliance with international human rights obligations with respect to freedom of expression and cultural rights, particularly concerning:
  - Legislative restrictions on freedom of expression and cultural rights
  - Repression of cultural figures
  - Dismissals and professional restrictions on cultural figures
  - Limitations on artistic expression
  - Violations of linguistic rights
  - Hate speech, disinformation, and violations of the rights of national minorities in Belarus
  - Ideologization of culture and state control over cultural institutions
2. During the third UPR in 2020, out of 266 recommendations received by Belarus, the authorities accepted nine recommendations, noted 124 recommendations as previously implemented, partially accepted 18 recommendations, and acknowledged four recommendations as being in the process of implementation. However, in practice, the vast majority of these recommendations have been ignored, as detailed in the annex of this joint submission. The intervening period since the last UPR has been marked by the authorities' continued repression of cultural figures and systemic violations of fundamental rights, including the right to freedom of expression.
3. According to former Minister of Culture Anatol Markevich, who spoke at a meeting of the Presidium of the Council of the Republic on 29 March 2024, the Belarusian authorities "have learned lessons from the events of 2020", and "the ranks of the creative intelligentsia are being cleansed of individuals who undermined the foundations of the state."<sup>1</sup> At a ceremonial event on 11 October 2024 dedicated to Culture Workers' Day, Markevich highlighted achievements on that front, stating that the cultural community had been purged of "destructive elements."<sup>2</sup>
4. State cultural policy continues to institutionalize repression and tighten control over the sector, persecuting dissenters, subjecting cultural workers and the public to ideological indoctrination, promoting authoritarian rhetoric, and monopolizing the historical narrative. The Belarusian government persists in its efforts to suppress national heroes and symbols while advancing cultural integration with the Russian Federation. The practice of broadcasting content without permission from copyright holders and using content illegally has continued. Support is provided to cultural figures whose work serves the interests of the authorities.
5. As of 14 March 2025, 1214 people in Belarus were considered to be detained for political reasons.<sup>3</sup> Between 2020 and 2024, courts have issued at least 5133 politically motivated verdicts in criminal cases; at least 36 418 people have been subjected to administrative prosecution; more than 400 Belarusians have been added to the list of individuals involved in "terrorist activities", 4 100 are labelled as "extremists"; 1 012 people had already served their

sentences and were released; six people died in custody.<sup>4</sup>

6. According to research by PEN Belarus, 5,871 instances of violations of cultural rights and human rights of cultural figures were documented during the period under review: 1,348 in 2024<sup>5</sup>, 1,499 in 2023<sup>6</sup>, 1,390 in 2022<sup>7</sup>, 1,041 in 2021<sup>8</sup> and 593 in 2020<sup>9</sup>.

## **II. Legislative restrictions on freedom of expression and cultural rights**

7. The recommendations put forward during the previous cycle were not only ignored by the Belarusian authorities but systematically countered by their efforts to legalize unlawful practices that contradict principles of international law. PEN Belarus has documented violations with a focus on the cultural sector.<sup>10</sup>
8. Since the fraudulent presidential elections of 9 August 2020, the authorities have misused overbroad counterterrorism and anti-extremism legislation to falsely justify their crackdown on peaceful dissent and freedom of expression.
9. Since 2022, the suppression of peaceful dissent through the use of anti-extremist legislation against critics of the Belarusian government has become widespread. The lists of people allegedly involved in extremist or terrorist activities, as well as the lists of extremist formations and extremist materials are regularly updated with new names and titles. The Belarusian government has weaponized the criminal justice system to target dissent.
10. According to research by the Belarusian Helsinki Committee, the authorities amended more than 30 laws and other normative legal acts in 2023 alone.<sup>11</sup> Civil society organizations, political parties, public and religious organizations that toe the official line can be legally established. The possibility of establishing separate schools and preschool institutions and teaching in a minority language was abolished; the rights of Belarusians abroad have been restricted; amendments now also include the possibility of banning the activities of foreign mass media in Belarus; the death penalty for state treason committed by a government official or a military serviceman has been introduced; amongst other repressive changes.
11. The same is happening in the cultural sphere: in 2022, the Code of the Republic of Belarus on Culture was substantially updated, with 126 out of 257 Articles amended.<sup>12</sup> In particular, the Code initiated the creation of a Register of Organizers of Cultural and Entertainment Events<sup>13</sup> and a National Register of tour guides and guides-interpreters<sup>14</sup>, the certification of which contains inherently discriminatory mechanisms.
12. On 1 January 2023, Resolution 582 came into force, unduly regulating the activities of tour guides and guides-interpreters.<sup>15</sup> Only those included in the official register can work as such. Those convicted of specific crimes (including on politically motivated grounds) are barred. According to Resolution 33, adopted on 4 July 2023, tour guides must “show respect for the state symbols of the Republic of Belarus, the history of the Belarusian statehood”; to prevent “subjective incorrect assessments and statements” about the country, “provocative and other negative statements or actions” on the part of tourists and sightseers; to exclude “any form of

