ANALYTICAL PAPER

SPEAK IN A NORMAL LANGUAGE

Language-Based Discrimination in Places of Detention in Belarus

THE INTERNATIONAL COMMITTEE FOR INVESTIGATION OF TORTURE IN BELARUS

September 2026

Belarusian is a state language of the Republic of Belarus on an equal footing with Russian. Nevertheless, testimonies documented by the International Committee for the Investigation of Torture in Belarus (hereinafter — the Committee) and by the Viasna Human Rights Centre show that in places of detention the use of Belarusian is systematically read by state agents as a marker of political disloyalty and results in worse treatment — from mockery and insults to beatings, placement in a punishment cell (ShIZO) and denial of visits, telephone calls and parcels.

The Committee has documented 2,000 testimonies of people who survived politically motivated detention and imprisonment. For this paper we analysed twenty testimonies containing accounts of pressure, humiliation, threats or violence connected specifically with the use of the Belarusian language at the stages of arrest, interrogation, trial and serving of sentence. These testimonies are corroborated by data from the Human Rights Centre Viasna, PEN Belarus, and by the findings of the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Belarus, who stated in June 2026 that repression in Belarus "extends to cultural life, education, language, historical narratives and identity itself".

1. SOURCES AND METHODOLOGY

The empirical basis of this paper consists of testimonies documented by the Committee. The testimonies were collected through in-depth interviews with the informed consent of respondents and have been anonymised. Quotations are rendered from the original Russian or Belarusian, preserving the speakers' own wording.

The Committee's sample is not representative in the statistical sense: it is drawn from survivors available for interview, predominantly those who have left Belarus. The testimonies cover the period 2020–2025; access to up-to-date information from places of detention is difficult and data arrive with a delay. At the same time, the convergence of patterns across independent bodies of data (the Committee, Viasna, PEN Belarus) increases the reliability of the conclusions.

2. CONTEXT: THE STATUS OF THE BELARUSIAN LANGUAGE AND ITS POLITICISATION

Under Article 17 of the Constitution of the Republic of Belarus, the state languages are Belarusian and Russian; Article 50 guarantees everyone the right to use their native language and to choose the language of communication. In practice, however, Russian dominates every sphere of public life, and Belarusian has been included by UNESCO in the list of vulnerable languages.

The quantitative parameters of this asymmetry are set out in the report of the UN Special Rapporteur on Belarus, Nils Muižnieks, presented to the Human Rights Council in June 2026:

In **Belarusian** were published

3 out of **3 044** legal acts (0,1%)



In 2024 books in **Belarusian** accounted for

12,5% of publications

against

80,9% in Russian



broadcast in **Belarusian**

1 of **6**

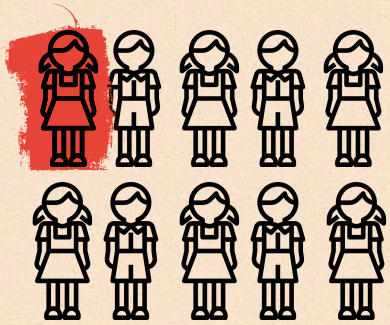
state television channels and

1 of **4**



national radio stations

Fewer than 1 in 10 schoolchildren
actually study in Belarusian



in Minsk in 2024
were Belarusian-language

17 first-grade classes
out of **860**



A full cycle of higher education in **Belarusian is unavailable.**

After 2020 the linguistic asymmetry acquired a new quality: the authorities began to read the Belarusian language as a political sign. The Special Rapporteur states that Belarusian cultural and national identity is increasingly viewed as an indication of political opposition. The everyday perception of this shift is also reflected in the testimonies collected by the Committee:

> *"Speaking Belarusian in public places stopped feeling safe after 2020. […] When I was walking down the street with a friend and we were speaking Belarusian, and if we saw police officers, we would fall silent and walk past, and only afterwards resume the conversation, even though we were not talking about politics."*

At the same time the language was politicised "from below": for part of society and for political prisoners, switching to Belarusian became a gesture of civic position — "language as protest", in the formula recorded by Viasna. This two-way politicisation is the key to understanding why the linguistic conflict manifests itself in its most concentrated form precisely in places of detention, the point of maximum power asymmetry.

