

Belarus Human Rights Index

<https://index.belhelcom.org/en/>

2024

Right to Take Part in Cultural Life

Expert Commentary

The score:	1,3	-0,1
<i>Including scores by component:</i>		
● Participating in cultural life	1,2	-0,1
● Access to cultural life	1,7	
● Contribution to cultural life	1,0	
● Protection of cultural diversity	1,4	

A baseline description of the situation regarding the realization of this right is available in the 2019 [overview](#). Expert assessments of the 2024 situation converge around two main perspectives. According to the first, the repressive environment has reached a kind of plateau: the situation remains consistently poor, with all state-desired repressive institutions and tools already in place, fully operational, and effectively functioning. Any new measures merely deepen an already established system.

The second position highlights the cumulative negative effect of previously adopted measures and the now entrenched nature of the repressive system – specifically, its capacity for self-reproduction. Repressive practices permeate all levels of interaction between the state and society, including the cultural sphere – from security, defense, and law-enforcement agencies to the leadership and staff of cultural institutions, as well as private interactions.

In either case, and in the absence of any significant qualitative changes during the reporting period, experts have **downgraded the overall score**, citing the cumulative impact of the state's repressive cultural policy – a trend that is likely to intensify in the future. The long-term consequences of the purge of the cultural sector, the emigration of highly qualified professionals and cultural figures producing nationally oriented content, the liquidation of civil society organizations – including those representing national minorities – and the shift in cultural policy toward close alignment with the Russian Federation are now becoming increasingly evident.

As a result, despite the state's efforts to promote an external image of general well-being and an active cultural life, the cultural space remains fully controlled – both through active repressive institutions and mechanisms, and through pervasive self-censorship, which stifles independent initiative. Access to cultural products, including those created by Belarusians for Belarusians, and the ability to contribute freely to cultural life remain severely restricted.



#human rights

#business and human rights

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- **Participating in cultural life**

Opportunities to participate in cultural life, particularly through independent initiatives rather than state-sponsored activities, remain extremely limited. Experts continue to assign the lowest possible score to the first indicator within this component, citing the ongoing state interference in cultural life and the absence of effective protections against interference by third parties.¹

The cultural sphere remains fully controlled by the state. Access to the public sphere and broad audiences is regulated through censorship and self-censorship. Interference in the staffing policies of state cultural institutions continues, along with pressure on employees – including dismissals, intimidation, “preventive” conversations about avoiding “extremism”, ideological indoctrination, monitoring of social media activity, and coercion to join trade unions.²

The practice of maintaining arbitrary lists of unreliable individuals also persists. Reports indicate not only the existence of blacklists barring certain specialists from employment in state institutions, but also a separate list of “unreliable” employees who may continue working only with a guarantor within the organization.³ Pressure on professional and creative unions has continued, including the forced (or “voluntary”) exclusion of “unreliable” cultural figures. In 2024, cross-border persecution – including of cultural workers – intensified.⁴

The state’s legislative, administrative, budgetary, and other efforts remain focused on maintaining the current repressive environment rather than on ensuring the right to participate in cultural life.

Opportunities to exercise the right to choose and preserve one’s cultural identity continue to shrink. By 2024, many national cultural associations had already been subjected to persecution and liquidation. Nevertheless, the number of such associations continued to decline: as of January 1, 2023, there were 174 national cultural associations in the country⁵; a year later – 140⁶; and by January 1, 2025 – only

¹ Informing (snitching) continued to result in politically motivated dismissals and acts of censorship; the culture of denunciation itself is encouraged. An illustrative example is the number of events targeted by reports submitted by pro-government activist Olga Bondareva: [Monitoring of violations of cultural rights and human rights of cultural figures. Belarus, 2024](#)

² [Monitoring of violations of cultural rights and human rights of cultural figures. Belarus, 2024](#)

³ Ibid

⁴ See the in absentia criminal trial of researchers, the criminal case brought against representatives of the People’s Embassies of Belarus, persecution of cultural workers in exile for celebrating Freedom Day, participating in elections to the Coordination Council, and other cases: [Monitoring of violations of cultural rights and human rights of cultural figures. Belarus, 2024](#)

⁵ https://web.archive.org/web/20230624103115/https://www.belarus21.by/Articles/nac_cult_ob

⁶ <https://president.gov.by/ru/belarus/society/mezhnacionalnye-otnosheniya>



130 remained.⁷ Experts also highlight a sharp decline in the number of associations representing national minorities traditionally present in Belarus.