provocation in dress and appearance”.<sup>16</sup>

13. According to Resolution 608 of 19 September 2023, the clearance process for those wishing to organize events has been tightened.<sup>17</sup> New requirements have been introduced for organizers included in the Ministry of Culture’s register (all others are prohibited from conducting such activities). These requirements include the following: the organizer, founder, head of the organization, and/or a specialist must have at least three years of experience in entrepreneurial activity or work related to organizing and holding cultural and entertainment events. Individuals with criminal convictions under specific articles (including on politically motivated grounds) are prohibited from participating. Additionally, organizers cannot be registered if their activities include statements against the President of the Republic of Belarus or heads of state bodies, promote extremist activities, or pose a threat to national security. These restrictions, along with the authorities’ excessively broad interpretation of the terms “extremist activity” and “threat to national security,” indicate that these legislative changes are discriminatory in nature. In August 2023, 706 organizers were included in the Register of Organizers of Cultural and Entertainment Events; only 45 remained at the end of 2023 following the tightening of requirements. At the time of writing, only 60 organizers were accredited by the Ministry of Culture in a country of over nine million people.
14. With 500,000 Belarusians having left Belarus since 2020, the authorities adopted measures that create significant challenges for Belarusians abroad. On 3 January 2023, amendments were made to the Law “On Citizenship of the Republic of Belarus” that set forth the possibility of stripping Belarusians of their citizenship on account of “extremist” activity.<sup>18</sup> The legislation requires citizens to disclose foreign citizenships or residency permits, expanding governmental access to sensitive personal data. Decree 278 of 4 September 2023 (also known as the “Passport Decree”) severely affects Belarusian citizens abroad by restricting their ability to obtain identity documents or conduct vital legal and administrative procedures, resulting in significant obstacles to personal, professional, and family life.<sup>19</sup>
15. The Law on Restrictions on Exclusive Rights to Intellectual Property was published on 3 January 2023. It allows the import and use of musical and audio-visual works, computer software and other intellectual property without the consent of the rights holders and payment of remuneration. In effect, it legalizes the parallel import and pirated use of films, music, television and radio broadcasts from “foreign states that commit unfriendly acts”. The law was originally limited to 2024 but has since been extended to 31 December 2026.<sup>20</sup>

### **III. Repression of cultural figures**

16. In PEN America’s 2023 Freedom to Write Index, Belarus ranked sixth place globally among countries imprisoning writers. Belarus, which was not mentioned in the 2019 Index, has been consistently present in the top 10 countries since 2020.<sup>21</sup>