3. THE LEGAL FRAMEWORK: THE GAP BETWEEN LAW AND PRACTICE

The practices described in this paper have no basis in Belarusian law — on the contrary, they contradict it. The Law "On Languages in the Republic of Belarus" enshrines the right of citizens to address state bodies in either of the two state languages. Article 10 of the Penal Enforcement Code expressly provides for the right of convicted persons to give explanations, conduct correspondence and submit applications and complaints in Belarusian, Russian or another language, the reply being given in the language of the request. Criminal procedure legislation allows proceedings to be conducted in Belarusian or in Russian.

Belarus's international obligations include the prohibition of discrimination on the basis of language (ICCPR, Articles 2 and 26), the rights of linguistic minorities (Article 27), fair trial guarantees (Article 14) and the prohibition of cruel and degrading treatment (Article 7 ICCPR, the Convention against Torture), as well as obligations under the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, which covers discrimination on the basis of ethnic origin, of which language is an expression. The Nelson Mandela Rules require non-discrimination against prisoners on the basis of language (Rule 2) and access to information and to disciplinary procedures in a language the prisoner understands (Rules 41, 54–55).

The subject of this analysis is therefore not a regulatory gap but a persistent divergence between the formal guarantees of bilingualism and law-enforcement practice, in which the use of one of the two state languages may in fact be punishable.

4. A TYPOLOGY OF PRACTICES: ANALYSIS OF THE TESTIMONIES

4.1. Violence and threats during arrest and interrogation

In testimonies relating to the first hours and days after arrest, a refusal to speak Russian, or a noticeable use of Belarusian, repeatedly acted as a trigger for violence:

> *"There was one guy detained along with us, he spoke Belarusian, he refused to speak Russian. […] In the end, because he refused to speak Russian, they took him out into the corridor, and there too you could hear that he was hit several times."*

> *"He says: 'I don't speak Russian, only Belarusian.' — 'We'll show you right now what Belarusian is,' — and then came the threats and so on."*

> ***"A riot policeman comes up, hits me with a baton […] and goes: 'Well then, [obscenity], Zhyve Belarus?!' I had been speaking Belarusian the whole time, and that set me apart from them. […] Behind my back I heard: 'How I hate that language.' […] I really understood that I was being treated more harshly because of the language."***

> *"The one taking down the record said: listen, your Belarusian is already giving me a headache, your language, let's speak Russian. […] And they started picking on my accent, so they beat me a bit there, made threats, speak Russian, with obscenities."*

> *"I kept speaking Belarusian, it made them angry, they demanded in obscene terms that I speak Russian with them. All of this was accompanied […] by arbitrary shoving and blows."*

A characteristic element is the demonstrative feigning of incomprehension. A GUBOPiK officer *"made me speak Russian, because he supposedly does not understand Belarusian. […] Although I later found out that he understands it perfectly well."*

A detained woman who used the words *"vyaselle"* (wedding) and *"pamyarantsavy"* (orange) was drawn by officers into a mocking argument in which they refused to believe that these words existed.

One of the witnesses describes how an interrogator threatened violence against a detainee who demanded to be questioned in Belarusian: *"I'll beat you to death […] I'll find another way to deal with you."*

It is analytically significant that in all of the cases cited the aggression is directed not at the content of what was said but at the very fact of using the language: language is sufficient grounds for singling a person out from the mass of detainees and treating them more harshly.

4.2. Language as an "operational indicator"

The testimonies make it possible to reconstruct the place of language in the logic of the security services: the use of Belarusian is treated as an indicator of belonging to the protest milieu. Belarusian-language correspondence is deliberately examined during phone searches; the fact that a witness's mother corresponded with her sister in Belarusian was taken by officers as confirmation of the family's "unreliability".

A witness who spoke Russian with the security officers notes that, after they had gone through his Belarusian-language messages, an officer began inserting mocking "Pryvitanne" ("hello") into the conversation: *"you can feel that dismissive attitude […] I perceived it as insults".*

A female witness says of GUBOPiK: *"they say that I have to speak Russian, and every time I have to explain that I have the right to speak Belarusian".*

The same logic is reproduced in formalised form within the penitentiary system (see 4.4): the overlap of categories is telling — language is taken into account in the registration of persons "prone to extremist and other destructive activity", that is, it is built into the official nomenclature of indicators of "dangerousness".

