

PEN Belarus has created a special exhibition, "Belarus. Voices of Banned Books", gathering several stories of authors and their works that the state has condemned as "extremist," "harmful to national interests," or "undesirable information".

PHOTO: PEN BELARUS



A court decision in Belarus ordered the destruction of copies of the catalogue of the 2011 Belarus Press Photo competition, arguing that the photographs presented a distorted picture of Belarusian life.

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The silence of the Belarusian library

A struggle against disappearance

by **Olga Bubich**

abstract

This essay examines the escalation of book censorship and repressions against independent publishers in Belarus. While state registries mask the suppression as a minor statistical anomaly affecting a minimal percentage of the national bibliography, context reveals a centralized program of cultural erasure (and books published in Belarusian language, in particular). The regime targets the intellectual vanguard, liquidating independent publishing houses and criminalizing Belarusian-language materials to suppress civic dissent. Situated within a broader historical trajectory – from Imperial Russian and Stalinist repressions to contemporary practices – the domestic crackdown has forced an institutional exodus, shifting the center of Belarusian literature abroad. This study analyzes the resilience of the transnational publishing infrastructure operating in exile and calls for the global community's support in counteracting state-enforced amnesia.

KEYWORDS: Belarus, censorship, independent publishing, cultural erasure, literature in exile, totalitarianism.

In a recent interview[1] for *CBS News*, Ai Weiwei – one of the most influential contemporary artists living and working in exile – offered a striking example of censorship, sharing an episode from his own life. Having asked DeepSeek, an AI platform used in China, to give information about himself, he received an evasive response: "Let's talk about something else."

"So, you have basically been disappeared?" the host asked him.

"True, I'm a person who exists and does not exist at the same time", WeiWei replied. "I think it's an achievement."

Irony, as a short-term coping strategy, indeed allows us to describe banned authors as having *achieved* a bittersweet symbolic milestone. However, viewed from a broader historical perspective, there is little reason for self-mockery. Bonfires of undesirable literature – whether they take the form of public book-burnings or tacit online erasure – inevitably lead to intellectual impoverishment, collective amnesia, and the eventual destruction of society's capacity for critical self-reflection, which makes keeping our eyes peeled on censorship indices a civic duty.

In her Nobel Prize lecture *The Tender Narrator* (2019),[2] Polish novelist Olga Tokarczuk introduced a powerful counter-metaphor for cultural survival in describing the tendency to "narrate the world", indirectly comparing literature with a loom that weaves the collective story of a people. "A thing that happens and is not told ceases to exist and perishes," she warned. "This is a fact well known to not only historians, but also (and perhaps above all) to every stripe of politician and tyrant. He who has and weaves the story is in charge."

The necessity to once again raise public awareness of state censorship, almost a century after the Nazi book burnings, is per se quite alarming. Haven't we learned our lesson? Weren't most countries steadily moving toward democracy and celebrating human rights? Isn't freedom of expression one of the defining values of the contemporary world? The numbers, sadly, suggest otherwise, demonstrating that systematic restriction on freedom of speech – similar to the historical precedents of Stalinist censorship in the USSR during the 1930s–1950s, China in the period of the Cultural Revolution, or Argentina during the Dirty War – are not yet a thing of the past. And judging by the current scale of repressions, Belarus is a state that must urgently return to the international spotlight, with the country's intellectual *achievers* demanding worldwide attention and support.

The weight of 0.2%: Statistical illusions in banned books calculations

When evaluated through a purely statistical lens, book censorship in Belarus can easily be misread as a minor anomaly. If one closely examines the *Republican List of Extremist Materials*,[3] available online on the website of the Ministry of Information of the Republic of Belarus, the numbers seem reassuringly small. The list began tracking items in September 2008 and contains approximately 160 specific titles, many of them looking like texts that a civil society would mutually agree have no place in public circulation: neo-Nazi literature, antisemitic tracts, or ultra-nationalist Russian fascist propaganda.

On the other hand, the Belarusian state senses this very same threat in the shortlist of winners for the photojournalistic competition *Belarus Press Photo 2011*, whose work is featured in the eponymous photo book; in a poetic collection by the Gulag prisoner Larysa Heniyush; in *Selected Works*, by the 20th-century historian and academician Vaclaw Lastouski; and in Zakhar Shybeka's *Essays on the History of Belarus, 1795–2002* – the latter two of which were until only recently recommended as additional reading for high school children.

