**Survey of violations of language rights in Belarus**

**from January 1st to June 30th 2023**

The association "International Union of Belarusan Writers" continues to monitor the situation with the Belarusan language in Belarus and records cases of linguistic discrimination.

In this survey, we are based on the data obtained from open sources, as well as on the results of researches conducted by other organizations and initiatives during the indicated period.

In May 2023, the Belarusan Institute of Strategic Studies ([BISS](https://belinstitute.com/be/article/dastupnasc-i-dyskryminacyya-belaruskay-movy-u-belarusi)) published the results of its study "[Availability and discrimination of the Belarusan language in Belarus](https://belinstitute.com/sites/default/files/2023-05/31ed368d-6eec-47e7-af83-97c28be7cdcf.pdf)", which focused on the availability of education, information, and services in the Belarusan language. The authors of the study interviewed 482 people aged from 15 to 72 who use the Belarusan language in Belarus. Here are its main results:

1. Thus, in the field of education, researchers noted the presence of linguistic discrimination against the Belarusan language. In theory, the Republic of Belarus, in accordance with existing laws, including the Constitution, should give the right to citizens to receive education in one of the state languages. In fact, the language of instruction is determined by the founders of the institutions, taking into account parents’ wishes; the Ministry of Education assumes that Belarusan-language schools and classes should be opened based on parents' written requests. The final decision is made by local executive committees and not always in favor of parents. Thus, 77.8% of the respondents encountered obstacles when using the Belarusan language, and 88% felt a special attitude towards themselves because they speak Belarusan. 86.9% of the pollees in kindergartens were brought up in Russian; 82.4% of the poll participants said that subjects at schools and universities were taught in Russian. However, 95% of respondents, if given a choice, would choose Belarusan as the language of education.

2. In the field of information, the authors of the study underline that since the early 2000s, the vast majority of mainstream mass media in Belarus have been published in Russian. In 2011, Belarusan-language programs on national television channels were only 4% of the airtime. Currently, all national newspapers, with the exception of the newspaper "Zvyazda", are published in Russian.

3. The situation in the service sector is not better. Thus, 99.4% of respondents reported that they do not receive communication in Belarusan in hospitals and medical institutions; 98.1% of Belarusans - in restaurants and cafés; 98.5% - in stores with sellers and consultants; 99.2% - in state-run institutions.

The human rights defender I̧har Sḷučak (<https://budzma.me/news/mova-svyadoma-stygmatyzuetstsa.html>) in an interview to the cultural and educational portal Budźma said that the Belarusan language is being stigmatized in Belarus. I̧har believes that the Belarusan language became a sign of disloyalty to the authorities, the language of "enemies of the people". Therefore, the authorities continue to suppress the native tongue of the Belarusan people in all possible ways, changing it to Russian.

During the first half of 2023, we managed to find the following cases of discrimination against the Belarusan language from open sources:

During the proceedings in the Leninsky District court of Minsk on January 5th, 2023, the human rights defender and Nobel Peace Prize laureate Aleś Bialacki[[1]](#footnote-1) and his fellow human rights defenders Uḷadź Ḷabkovič[[2]](#footnote-2) and Valancin Stefanovič[[3]](#footnote-3) filed petitions for the proceedings to be conducted in the Belarusan language. The judge Marina Zapasnik did not grant the petition. After that, Aleś Bialacki submitted a request to appoint him a translator from Russian into Belarusan in order to fully understand the presented accusation. In justification of his position, Aleś said that he has been speaking Belarusan all his life and no longer fully understands Russian. And this petition was rejected by the court. Aleś Bialacki also stated that the prosecutor Alexander Korol, as a civil servant, should also use the Belarusan language in court. But despite everything, the proceedings were conducted in Russian. (<https://spring96.org/be/news/110331>)

