

Director-General of UNESCO
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Dear Madam Director-General!

Belarusians are writing to you as the Director-General of UNESCO, the United Nations specialized agency for education, science and culture, with a request - to express UNESCO's reaction to repression of the national culture of Belarus!

We are certain that you are aware of the dramatic situation in Belarus following the rigged presidential election. For more than a year now, there have been illegal detentions, arrests and repressions of all those who disagree with Lukashenka's regime. To date, the number of initiated criminal cases on political grounds has reached more than 4.7 thousand, 640 people have been recognised as political prisoners. More than 40 thousand Belarusians were detained and beaten, 16 people were killed by security officials, political prisoners tried to commit suicide.

We feel obliged to inform you about the repression in the sphere of culture, which is under particular pressure from the regime. Entire cultural institutions, individual artistic collectives, cultural public associations and hundreds of cultural figures have been subjected to repression. As of August 2021, more than a thousand cases of repression against cultural workers have been recorded, dozens of its activists have gone through prison, and of the total number of prisoners of conscience, 74 belong to the sphere of culture.

On Lukashenka's personal order since July 2021, public organisations with a humanitarian mission to support national culture have been deliberately destroyed in Belarus. Even the international prestige of such organizations does not hinder the regime. Thus, on August 9, 2021 the Belarusian PEN Center - an

organization which is a member of International PEN, has "A" status in UNESCO and consultative status in the UN, was liquidated.

A civil case was initiated to liquidate the Union of Belarusian Writers, the oldest creative organization in Belarus, within and around which the core of the national intelligentsia was formed for decades, and whose founders were the classics of Belarusian literature, Yanka Kupala and Yakub Kolas, whose anniversaries were repeatedly included in the UNESCO commemorative dates. The legal circumstances of the case indicate that it is politically motivated, another example of the Lukashenka regime's violation of Belarus' international obligations regarding freedom of associations and freedom of speech.

Particular indignation is caused by the increasing discriminatory attitude of the regime towards the Belarusian language. Cases of particularly cruel treatment of detained Belarusian-speaking protesters have been registered, and Belarusian language courses ("Mova Nanova", etc.) have been liquidated. The next example is an ungrounded attempt of the regime to liquidate the Belarusian Language Society named after Francysk Skaryna, a non-governmental organization, the main goal of which is revival and popularization of the Belarusian language. The trial on behalf of the state to liquidate the organization is scheduled for 27 August 2021.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights declares the right of everyone "to enjoy all the rights and freedoms set forth in the Declaration without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion. At the same time, "protection against any discrimination in violation of the Declaration" is guaranteed.

These norms, including in the field of culture, have been elaborated in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity, the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage and the Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions.

Today, however, we have ample evidence that in Belarus - a founding member state of the United Nations and a member of UNESCO since 1954 - there are massive violations of the aforementioned UN instruments.

We are convinced that the Lukashenka regime poses a real threat to the culture of the titular nation of Belarus, therefore we ask you to:

1. Urge the illegitimate authorities of Belarus to stop repressive actions against Belarusian national culture, violations of cultural rights and freedoms of Belarusians, administrative persecution of cultural workers for dissenting opinions.

2. To demand from the Supreme Court of Belarus and other relevant Belarusian authorities to respect the international law norms concerning the freedom of association, freedom of speech, and cultural rights.

3. dispatch a UNESCO mission and international experts to Belarus to document the Lukashenka regime's violations of the UNESCO Charter, its basic declarations and conventions.

4. Temporarily suspend the interaction between UNESCO structures and the National Commission of the Republic of Belarus for UNESCO, which is fully controlled by the dictatorial regime.

5. To consider the issue of repression in the sphere of culture in Belarus at the forthcoming meetings of the Executive Board and the General Conference of UNESCO with the adoption of an appropriate UNESCO Resolution on Belarus.

We would be grateful for any help you can give and for using UNESCO's authority to stem the unprecedented wave of repression that is afflicting Belarusian culture.