PARALLEL TO THIS COMPILATION, another frequently updated list[4] is currently in circulation on the same government website, with its titles explicitly designated as "printed publications containing information messages and/or materials the dissemination of which could harm the national interests of the Republic of Belarus." As of June 2026, this second registry lists 258 names – including entries that are no less surprising than the state's criminalized academicians. The veteran targets of this "potential harm to national interests" are Irvine Welsh (ten banned titles), William S. Burroughs and Ryu Murakami (five books censored each), and Chuck Palahniuk and Jeffrey Eugenides (two titles each).

When measured against the vast expanse of the national bibliography – which spans hundreds of thousands of entries that track every technical manual, state pamphlet, Soviet-era reprint, and textbook published over the last 30 years – the two lists' combined total of 418 banned or "extremists" volumes represents a mere 0.2% of the total catalogue. If one subtracts from that figure the truly dangerous or hateful titles, the number would even be smaller.

Moreover, when placed side-by-side with the 8,005 books censored after 2000 in the United States – a nation that routinely tops global lists of banned literature, according to the corresponding international archive[5] – the 418 Belarusian titles might not look like a reason for urgent vigilance. But to see beyond this statistical illusion, more context is necessary.

TO THE EXTERNAL observer, the Western narrative of book banning invokes localized, highly decentralized friction associated with morality policing or culture wars, such as when school boards and district libraries request specific themes or authors to be redacted and removed. In countries like the USA, these challenges are often balanced with counterweights in the market: If a school board censors a text, the open market remains untouched, and the writer might even see their national sales raise. Particularly curious citizens are still free to buy the disputed book online or read it on a digital device in their own living rooms. And obviously, no one faces physical dangers or state prosecution for purchasing or owning it.

The Belarusian model belongs to an entirely different category. Here, a book ban is a centralized, vertical program of state-mandated cultural liquidation, comparable to the implementation of the National Security Law in Hong Kong, which resulted in the elimination of hundreds of pro-democracy titles and the forced closure of independent newsrooms. In today's Belarus, when a title is blacklisted, it is removed from bookstores, schools, and both public and prison libraries. Furthermore, the publisher behind it will most likely be detained and designated as "extremist", with the publishing house itself either liquidated or forced to close.

In the span of twenty years, the number of books labelled as "extremist" in Belarus has raised fourfold, five independent publishing houses have been liquidated,[6] and at least 24 writers, translators, poets, publicists, and literary scholars remain in prison or under house arrest. Particular pressure is exerted on independent publishing initiatives that translate, print, and disseminate literature in the Belarusian language.

Between the gallows: Censorship in Belarus before the Soviets

However, the war on the printed word in Belarus did not start with the 2020 civil society crackdown. Nor did it start in 2008, when books in the Belarusian language or books proposing political reforms, like for example *A Special Opinion or Address of a Christian Woman*, by the civic activist and human rights de-



In 1772, Empress Catherine II issued a decree requiring all regional governors to conduct official correspondence, rulings, and administrative orders in Russian.

PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS



Romuald Podbereski (1812–1856) and Kastus Kalinouski (1838–1864) were among the most prominent intellectuals who fought against the erasure of the Belarusian language.

PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

fender Alena Hnauk – started being declared "*extremist*." In the history of Belarusian print culture and early censorship debates, one of the foundational places is taken by Francysk Skaryna, a pioneering 16th-century scholar celebrated as the father of Eastern European printing. Beginning in 1517, the same year Martin Luther published his *Ninety-Five Theses*, Skaryna printed 20 books of the Bible in the Belarusian redaction of Church Slavonic. His goal was to make sacred texts accessible to lay readers across the Grand Duchy of Lithuania – a massive, multi-ethnic medieval European state of which Belarus was a core part, together with today's Lithuania, Ukraine, and Poland.

Skaryna's innovative use of a vernacular language, as well as his extensive commentaries and encouragement of individual interpretation, challenged Orthodox hierarchies and provoked resistance on their side. Moscow authorities ordered copies of Skaryna's Bible to be burned, accusing the scholar of spreading heretical ideas and prohibiting his very name from Muscovite religious discourse throughout the 16th century.[7]

Following the partitions of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth between 1772 and 1795, the Belarusian lands were incorporated into the Russian Empire. Imperial authorities gradually introduced a system of political, linguistic, and cultural censorship aimed at strengthening their control and reducing local identities. In 1772, Empress Catherine II issued a decree requiring all regional governors to conduct official correspondence, rulings, and administrative orders in Russian. This policy was reinforced a year later by mandating Russian as the sole language of the provincial court system.