4.3. Language in court proceedings

Although Belarusian is a language of judicial proceedings on an equal footing with Russian, courts reject motions to conduct proceedings in Belarusian, while testimony given in Belarusian is entered in the record in an unverified Russian translation:

> *"That judge rejected my motion about the Belarusian language. She said: you speak however you like, but I will conduct the proceedings in the language I speak. As a result, I spoke Belarusian, but all the documents, my words, everything was written down in Russian. And the question is who translated it and how, and to what extent that can legally be regarded as a translation."*

> ***"The judge told him, either deliberately or genuinely: 'I don't understand you, could you speak Russian,' to which he replied: 'I don't know Russian, this is my native language, I will speak it, and if you wish, call an interpreter.'"***

The depth of the problem is indicated by the fact that the risk attached to language in court is acknowledged by officials of the system themselves: an investigator advised a detainee not to speak Belarusian "with the 'screws' or during the trial, because you can get a longer sentence" (Viasna).

Some defendants waive their procedural language rights pre-emptively: *"I was told that I had the right to ask for the procedure to be conducted in Belarusian, but I didn't ask, just so as not to irritate them even more".*

4.4. Penitentiary institutions: from humiliation to formalised punishment

The widest range of practices has been documented in detention facilities and penal colonies.

Verbal aggression and public humiliation. Admission to an Offenders' Isolation Centre (TsIP):

> *"The jailer who admitted me, on hearing Belarusian, started shouting at me, just swearing, that people like me ruin his life […] he started mangling the Belarusian language, speaking a 'normal' language, he screamed obscenities that people like me […] had sold out to Europe and to the Yanks. […] It was a reaction specifically to the Belarusian language and to nothing else. There was no such reaction to the other detainees, who spoke Russian."*

Systematic humiliation in a penal colony, staged for an audience of other prisoners:

> *"The deputy head of the colony […] hated me personally because of the Belarusian language. […] As soon as he saw me, […] he demanded that I report to him, and every time he shouted obscenities at me. Word for word: '[Obscenity], how long are you going to [speak] your Belarusian, [speak it] in the kitchen. Come on, stop showing off, speak a normal language.' […] And all of this was in an aggressive form, […] among other things in order to humiliate me in the eyes of the other prisoners."*

Pressure through other prisoners. In a women's penal colony:

> *"Often it was not the staff themselves who did something to those convicted under political articles — they did it through the hands of other prisoners. I encountered attempts to forbid me to speak Belarusian, they shouted: 'Speak normally.' […] They say: 'In Russian.'"*

Disciplinary punishment. According to Viasna, in penal colony No. 15 in Mogilev a political prisoner was given three separate 10-day terms in a punishment cell (ShIZO) for making his report in Belarusian, the report being deemed "not made"; within the first 20 days he was declared a "malicious violator" and deprived of visits and parcels.

Formalised registration. The former political prisoner and journalist Yauhen Merkis describes the practice of penal colony No. 17 in Shklou:

> *"There were even cases [of non-political prisoners] who, moved by patriotic feelings, spoke Belarusian with the staff, and for that they were put on 'our' preventive register No. 10 as persons 'prone to extremist and other destructive activity'."*

According to PEN Belarus, prisoners who spoke Belarusian were placed on preventive registers and threatened with solitary confinement; the released documentary filmmaker Larysa Shchyrakova testified that the head of the colony regarded her use of Belarusian as an attempt to "set up the administration".

4.5. The institutional dimension: documents, forms, libraries

Irrespective of the conduct of individual officers, discrimination is reproduced at the level of the administrative infrastructure. All document templates — applications for visits and parcels, lists of relatives — exist only in Russian. In a temporary detention facility (IVS) in Gomel, a detainee was refused a record form in Belarusian; in an Offenders' Isolation Centre a detained woman was not allowed to read a "preventive" text to camera in Belarusian: *"I was told no, only in Russian"*. In penal colony No. 1 in Novopolotsk, all books in Belarusian were removed in the autumn of 2023, including works by Yanka Kupala, Yakub Kolas and Uladzimir Karatkevich; monitoring by PEN Belarus for 2025 records bans on language learning and the confiscation of textbooks, extending to placement in a punishment cell for keeping them.

The institutional layer is self-reproducing: the absence of Belarusian-language forms and procedures makes use of the language "non-standard" behaviour, which in turn is easier to classify as a violation.

