

# BALTIC WORLDS

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## New historical narratives

The concept of positive  
de-Sovietization

The meaning of new  
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Illustration: Karin Zarc Sunesson

# The concerns of historians

**T**his 31<sup>st</sup> Annual Report of the Network of Concerned Historians (NCH) contains news about the domain where history and human rights intersect, in particular about the censorship of history and the persecution of historians, archivists, and archaeologists around the globe, as reported by various human rights organizations and other sources. It mainly covers events and developments in 2024 and 2025.

A problematic development in the East European region that causes concern among historians is the Belarusian governmental repression, arrests and imprisonment of historians for researching on topics that the government finds “provocative”. In the report that consists of lists of examples from country by country the following is for instance noted in Belarus:

[...]On 10 September 2024, the trial of historian Ihar Melnikau [Melnikov] started at the Minsk City Court. Melnikau was charged with ‘facilitating extremist activities,’ reportedly on account of his work on the historical ties between Belarus and Poland and for giving an interview to Euroradio while traveling to Poland. The state-sanctioned view of history saw Belarusian history as intertwined with Russian history, sanctioning research into and teaching of historical subjects like the Grand Duchy of Lithuania (1236–1795) [See NCH Annual Report 2024]. On 13 September 2024, Melnikau was sentenced to four years in a penal colony. [...]’ [...]In [early June] 2024, a resident of Kobrin (Kobryny) was sentenced to ten days’ imprisonment for



PHOTO: VIASNA

Belarusian historian Melnikau was sentenced to four years in a penal colony.

*Network of Concerned Historians Annual Report 2025*, eds., Antoon De Baets and Ruben Zeeman, (July 31, 2025), 186 pages. Available at: <https://www.concernedhistorians.org/ar/25.pdf>

‘distributing’ *Айчына: маляўнічая гісторыя – Ад Рагнеды да Касцюшкі* (‘Fatherland: A Colorful History – From Ragneda to Kosciusko’) by historian and chairman of the Belarusian charter of PEN International Uładzimir Arlou.

The court argued that by having the book on a shelf in his house, it was being ‘publicly displayed’ as it could at least be seen by ‘family members.’ The book was ordered to be destroyed. [...]’<sup>2</sup>

THE REPORT FROM Russia is long and contains several examples of restrictions and repressive actions, arrests and trials targeting researchers and civil society, an development that has escalated since the full-scale invasion in 2022. A phenomena that is reported is that Russia, between 2020 and June 2024, accounted for more than sixty percent of takedown requests to internet company Google:

Among the removals made at the behest of government agency Roskomnadzor were certain posts on Google’s blogger platform, which ‘included criticism of Russian military history and policy, and Russian patriotic holidays.’ Footage of Ukrainian protesters burning a



The books of historian and chairman of the Belarusian charter of PEN International, Uładzimir Arlou are banned.

PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Russian flag and of people insulting Russian state symbols on Google’s YouTube was also taken down.<sup>3</sup>

Apart from trying to control information online Russia also takes further measures in the propaganda aimed towards children. In October 2024, it was reported that indoctrination lessons called “Conversations about important things,” introduced in schools in Russia in 2022, would be extended to kindergartens. Topics for such classes included the promotion of so-called “traditional values” and the glorification of Russia’s war against Ukraine.<sup>4</sup>

The scale of the silencing of freedom of expression – in words, spoken or written, or even, merely thought or imagined, if one consider the molding of future generations – is striking in countries such as Belarus and Russia today. If one looks at previous reports

from the Network of Concerned Historians, the development in several countries in the region showed early signs of authoritarianism and populist politics. Therefore one should also, with caution, read and follow the reporting from countries with similar emerging tendencies. 

Ninna Mörner

## references

- 1 “Belarusian Historian Ihar Melnikau Goes on Trial on Extremism Charge,” RFE/RL, (September 10, 2024); Scholars at Risk, *Academic Freedom Monitoring Project*, (September 13, 2024); PEN America, *Freedom to Write Index 2024* (London: PEN, 2025).
- 2 “A Resident of Kobrin Was Given a Prison sentence for a Book by Historian Arlou in a Bookcase,” Racyja, (June 3, 2024).
- 3 Siân Boyle, “Revealed: Google Facilitated Russia and China’s Censorship Requests,” *Guardian*, (February 15, 2025).
- 4 Amnesty International, *The State of the World’s Human Rights* (London: AI, 2025), 313.