

2023

# **Belarusan cultural sphere in 2020-2023: losses and gains**

Analytical review



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# Introduction

This analytical review was prepared in August 2023 on the basis of regular cultural sphere studies carried out by the Center for European Transformation (CET) over the past eight years. In 2015, our researchers developed a methodology to evaluate the implementation of the values and norms of the UNESCO Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions in Belarus and carried out an initial study<sup>1</sup>. The next stages of monitoring were carried out in 2019<sup>2</sup> and 2022<sup>3</sup>, which made it possible to compare the results and to trace the dynamics of development within the Belarusian cultural field. The conclusions of the latest monitoring survey and other studies of the Belarusian cultural sector conducted by the CET over the past three years underlie this review.

In the period of 2020-2023, the Belarusian cultural sphere was affected by three severe shocks:

- the outbreak of the new coronavirus infection COVID-19 pandemic and unprecedented measures to combat it;
- the acute internal political crisis in Belarus and the related ongoing mass political repressions against the country's civil society;
- the beginning of Russia's full-scale military aggression against Ukraine, in which Belarus took the side of the former.

These events equally became shocks and created new challenges for cultural figures, served as an impetus to rethink the content of Belarusian culture per se, to fill it with new meanings, and to actualize cultural traditions and heritage. For many, the sphere of culture ceased to be an area of leisure and entertainment, but became to be associated more with civic solidarity, the current political agenda, and problems of civil society.

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<sup>1</sup> See: **Monitoring of How the Republic of Belarus Implements the UNESCO Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions** (2015), Centre for European Transformation, 26.05.2016: [http://cet.eurobelarus.info/files/userfiles/5/CET/2016\\_Convention\\_UNESCO-Monitoring\\_EN.pdf](http://cet.eurobelarus.info/files/userfiles/5/CET/2016_Convention_UNESCO-Monitoring_EN.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> See: [in Russian] **Monitoring of How the Republic of Belarus Implements the UNESCO Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions** (2019), Centre for European Transformation, 13.08.2019: [https://cet.eurobelarus.info/files/userfiles/5/CET/2019\\_Convention\\_UNESCO-Monitoring\\_RU.pdf](https://cet.eurobelarus.info/files/userfiles/5/CET/2019_Convention_UNESCO-Monitoring_RU.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> See: **Monitoring of How the Republic of Belarus Implements the UNESCO Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions** (2022), Centre for European Transformation, 31.05.2023: <https://cet.eurobelarus.info/en/library/publication/2023/05/31/monitoring-of-how-the-republic-of-belarus-implements-the-unesco-2306022023.html>.

Under these conditions, creative activity is increasingly becoming an effective tool and driver of changes in society, which determines a special research interest in the sphere of culture in the context of socio-political transformations.

The structure of this review is based on four questions:

- 1) What did the Belarusian cultural sphere lose and what did it gain in the period of 2020-2023?
- 2) How has Belarus' state policy in the field of culture changed?
- 3) How have Belarusian non-state cultural actors adapted / restructured?
- 4) What are the main challenges faced by the Belarusian cultural sphere today, and are there any strategic proposals / visions of its further development?

In our review, we shall try to briefly outline the main results and trends in the development of the situation in the Belarusian sphere of culture in these four dimensions.



# 1. 2020-2023: losses and gains of the Belarusian cultural sphere

**The creative outburst in 2020.** One of the effects of the turbulent political events in 2020 was the creative surge expressed in an unprecedented growth of cultural production and consumption. The revolutionary situation was manifested, inter alia, in the rapid rise of creativity and diverse creative self-expression, the manifestation of new identities (including local ones: district, street, courtyard). Not only did it saturate symbolic space with new images and works, but, albeit for a short period of time, restructured the nature of cultural production and consumption. First of all, we are talking about unprecedented opportunities for public demonstration: literally every person or community of people could publicly present their creative works, and this creative product was instantly picked up and distributed further in public space. A new way of interaction between artists and audiences became widespread in cities — meetings with local communities right in the courtyards of houses in residential areas. Gradually, with the increase of repressions, the volume of such creative production and consumption decreased and — by 2023 — it had practically disappeared.

