***EMBARGOED until 00:01 UK time on 21 February 2023***

**PRESS RELEASE**

**On International Mother Language Day, PEN International calls for the release of Nobel Laureate Ales Bialiatski (Belarus)**

On 21 February 2013, **International Mother Language Day,** PEN International willmobilize its Centres in support of Belarusian writer, human rights defender, 2022 Nobel Peace Prize winner and PEN Belarus member **Ales Bialiatski**, detained since 2021 and currently on trial.

Bialiatski is the founder of the Viasna Human Rights Centre (Viasna), an organisation that campaigns for opposition activists who are harassed and persecuted by the Belarusian authorities. His case is emblematic of the type of threats and attacks writers and journalists around the world are often subjected to, for peacefully exercising their right to freedom of expression. It is also emblematic of the type of oppression experienced by writers and journalists who are prevented from expressing themselves in their indigenous or minoritised language.

*International Mother Language Day is a stirring reminder of the ongoing need to preserve and protect linguistic and cultural diversity across the globe. It accentuates the crucial need to uplift those, like Ales Bialiatski, who ardently defend their right to speak their mother tongue. We stand in solidarity with Bialiatski in his ceaseless fight for human rights and democratic values in Belarus, despite the government's persistent endeavours to silence him.*Urtzi Urrutikoetxea, Chair of PEN International’s Translation and Linguistic Rights Committee

**Ales Bialiatski (Belarus)**

Bialiatski is currently on trial in Minsk. He faces up to 12 years in prison in relation to his human rights work and his writings that are critical of the Belarusian authorities. The verdict against him will be announced on 3 March 2023.

Bialiatski’s trial [opened](https://spring96.org/en/news/110710) at the Lieninski District Court of Minsk on 9 January 2023. He stands accused of smuggling (Article 228.4 of the Belarusian Criminal Code) and organising and financing actions that grossly violate public order (Article 342.2 of the Belarusian Criminal Code). Throughout the trial, Bialiatski repeatedly [asked](https://spring96.org/en/news/110583) that the prosecutor and the court conduct the trial in Belarusian, to no avail. According to Viasna, Bialiatski notably said:

*‘The situation with the language used in court appears to be extraordinary: the prosecution and the court refused steadfast to speak Belarusian, despite the fact that I, as the accused, am a Belarusian-speaking person in life. I speak, write, and think in Belarusian. I remind you that the Belarusian language is a state language, and you, as state officials, should know two state languages, including Belarusian, and not struggle to say two words. Therefore, you are obliged to speak, accordingly, in Belarusian with Belarusian-speaking citizens. For example, as provided for by the Law ‘On Appeals of Citizens’, if you write in Belarusian, any official department will respond to you in Belarusian. This put me in an unequal position with the prosecution. I was not given the opportunity to explain my position thoroughly and in detail, to dispute the unjust and senseless accusation".*

It is not the first time Bialiatski has been targeted by the Belarusian authorities. On 4 August 2011, he was arrested on spurious charges of tax evasion, for solely using his personal bank accounts in Lithuania and Poland to fund Viasna, as the organisation is not allowed to hold a bank account in Belarus. On 24 November 2011, he was sentenced to four-and-a-half years’ imprisonment in a high security prison colony. PEN members actively [campaigned](https://pen-international.org/news/open-letter-to-president-lukashenko-calling-for-the-release-of-writer-and-human-rights-defender-ales-bialiatski/) for his release; he was amnestied in June 2014.

PEN International calls on the **Belarusian authorities to r**elease Ales Bialiatski immediately and unconditionally, and drop all charges against him, and demands that he is provided with regular communication with his family, lawyers and adequate health care, pending his release. The organisation also calls on the authorities to abide by their international human rights obligations and uphold the rights to freedom of expression, association, and peaceful assembly for all.

**Crackdown against the Belarusian language and literature**

The [stigmatisation and repression](https://penbelarus.org/en/2022/09/26/belaruskaya-mova-u-peryyad-gramadska-palitychnaga-kryzisu-prayavy-mounaj-dyskryminaczyi.html) of the Belarusian language and literature in Belarus, where the authorities have been seeking to assert the dominance of the Russian language for decades, have worsened since the Russian Federation launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022. PEN International has long supported PEN Belarus in promoting the Belarusian language, including through a 2019 [resolution](https://penbelarus.org/en/2019/10/04/resolution-on-the-belarusian-language.html) calling on the Belarusian authorities 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.

**Note to editors:**

* For further information, please contact Sabrina Tucci, PEN International Communications and Campaigns Manager, Sabrina.Tucci@pen-international.org

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