

POLICY BRIEF

**REPRESSIONS AND
CULTURAL RESISTANCE:
HOW TO HELP BELARUSIANS
FIGHT CULTURAL OPPRESSION?**

MARCH 30, 2023

TABLE OF CONTENTS:

- CONTRIBUTORS
- EXECUTIVE SUMMARY & BACKGROUND
- INTRODUCTION
- BELARUSIAN CULTURE AND THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF RESISTANCE
- THE NATIONAL "AWAKENING" OF 2020 AND BELARUSIAN CULTURE
- CULTURE ON THE AGENDA OF THE BELARUSIAN PRO-DEMOCRACY FORCES
- BELARUSIAN LITERATURE IN TIMES OF TERROR
- CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS
- CONTACTS

MODERATOR:



KATSIARYNA LOZKA,
Research fellow at the Oxford
Belarus Observatory (OBO),
PhD Fellow at Ghent University

SPEAKERS:



JULIA CIMAFIEIEVA,
Belarusian Poet and Transla-
tor



DR. TATIANA ASTROUSKAYA
Postdoctoral Researcher,
Herder Institute for Historical
Research on East Central
Europe, Institute of the Leib-
niz Association; Associate
Lecturer, Justus Liebig Univer-
sity of Giessen, Germany



TATSIANA PASHAVALAVA
Capacity-Building Consul-
tant, Belarusian Council
for Culture

CONTRIBUTORS:

OXFORD BELARUS OBSERVATORY: The Oxford Belarus Observatory (OBO) seeks to raise awareness and knowledge of contemporary issues and challenges facing Belarus today, including those related to the specifics of the COVID-19 pandemic and its enduring consequences. Most specifically, employing the insights unique to Area Studies, OBO will support and promote evidence-based policymaking, knowledge brokering and stakeholder interaction through:

- the comprehensive and rigorous analysis of the impact of and responses to COVID-19 in Belarus;
- the analysis of social, economic, political, cultural and historical issues which shape contemporary Belarus and which can inform external understanding;
- engagement, wherever possible, with domestic stakeholders;
- the production of timely and reliable evidence in response to both real domestic policy needs but also external stakeholder initiatives; and
- the communication of evidence in ways that are useful to, and usable by, policy-makers, national and international civil society, the media and other non-academic stakeholders.

OST RESEARCH CENTRE: OST Research Centre is a department of the **OFFICE OF SVIATLANA TSIKHANOUSKAYA (OST)**. The OST is a democratic representative body of the Belarusian people aiming to achieve a national dialogue, ensure a peaceful transfer of power, and hold new democratic elections. The Office promotes and advocates for democratic changes in Belarus. OST Research Centre conducts a range of analytical activities, including expert discussions, research on the Belarusian agenda, and data analysis.

IGSD, UNIVERSITY OF WARWICK: Institute for Global Sustainable Development (IGSD) is a world-leading research institute with a focus on resilience and sustainable governance. IGSD supports the work of OBO by providing expertise, networks and advocacy for this initiative. It also complements the OBO expertise through its own projects which focus on **Resilience in Ukraine** from a comparative perspective (2022-23); the **GCRF COMPASS+** project on Central Eurasia (2022-23), the EU Horizon project **SHAPEDEM** focusing on the eastern neighbourhood and Belarus in particular (2022-25), and DFF **AGMOW** project (SDU, 2023-26) focusing on Russia. IGSD has expertise from life science, humanities and social sciences and champions transdisciplinary research for transformative change.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This policy brief focuses on repression and cultural resistance in Belarus. Belarusian culture has long been repressed under the non-democratic regime within the country. Yet, the scale of this repression has considerably increased since 2020. At the same time, cultural resistance to oppression and authoritarianism has been one of the pillars of the democratic movement in Belarus. This policy brief examines different aspects of cultural oppression facing Belarusians and the ways in which they are coping with it. The brief concludes with a set of policy recommendations on the revival of Belarusian culture in language, literature, the arts and other related areas.

BACKGROUND

The cultural sphere in Belarus is facing unrelenting repression, from the arrests of well-known cultural figures to attacks on the Belarusian language and traditions. Dozens of cultural workers remain behind bars, while hundreds have been forced to flee. Many cultural civil society organisations (CSOs) have been liquidated. Nevertheless, in the context of continuous repression and war, a resistance movement empowered by artists, writers, and musicians persists. These experiences and practices of cultural resistance have deep historical roots.