**Solidarization of cultural actors in 2020 remains in an inertial mode.** The COVID-19 pandemic, which came to Belarus in the beginning of 2020, demonstrated a wide potential for solidarity and mutual assistance in the cultural environment. Difficulties in the field did not prevent cultural figures and organizations from their active participation in charity campaigns to raise funds for doctors and vulnerable groups, as well as in initiatives aimed at helping the struggling cultural institutions and their projects. Self-organization and cooperation of cultural actors manifested itself to an even greater extent in the situation of the emerging political crisis, when the voice of creative figures became one of the most noticeable voices of the Belarusian protests. However, by 2023, the focus on political protest was gradually giving way to depoliticization of the Belarusian independent cultural field; there is an increase of the number of projects and initiatives not directly related to the topics of political repressions, cultural resistance, etc. This is also due to some fatigue with this topic among consumers of cultural products.

**The increase of the status and role of Belarusian culture abroad and within the country.** The world community's solidarity with the Belarusians who advocate democratic changes also increased the interest in Belarusian culture and art, especially (but not exclusively) those of a protest nature. The voice of cultural figures with a pronounced civic position became one of the significant symbols of the socio-political confrontation, which contributed to the increased interest in Belarusian culture and its representatives among the Belarusians themselves.

**Delegalization of the independent sphere of culture within Belarus.** The return of criminal liability for organizations carrying out activities without state registration and, at the same time, the almost complete destruction of the Belarusian “third sector” actually criminalized all activities in the independent cultural field. According to human rights defenders, starting from the post-election period of 2020 and as of the end of August 2023, at least 900 public organizations of various forms have been forcibly liquidated (or are in the process of liquidation) in Belarus; about 500 more NGOs have decided to get self-liquidated<sup>4</sup>. Among them there are at least 220 non-profit organizations that worked in the field of culture or had a pronounced cultural orientation. These are organizations of various types: from the oldest public associations and unions (such as, for example, the Union of Belarusian Writers), large organizations that actively participated in socio-political processes in 2020 (Belarusian PEN, ART Corporation) to local foundations, creative clubs, organizations involved in the preservation and promotion of cultures of national minorities, etc. The repressions affected not only organizations, but individual cultural figures as well. According to the monitoring of violations of rights in the cultural sector conducted by the Belarusian PEN, at least 1,875 representatives of the cultural sector were subjected to politically motivated persecutions between August 2020 and March 2023. These persecutions take different forms: from various obstacles in the implementation of creative activities, dismissals from work, administrative arrests and large fines to criminal prosecution and imprisonment for many years. As of March 2023, the number of cultural figures recognized as political prisoners was 137 people<sup>5</sup>.

Large-scale political repressions, as well as various obstacles from the state, leave no opportunities for legal and public activity for a large number of representatives of the independent sphere of culture, who, under these conditions, are forced to live and create “below the radar”.

**Personnel outflow, unemployment, emigration in the professional cultural environment** became a natural consequence of the political repressions and ideological purges in all spheres of professional activity. The Belarusian cultural sphere is one of the most affected in this regard. We are talking about various manifestations of a “profession ban”: dismissals from work, a ban to carry out events (exhibitions, concerts, performances, etc.), liquidation of cultural institutions, deprivation of licenses, inspections that paralyze the activities of organizations (tax checks, fire safety compliance, etc.), expulsion of students from educational institutions, “black lists” of creative figures, fines and imprisonment. All of the above pushes

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<sup>4</sup> See: **Monitoring the situation of freedom of association and civil society organisations in the Republic of Belarus August 2023**, Lawtrend: <https://www.lawtrend.org/english/monitoring-the-situation-of-freedom-of-association-and-civil-society-organisations-in-the-republic-of-belarus-august-2023>.