On January 10th, 2023, it became known that the Januškievič publishing house, which published books in the Belarusan language, was deprived of its license in a court order on the basis of Article 33 of Law d/d December 29th, 2012 №8-3 "On Publishing in the Republic of Belarus". The court's decision lists printed editions published by Januškievič and recognized as "extremist materials". These are the book "Dogs of Europe" by Alhierd Bacharevič and the book of children's poems by Joseph Brodsky "The Ballad of the Little Tugboat". In 2022, the Januškievič publishing house was at first evicted from its office, and then the security forces destroyed its newly opened bookstore "Knihaŭka" in Minsk, which managed to work only for a few hours, and Andreï Januškievič was detained. (<https://spring96.org/be/news/110331>)

On January 11th, 2023, Radio Svaboda (Liberty) reported that an official translation of the Criminal Code into Belarusan appeared in Belarus. In Belarus, out of 25 codes, only 16 have been translated into Belarusan, despite the equality of the two state languages declared in the Constitution of Belarus. Of all the codes, only one - the Code on Culture - was adopted in the Belarusan language. In general only 1.4% of legal acts of Belarus have a version in Belarusan. The absolute majority of Belarusan-language acts have a technical, insignificant character from a legal point of view. At the same time, the presence of codes and laws in the Belarusan language does not affect their usage. In courts, convicts are most often denied the opportunity to conduct proceedings in the Belarusan language. During the execution of the sentence, Belarusan-speaking convicts are treated harsher in the colonies. (<https://www.svaboda.org/a/32218777.html>)

On January 26th, 2023, it became known that Mikoḷa Papieka, a Belarusan-speaking defendant in the case of "Karahody", was refused access to the case materials in Belarusan by the Brest District Court. Mikoḷa Papieka (convicted under Article 342 of the Criminal Code - organization and preparation of actions that grossly violate public order, or active participation in them, up to 2 years of restriction of freedom in an open correctional institution, in April 2022 the sentence was replaced by 8,5 months of imprisonment under the conditions of the general regime; recognized as a political prisoner on 16 September 2021; freed on 17 December 2022) tried to use his native tongue during the process. Earlier, the poet-beekeeper made sure that he could speak Belarusan during the interrogation (as a result, he was interrogated through an interpreter). Mikoḷa also tried to familiarize himself with the materials of the case in Belarusan. However, he received a refusal from the chairman of the Brest district court, according to whose opinion "there are no grounds for familiarizing oneself with the case materials in the Belarusan language." (<https://t.me/viasna_brest/875>)

On February 2nd, 2023, the administrator of the Telegram channel "In Belarusan" Andreï Filipčyk was detained (convicted under Article 342 of the Criminal Code - organization and preparation of actions that grossly violate public order, or active participation in them; on February 28th, 2023, he was recognized as a political prisoner, received a sentence without imprisonment). He was charged with participation in "unsanctioned mass events", as well as administration of the "In Belarusan" TG-channel, which published jokes and memes in the Belarusan language. According to the security forces, Andreï Filipčyk popularized "the Belarusan Latin alphabet and hatred towards the Russian-speaking socio-cultural space" in this way. (<https://t.me/viasna96/17122>)

The International Mother Language Day is celebrated on February 21st in various countries of the world. This holiday was announced by the UNESCO General Conference on November 17th, 1999, and has been celebrated since 2000. This is one of the few occasions when state propaganda through its mass media and bloggers address the topic of the Belarusan language. On the Mother Language Day in 2023, all news programs of the state-run Belarusan television (three main TV channels) were broadcast in Belarusan; each TV channel showed a small story dedicated to the Mother Language Day. The key role in these stories was assigned to the all-national dictation, which took place in the Jakub Koḷas Central Scientific Library.