17. The government's policies have led to a deep crisis in the cultural sphere, forcing many artists and intellectuals into exile or underground. As of 28 February 2025, according to research by PEN Belarus, at least 170 cultural figures, including 36 People of the Word, were deprived of freedom — either imprisoned or under house arrest.<sup>22</sup> From 2020 to 2024 at least 1 900 representatives of the cultural sphere have been subjected to politically motivated persecution and censorship. At least five cultural figures died in custody (Mikalaj Klimovich, Ales Pushkin – in 2023; Vadzim Chrasko, Ihar Lednik, Aliaksandr Kulinich – in 2024); at least 960 cultural workers were arbitrarily detained (at least once), 645 were administratively prosecuted (as least twice), and 370 were criminally prosecuted (at least once); at least 295 criminal convictions (including five in absentia) were carried out against 281 cultural; at least 208 cultural figures have been searched, while 137 have had their property confiscated. It is known that special (in absentia) proceedings were initiated against 17 cultural figures who remain outside Belarus.<sup>23</sup>
18. Several cultural figures, including Siarhei Tsikhanouski, Maksim Znak, Maryia Kalesnikava, Viktar Babaryka, Aliaksandr Frantskevich, and Uladzimir Hundar have been arbitrarily detained, subjected to enforced disappearance, and held incommunicado since 2023.<sup>24</sup> Nobel Peace Prize winner, human rights activist, literary scholar and PEN Belarus member Ales Bialiatski continues to serve a 10-year prison sentence handed down in March 2023 on fabricated charges.<sup>25</sup>
19. The following actions by the Belarusian authorities have been documented during the period under review: artificial extension of prison sentences; replacement of penalties with harsher punishments on fabricated grounds (e.g., converting non-custodial freedom restrictions into full imprisonment in penal colonies); deterioration of detention conditions (restrictions on correspondence, care packages, and contact with relatives, restrictions on access to lawyers); growing number of cultural figures being repeatedly convicted on trumped-up charges; forcing former political prisoners to leave Belarus and actively using travel bans for people on trial; inclusion of political prisoners in extremist and terrorist lists, thus significantly limiting their rights.

#### **IV. Dismissals and professional restrictions on cultural figures**

20. As documented by PEN Belarus, PEN International and PEN America, cultural figures in Belarus operate in an increasingly toxic and suffocating atmosphere, with serious consequences for freedom of expression and cultural rights. Those who do wish to self-censor or restrict their creative activity face numerous and severe challenges.
21. During the period under review, PEN Belarus documented at least 450 cases of cultural figures being dismissed from cultural institutions on politically motivated grounds and 32 expelled from educational institutions. Eight cultural figures who did not hold Belarusian citizenship were expelled from Belarus. Unfair dismissals due to political views and/or refusal to participate in ideological and propaganda events continued at the time of writing. As a result, Belarus faces a shortage of qualified personnel, a depletion of its cultural sphere, and an increase in unemployment and low-skilled labor among cultural workers.<sup>26</sup>

22. The following trends were identified: inability to find employment after dismissal or administrative and criminal prosecution; mass surveillance of employees' social media accounts, forced signing of responsibility for "extremist subscriptions," security service interrogations (focusing on previous artistic activities, plans, colleagues and acquaintances in order to identify dissidents), mandatory permission from employers for foreign travel and reporting upon return (reports addressed to the internal security service are subsequently submitted to law enforcement agencies); practice of denunciation by those ideologically close to the authorities.
23. In the aftermath of the 2020 presidential election, independent publishing houses have been liquidated on spurious grounds: for example, Goliaths, Limarius (liquidated in 2022); the oldest private publishing house Zmicier Kolas, established in the late 1980s, Knihazbor (liquidated in 2023); Yanushkevich publishing house, forcibly closed and relocated to Poland in 2023.<sup>27</sup>
24. Significant art spaces, international centers (Goethe Institute, Polish Institute in Minsk, American Centre in Belarus, and others), and commercial shops that built their business on selling goods with national (white-red-white) symbols have also closed as a result of repressive actions by the Belarusian authorities. On 30 June 2021, Germany's Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated that Belarus had demanded that the Goethe Institute and the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) cease operations within a month. The Polish Institute in Minsk remains inactive; its website and social media pages have not been updated since mid-2021. Symbol.by, a company selling national symbols, was liquidated after its founder Paval Bielavus, was detained in November 2021 and sentenced on 11 May 2023 to 13 years in a penal colony on fabricated state treason grounds.
25. One in four non-governmental organizations, including dozens of the oldest public associations in Belarus, were liquidated. By the end of June 2024, the losses in the non-governmental sector amounted to at least 1 686 institutionalized non-profits, 1 051 of which ceased to exist due to forced liquidation, including about 249 non-governmental organizations dealing with the development of the cultural sphere in Belarus.<sup>28</sup> On 9 August 2021, PEN Belarus, an organization founded in 1989 and headed at the time by Nobel laureate in Literature Svetlana Alexievich, was unlawfully forcibly liquidated and subsequently forced to relocate to Poland<sup>29</sup>.
26. The emigration of individuals and families and the relocation of companies and organizations outside Belarus continued at the time of writing. The Belarusian Association of Journalists estimates that at least 400 independent journalists have left the country during the reporting period.<sup>30</sup>