AMONG THE MOST prominent intellectuals whose printing initiatives in Belarusian presented a solid counterforce to the erasure of the language were Romuald Podbereski (1812–1856) and Kastus Kalinouski (1838–1864). As a publisher, scholar, and ethnographer, Podbereski dedicated his life to documenting the language, folklore, and material culture of the Belarusian countryside, establishing an early vernacular archive on the pages of *Rocznik Literacki* [Literary yearbook] and *Pamiętnik Naukowo-Literacki* [Scientific and literary journal]. These attempts to render the peasantry's language and traditions visible in print brought Podbereski into conflict with the censorship regime. In 1850, by personal order of Emperor Nicholas I, he was arrested and exiled to the Russian North, where he developed a severe mental illness and died in a psychiatric hospital. In his book *Kalinouski and the Political Birth of Belarus* (2020), Belarusian historian Siarhei Ablameika calls Romuald Podbereski "the first person to die for the new Belarus."[8]

Equally tragic was the fate of Kastus Kalinouski, the leader of the 1863 January Uprising against Russian rule and the publisher of *Mužyckaja Praŭda* [Peasants' truth], the first revolutionary newspaper published in Belarusian. Produced clandestinely, the paper addressed the peasantry directly in their native tongue, criticizing imperial oppression and advocating for fundamental social rights. After the uprising was crushed and Kalinouski executed, his writings were prohibited. His acclaimed collection of texts with the self-explanatory title *Letters from Beneath the Gallows* was treated as politically subversive and circulated primarily through the exile press.

Today, Kalinouski continues to occupy a central place in Belarusian cultural memory, serving as a symbol of struggle for freedom and national self-determination. His name has been adopted by the Kalinouski Regiment, a military formation of Belarusian volunteers fighting alongside Ukraine, and is commemorated through the EU's Konstanty Kalinowski Scholarship Program for displaced Belarusian students and researchers.

The historical parallel between Kalinouski's fight and contemporary Belarusian reality is vividly captured in the poem *Hanged Men*, by the prominent Belarusian poetess Vera (Burlak) Zhybul. In her verse, the installation of gallows on a street named after Kalinouski, and the local children's fascination with them as a new playground attraction, causes concern among the parents. Yet, the poem's chilling conclusion presents the prospect of state execution as morally preferable to collaboration with an oppressive regime. "It is definitely better if they grow into hanged men", Zhybul writes. "Being a hanged man is much better than being an executioner."

Dark Nights of Belarusian literature

The establishment of Soviet power brought a profound transformation to Belarus's cultural landscape. Unlike the Russian Empire, which had largely dismissed Belarusian as a mere regional dialect, early Soviet authorities in the 1920s–1930s initially promoted a policy of "Belarusization". During this brief window of relative cultural openness, Belarusian became the language of state administration, education, and publishing. An unprecedented national revival flourished, evidenced by the founding of the Belarusian State University in 1921 and the National Li-

brary in 1922, and by the publication of literary classics such as Yakub Kolas's *Novaya Zyamlya* [New land] (1923), *Symon Muzyka* [Symon the Musician] (1925), and the second part of the *Na Rostanyah* [At the crossroads] trilogy (1927). By 1928, about 80% of schools taught in Belarusian.[9]

BY THE END OF the decade, Stalin's consolidation of power was accompanied by growing suspicion toward nationalist movements across the Soviet Union. What had previously been encouraged as a manifestation of socialist nation-building was suddenly classified as a threat to political unity. In Belarus, the turning point arrived with the so-called *Case of the Union of Liberation of Belarus* – a fabricated prosecution of prominent intellectuals, academics, and cultural figures accused of nationalist conspiracy. Starting in 1930 with the arrest of the editor Pjotar Illjuchonak (1891–1945), the repressions affected numerous scientists and cultural workers, among whom were five academics including the historian, writer, and Prime Minister of the Belarusian Democratic Republic, Vaclaw Lastouski (1883–1938); the first president of the National Academy of Sciences of Belarus, Usievalad Ihnatouski (1881–1931); and the head of the Belarusian Language and Literature Section of the Institute of Belarusian Culture, Anton Balitski (1891–1937).

