



## RESOLUTION ON THE BELARUSIAN LANGUAGE

**Proposed by PEN Belarus**

**Seconded by PEN Ukraine, Estonian PEN, PEN America, Polish PEN, Latvian PEN, St Petersburg PEN**

*The Assembly of Delegates of PEN International, meeting at its 85th annual Congress in Manila, Philippines, 1 to 5 October 2019, is concerned at the continuous stigmatisation of the Belarusian language in Belarus, where the authorities have been seeking to assert the dominance of the Russian language for nearly three decades.*

Although the Constitution of Belarus enshrines both Belarusian and Russian as official languages, Belarusian remains frowned upon at state level. Official use of Belarusian remains rare, and nearly every law is published in Russian only.<sup>1</sup> According to recent studies,<sup>2</sup> 48% of Belarusians consider Belarusian as their native language but access to Belarusian in education remains limited, with only 13% of pupils reportedly studying in Belarusian and no university using it as the main language of instruction.<sup>3</sup>

Eighty five per cent of books published in Belarus each year are published in Russian, with Belarusian books taking up 9.5% of the market.<sup>4</sup> The Belarusian authorities have striven to marginalise the independent literary community in recent decades, leading to an acute decrease of the role of Belarusian literature in society. They also have a monopoly on book distribution in the country, thus acting as censors by restricting access to independent literature in bookshops. Independent publishers and distributors are regularly subject to persecution from the state, such as fines or bans on holding book presentations.

Russian still dominates the media space in Belarus, which remains under tight government control. Belsat TV, the first and only independent channel in Belarus, currently plays a key role in popularising Belarusian and offering alternative content<sup>5</sup>. Yet Belsat TV is unable to place advertisements promoting videos in Belarusian on its YouTube channels, as Google ads does not support the Belarusian language. This greatly affects Belsat TV's attempts to expand its audience and disseminate independent and reliable news in the Belarusian language.

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<sup>1</sup> Freedom House, 2015 report, Belarus: <https://freedomhouse.org/report/nations-transit/2015/belarus>

<sup>2</sup> See <https://www.kp.by/online/news/3381149/> (In Russian)

<sup>3</sup> Belarus Digest, Belarusian language: declining in state education, strengthening in civil society, 12 March 2018 <https://belarusdigest.com/story/belarusian-language-declining-in-state-education-strengthening-in-civil-society/> and Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Belarus (A/HRC/41/52) 2019: [http://ap.ohchr.org/documents/dpage\\_e.aspx?m=140](http://ap.ohchr.org/documents/dpage_e.aspx?m=140)

<sup>4</sup> The Guardian, After decades of Russian dominance, Belarus begins to reclaim its language, 28 January 2015: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jan/28/-sp-russian-belarus-reclaims-language-belarusian>

<sup>5</sup> Belsat TV, Belsat launches campaign to improve de facto status of Belarusian language, 6 February 2019: <https://belsat.eu/en/news/belsat-launches-campaign-to-improve-de-facto-status-of-belarusian-language/>

As initiatives aimed at promoting the Belarusian language have been growing in recent years, it is time for the Belarusian people to enjoy their rights to express themselves and to take part in cultural life, including through language.

**The Assembly of Delegates of PEN International calls on Belarus to:**

- Comply with Article 17 of the Constitution of Belarus, which enshrines Belarusian as an official language;
- Respect, protect and fulfil the right of all those who speak Belarusian to express themselves in that language and to have their literature promoted and distributed;
- Ensure that those wishing to study in Belarusian-language classes, including at the higher education level, are provided with such opportunities;
- Take effective measures to promote the wider use of the Belarusian language in all areas of life, including cultural life.

**The Assembly of Delegates of PEN International further calls on Google and other online platforms to:**

- Recognize Belarusian as a language and thereby ensure that Belarusians can express themselves and communicate freely with members of their own communities and others in the Belarusian language.