How do Belarusians inside and abroad fight for their cultural and historical heritage? To what extent is the current period of Belarusian resistance comparable with earlier periods, including the Soviet times? How do culture and art help to resist the dictatorship? What support do cultural workers need and what challenges do they face? Finally, what could their role be in overcoming the trauma of repressions and exile today and in post-authoritarian Belarus?

These and other questions were discussed at the expert webinar jointly convened by the Research Centre of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya Office (OST Research Centre), the Oxford Belarus Observatory and IGSD University of Warwick (Institute for Global Sustainable Development). The present policy brief is based on this event, which was moderated by Katsiaryna Lozka, Research Fellow at the Oxford Belarus Observatory. Speakers included Julia Cimaŋiejeva, Belarusian Poet and Translator; Dr Tatsiana Astrouskaya, Post-doctoral Researcher at the Herder Institute for Historical Research on East Central Europe, Institute of the Leibniz Association, and Associate Lecturer at the Justus Liebig University of Giessen, Germany; and Tatsiana Pashavalava, a Belarusian Council for Culture Capacity-Building Consultant.

INTRODUCTION

The landscape of Belarusian culture has long been marked by repression and resistance to the incumbent regime, but the events of 2020 brought forth an unprecedented level of political and cultural repression. In the aftermath of the 2020 protests, the scale of repression reached levels unseen since the early Soviet era. Over the past few years, hundreds of individuals have been detained, including approximately 100 cultural workers, of whom 41 are currently serving criminal sentences in penal colonies. Seven cultural workers face restrictions on their freedom in open correctional facilities, known as 'khimija,' while 14 others are imprisoned, and 45 are awaiting trial or transfer to serve their sentences in pre-trial detention centres of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the KGB. One cultural worker remains under house arrest¹.

Furthermore, cultural rights violations and human rights abuses against cultural workers have intensified. In 2022 alone, over one hundred such instances were recorded. These violations are directed against a wide range of cultural content, including websites, YouTube channels, articles, clips, books, and media accounts related to cultural themes, all of which have been included in the list of extremist materials by the Ministry of Information of the Republic of Belarus. Musicians, journalists, philosophers, and writers who have spoken out against state violence or Russia's invasion of Ukraine find themselves being categorised as part of the political opposition. The repressive measures extend beyond cultural workers to encompass bloggers, activists, human rights defenders, businessmen, and many others who have simply exercised their right to participate in peaceful assemblies.

Despite this repressive context, Belarusian culture continues to demonstrate remarkable resilience and defiance, with artists, writers, and cultural figures persistently pushing boundaries, using their creativity to resist oppression, and raising their voices in support of human rights and democratic values. Their resistance is the central focus of this policy brief.

LINKS AND INFORMATION

1. For more information about repressions in the sphere of culture, please see the website of the Belarusian Council for Culture: [VISIT WEBSITE](#)

BELARUSIAN CULTURE AND THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF RESISTANCE

Belarusian culture has a long history of resistance to the attempts of the ruling non-democratic political regime to homogenise and centralise cultural production. This trend has been evident not only in recent times, but also throughout the 20th century during the Soviet era. While it is not uncommon for culture and power to be interlinked, there is typically some degree of diversity in cultural production. However, in Belarusian culture, this tendency towards homogenisation takes exaggerated forms.

Culture has served as a tool for exerting dominance, where the ruling regime – be it Soviet or Lukashenka's – seems to employ a dual strategy when it comes to cultural governance. On the one hand, it resorts to

repressive measures, including the persecution and elimination of cultural actors, as witnessed during the dark period of the 1930s. This brutal suppression aims to silence dissent and eradicate any opposition that threatens authority. On the other hand, there are deliberate attempts to co-opt cultural expressions and bring them under the control of the ruling regime. By co-opting elements of culture, the authorities seek to manipulate and mould artistic endeavours to align with their own agenda, blurring the line between genuine creative expression and propaganda.

Against the backdrop of these repressive circumstances, Belarusian culture has continued to evolve. Despite the authoritarian state's relentless promotion of its rigid vision of culture, an alternative anti-regime version of culture has persisted. It is important to note that these two cultural dimensions are not mutually exclusive; rather, there are spaces of inter-permeability where they intersect and influence each other¹. Within this dynamic environment, elements of the official cultural narrative may coexist and intersect with expressions of resistance and dissent, giving rise to a complex and multifaceted cultural landscape. An example of this dynamic can be observed in the works of Belarusian writers, including Vasil Bykaŭ and Uładzimier Karatkievič, who were not aligned with the "official regime". Despite this, their works managed to reach a broad audience, signalling the presence of alternative cultural channels that were not fully controlled or blocked by the authorities.

