

++ MEDIA INFORMATION ++

On the occasion of the European Day of Language, the #FreeAllWords project draws attention to the increasing attacks against the linguistic rights of authors in Belarus and Ukraine.

Brussels, 26 September 2022

On September 26th, the European Day of Languages is celebrated all across the continent. Since 2001, the Day has been promoting awareness for the rich tapestry of languages coexisting in Europe and beyond. On this day, the EWC-project #FreeAllWords draws attention to the increasing attacks against linguistic rights of authors and people in Belarus and in Ukraine.

Linguistic rights violations in Ukraine

“On the territories of Ukraine occupied by the Russian Army, there is purposeful destruction of the Ukrainian national identity, i.e., everything that has to do with the Ukrainian language and culture”, explains Nina George, novelist and EWC President. In exchange – the Russian language, Russian culture, the Russian Weltanschauung and ideology are being planted violently, and people who speak Ukrainian are being tortured and even murdered.

- In Mariupol, the occupational authorities [replace Ukrainian textbooks with Russian ones](#) and introduce the Russian curriculum, intimidating pupils’ parents;
- In Balakliya, during the occupation, [it was forbidden to speak Ukrainian](#) – Russian only. People with the pro-Ukrainian position and those who had the Ukrainian national symbols could vanish into thin air;
- On the occupied territories, Russians [destroy Ukrainian-language books in libraries](#);
- [Ukrainian children deported to Russia](#) are being compulsorily Russified.

Linguistic rights violations in Belarus

In Belarus, the discrimination and oppression of the Belarusian language and its speakers have been carried out by the state system itself for more than 20 years. During the years of Lukashenko’s regime, the number of people who consider the Belarusian language their native tongue has decreased from 85,6% (1999) down to 61,2% (2019). Belarusian-language schools are attended by 11,1% of pupils only, and these schools are mainly in villages. Children who are educated in Belarusian have no possibility to continue their education in the Belarusian language at universities as in Belarus there are no higher educational establishments with instruction in Belarusian. The language of the press and mass media is mainly Russian. The language of the state records management and army is Russian.

After the rigged presidential election in 2020, the situation has essentially worsened. The already existing censorship put a considerable number of Belarusian-language authors in blacklists (their books are forbidden in libraries and bookshops; their works are removed from textbooks; authors are forbidden to carry out public meetings or reading events with readers); and now not only Belarusian-language authors are being persecuted, but actually native speakers are as well. In 2022, in Belarus, people are being imprisoned for the very fact of using the Belarusian language and Belarusian-language books are being included in the list of "extremist materials".

More details are in the survey of linguistic discrimination in Belarus prepared by the public organization "International Union of Belarusian Writers" [here](#).

Since 2020, Belarus has been in the condition of "total lawlessness"; all the independent media and press that carried out true monitoring and fact-checking were compelled to leave the country and the majority of human rights defenders are in prison now.

"We should not look away or accept those attacks on identity and freedom of expression. Taking away someone's language is like trying to erase their existence, their history. Standing up for the fundamental values of Europe means also advocating for the languages of our neighbors", Nina George affirms.

Together with the organizers of the EWC-project #FreeAllWords, we urge the international community to join the preservation and protection of the two European languages, Ukrainian and Belarusian, with the help of any possible means, including:

- translation projects, support programs or (residency-) scholarships. We appeal to the book publishing sector to print Belarusian and Ukrainian books in the original, especially those that have been destroyed or declared as "extremist";
- we call upon the Human Rights Committee of the EU Parliament to take appropriate measures to protect the cultural and linguistic heritage of Ukraine and Belarus;
- and we urge the UNESCO to investigate the situation in Belarus and Ukraine with regard to language diversity, violation of human rights and linguistic heritage.

About #FreeAllWords

The #FreeAllWords text and translation fund is a joint support project for Belarusian and Ukrainian writers of all genres and is organized under the umbrella of the European Writers' Council (EWC) . #FreeAllWords was initiated by the authors' associations A*dS (Authors of Switzerland), Forfatterforbundet (Norway), and the Community of Belarusian Writers (Belarus).

Within the framework of #FreeAllWords, short, topical, existing as well as original texts, interviews, reports, essays, poems and other literary forms are to be translated into European and international languages and disseminated through a wide variety of communication channels - digital, print, blogs, media, etc.

The authors' and translators' fees are paid from the #FreeAllWords fund.

Foundations involved so far: Fritt Ord, Kopinor (both Norway), Landis&Gyr, Karl und Sophie Bindung Stiftung (both Switzerland). Other supporters: The Irish Writers' Union and the Society of Swedish Authors in Finland. The first texts and translations by up to 30 authors from Belarus, Ukraine and Russia are to be published in up to 31 countries in the upcoming six months.

The goal is **one million published words** for peace and freedom of expression, for understanding between cultures and nations, and as a key contribution in persuading people for a free, democratic, peaceful and inclusive society.

In particular, writers' associations in the European book sector and literature institutions are welcome to request texts and bring authors closer to the public. The European press and media can also register for texts and translations. Literary translators from the language regions of Ukraine and Belarus are also invited to register. The website www.freeallwords.org also contains a summary of the frequently asked questions and answers about the programme so far, as well as a portrait of the participants and their works.

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