## **V. Limitations on artistic expression**

27. The period under review has been marked by censorship and self-censorship in the cultural sphere. Publishers and media are often reluctant to publish texts for fear they could generate problems. All this strengthens self-censorship in Belarus, which many writers told PEN Belarus, PEN International and PEN America was most harmful to their work and greatly limited their freedom to write. Artistic work is abandoned and publications put on hold for the sake of personal safety. Belarusian culture has become a culture of resistance and preservation as well as one of enforced silence and anonymity. The urgent task for the future is to restore the

integrity of the cultural landscape, free creativity from censorship and self-censorship, and ensure the return of cultural figures to Belarus – who, despite severe threats and constant pressure, continue to create.<sup>31</sup>

28. The period under review is characterized by the following: erasure of cultural figures inconvenient to the authorities from history and collective memory (for example, without any legal grounds Nobel Prize in Literature laureate and former President of PEN Belarus, Svetlana Alexievich, saw her books withdrawn from libraries across the country in June 2023, after her name and books were removed from the school curriculum in August 2021); expansion of “blacklists” of cultural figures (bans on public events such as exhibitions, concerts, and creative meetings; prohibition of publishing and selling works; increased control over authors’ activities); Security Committee (KGB) screenings of artists before allowing public performances; those under surveillance by security services forces retreat into underground creative spaces; books that do not align with the Belarusian government’s views and state ideology are removed from bookshops and libraries.
29. During the reporting period, 57 books were labelled as “extremist materials” in Belarus.<sup>32</sup> Among them is *Europas Hunde* by Belarusian author Alhierd Bacharevič, who was awarded the Leipzig Book Prize for European Understanding in 2025. Possession and distribution of books labelled as “extremist” in Belarus carry severe penalties. Under Article 19.11 of the Code of Administrative Offences, the dissemination of information products included in the national list of extremist materials, as well as the production, publication, storage or transportation for the purpose of disseminating such information products, is punishable by a fine of up to 500 basic units (about US\$ 6,400) with confiscation of the information products and the equipment used to produce them.<sup>33</sup>
30. The Belarusian authorities introduced a new category of banned literature in 2024, after the Ministry of Information published a list of printed publications prohibited in Belarus for allegedly “potentially harmful to national interests.”<sup>34</sup> The list includes 65 titles, among them historical books that present a perspective on history differing from the official narrative (such as *Essays on the History of Belarus (1795–2002)* by Zakhar Shybeka and *Gulag* by Anne Applebaum), as well as books intended for an 18+ audience, primarily focused on LGBTQ+ themes. In doing so, the state unjustifiably restricts access to books for political reasons.
31. According to PEN Belarus’s monitoring for 2022-2024, the Belarusian authorities labelled 527 books and cultural resources as “extremist materials”: 289 in 2024, 182 in 2023, 56 in 2022. Examples include *Cattle Is Not What I Want to Be*, a song and music video by the band Lyapis Trubetskoy, based on the 1908 poem *Who are you?* by Janka Kupala, as well as the Instagram pages of organizations such as PEN Belarus, the Belarusian Council for Culture, and the theatre troupe Volnyja Kupalaŭcy.<sup>35</sup>
32. The Belarusian authorities included at least 209 cultural figures in the “List of citizens of the Republic of Belarus, foreign citizens or stateless persons involved in extremist activities” and 31 in the “List of organizations and individuals involved in terrorism” at the time of writing. For example, a Belarusian stand-up comedian, Viačasłaŭ (Słava) Kamisaranka, was sentenced in absentia on 30 December 2024, to six years in prison for making jokes about Alexander Lukashenko. Following the verdict, he was put on a wanted list and added to the register of

extremists and terrorists.<sup>36</sup> In 2024 alone, the state labelled as “extremist formation” a range of cultural organizations including Volny Belaruski Universitet (Free Belarusian University); DW Belarus (which provides sections on Belarusian culture), Znadniemna.pl (the former portal of the Union of Poles in Belarus, which covers topics and events relevant to the Polish community); communities of Belarusians abroad: People’s Embassies of Belarus, ABA Together (Association of Belarusians in America) – these organizations have the mission to preserve Belarusian heritage, culture, and language; an online store of products with national symbols: Admietnaść (Uniqueness); an independent theatre troupe: Volnyja Kupalaŭcy (Free Kupala Theatre Actors).<sup>37</sup> The legislation of Belarus therefore allows the imprisonment of theatre actors for participating in an “extremist formation” and its spectators for financing an “extremist formation.”