According to the data compiled by journalist Leanid Marakou (1958–2016) in his multi-volume directory *Repressed Literary Men, Scientists, Educators, Public and Culture Figures of Belarus. 1794–1991*, out of 108 intellectuals swept up in this single fabricated case, 90 were convicted and the remainder either perished or broke under torture before their verdicts could be read. Over 70% of those exiled to labor camps did not survive the harsh conditions there.[10]

IN A BITTER HISTORICAL rhyme, in 2024 the works of Vaclaw Lastouski, published as part of the *Belaruski Knihazbor* series[11] and containing historical essays and literary pieces that advocate for the country's independent cultural and historical identity, were categorized as "extremist" by Belarusian authorities.[12] The fact that the works of a founding father of the country's historiography have once again been banned, having been openly taught in schools for decades following Lastouski's rehabilitation in the late 1980s, serves as a sad reminder of the terrifying speed at which the boundaries of the acceptable can shift under authoritarian rule.

The era of ideological control inaugurated in 1930 with the fabricated case had another tragic milestone, which became known in the history of Belarus as the *Night of the Executed Poets*. On the night of October 29–30, 1937, 132 representatives of the Belarusian intelligentsia were executed by shooting in the basement of the NKVD internal prison and at Pishchalauski Castle in Minsk. Their bodies were subsequently dumped in mass graves at Kurapaty forest. Among the victims were some of the most significant figures of the Belarusian cultural revival, including 22 poets and writers, many of them still in their thirties and early forties.[13]

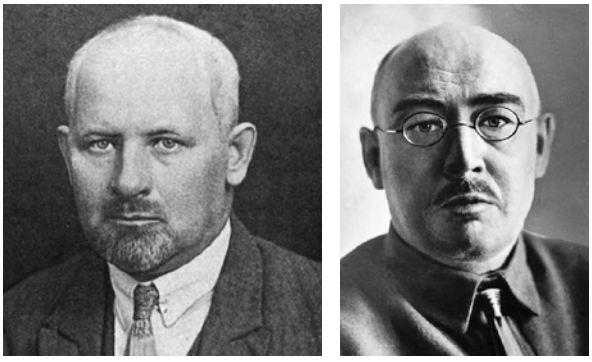


PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Vaclaw Lastouski, Prime Minister of the Belarusian Democratic Republic, and Usievalad Ihnatouski, president of the National Academy of Sciences of Belarus, were among the affected by the so-called *Case of the Union of Liberation of Belarus* in 1930.

As historian Iryna Kashtalyan notes, the silence that followed these forced disappearances lasted for decades afterward, with the fates of the missing intellectuals unknown to either their own relatives or the wider public. In an interview for *Dekoder*,[14] she recalls the fates of the poet Izi Kharik (an active member of the Poale Zion organization and author of thirteen books in Yiddish), who was convicted as "a member of a Trotskyist-Zinovievist" organization, and of the prose writer Platon Holavach (a leader of the Maladnyak literary group and the Belarusian Association of Proletarian Writers), sentenced to execution by firing squad for "organizing a terrorist group". The wives of both men were each sentenced to eight years in labor camps as "family members of traitors to the Motherland" and sent to the Karaganda NKVD camp in Kazakhstan. "In total, approximately 500 cultural figures were killed in the Byelorussian SSR during the Great Terror", says Kashtalyan. Needless to say, the literary works of the repressed remained excluded from public discourse for decades.

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THE DISCOVERY IN 1988 of the Kurapaty mass graves,[15] which contained the remains of between 30,000 and 250,000 victims of NKVD executions carried out in 1937–1941, transformed the forest into a sacred monument of national counter-memory. On October 30 of the same year, on the eve of Dziady (the ancient Belarusian ritual of honoring the deceased ancestors), the Belarusian Popular Front organized the first public commemoration there, drawing public attention to the need to revisit the traumatic collective history around the executions. Since then, the site has





PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

The prose writer Platon Holavach and the poet Izi Kharik were among the 132 intellectuals killed during the *Night of the Executed Poets*, October 29–30, 1937. Their bodies were subsequently dumped in mass graves at Kurapaty forest (right).

remained a contested space of memory, with public gatherings repeatedly restricted and their organizers imprisoned. Activist Vitold Ashurak and artist Ales Pushkin, whose work was associated with these practices, both died in custody, while investigative journalist Dzianis Ivashyn,[16] who wrote about construction works in the vicinity of Kurapaty, was sentenced to thirteen years and one month for "high treason". In such a harsh climate, after 2020, most annual commemorations dedicated to Kurapaty[17] have been moved abroad to diaspora communities. Today, a new generation of diasporic poets, writers, musicians, and artists organize readings and online art projects abroad, viewing the preservation of the erased generation as their civic duty.