However, of all government officials, only the head of the presidential administration, Igor Sergeyenko, gave a small comment to the mass media in Belarusan. In the evening, the program "In Fact" was released, in which MP Igor Marzalyuk expressed his views on the need for positive discrimination of the Belarusan language and suggested that humanitarian subjects be taught in Belarusan in Russian-language schools. His words caused indignation on the part of pro-government propagandists and Telegram channels. (<https://www.svaboda.org/a/32283175.html>)

In Bratislava (Slovakia), for the Mother Language Day, the Embassy of Belarus organized an exhibition of Belarusan books. However, most of the presented books were translated into Russian. Several stands with information and a photo of the Russian writer Fyodor Dostoyevsky were also displayed.

Officials in the Hrodna Region spoke out against the Polish language in the Roman-Catholic churches of Belarus. Officials in I̧ŭje called the Polish language illegal in the church during a meeting of the district authorities with the clergy, where problematic issues were discussed. However, the clergy noted that the Belarusan Roman-Catholic Church has 2 official languages: Belarusan and Polish. This is even established in the documents of the Roman-Catholic Church in Belarus. This decision was made during the meetings of the Synod in 1996-2000. As the priests noted, there are several reasons for the presence of the Polish language in churches: this is the fact that Western Belarus was once occupied by Poland, and the fact that Catholic priests came to preach in Belarus mainly from Poland, accordingly they brought Polish texts of prayers, because there was no way to print Belarusan ones, and Russian culture was always that of occupants, so historically it developed exactly like that. (<https://www.svaboda.org/a/32297705.html>)

On March 3rd, 2023, the Belarusan language was removed from Sberbank's mobile application. The bank referred to the fact that, in accordance with the law, the interface and output documents must be created in one of the state languages - Belarusan or Russian. The bank explained that this decision is due to the high costs of maintaining additional localizations with a small client base of users of the Belarusan language package, despite the fact that Sberbank is one of the largest banks in Belarus. (<https://nashaniva.com/311489>)

On April 1st, an interview with Alexander Ivulin was published on the YouTube channel "Life-Raspberry", in which he said that the administration of the correctional colony №22, where the artist Aleś Puškin is serving his sentence (convicted under Article 370 of the Criminal Code - mocking state symbols, Article 130 - incitement of enmity or enmity up to 5 years of imprisonment in a prison under strict regime, on 06 April 2021 he was recognized as a political prisoner), creates very harsh conditions for serving his sentence due to the fact that Aleś speaks only Belarusan; DEOs [Detention Escort Officers] make fun of him and he is forced to speak Russian, allegedly because DEOs do not understand the Belarusan language. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=psz43wkPoJ0&t=25s&ab_channel=%D0%B6%D0%B8%D0%B7%D0%BD%D1%8C-%D0%BC%D0%B0%D0%BB%D0%B8%D0%BD%D0%B0>)

On April 4th, 2023, a new resolution of the State Committee on Property d/d March 24th, 2023 was published on the National Legal Internet Portal. №19 "On the translation of the names of geographical objects from the Belarusan and Russian languages into other languages". The new decree canceled the use of the Belarusan Latin alphabet. It will be replaced by other Latin letters. And the names of geographical objects will be translated not only from Belarusan, but also from Russian. Earlier, pro-Russian activists pushed for the abolition of the Belarusan Latin alphabet. As of June 23rd, 2023, almost all bus stops in Minsk now have signs in Russian instead of the Belarusan Latin alphabet. (<https://nashaniva.com/313651>)

On April 21st, it became known that the Ministry of Information filed a lawsuit in the Economic Court of Minsk to terminate the state registration of the Źmicier Koḷas publishing house. The basis for the lawsuit was the collection of historical documents “Freed and Enslaved. The Polish-Belarusan border in 1939-1941 in documents from Belarusan archives” (on January 6th, the court of the Central District of Minsk recognized the published documents as "extremist materials"). Since March 5th, the Źmicier Koḷas publishing house has suspended its activities. At the beginning of March, Źmicier Koḷas himself was detained together with the printer Aleh Syčoŭ and spent 10 days in the KGB pre-trial detention center. As a result, the publisher was released without charge. On May 11th, it became known that the economic court liquidated the Źmicier Koḷas publishing house. (<https://mediazona.by/news/2023/04/21/kolas>)