33. PEN Belarus documented at least 397 cases of state censorship between 2020 and 2024: 133 in 2024, 66 in 2023, and 198 in 2021. For example, the exhibition dedicated to the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of Vasil Bykau (also known as the People’s Writer of Belarus), was originally planned to be displayed at the State Museum of the History of Belarusian Literature from 27 January to 5 May 2024, but the decision was reversed. The exhibition lasted only 10 days before being forcibly shut down on 5 February. As one of the leaders of the Belarusian national revival in the 1980s-90s, Bykau served as the president of PEN Belarus from 1999 to 2003. He was a staunch critic of the Communist party and the ensuing Lukashenko government. Censors of the Ministry of Culture demanded the removal of works by several artists from the Art-Minsk 2024 exhibition, which took place from 3 May to 9 June 2024, at the Palace of Art in Minsk. The theatrical performance *My Husband’s Mistresses*, scheduled on the Palace of Culture for Veterans’ (Minsk) playbill for 14 October 2024 was cancelled following a decision by the Public Council on Morality (established by the Belarusian Orthodox Church and the pro-government Union of Writers of Belarus). The reason: censorship targeting dissenting cultural figures (supported opposition candidates, did not recognize the results of the 2020 elections, did not support Russian military actions in Ukraine, etc.).<sup>38</sup>

## VI. Violations of linguistic rights

34. The Belarusian language is classified as potentially vulnerable by UNESCO, making efforts to safeguard the Belarusian languages essential.<sup>39</sup> According to Article 17 of the Constitution of Belarus, both Belarusian and Russian are recognized as official languages. However, in practice, language discrimination against Belarusian is widespread. The results of a census carried out in 2019 show that the percentage of Belarusians who consider Belarusian as their native language has declined from 86% in 1999 to 61% in 2019 (a decrease of 2 093 732 people). The percentage of Belarusians who speak Belarusian at home has dropped from 41% to 28% over the same period (a decrease of 1 098 033 people). It is crucial to emphasize that the rapid decline in the number of native speakers of the Belarusian language is a direct consequence and clear evidence of the authorities’ continued attempts to promote and integrate Russian language and culture in Belarus (also known as Russification policy).<sup>40</sup>
35. PEN Belarus and the International Union of Belarusian Writers recorded numerous violations of linguistic rights and cases of language discrimination during the period under review, which continue unabated.<sup>41</sup> Most cases are related to the authorities’ failure to provide equal rights for the use of the Belarusian language in various spheres, including the education system,

theatre, music, visual arts and museums, literature and libraries, heritage preservation and historical memory, the film industry, media, the urban environment, and government institutions. Given the special status of the Belarusian language as a legitimate means of expressing dissent against the policies of the Belarusian authorities, books published in the Belarusian language are under particular scrutiny of state control bodies. In spring 2022, the Ministry of Information suspended for three months the operation of four independent publishing houses that published books by Belarusian authors or in the Belarusian language: *Medysont* and *Goliaths* on 15 April, *Limarius* and *Knihazbor* on 16 May. Amidst a large-scale socio-political crisis, rising national consciousness, and Belarusians' search for their own identity, the confrontation between the authorities and Belarusian language speakers has intensified since 2020, with the latter facing serious obstacles.<sup>42</sup>

36. Although this Russification policy has been in place since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the process accelerated following the fraudulent presidential elections of August 2020 and the Russian authorities' support for the crackdown on peaceful protests. It strengthened even more after the Russian authorities lured Belarus into their full-scale war against Ukraine. The Russification process is supported inside Belarus by state media's anti-Belarusian propaganda and encouragement of pro-Russian activists who smear the Belarusian national culture with impunity.<sup>43</sup>