The cultural sphere continues to be purged on the basis of political unreliability. As the former Minister of Culture stated, “the ranks of the creative intelligentsia are being cleansed of individuals who undermined the foundations of the state”.⁸ The new Minister of Culture likewise expressed his intention to continue identifying and rooting out “enemies” within the field.⁹

During the reporting period, the systematic and arbitrary application of “anti-extremism” legislation to restrict public access to undesirable cultural content continued.

In 2024, at least 289 cultural materials were designated as “extremist”, including 19 books.

Seven cultural figures were added to the List of Organizations and Individuals Involved in Terrorist Activities, and 64 others were included in the List of Citizens of the Republic of Belarus, Foreign Citizens, or Stateless Persons Involved in Extremist Activities.¹⁰

In 2024, the Ministry of Information began expanding a new list of “banned” literature – the List of Printed Publications Containing Information or Materials Whose Distribution May Harm the National Interests of the Republic of Belarus, introduced in 2023.¹¹ As of late November 2024, the list contained 35 items, including books on the history of Belarus. The majority of the “banned” literature consists of books intended for 18+ audiences and, in one way or another, related to LGBT topics.¹²

Other forms of interference included: suspension of licenses and bans on the sale of printed publications, refusals to distribute materials, the freezing of private centers’ activities, inspections of venues, “recommendations” not to hold events, censorship of posters and programs, visits from security, defense and law-enforcement agencies, revocation of rental agreements, website access restrictions, designation of groups as “extremist formations,” domain name cancellations, removal of entities from the state register of cultural event organizers, and more.¹³

⁷ https://belarus21.by/Articles/nac_cult_ob

⁸ <https://belta.by/culture/view/markevich-sovremennaja-kultura-litso-strany-v-mire-667694-2024/>

⁹ <https://nashaniva.com/357146>

¹⁰ [Monitoring of violations of cultural rights and human rights of cultural figures. Belarus, 2024](#)

¹¹ <http://mininform.gov.by/news/all/izmeneniya-v-zakon-ob-izdatelskom-dele-vstupayut-v-silu-22-oktyabrya/>

¹² [Monitoring of violations of cultural rights and human rights of cultural figures. Belarus, 2024.](#)

¹³ Ibid; by the end of the year, only 46 organizations out of 59 remained active in the Register of Cultural and Entertainment Event Organizers.

The recipients of state support measures that formally relate to the realization of cultural rights remain exclusively loyal organizations and structures.¹⁴

- **Access to cultural life**

While the overall score for this component remained unchanged, experts observed a continued deterioration of the situation, driven by the cumulative effect of earlier repressive measures. Ongoing persecution of cultural figures and organizations on political grounds, alongside restrictions on access to undesired content and censorship of events, continues to shrink public access to cultural life.

Experts note the active use of state-controlled public associations – such as the Belarusian Republican Youth Union (BRSM), Belaya Rus, and others – to provide cultural education and outreach, including in rural areas. The top-down approach to cultural policy, implemented through loyal organizations while suppressing local initiatives and reinforcing self-censorship, results in a performative, showcase-like nature of cultural programming.

During the reporting period, pressure on providers of language courses in Belarus persisted. Around ten centers offering instruction in Polish were shut down. The pressure was accompanied by searches, detentions, and the recording of “repentance videos”.¹⁵ Experts expressed particular concern about statements by security, defense and law-enforcement agencies alleging that language course providers were involved in financing “extremist activities”.¹⁶ Such accusations create a chilling effect not only for organizers of courses in “undesirable” foreign languages but also for potential students, who risk being accused of participating in “extremist activity” simply by attending language instruction.