"The book is a truly formidable weapon"

To understand why the administrative machine in Minsk operates with such disproportional measures, it is enough to listen to the censors themselves. During a roundtable discussion on political journalism, held at the pro-government Union of Writers of Belarus in July 2022, Igor Buzovsky, the Deputy Minister of Information and a key member of the state commission task force for imposing internet restrictions in Belarus, spoke words that lay bare the mechanics of totalitarian thought:

> **It is a great blessing that we do not see them, that we possess the will, strength, understanding, and awareness that the book is a truly formidable weapon – indeed, the most powerful one. A failure to grasp that a book is a far more potent instrument and weapon than perhaps missiles and tanks is precisely what leads to the eventual need to deploy those very missiles and tanks. Social revolutions and upheavals occur, in part, due to the actions and initiatives of the elites. It is a well-known fact that the elites comprise just five percent of society who read books and shape social processes. The elites are the ones who write and read. If we neglect these processes and lose sight of this direction, we will have no future.**[18]

This candid admission openly strips away the regime's rhetoric. First, Buzovsky's chilling phrase – "*It is a great blessing that we do not see them*" – officially confirms the existence of the censorship that keeps the Belarusian intellectual landscape under control. The state prides itself on liquidating books, indirectly claiming themselves to be the heir to the Soviet *Glavlit*, the Main Directorate for the Protection of State Secrets in the Press under the Council of Ministers of the USSR, which until the final years of the USSR had operated as the official censorship organ to maintain the illusion of a contented, harmonious society.

Second, Buzovsky's explicit fear of the "five percent of society who read books and shape social processes" serves as an ideological manifesto for a cultural purge. Consequently, the blows of censorship are aimed directly at the cultural vanguard: the historians, writers, journalists, and independent publishers who keep the Belarusian language alive. If Olga Tokarczuk compared "world narrators" with weavers, for the Belarusian Ministry of Information they are weapon holders who should be silenced and kept at a distance from the larger public.

Belarusian publishing beyond the borders

These domestic legal and physical crackdowns inevitably triggered a massive institutional exodus. According to PEN Belarus, since the 2020 protests five independent Belarusian publishing houses faced liquidation:[19] *Limarius* and *Halijafy* in 2022, followed by *Januskievic*, *Knihazbor*, and *Zmicier Kolas* in 2023. The founder of the latter, translator Zmicier Kolas, remains in custody,[20] while the activities of his eponymous publishing house – founded in 1998 and specializing in Belarusian translations of world classics by authors such as Albert Camus, Jean-Paul Sartre, Charles Baudelaire, René Descartes, and others – have been discontinued.

Beyond these five official liquidations, two other publishing houses were forced to suspend their work: *Medisont* in 2022 and *Technalohiya* in 2026. The closure of *Technalohiya* – one of the nation's oldest printing houses – was marked by the state's targeted detention of founder Vatslau Bahdanovich's entire family. Furthermore, in 2026, three more publishing initiatives were declared "extremist formations": the Krakow-based *Gutenberg Publisher* and the joint network of *Kamunikat.org*, *Januskievic*, and *Lohvinau*. The founder of the latter, Ihar Logvinau, had long operated under pressure, ultimately moving his production to Lithuania in 2014 after his domestic license had been revoked due to the "extremist" status of *Belarus Press Photo 2011*. This



PHOTO: SVABODA.ORG

Zmicier Kolas, founder of the independent publishing house with the same name, remains in custody since February 2026. The publishing house was liquidated in 2023.



PHOTO: PEN INTERNATIONAL

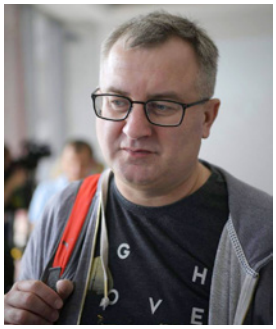


PHOTO: PEN BELARUS

The publisher Andrej Janushkevich has reopened the Belarusian bookshop Knihaŭka (left) in Warsaw, Poland.

harsh climate of repression inevitably breaks the physical and emotional health of the sector's remaining experts. In February of this year, Roman Zymberov, the 44-year-old poet, publisher, and owner of the online bookshop *kniger.by*, died following a sudden illness. Though he had been detained at the border in 2024, he had chosen to remain and work within Belarus until the very end.