## **VII. Hate speech, disinformation, and violations of the rights of national minorities in Belarus**

37. State policy in the cultural sphere is characterized by anti-Western, anti-Ukrainian, and pro-Russian vectors. Defamatory materials, statements and hate speech characterize state media propaganda, with targeted defamation and discrediting of cultural figures in state media and pro-government Telegram channels. The Belarusian authorities use hate speech against Western countries and are systematically violating minority rights in Belarus.
38. Since 2020 PEN Belarus has continuously recorded the persecution of cultural figures who were forced to leave Belarus and carry out their activities from abroad. Writer and Nobel Prize in Literature winner Svetlana Alexievich, publisher of Belarusian literature Andrei Yanushkevich, opera singer Marharyta Leuchuk, the former director of the Kupala Theatre, ex-Minister of Culture of the Republic of Belarus Pavel Latushka are amongst those smeared by propagandists in TV broadcasts, press, social networks – with impunity.<sup>44</sup>
39. According to research by Lawtrend, more than 1,150 non-profit organizations have been liquidated since 2021. At least 30 of these were organizations supporting national minorities. Forced liquidation affected associations of Poles, Lithuanians, Ukrainians, Jews, Tatars, Armenians, Georgians, and people of other nationalities living in Belarus. Additionally, at least 20 national minority associations decided to dissolve themselves. Since the fraudulent presidential elections of August 2020, many NGOs have been forced to self-liquidate due to direct pressure from the authorities on their employees and the broader socio-political climate in Belarus. Since 2021, members and activists of the Union of Poles in Belarus and the Polish minority Andzelika Borys, Renata Diemjanchuk, Iryna Valus, Anzalika Arechava across the country have faced pressure. In February 2023, poet, journalist, and member of the unregistered Union of Poles in Belarus, Andrzej Poczobut, stood trial and was sentenced to eight years in a high-security penal colony. The criminal prosecution was linked to Andrzej



Poczobut's statements defending the Polish minority in Belarus. The charges against the journalist stated that Poczobut described the Soviet Union's 1939 invasion of Poland as aggression. Additionally, he was accused of making statements defending the Polish minority in Belarus, as well as his articles about the 2020 Belarusian protests in *Gazeta Wyborcza* and a piece in *Magazyn Polski* written in 2006 about Anatol Radziwonik, one of the leaders of the Polish anti-communist underground resistance in the Hrodna region. The LLC Polish School in Brest was liquidated.<sup>45</sup>

40. The Russification policy promoted by the Belarusian authorities denigrates the country's shared cultural heritage with Poland and Lithuania, labelling materials supporting national minorities as "extremist," and restricting freedom of speech. These actions contradict Belarus's Constitution and its international obligations.
41. The Belarusian authorities, in violation of international treaty provisions (specifically, Article 5 of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination – which Belarus ratified), have banned education in the native language of national minorities in Polish schools in the Belarusian cities of Hrodna and Vaukavysk, as well as in Lithuanian schools in the towns of Rymdziuny and Pelesa.<sup>46</sup>

#### **VIII. Ideologization of culture and state control over cultural institutions**

42. Cultural and educational institutions have been turned into state propaganda tools, where employees and students are not only forced to participate in state events but also paraded as crowds in propaganda campaigns. In 2024, the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Lukashenko's presidency turned into an occasion for large-scale events aimed at reinforcing his personality cult. The Ministry of Culture is actively supporting and promoting the agenda of the government, including during election campaigns. The scope of what is permissible in the cultural sphere has been drastically narrowed, pushing independent artistic expression underground.
43. State-owned cultural and educational institutions are marked by dismissals and intimidation of employees on political grounds. With the support of security services, employers systematically work to convince staff of the existence of the only "correct" state ideology. Security services continuously monitor employees' social media accounts, can read their messages, and conduct video surveillance to identify and suppress dissent. Employers force staff to join the only pro-government trade union (as independent trade unions have been liquidated in Belarus). The freedom of cultural and educational workers is restricted by censorship imposed by management — both formally documented in internal regulations and informally enforced as an established practice. According to cultural figures who continue working in state institutions, the Belarusian authorities have created two lists for individuals deemed "disloyal": those included in the first list are no longer allowed to work in state-owned structures; those on the second list may work if a guarantor (usually the manager) can vouch for them - thus becoming their personal responsibility and liability. These lists reportedly exist for each cultural institution.
44. Every planned performance and its participants (musicians, actors, comedians, etc.) must be checked and vetted by local executive authorities and law enforcement agencies for loyalty to the Belarusian government; only a few performers are successful. Western performers have

