

BELARUS.

An exhibition of banned books

VOICES OF BANNED BOOKS

BELARUS
BANNED
BOOKS

Why are books banned in Belarus, who determines their “harmfulness,” and how does the mechanism of censorship work overall? Books disappear from libraries, bookstores, and school curricula – and with them disappear important ideas about language, history, and freedom.

Our task is to bring these “forbidden” books into the light and to speak about them. For a word continues to live as long as there are those who wish to read it. We have gathered several stories of authors and their works that the state has condemned as “extremist,” “harmful to national interests,” or containing “undesirable information.”

We give a voice to the books that, in our country, are destined to remain silent.

PEN BELARUS

BELARUS. VOICES OF BANNED BOOKS

The unique scale of book bans

TODAY IN BELARUS:

OFFICIAL LIST: EXTREMIST MATERIALS

OFFICIAL LIST: HARMFUL TO NATIONAL INTERESTS

INFORMAL BANLIST:

- Hidden censorship
- Self-censorship and fear
- Known but overcited
- Even Nobel laureates are silenced, like Svetlana Alexievich.

CONSEQUENCES:

Having a banned book in Belarus can cost you your freedom.

FINE — from 100 to 5300 EUR

ARREST — up to 15 days

FIND OUT MORE

www.bannedbooks.penbelarus.org

WHY ARE BOOKS BANNED?

- For offering a Belarusian rather than a pro-Russian view of history
- For criticising the authorities
- For telling the truth about repression and war
- For compassion, humanity, and love
- Even for a white-red-white cover design

Official decisions provide no specific explanations and look identical for all works. Thus, books on culture or alternative history are lumped together with genuinely extremist texts. PEN Belarus maintains an alternative list — works of fiction, history, and scholarship that, under international standards, should never be banned.

A DISTINCTIVE FEATURE

Book banning is a global phenomenon, but in Belarus it takes on a unique form. Here, not only are «disloyal» books banned, but also simply Belarusian ones, because they do not fit the regime’s pro-Russian policy. This is a direct threat to the language, literature, and culture.

The history of banning Belarusian books stretches back over 185 years — from the 1840 prohibition in the Russian Empire to today’s Lukaŝenka-era censorship. Yet despite repression, books continue to be published and to find their readers — a testament to the resilience of Belarusian culture.

Books are banned to silence voices. We bring them back.

“The books gathered here differ enormously – by genre, theme, geography, and by the depth of human experience they contain. Yet they share one defining quality: a refusal to accept the worldview of a totalitarian state. They show other models of life, alternative versions of reality. Their authors place no limits on thought or emotion – and that is precisely what makes them dangerous.” – Poet and head of PEN Belarus Taciana Niadbaj.

Exhibition Content

The exhibition consists of:

- a banner wall (including frame: width – 4 m, height – 3 m) in English
- 5 roll-ups (width – 1 m, height – 2 m) in English
- 6 posters with translations of the roll-ups and the banner wall into Belarusian and Polish (A1 format)
- a 16-minute video (with English, Belarusian, and Polish subtitles)
- a collection of banned books (around 40 titles)
- optionally: an “empty chair” for confiscated manuscripts with an explanatory description

Composition

The exhibition can be presented in its full version with all its elements, or in a combined format consisting of only several components. Thanks to the mobility of all elements, the exhibition can be assembled according to the possibilities of the venue or exhibition space.

We recommend the banner wall as the core element of the exhibition, to which banners, books, the film, and other elements can be added. We also recommend displaying the books as an interactive part of the exhibition, as the opportunity to leaf through real “banned” books attracts visitors’ attention.



Exhibition Layout



Technical Rider

Venue: The venue / space should allow for the placement of the roll-ups and the banner wall, as well as the translated materials (if needed). The simplest arrangement is along the walls so that translations can be mounted on the wall next to the corresponding banners.

Required elements:

- **The banner wall and roll-ups** can be transported / delivered by train, bus, or car. If delivery is not feasible, they can be printed locally (printed on Frontlit 510 g/m² material; other high-quality printing options are possible). Another option is printing on paper that can then be mounted directly on the wall (A1 format or large wall poster / wallpaper format). A sheet with updated statistics (A4, colour print) is attached to the banner wall and should be printed locally shortly before the exhibition opening.
- **Translation posters** can be transported / delivered or printed locally. Format A1, heavy paper, colour print. Translations may be prepared in other languages depending on the location of the exhibition. We recommend using Patafix (removable adhesive putty) to attach the posters to the wall without leaving marks after removal. Alternatively, stands or frames can be used if it is not possible to mount them on the wall next to the corresponding banner.
- A TV screen / LED screen / projector or other display equipment is required to show **the video film**. The film should be looped and played continuously during exhibition hours. Speakers (or headphones) are required for the audio track. The film can be provided as a file and is also available on our YouTube channel.
- A table / shelves / bookcase are required **for displaying the books**. The books can be transported / delivered or sent by post (they fit into one box). Each book contains a short description in Belarusian, Polish, and English, and descriptions can also be printed in another language if necessary. Each book is wrapped with a “BannedBooks” band. Several armchairs or a sofa can be placed nearby so that visitors may sit down and browse the books.
- **The “empty chair” element** can be transported / delivered or printed locally (A3 foam board panel). The description can be translated into the relevant language and printed locally. An actual chair is needed for the display, with the panel placed on it. The description can be mounted on the wall next to it or placed on a stand / easel.
- **Lists of banned books** updated to the current date should be printed on A2 paper (other formats are possible). They can be mounted on the wall using Patafix or placed near the banned books. Optional element.
- **Leaflets, stickers, and other handout materials** can be transported / delivered or printed locally. Leaflets are available in Belarusian, English, and Polish (they can also be translated into other languages if necessary). A table or stand is required to display these materials.