4.6. The chilling effect and forced linguistic assimilation

The most telling systemic consequence is the pre-emptive abandonment of their native language by Belarusian speakers in any contact with the security services:

> *"From the district police department (ROVD) onwards I spoke Russian everywhere, because I had heard that people who speak Belarusian are treated worse."*

> ***"I spoke Russian with them from the first second, from the moment I opened the door to them, because I knew that Belarusian is a dangerous language for communicating with them and with any security agency in Belarus."***

> *"You understand that speaking Belarusian with the colony administration may draw fire onto you. […] I have seen situations where it caused, to put it mildly, a certain irritation."*

Merkis describes the same strategy: *"Speaking Belarusian in the colony […] is a reason to attract a great deal of unnecessary attention. […] So I had to switch to Russian. […] For a very long time afterwards I went through withdrawal and Belarusian words kept slipping out"* (Viasna/Zerkalo).

A political prisoner in colony No. 15 explained his abandonment of the language by the threat of Article 411 of the Criminal Code (a mechanism for extending sentences for "malicious disobedience"): *"I was afraid of falling under Article 411 of the Criminal Code and getting another year or years on my shoulders… I might not have switched to a language not my own had I not known that Vitold Ashurak was most likely killed over language."*

The mechanism works without direct coercion in every individual case: a few exemplary punishments and the circulation of information about them are enough for abandoning the language to become a mass survival strategy. The testimonies also record the psychological cost of this strategy — from "withdrawal" on switching to a non-native language to the episode in which a first letter home, written in Russian, was read by the family as a distress signal: *"That letter, not in my native language, said more about what was happening to me there than if I had written it in Belarusian"* (Viasna).

4.7. Variation in practice and its significance

Hostility towards the Belarusian language is not universal. A witness who for two months spoke exclusively Belarusian in the temporary detention facility of the Maladzyechna district encountered only two mildly negative reactions, whereas *"one elderly corridor guard even tried almost always to speak our language with me"* (Viasna); a similar balance — *"two incidents [of hostility] from the staff"* against a generally neutral background — is recorded by another witness. A third told us that he conducted his everyday life and his correspondence (which passed censorship) in Belarusian without encountering formal obstacles.

The attitude of cellmates is described in most testimonies as neutral or emphatically friendly; in pre-trial detention centre (SIZO) No. 1 prisoners held "Belarusian language days", *"when we spoke Belarusian with all the cellmates. Many people had a positive attitude to it."* One of the witnesses sums it up: *"the problems arise from the fact that you are a political prisoner in the first place, and the fact that you speak Belarusian adds nothing on top of that."*

This variation matters for the analysis in two respects. First, it shows that the discrimination is not prescribed by formal rules — it is produced by institutional culture and by the personal attitudes of staff, that is, it belongs to the sphere of the state's actual rather than its normative practice. Second, it is precisely the unpredictability of the reaction — from friendliness to the punishment cell — that in itself constitutes a factor of pressure: a prisoner cannot know in advance what using their native language will lead to, and rationally chooses to give it up.

5. DEATHS IN CUSTODY: VITOLD ASHURAK AND ALES PUSHKIN

Vitold Ashurak died in penal colony No. 17 in Shklou in May 2021; the officially announced cause was "cardiac arrest". Former political prisoner Vadzim Khizhniakou testified: *"As I heard, he began speaking Belarusian with the administration as a matter of principle. And they forced him to speak Russian. He says: 'The state language is Belarusian, and I will speak Belarusian.' It is possible that he was [beaten] for that position."*

The Belarusian-speaking artist Ales Pushkin died in custody in July 2023 after being denied timely medical assistance. PEN Belarus classifies both as cases of intensified pressure connected, among other things, with their principled use of the Belarusian language. The circumstances of both deaths have not been the subject of an independent investigation.

6. DEVELOPMENTS IN 2020–2026 AND THE POSITIONS OF INTERNATIONAL MECHANISMS

Comparing the testimonies over time makes it possible to distinguish three phases.

- In **2020–2021** spontaneous reactions to language during mass arrests predominate: beatings, threats, insults.

- In **2022–2023** the practices shift into the penitentiary system and take on a disciplinary form: punishment cells for making reports in Belarusian, deprivation of visits, "malicious violator" status, the removal of Belarusian-language books from libraries.
- By **2024–2025** institutionalisation is recorded: preventive registration as persons "prone to extremism" on account of language, entrenched restrictions on Belarusian-language literature and on language learning, and the use of the threat of Article 411 of the Criminal Code as a background deterrent.