Experts also highlight the *ghettoization* of cultural opportunities: through direct pressure, administrative barriers, interference in hiring decisions, and censorship, the state creates conditions in which “undesirable” organizations find it easier to shut down than to implement their own cultural initiatives. Under such conditions, even the cultural diversity that remains has a showcase character: while there is nominal representation of national minorities, real opportunities to promote their cultures – especially among communities affected by the state’s current geopolitical interests (Polish, Lithuanian, Ukrainian, Jewish) – are severely restricted.

The official narrative of the “genocide of the Belarusian people” continued to evolve during the period, accompanied by significantly distorted portrayals of 20th-century tragedies.¹⁷ In 2024, the General

¹⁴ Ibid; <https://pravo.by/document/?guid=12551&p0=H12400048>

¹⁵ https://news.zerkalo.io/life/58001.html?utm_source=news.zerkalo.io&utm_medium=news-bottom-block&utm_campaign=relevant_news

¹⁶ <https://news.zerkalo.io/life/56900.html>

¹⁷ See the way this theme has been introduced into the school curriculum: The Right to Participate in Cultural Life (2023), p. 6: https://belhelcom.org/sites/default/files/17_pravo_na_uchastie_v_kulturnoy_zhizni_2023.pdf



Prosecutor's Office published the fourth volume in the series "The Genocide of the Belarusian People. Punitive Operations. Part 2", which furthers the development of a one-sided official interpretation of historical events. The year 2024 also saw the first conviction under Article 130-2 of the Criminal Code ("Denial of the genocide of the Belarusian people"), marking the beginning of a practice of prosecuting individuals for expressing views deemed by the authorities to contradict the official version of history.¹⁸

The narrowing of opportunities to contribute to cultural life also manifests in diminished access to events and products: their quantity and diversity are steadily declining,¹⁹ and barriers to accessing content created by Belarusians abroad are growing (see below).

Experts also note persistent discrimination in access to the cultural sphere for marginalized groups – particularly certain national minorities and political prisoners. For example, a 2024 investigation into torture and ill-treatment at Gomel Women's Colony No. 4 reported, among other issues, that political prisoners were denied unrestricted access to the library and faced a total ban on foreign-language literature, including self-study materials.²⁰

Problems of physical and financial accessibility also persist in the cultural sector. Experts highlight a lack of resources for organizing cultural events at the regional level. The ability to implement independent cultural initiatives is constrained not only by insufficient funding, but also by the requirement to comply with political loyalty criteria.

- **Contribution to cultural life**

The score for this component remains at the minimum level: the right to contribute to cultural life remains effectively unrealizable. According to monitoring by Belarusian PEN, at least 133 instances of censorship were recorded in 2024 – ranging from the cancellation or suspension of exhibitions, theatrical performances, film screenings, and concerts, to the removal of individual works and thematic sections from displays; denial of touring licenses; bans on festivals; exclusion from competitions, conferences, and congresses; deletion of citations from academic publications; and Ministry of Information bans on the distribution of entire lists of literature.²¹ Cases were also reported involving the removal of Belarusian-language and historical literature from libraries and bookstores, and the destruction of "banned" books in places of detention.²² Censorship targeted themes related to

¹⁸ [55-year-old plasterer posted about Khatyn; he was convicted of denying the genocide of the Belarusian people and sentenced to three years in prison](#); See also [the case of Siarhiej Dubaviec](#), who was criminally charged, among other things, with "denial of the genocide of the Belarusian people".

¹⁹ Among other examples: ticket lines for productions at certain Minsk theaters – in this case, reflecting a shrinking supply of high-quality cultural events: [Belarusian Culture: Review \(January-March '24\)](#).

²⁰ [Torture and Ill-Treatment at Homiel Women's Colony No. 4: A Public Investigation](#)

²¹ [Monitoring of violations of cultural rights and human rights of cultural figures. Belarus, 2024](#)

²² Ibid



Belarusian national history, the war in Ukraine, works of Ukrainian and Polish culture, and content framed as “propaganda of non-traditional values”, including LGBT topics, sexuality, and expressions of ‘Western culture’.²³ An informal system of blacklists of cultural figures remained in place, resulting in denials of access to public sphere.²⁴

Experts separately draw attention to the inhumane practice of confiscating manuscripts from political prisoners,²⁵ thereby preventing them from contributing to cultural life.