APART FROM *Lohvinau*, which continues printing from abroad, a few other, more recently exiled publishing houses have also managed to resume their activities – although not without difficulties. One of them is *Januskievic*, who also reopened the Belarusian bookshop *Knihaŭka* in Warsaw. Back in Minsk, the shop had been raided by pro-government propagandists and security forces on its very opening day, leading to the confiscation of 200 books. Commenting for *Baltic Worlds* on the difficulties of relaunching his business, Andrej Janushkevich says:

> **Publishers in exile face classic émigré challenges: an ill-defined audience, a lack of firm footing, and low turnover – factors that cast doubt on future growth. Misunderstandings are common; local partners may trigger a "sanctions mindset" upon hearing the word "Belarusian", mistakenly conflating the anti-regime cultural diaspora with the state authorities of the Republic of Belarus. We hope for an understanding that we are cut off from our native soil – from our natural sphere of existence. Under these conditions, publishing any book – even one with clear commercial potential – becomes more than just a market activity.**

Janushkevich frames the current crisis as "unprecedented," adding that censorship in Belarus pursues a single strategic goal:

> **As part of the campaign against dissent, it seeks to destroy independent national culture – viewing it as an alien product. This amounts to a return to the USSR, where national culture served merely as a façade, a kind of "Potemkin village" for the outside world.**

Consequently, the center of gravity for Belarusian literature is shifting abroad, splitting into diverse, highly specialized nodes. Statistics for independent Belarusian printing suggest the number of such initiatives now ranges between 20 and 30.[21] Some have a narrow specialization, such as the Berlin-based *Hochroth Minsk*, a *Hochroth Verlag* imprint led by exiled poet Dmitry Strotsev; its focus is poetry. Others boast deep historical roots, like London's *Skaryna Press*, which evolved alongside the historic Francis Skaryna Belarusian Library and Museum. For its part, *Skaryna Press* handles an incredibly expansive catalogue, ranging from queer literature anthologies to historical photo books documenting Vaclaw Lastouski's ethnographic expeditions. Ihar Ivanou, the head of this publishing house, when commenting on his views for *Baltic Worlds*, sees in this displacement the historic emergence of a transnational Belarusian literary infrastructure – and potential for a future Belarus:

"TODAY, A NEW GENERATION OF DIASPORIC POETS, WRITERS, MUSICIANS, AND ARTISTS ORGANIZE READINGS AND ONLINE ART PROJECTS ABROAD."

> **Never before has Belarusian publishing existed under such conditions: Almost the entire independent sector operates outside the country. Alongside printing houses, we have bookshops, festivals, and literary awards. All of this could easily be transferred to Belarus if the country were to open up even a little.**
>
> **Being scattered across the world has also allowed Belarusians to encounter new cultures, perspectives, and opportunities. Paradoxically, this has worked to the benefit of our language. Here, in London, we are masters of our own business. No one registers, interferes, or encourages. I would not be surprised to learn that more Belarusian-language books are currently published abroad than inside the country. The regime has largely managed to stop the movement of books across the border in both directions. Nevertheless, encrypted books**

are nominated for literary prizes, and in this I see a possible indicator of our common literary space.

I publish books also for a future Belarus – for those who will bring changes in five or twenty-five years. They will have something to build upon, something that will help them move further and faster. For many Belarusian publishers, this work is also our mission, our devotion.

Similar are the thoughts of Nasta Karnatskaya, a former associate of the independent Belarusian bookstore *Knihauka*, who now works in exile as a literary blogger on the *Bellit* podcast, which currently has 167 episodes on YouTube. Detained in 2022 for distributing native-language literature, Karnatskaya describes how the trauma of the post-2020 crackdowns inverted the symbolic role of the native tongue, transforming the targeted cultural product into a distinct marker of identity. She further reflects:



Nasta Karnatskaya, blogger and former bookstore associate.

