

To the Members of the European Parliament DROI Subcommittee on Human Rights

Human rights violation and state abuse against cultural professionals, writers and translators in Belarus. Briefing by the European Writers' Council for the DROI meeting on 27 and 28 October 2021.

Brussels, 26 October 2021

Distinguished Members of the DROI Committee,

On the occasion of your meeting, we would like to inform you about the continuously worsening situation against cultural professionals, and in particular writers, translators, writers' associations and the independent book scene in Belarus. We obtain our information through regular exchanges with authors in Belarus, on the run as well as in exile, and our member, the Union of Belarusian Writers (UBW), as well as the PEN Centre Belarus, and the European Federation of Journalists (EFJ).

Since the rigged elections in Belarus in August 2020, the country is being overrun with a radical crackdown on free speech and against humanitarian organisations by the dictatorial Lukashenko regime:

- **Over 40,000 people have been arrested** in Belarus, including over 1,200 cultural and media workers — writers, translators, musicians, actors — and human rights activists, as the immersive 2021 Report [by the Belarusian PEN Centre](#) shows. In the first half of 2021 alone, over 600 political prisoners were registered, spending an average of 4 years behind bars – for a Facebook post, a bumper sticker in the colors white-red-white, or for reading the recently banned literary classics on the train. The newsrooms of 70 media outlets have been raided, and 50 websites blocked.
- **More than 1,500 cultural, human rights, media and civil society organisations** have been targeted by a “radical cleansing”-operation. Over 284 organisations against whom Lukashenka is directing his attack, have already been forcibly dissolved by the Supreme Court, among them the Belarusian Association of Journalists, the PEN Belarus – and the independent Union of Belarusian Writers (UBW), which was shut-down by the Judge Ihar Milto of the Supreme Court in Minsk on 1 October 2021. Since a number of lawyers have lost their attorney license after representing non-governmental organisations, or been imprisoned for defending cultural organisations, it is hardly possible anymore for persecuted associations to defend themselves against the state's malevolence.
- **Our EWC member, the Union of Belarusian Writers (UBW) Саюз беларускіх пісьменнікаў was founded in 1934 and is the oldest cultural organisation in Belarus. It was stripped of its legality** – a process that UBW board members describe as “Kafkaesque”: On 14 July 2021, the offices of the UBW were stormed, the PC and archives raided and sealed. Subsequently, the Union was accused of not having been able to submit papers on time – the same papers that the State itself has put under lock and key.

- **For authors, bloggers, journalists, it's impossible to publish** anything off- or online, without risking to be imprisoned. The members of the Union of the Belarusian Writers (UBW) are black-listed because of their civil position. They are forbidden to be published in state newspapers, literary magazines, or allowed to speak at state TV or other state media.
- **State-owned printing houses refuse to print independent newspapers.** In May 2021, dictator Lukashenko passed an amendment to the law on the mass media, which allows the authorities far-reaching interference with regard to freedom of information.
- **It is forbidden to accompany demonstrations with live streams.** Anyone carrying a mobile phone risks being named as an active organiser of the demonstration. Belarusian authorities have characterised anti-government protesters as “criminals” and “violent revolutionaries backed by the West”, and described the actions of their law enforcement agencies as “appropriate and necessary”, to “fight terrorism”.
- **Authors and translators critical of the regime** are unerringly discredited on state television and their works sorted out in state bookshops. There are public calls on Belarusian state television to hang opposition members.
- **As PEN Belarus reported, the literary scene is being targeted in a particularly perfidious and arbitrary manner.** Pensioners who read books by Nil S. Hilevich, Yakub Kolas, Uladzimir Karatkievich on the train were accused of taking part in an “unauthorised protest action” because they read “opposition books”.
- **Customs inspects books sent abroad** or from abroad, and confiscate works classified as “extremist”, including the novel “Revolution” by Victor Martinovich.
- **Nobel Laureate Svetlana Alexievich** is probably one of the most censored writers: it is now forbidden to mention her name and her work in school and university literature classes.

We are witnessing a hateful state power that resorts to all means to slaughter the democracy movement and the freedom of speech. Our colleagues who are on the run or still under pressure in Belarus, ask us to call on European governments on their behalf to actively support the people and democracy movement of Belarus. After a year in which neither sanctions took effect nor the culture ministers of the EU and EEA were at least able to agree on a common stance in favor of the media and cultural professionals of Belarus, it is time for Europe to actively defend the values of democracy – by supporting those who are suffering under Lukashenko's violence.

Thus, we call for the following:

Being conscious of the dictatorial behavior of Lukashenka's regime, we request from EU authorities:

- A clear protest in a common statement on the ongoing violence and repression in Belarus, and to press the illegitimate Lukashenko's regime to comply with the three former requests.
- Clear leveraging in other institutions, such as UN, ACNUR or OSCE to step up pressure from the international community and take action in the face of continuous violations of the human right to freedom of expression in Belarus.



- Extended and accelerated humanitarian and/or Schengen visas (D) for fleeing Belarusians, especially, but not limited to persecuted media and cultural professionals, writers and translators. Financial and political support for those forcibly liquidated NGOs to be re-established in countries outside Belarus.
- To establish and expand residency scholarships (6-12 months) and shelter programmes such as those already offered by ICORN, national PEN centres or universities. This appeal is extended to all EU member States to whom we strongly suggest doing what is in their power to support cultural workers and the writers and translators from Belarus.
- Promoting translation and supporting the development of communication projects that make the banned and silenced voices of Belarusian culture and writers in Europe readable and audible again.

And specifically, from DROI we urge:

- To actively support, by the most adequate and firm means, the democracy movement, freedom of speech and the return of human dignity in Belarus, as well as a strong defense of a singular and valuable European culture.

We remain confident in the power of democracy and the European Union bodies and institutions, and we thank you for the [HR Resolution](#) already passed in September 2021, especially for point 38.

We stay at your disposal for any further information.

Sincerely,

Nina George
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Germany

Maïa Bensimon
Vice President
France

Miguel Ángel Serrano
Vice President
Spain

Myriam Diocaretz
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