LINKS AND INFORMATION

1. Astrouskaya, Tatsiana. 2019. Cultural Dissent in Soviet Belarus (1968–1988). *Intelligentsia, Samizdat and Nonconformist Discourses*, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag.

THE NATIONAL "AWAKENING" OF 2020 AND BELARUSIAN CULTURE

Resistance to the Belarusian regime within the realm of culture is not a recent development. For decades, opposition writers, singers, and actors have fearlessly expressed their opposition to the Lukashenka regime. Notably, concerts by Belarusian rock star Lavon Volski have consistently drawn immense audiences, albeit now abroad. The Belarus Free Theatre¹, which operated underground in Belarus for a long time, now performs in exile across European countries and beyond. However, what made 2020 particularly noteworthy was a more concerted effort of the Belarusian pro-democracy movement and its cultural figures to unite in defiance of the regime.

One manifestation of this unity and growing solidarity was the establishment of the Belarusian Culture Solidarity Foundation. The Foundation was established in 2020 during the anti-authoritarian protests in Belarus. From its inception, its primary objective was to provide support and assistance to individuals facing difficult situations, including those who were repressed, imprisoned, or forced to swiftly leave the country to avoid hefty penalties. The Foundation initially aimed to express its perspective on the country's situation and to actively resist the violence, garnering support from 1,500 signatories.

As the need for aid grew, the Foundation began collecting donations to

help those in need, drawing inspiration from existing initiatives such as the Belarusian Solidarity Foundation (BYSOL)² and ByHelp³. The Foundation expanded its scope of assistance to include relocation, psychological aid, and even the funding of small artistic projects to provide cultural figures with opportunities to continue their activities.

As the situation in Belarus evolved and repression escalated into a full-scale terror affecting the entire society, the Foundation adjusted its activities accordingly. Although initially planned as a crisis management mechanism, the initiative expanded its scope and grew. To reflect this change, upon the proposal by Mikalaj Chalezin and Maksim Žbankoŭ, the Foundation was renamed as the Belarusian Council for Culture. Currently, the Council for Culture is actively working towards formulating an independent cultural policy that is not reliant on the state alone. It seeks to establish connections with the international community, leveraging their support and re-integrating Belarusian culture into European and international mindmaps.

LINKS AND INFORMATION

1. Brian Phillips, Towards a Radical Human Rights Theatre Practice: The Belarus Free Theatre in Performance, *Journal of Human Rights Practice*, Volume 3, Issue 3, November 2011, Pages 327–331,
2. Belarusian Solidarity Foundation established in August 2020 to help those facing repression and persecution [VISIT WEBSITE](#)
3. By-Help is a civic campaign to help people facing repressions; it aims to provide different types of support, from financial to psychological: [VISIT WEBSITE](#)

CULTURE ON THE AGENDA OF THE BELARUSIAN PRO-DEMOCRACY FORCES

Culture is high on the agenda of the Belarusian pro-democracy forces. In 2022, former Belsat journalist Alina Koushyk was appointed as the United Transitional Cabinet (UTC) Representative for National Revival¹. The central goal of her mandate is to promote Belarusian culture, provide the support necessary in times of repression, and increase its visibility in cooperation with international partners.

Since 2022, the United Transitional Cabinet (UTC) has been working on the Program of National Revival, which includes several elements:

- Unconditional support and development of the Belarusian language as the means of communication in Belarusian society and cultural life;
- Support of traditional and modern elements of Belarusian culture;
- Preparing the ground for reforms in the field of education following European standards;
- Restating independence and sovereignty of Belarus as a state and Belarusians as a nation.

Belarusian Democratic forces have been vocal in asking for assistance in supporting Belarusian representatives of the cultural sphere, at home and abroad, highlighting the importance of popularising Belarusian culture and language and the need for creating joint cultural projects with other countries.

1. Alina Koushyk assigned as the United Transitional Cabinet Representative for National Revival | People's Embassies of Belarus [VISIT WEBSITE](#)

BELARUSIAN LITERATURE IN TIMES OF TERROR

Belarusian literature stands out as a prominent and conspicuous element of cultural resistance in today's Belarus. This field is currently under significant pressure as most of the biggest independent publishers have been liquidated. Two of the biggest writers' organisations, the Belarusian PEN Centre and the Union of Belarusian Writers (UBW)¹ have been shut down. Many writers have had to flee the country because of (the threat of) prosecution by the state. Several independent publishers, but also many readers too, have had to leave Belarus for political reasons.