This trajectory runs in parallel with general policy: over the same period school libraries were purged of "extremist" authors, hundreds of books were added to the lists of "extremist materials" and of publications "capable of harming national interests", and educational programmes were brought closer to Russian ones.

International mechanisms have recorded individual elements of this picture. In its 2024 concluding observations (CERD/C/BLR/CO/24-25), the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination expressed concern about restrictions on education in minority languages and the arbitrary application of anti-extremism legislation.

The UN Special Rapporteur on Belarus devoted the 2026 report to violations of cultural rights, including restrictions on the use of the Belarusian language and the ill-treatment of prisoners. At the same time, linguistic discrimination specifically in places of detention has so far not been singled out by international mechanisms as a separate subject of analysis; the present paper systematises the available empirical evidence on this segment.

7. THE FUNCTIONS OF DISCRIMINATION: AN INTERPRETATION

Taken together, the data allow three complementary explanations for the persistence of the practices described.

A sorting function.
Under conditions of mass repression, the security system needs quick criteria for picking "politicals" out of the general flow of detainees and prisoners. Language is an instantly legible marker that is hard to conceal: it "labels" a person before their case has even been examined.

A disciplining function.
Punishment for language is punishment for insubordination in its most visible form. The demand to "speak normally" is a demand for demonstrative loyalty; giving up one's native language under pressure is a visible act of submission, while the public humiliation of Belarusian speakers is addressed to everyone who witnesses the scene.

An ideological function.
Practices in places of detention reproduce in concentrated form the state-wide policy of displacing the Belarusian language and russifying the public sphere described by the UN Special Rapporteur. Staff act in line with the signals coming from official discourse, in which the use of Belarusian is associated with "extremism"; the absence of any disciplinary consequences for staff for linguistic aggression entrenches the norm.

8. LEGAL ASSESSMENT

The documented practices may be characterised as follows.

Discrimination on the basis of language and ethnicity. The Belarusian language is a constitutive expression of Belarusian ethnocultural identity; systematically worse treatment of its speakers constitutes discrimination prohibited by Articles 2 and 26 of the ICCPR, and intolerance based on ethnic origin within the meaning of Article 1 of ICERD.

Cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment.
Beatings for refusing to speak Russian, public humiliation, placement in a punishment cell and deprivation of contact with family for making a report in one's native language — given the vulnerable position of a prisoner — fall under the prohibitions of Article 7 ICCPR and of the Convention against Torture, and contravene Rules 2, 41 and 43 of the Nelson Mandela Rules.

Violation of the right to a fair trial.
The refusal to conduct proceedings in the defendant's state language and the recording of testimony in an unverified translation affect the guarantees of Article 14 ICCPR and of national procedural legislation.

Violation of national law.
Each of the practices described contravenes Articles 17 and 50 of the Constitution, the Law "On Languages" and Article 10 of the Penal Enforcement Code of the Republic of Belarus.

Since the acts described are committed by agents of the state in the exercise of their powers and are reproducible in character, responsibility for them lies with the state. In the context of characterising the repression in Belarus as possible crimes against humanity, the linguistic marker has evidentiary significance: it documents discriminatory intent — an element of the crime of persecution on political and ethnocultural grounds.

9. CONCLUSION

Language-based discrimination in Belarusian places of detention is not a sum of isolated excesses but a logical projection of the state's language and repression policy after 2020 onto closed institutions — an environment in which the asymmetry of power is at its maximum and external oversight is absent. For the security system, language performs the functions of a marker of "politicals", an instrument of discipline and a vehicle of ideological russification. The main cumulative result is forced linguistic assimilation: a rationally acting Belarusian-speaking prisoner gives up their native language because the costs of using it are unpredictable and potentially include violence, solitary confinement and new criminal cases.

At the same time, the materials record a counter-process: for some prisoners the Belarusian language has become a practice of preserving dignity and solidarity — "a symbol of resistance", in the words of one of the witnesses. The persistence of both tendencies makes the linguistic dimension an indispensable element of any further documentation of detention conditions in Belarus, of the assessment of ill-treatment, and of the analysis of repression in the categories of international criminal law.