The exhibition is highly adaptable and can be presented either in a shortened or a full version. Feel free to contact us with your ideas or requirements, and we will work together to find the best possible format.

1. Banner Wall



Size without frame: 3 × 2.4 m

Size with frame: approximately 4 × 3 m

Language: English

Technical requirements: The wall is self-standing and assembled independently. It is usually placed along a wall and is single-sided.

Transportation: The frame is packed in a case (approx. 1.5 m in height), and the banner canvas is packed in a cardboard box (approx. 1.6 m in height).

Content: General introductory information about the exhibition and the current situation regarding banned books in Belarus. A sheet with updated figures on the number of banned books, authors, and publishers at the time of the exhibition is inserted into the first square on the left.



2. Roll-ups



Size: 5 roll-ups, each measuring 1 × 2 m

Language: English

Technical requirements:
The roll-ups are self-standing and are usually placed along a wall or other structures. They are single-sided.

Transportation:
Each roll-up is packed in a case approximately 1 m in height.

Content: Each roll-up presents the “voices” of two books banned in Belarus. The text includes the titles of the books and their authors, the dates and forms of their ban, and a short description (“voice”) of each book, reflecting our perspective on what may have led to its prohibition.



Roll-up dedicated to:

- the book by Uladzimir Arloŭ, Paviel Tatarnikaŭ, “Fatherland. A Pictorial History. From Rahnieda to Kaŭciŭška”
- the book by Alhierd Bacharevič, “Dogs of Europe”



Roll-up dedicated to:

- the book by Anne Applebaum, “Gulag”
- the book by Fredrik Backman, “Björnstad (Beartown)”



Roll-up dedicated to:

– the book by Łarysa Hienijuš, “Selected Works (Belarusian Book Collection series)”

– the book by Hanya Yanagihara, “A Little Life”



Roll-up dedicated to:

– the book by Maksim Harecki, “Two Souls”

– the book by Francišak Alachnovič, “In the Clutches of the GPU”



Roll-up dedicated to:

– the book by Zmicier Daškievič, “The Worm”

– the book by Kaciaryna Andrejeva and Ihar Iljaš, “Belarusian Donbas”

3. Translation Posters



Size: 6 posters printed on heavy paper, A1 format each

Language: Belarusian and Polish (can be translated into other languages if needed)

Technical requirements: Mounted on the wall next to the banners using Patafix.

4. Video Film



Format: 1920 × 1080; duration 16:34 minutes; file size approximately 1 GB

Language: Belarusian, English, and Polish. Two subtitle versions are available:

1. Belarusian + English subtitles
2. Belarusian + Polish subtitles

Technical requirements: A TV screen, LED screen, projector, or other video display equipment.

Content: The film explores the situation of banned books in Belarus and around the world, the history of such bans, and their legal consequences. We also spoke with people directly affected by this issue — authors, publishers, international experts, and human rights defenders — who shared their perspectives on the problem of book banning.

The film features: Taciana Niadbaj (PEN Belarus), Daniel I. Pedreira (PEN Cuba), Justyna Czechowska (PEN Poland), Hanna Nordell (PEN Sweden), Jennifer Finney Boylan (PEN America), Andrej Januškievič (Belarusian publisher), Jury Kozikaŭ (lawyer, PEN Belarus).

5. Book Collection



Size: Banned books by Belarusian authors or translations into Belarusian (around 40 titles)

Language: Most books are in Belarusian, with several in English and Polish

Technical requirements: Displayed on a table or on shelves / bookcases

6. “Empty Chair”



Size: An A3 foam board panel with an image of confiscated manuscripts + a description (A4 paper)

Language: The panel is in English; the description can be printed in different languages

Technical requirements: A chair to place the panel on, and a wall or stand for the description

Content: PEN International has a tradition known as “Empty Chairs”, dedicated to those whose voices cannot be heard but must be heard. During meetings, discussions, events, and stage appearances, one empty chair remains on stage with the portrait of an imprisoned writer who cannot be physically present but whose symbolic place is among us. In this exhibition about banned books, we chose to dedicate the empty chair to confiscated manuscripts. These manuscripts remain imprisoned together with their authors and continue to serve an unjust sentence even after the writers themselves are released.

Contacts

For all inquiries, please contact us at: info@penbelarus.org



To learn more about the situation with banned books in Belarus, visit our dedicated website:
bannedbooks.penbelarus.org