However, Belarusian literature and literacy are alive, and there is a growing demand for publications by Belarusian authors. Inside the country, the books written by authors that are considered to be disloyal to the state, like Sviatlana Aleksijevič, or Alhierd Bacharevič, or Viktor Marcynovič, are taken out of libraries and bookstores. Due to the atmosphere of continuous terror and repression, it is dangerous to organise large activities inside the country. Nevertheless, there are many representatives of the cultural sphere, including writers and poets, who stay in Belarus and continue working. They usually lack means and support to promote and publish their books, and it is too dangerous for them to speak out publicly. In this context, they become less visible to their audience and need more support from Belarusians and various foundations abroad.

Although some activities happen within Belarus even under these circumstances, most initiatives, and events in the field of culture take place outside of the country. For instance, several publishing houses, such as Knihaŭka, Viasna, and Skaryna Press continue to publish Belarusian-language books in Poland, the Czech Republic, Germany and the UK. While previously held in Belarus, the two big literary festivals of Belarusian books are now held in Poland, Lithuania, and Georgia, where the greatest number of Belarusians have relocated since 2020. In addition, the liquidated organisations such as Belarusian PEN Center and the Union of Belarusian Writers (UBW) moved abroad and registered outside the country of origin. Furthermore, in different countries, there are numerous local initiatives that try to promote Belarusian literature among the diaspora cooperating with local libraries, creating places where they sell Belarusian books, creating small libraries themselves, and organising events with Belarusian authors.

While various initiatives exist, there is a crucial area that deserves support – the publishing of Belarusian literature by foreign publishers in different languages. Typically, the publishers who work with Belarusian and Eastern European literature are relatively small, constantly in need of support for publishing projects such as novels. Translating a novel takes a considerable amount of time and effort, which can sometimes be financially burdensome for these publishers. Moreover, there is a shortage of translators

for the Belarusian language. And there is a lack of young translators entering the field due to its perceived unpopularity.

The issue of limited translation resources is not unique to Belarusian literature but is shared by authors from the neighbouring countries such as Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine, and others. However, there is currently a lack of cooperation and solidarity among these countries, who seek to challenge Russo-centrism in their external perceptions, but do not actively build alliances and bridges to amplify their voices.

LINKS AND INFORMATION

1. Authorities set to liquidate independent Union of Belarusian Writers, Belsat, 17 August 2021 [VISIT WEBSITE](#)

CONCLUSIONS

Belarusian culture has endured a long history of repression and attempts at homogenisation by the non-democratic political regime, historically and at present. However, throughout this time, there has been a persistent resistance within the cultural sphere, with writers, singers, actors, and artists expressing their opposition to the regime. The events of 2020 marked a significant turning point, witnessing unprecedented levels of repression in the post-Soviet era. Yet, in the face of these challenges, cultural figures have shown remarkable resilience, uniting in defiance of the regime and establishing initiatives like the Belarusian Cultural Foundation (now, the Belarusian Council for Culture).

However, further support is needed to help those affected by repression and to preserve and grow the richness and diversity of Belarusian culture.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1** Promoting Belarusian language and literature is crucial for cultural revitalization in Belarus. This can be achieved through the support of independent publishers, both within Belarus and abroad.
- 2** In addition, organising seminars to encourage potential translators to develop an interest in Belarusian literature can help address the lack of translation resources. Investing in these efforts can help preserve and promote Belarusian culture for future generations.
- 3** It is important to support and expand educational opportunities for Belarusians across various fields to nurture their personal and professional growth, allowing them to bring valuable experiences back to Belarus in the future.
- 4** To respect the unique struggles and aspirations of the Belarusian people, it is crucial to provide platforms for Belarusian authors and activists to express their views and perspectives. It is essential not to conflate Belarus with Russia, particularly during this critical time when Belarus is fighting for its right to exist as an independent nation. By actively recognising and amplifying Belarusian voices, we can foster a better understanding of the distinct cultural, social, and political dynamics within Belarus.

CONTACTS

OXFORD BELARUS OBSERVATORY, OXFORD SCHOOL OF GLOBAL AND AREA STUDIES

Email: obo@area.ox.ac.uk

Twitter: [@OxfordBelarus](https://twitter.com/OxfordBelarus)

RESEARCH CENTER OF THE OFFICE OF SVIATLANA TSIKHANOUSKAYA (OST RESEARCH CENTER)

Email: researchcenter@tsikhanouskaya.org

YouTube: [go to the channel](#)

INSTITUTE FOR GLOBAL SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT, UNIVERSITY OF WARWICK (IGSD)

E-mail: igsd@warwick.ac.uk

Twitter: [@IGSD_UoW](https://twitter.com/IGSD_UoW)