Since 2024, Belarus has been guided by the Concept for the Development of the National Cultural Space for 2024–2026, which declares cultural products that convey “foreign political, moral, or aesthetic values” to be a potential threat to national security.²⁶ Special emphasis is placed on the so-called “traditional cultural values of the Belarusian people”, which, according to experts, are still largely defined by the Belarusian Orthodox Church. This influence is evident, for example, in the activities of the Public Council on Morality, reinstated in 2023, which has assumed the role of a moral authority in defining acceptable ethical boundaries on socially important issues.

Experts have documented this body’s involvement in censorship of cultural activities, including the cancellation of concerts and performances, removal of participants from exhibitions, and similar interventions.

Belarusian PEN notes the broad ideological control exerted over cultural life — one that, in line with the general trend of anti-Western sentiment, extends to the celebration of Halloween and other expressions of Western culture, the decoration of retail and food establishments for holidays, the format of school graduation ceremonies, and more.²⁷

- **Protection of cultural diversity**

While maintaining the same score for this component, experts note that the situation remains unfavorable for the protection of cultural diversity. The “showcase” character of cultural diversity tolerated by the state — limited to what is considered safe by the state — persists, as does the ongoing policy of cultural integration with the Russian Federation.²⁸

²³ Ibid

²⁴ Ibid

²⁵ [People don't feel free — even when holding their smartphones](#)

²⁶ <https://pravo.by/document/?guid=12551&p0=C22300961>

²⁷ [Monitoring of violations of cultural rights and human rights of cultural figures. Belarus, 2024](#)

²⁸ See the section Pro-Russian vector of development: [Monitoring of violations of cultural rights and human rights of cultural figures. Belarus, 2024](#)

The cultural sphere continues to be subject to censorship and self-censorship. Experts draw particular attention to the active use of “anti-extremism” legislation to restrict access to nationally oriented cultural products created by Belarusians in exile – further widening the gap between domestic audiences and cultural actors abroad.²⁹

Regarding the protection, preservation, and restoration of cultural heritage in all its forms, experts once again emphasize the need for systematic and independent monitoring of the sector by qualified professionals. In 2024, Belarusian PEN documented at least 55 instances of violations involving cultural and historical heritage (both with and without formal status as cultural assets), as well as memory culture.³⁰

Experts observe the continuation of broader trends within this component: in the field of heritage protection, priority is given to “safe” activities that do not touch on politically sensitive issues – such as architectural restoration. However, widespread evidence of negligent treatment of cultural heritage – including state-sanctioned destruction, deliberate damage, disrepair of certain sites, unlawful construction, and profanation during restoration work³¹ – reflects, among other things, the absence of a coherent, well-funded, and heritage-conscious state policy.

Preservation of cultural heritage remains selective. For example, memorial sites of Stalinist repression victims continue to lack proper protection. In 2024, there were again recorded acts of vandalism at burial sites of Stalin-era repression victims. Soviet-era mosaics and murals, considered examples of decorative art, have also been destroyed due to the lack of adequate protection.³²

Financial and other forms of support are provided by the state only within an ideologically sanctioned framework. Discriminated groups and politically “unreliable” cultural figures and organizations, deliberately excluded from the cultural sphere by the state, are unable to access adequate support.

²⁹ Among other examples: the designation of the social media pages, logo, and YouTube channel of the former Kupala Theater troupe as “extremist”. Even online interaction with their productions – for example, by watching them on YouTube – may serve as grounds for persecution of the viewer.

<https://citydog.io/post/zaden-spisok-ekstrimist/>, <https://byculture.org/en/belarusian-culture-review-january-march-23/>

³⁰ [Monitoring of violations of cultural rights and human rights of cultural figures. Belarus, 2024.](#)

³¹ Ibid

³² Ibid