either refused or are not allowed to perform in Belarus. Russian musicians who spoke out against the Russian Federation's war against Ukraine, are not allowed to tour in Belarus either. The music venues of Belarus mainly host concerts of ideologically verified Russian musicians: supporters of military aggression and authors of patriotic songs. State authorities require theatres to create and promote ideologically verified plays and productions. The Ministry of Culture controls theatres through mandatory approvals and staff appointments. Theatres must submit scripts, cast lists, and other details to the Ministry, which decides whether a production can take place and receive funding. Before public performances, a commission from the Ministry reviews the play and may demand changes or cancel it. Non-state theatres are required to obtain a touring license from state institutions, which also assess the details of the production. If a play is deemed ideologically unacceptable, it is denied approval, and its performance is prohibited. In cultural institutions, authorities continue to replace managers with those loyal to the government, including specially designated ideology officers. Both employees and employers are under pressure amid strengthened administrative control. In 2021-2022, in-house ideology officers appeared in all cultural institutions, vetting everyone for loyalty.<sup>47</sup>

## **IX. Recommendations**

PEN Belarus, PEN International and PEN America urge the authorities of Belarus to fully uphold the right to freedom of expression and cultural rights.

In particular, PEN Belarus, PEN International and PEN America call on the authorities of Belarus to:

- Immediately and unconditionally release writers, cultural figures and others held solely for peacefully expressing their views and drop all charges against them.
- Immediately end the torture and other ill-treatment of detainees, including the use of incommunicado detention.
- Ensure independent, impartial, transparent and prompt investigations into all allegations of human rights violations. Perpetrators must be brought to justice in fair trial proceedings.
- Stop the harassment and persecution of cultural figures and workers for the legitimate exercise of their human rights, including freedom of expression and artistic freedom.
- Take the necessary legislative, administrative and judicial measures to ensure safe conditions for implementing creative activities and cultural projects, and to preserve and develop Belarusian culture in Belarus. Specifically:
  - Repeal all discriminatory amendments to the Culture Code of the Republic of Belarus;
  - Repeal Resolutions 582 and 33, which unduly regulate the activities of tour guides and guides-interpreters;
  - Repeal Resolution 608, which unduly restricts the organization and holding of cultural and spectacular actions;
  - Repeal the Law on Restrictions on Exclusive Rights to Intellectual Property, which violates copyright.
- Stop the persecution of cultural figures outside Belarus. Specifically:
  - Stop initiating criminal proceedings in absentia;
  - Repeal Decree 278 (the "passport decree");



- Repeal amendments to the Law “On Citizenship of the Republic of Belarus” as introduced in January 2023.

<sup>1</sup> SB.by article, 2024, available at: <https://www.sb.by/articles/markevich-na-nas-obrushivayutsya-strashnye-dukhovnye-ugrozy-kotorye-vedut-k-nravstvennoy-degradatsii.html>

<sup>2</sup> Belta.by article, 2024, available at: <https://belta.by/culture/view/markevich-sovremennaja-kultura-litso-strany-v-mire-667694-2024/>

<sup>3</sup> Statistics of the Human Rights Centre Viasna, 2025, available at: <https://prisoners.spring96.org/en>

<sup>4</sup> Human Rights Centre Viasna article, 2024, available at: <https://spring96.org/be/news/115386>

<sup>5</sup> Monitoring of violations of cultural rights and human rights of cultural figures. Belarus, 2024, 2025, available at: <https://penbelarus.org/en/2025/02/20/manitoryng-parushennyau-kulturnyh-pravou-i-pravou-chalaveka-u-dachynenni-da-dzeyachau-kultury-belarus-2024-god.html>

<sup>6</sup> Monitoring of violations of cultural rights and human rights of cultural figures. Belarus, 2023, available at: <https://penbelarus.org/en/2024/03/03/manitoryng-parushennyau-kulturnyh-pravou-i-pravou-chalaveka-u-dachynenni-da-dzeyachau-kultury-belarus-2023-god.html>

<sup>7</sup> Right for Culture. Belarus 2022, available at: <https://penbelarus.org/en/2023/03/02/bel-prava-na-kulturu-belarus-2022.html>

<sup>8</sup> Right for Culture. Belarus 2021, available at: <https://penbelarus.org/en/2022/02/16/prava-na-kulturu-belarus-2021-rus.html>

<sup>9</sup> With no right to the culture. Belarus 2020, available at: <https://penbelarus.org/en/2021/01/28/bez-prava-na-kulturu-belarus-2020.html>

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