On Twitter, on April 25th, 2023, the Belarusan activist Kaciaryna Varažun talked about the situation with "state bilingualism" in Belarusan business. According to the published screenshots, it can be seen that the companies "Slivki.by" and "Buślik" have a negative attitude towards the Belarusan language. Thus, the representative of the company "Slivki.by" asked to translate all documents into Russian, because they do not accept documents in Belarusan. "Buślik" also asked to write the names of the customers in Russian, as there may be problems with the shipment of the goods. It should be noted that the supermarket chain for children "Buślik" [“a nestling of a stork”] has a name in Belarusan. And on the company's official website, it is written in Belarusan that "according to ancient traditions, the stork brings happiness to the house, a symbol of the Motherland, family well-being, home comfort, love for the native land and the native house." (<https://nashaniva.com/315363>)

The Telegram channel Pravda Gerashchenko published a part of the program from the Russian TV channel, which showed a program in which Russians are outraged that Belarusans, especially young people, speak Belarusan. It follows from the program that Polish and Lithuanian special services are teaching Belarusans to speak Belarusan in order to separate Belarus from Russia. (<https://t.me/Pravda_Gerashchenko/71430>)

On May 25th, 2023, Radio Svaboda published an article in which former political prisoners spoke about the state of the Belarusan language in the colonies:

1. The assistant to the head of women's colony №4 in Homiel shows a special attitude to Belarusan speakers: "he likes to regularly stop political prisoners and pick on them, asking them, among other things, how this or that word can be translated into Belarusan. Political prisoners perceive it as a sophisticated, ugly mockery of women who are completely dependent on a man in epaulettes and cannot oppose him.

2. The head of Babruïsk colony №2 insultingly called a Belarusan-speaking political prisoner a "Belarusan-speaking monkey." In general, they note that a systemic phenomenon has developed in the penitentiary system - the persecution of Belarusan-speaking citizens based on their use of the Belarusan language. (<https://www.svaboda.org/a/32427144.html>)

On June 3rd, 2023, Radio Svaboda published an article in which a fragment of Aleh Hruździḷovič's book was published (sentenced under Article 342 of the Criminal Code to 1 year and 6 months of imprisonment in a colony under the general regime; recognized as a political prisoner on 20.07.2021, released by amnesty on 21.09.2021). He says that the colony forces political prisoners to adapt to the conditions and choose with whom they can speak Belarusan and with whom they cannot. Aleh had to speak Russian with the colony's staff in order not to receive an extra term in a punishment isolation cell or to be deprived of a date or parcels. (<https://www.svaboda.org/a/32442328.html>)

The head of the Belarusan Theater of Young Spectators, Vera Polyakova, on June 5th, 2023, expressed her wish that there would be more the Russian language in the theater. She said that currently, out of 20 children's performances, 15 are performed in Belarusan and 5 in Russian. And she would like it to be 50/50, because Belarus has two official languages and it is more pleasant and interesting for the guests of the city of Minsk to watch performances in Russian. (<https://nashaniva.com/318398>)

By Resolution №274 of the Council of Ministers d/d August 19th, 2022, the Ministry of Education of Belarus replaced the forms of education documents. In the new forms, specialists of the education system made a mistake: instead of the word "surname" [proźvišča] in Belarusan, they wrote the Russian word "surname" [familia] in Belarusan spelling. But since the Belarusan authorities never admit mistakes, the Deputy Minister Alexander Kodlub sent a letter to subordinate educational institutions, where he explained the correctness of the chosen term, referring to the explanatory dictionary. Thus, the Ministry of Education not only made a mistake, but also justified it. (<https://nashaniva.com/318812>)