PHOTO: PEN BELARUS

We clearly observed a particular surge of interest in Belarusian literature and the Belarusian cultural sphere in general (including the appeal to the Belarusian language) after 2020. Then, the number of readers definitely increased; new people came to Belarusian books. Along with the rise in self-awareness, there was also a cultural upsurge. People discovered Belarusian books for themselves, surprised that so much world literature can be read in Belarusian. Moreover, the sociopolitical weight of the language underwent a drastic evolution. Our language had certainly been important before, often even denoting specific political views, but the events of the last six years have given it additional meanings. Especially in emigration, Belarusian has become a way for many of us to express our nationality, to distinguish ourselves from Russian speakers from other countries like Ukraine or Russia.

When analyzing literature in exile, Karnatskaya also admits that censorship has partially achieved the opposite result to the one desired. On the one hand, independent publishers are declared "extremist" and forced to flee the country, along with writers, journalists, and cultural organizations. On the other hand, new independent publishing initiatives are being launched abroad, as well as literary podcasts and online platforms dedicated to supporting emerging reading communities, which make great efforts to reach out to the audience on the other side of the border.

DOMESTICALLY, the grassroots hunger for books in the Belarusian language is evidenced, for example, by the 2025 statistics of Belarusian literature sales presented by OZ – the largest mainstream retail and book network operating legally inside Belarus. While official Ministry of Information figures[22] show that books published in the Belarusian language constitute a meager 10% to 14% of the country's annual printed titles and brochures,[23] overall sales of books by domestic authors skyrocketed by 200%, coupled with a 30% spike in demand for books in Belarusian specifically. At the top of the domestic commercial best-seller charts is Jan Barszczewski's *Szlachcic Zawalnia*,[24] a masterpiece of Belarusian gothic fiction written nearly 180 years ago.

YET, KARNATSKAYA ARGUES, as with any literary renaissance born out of crisis, this rise is now being followed by a decline. The need to search out new ways of preserving contact with the market of eight million Belarusian readers, who are increasingly affected by Russia's economic and cultural colonization, comes to the forefront, in parallel with the predictable exhaustion that comes with the realities of exile. Karnatskaya says:

As it seems to me, new, harsh everyday problems gradually appeared, and everything else receded into the background. Readers in Belarus are a bit out of reach for us now, and people in emigration are adjusting to their lives in a new place where a book is not always a necessity. It is deeply painful that we no longer have direct, physical access to our audience inside the country. Because right there, right now, there is a massive deficit of Belarusian cultural products. But due to bans, people inside cannot openly support what is being done in the cultural sphere abroad. They cannot even simply buy our books. The difficulties are also related to censorship, and therefore, when talking in a podcast about books that may be somehow dangerous for listeners from Belarus, you consciously also engage in self-censorship. The most banal phrase motivates me to continue – 'Who, if not us?'

Conclusion

The turn toward right-wing, populist, and authoritative modes of governance that Europe and the wider world currently face inevitably brings to the forefront the question of censorship, as social polarization remains a core premise that all these regimes share. This structural segmentation claims that the lived reality of individuals – the cultures they represent, the artifacts they produce, and the stories they share – can be artificially categorized into the desirable and the undesirable – with the latter subjected to exclusion, banning, and enforced forgetting.

Belarus, despite its location at the geographical center of Europe, appears to be at the vanguard of this modern censorship, with the scale of its repressions focused on the country's intellectuals, although not limited to them only. The nation's segmentation into self-censored or uncritical insiders on the one

hand and exiled creatives on the other – with the latter forced to combine basic survival as immigrants with the struggle to preserve their country's history, culture, and language – threatens to become the future of a segmented and polarized Europe.

Does this mean there is much that the rest of Europe can learn from Belarusian publishers and writers? Does it mean that the resilience of the Belarusian literary and academic community is an attitude that should also be adopted by culture workers in countries where censorship is only starting to be applied to suppress dissent and limit diversity? My answer is unequivocally yes. But at the same time, when talking about the silence of the Belarusian library and attempting to break it with the stories of our literary figures of the past and present, I would like to emphasize that in order to truly break it we need the attention of the global cultural community. Regardless of what side of the EU border the Belarussians are currently on, we need our stories to be integrated into the broader European and global cultural conversation, our challenges to be met with understanding and support, our books to be translated, and our authors to be given platforms for expression. We all know that censorship thrives on isolation and forgetting, and embracing disappearance with irony and self-deprecation is a defense strategy that would not work when what is at stake is the memory of an entire country, and the survival of the language of the first book printed in Eastern Europe.

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