The former political prisoner Stanisḷaŭ Paŭlinkovič told the human rights defending center "Viasna" [Spring] that during his sentence in the colony in Krupki, when he asked in Belarusan the librarian for books in the Belarusan language, he heard the answer, "What are you, a Pole?". According to the political prisoner, the librarian was literally shaking from the fact that Stanisḷaŭ spoke to him in Belarusan. (<https://spring96.org/be/news/112019>)

On June 30th, the Ministry of Information once again updated the "List of Extremist Materials". Among its new members there are the cultural Internet resource budzma.me and the Telegram channel https://t.me/budzmaby. Both website and Telegram channel are Belarusan-language information resources of the public cultural campaign "Budźma [Let's Be] Belarusans!", aimed at popularizing Belarusan culture. The main idea of the campaign is to unite the Belarusans by developing respect for themselves, their culture, language, history and awareness of their distinctiveness. (<https://nashaniva.com/320530>)

The Technical Regulation of the Customs Union "On the Safety of Packaging" prescribes that "the information must be presented in Russian and in the official language(s) of the state - a member of the union, if there are relevant requirements in the legislation of the state(s)-members". However, the presence of a choice led to the fact that the Russian language in product labeling became mandatory, and the Belarusan language did not.

In response to this, the Belarusan human rights defender I̧har Sḷučak appealed to Belarusan product manufacturers with proposals to label their products in Belarusan. Some manufacturers agreed with him, but most refused and stopped correspondence altogether.

- Thus, the "Rassvet" poultry factory will not add the Belarusan language to its products due to the lack of free funds for the purchase of new packaging complexes due to the company's difficult financial situation.

- JSC "Pharmtechnology" will not label its products and make a website in Belarusan because it does not want to incur additional costs. They stopped correspondence with the human rights defender I. Sḷučak.

- JSC "Kobryn Butter and Cheese Factory" refused to use the Belarusan language when labeling its products, because the artistic council of this factory considered the language impractical. The impracticality of using the Belarusan language on labels and packaging is explained by the too small physical dimensions of most packaging units of the company's products.

- JSC "Sḷucak Meat Factory" will not use the Belarusan language when labeling its products, as it focuses on CIS countries and Russian-speaking residents.

- The manufacturer of baby food BELLAKT will not add the Belarusan language to the packaging, because there is no place for it there. The company stopped correspondence with him.

- JSC "Rahačoŭ MKK" will not add the Belarusan language to the packaging of its products because there is no place for it and it focuses on CIS consumers who use the Russian language.

- The producer of dairy products, which works under the Belarusan brand "Sofiyka", refused to label its products in Belarusan due to high costs.

The information is taken from the Facebook page of I̧har Sḷučak.

In our opinion, it is very important to collect and publish cases of discrimination based on language because today, more than ever, the Belarusan language is under the threat of extinction. We shall continue to closely monitor the state of the Belarusan language and conduct similar surveys, at least once every six months. Therefore, if you have examples of language discrimination that are not included in this review, please send them to us: naszamova@gmail.com.

The survey has been prepared by the association "International Union of Belarusan Writers"

1. Aleś Bialacki was convicted under Article 228 of the Criminal Code - smuggling; part 2 of Article 342 of the Criminal Code - financing of group actions that grossly violate public order, up to 10 years of imprisonment in a colony under enhanced security; recognized as a political prisoner on 15 July 2021. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Uḷadź Ḷabkovič was convicted under Article 228 of the Criminal Code - smuggling; part 2 of Article 342 of the Criminal Code - financing of group actions that grossly violate public order, up to 7 years of imprisonment in a colony under enhanced security; recognized as a political prisoner on 15 July 2021. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Valancin Stefanovič was convicted under Article 228 of the Criminal Code - smuggling; Part 2 of Article 342 of the Criminal Code - financing of group actions that grossly violate public order, up to 9 years of imprisonment in a colony under enhanced security; recognized as a political prisoner on 15 July 2021. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)