<sup>5</sup> See: **Monitoring Violations of Cultural Rights and Human Rights of Cultural Figures. Belarus, January-March 2023**, PEN Belarus, 28.03.2023: <https://penbelarus.org/en/2023/04/28/rus-monitoring-narushenij-kulturnyh-prav-i-prav-cheloveka-v-otnoshenii-deyatelej-kulturny-belarus-yanvar-mart-2023-goda.html>.



professionals out of cultural circulation, makes it impossible for them to continue their activities in the country and, as a result, forces many of them to look for opportunities for self-realization abroad.

**Belarusan culture becomes a cross-border culture.** Due to the mass “exodus” of cultural figures and independent cultural organizations outside the country, as well as in general due to the expansion of Belarusian diasporas in different countries of the world, the production and consumption of Belarusian cultural products are being increasingly “decoupled” from Belarus as a country. While maintaining an active and symbolic orientation to the geographical space of Belarus, Belarusian culture actively fits into the world cultural context and is being increasingly oriented not only to consumption by the Belarusians, but also to the inclusion and participation of the international community in it.

**Designation and appropriation by society of cultural dominants, new national mythology, etc.** In the process of the sharp politicization of Belarusian society as a result of the events in 2020, noticeable changes took place in the attitude of the Belarusians towards many values and ideas previously shared by relatively small groups; their rethinking and appropriation has begun. We are talking about the values related to national identity, history, traditions, the Belarusian language and culture. Thus, for example, the Belarusian national white-red-white flag became widely used, which became the main symbol of the Belarusian protests, which contributed in no small extent to the awakening of a widespread interest in Belarusian history and culture among supporters of change. Changes in Belarusian symbolic space have formed a fairly stable system of cultural dominants, marking the cultural field around them (the white color as a symbol of the non-violent nature of protests, the already mentioned national white-red-white flag, the Belarusian language, etc.) and setting, among other things, the Belarusians’ perceptions of themselves (a new national myth).



## 2. Changes in the state policy in the field of culture

**Strengthening of control and censorship, ideologization of culture.** With the beginning of the mass repressions against the entire Belarusian civil society, there have been numerous cases of dismissals from work, pressure through inspections of cultural organizations, including their legal liquidation, as well as a large number of cases of administrative and criminal prosecution, and many others. At the same time, the official sphere of culture began to increasingly demonstrate its propaganda potential and to move to the serving of ideological practices of the current authorities. Previously, the Belarusian official sphere of culture performed the function of implementing the ideological guidelines of the current political regime as well, but at the same time it managed to maintain relatively politically neutral meanings, which opened up opportunities for cooperation with the independent cultural field. Following the repressions, the authorities began a large-scale work to rethink and rewrite history, forcing “patriotic” practices in society. The main tool that brings culture into line with official ideology has been various practices of censorship.

**The creation of legal and institutional obstacles to the independent sphere of culture.** Since the beginning of 2021, repressions began to acquire a systemic character, which gives grounds to talk about the deliberate destruction of the independent sphere of culture. Against the backdrop of all the listed negative trends in the field of culture, caused by the response of the current Belarusian authorities to the post-election crisis situation, they also create long-term, systemic, legislatively formalized restrictions on the inclusion of independent actors in public cultural circulation<sup>6</sup>.

**The curtailment of the government policy aimed at developing the country’s openness to foreign guests and equal cooperation with all states.** First of all, it affected the member states of the European Union, especially Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia, neighboring Belarus, and became the response of the Belarusian authorities to the governments of these countries supporting the actions of opponents of Lukashenko’s regime and the imposition of sanctions by Western countries against Belarus. There has been a radical reorientation of the foreign policy of the Belarusian state (including cultural cooperation) towards Russia and Asian countries.

**Creeping Russification.** The refusal to cooperate in the cultural and humanitarian spheres with Western countries, as well as the ongoing and increasing “deep integration” with Russia,

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<sup>6</sup> See: [in Russian] **Legislation of the Republic of Belarus on culture in the context of the UNESCO Convention** (2022), Flying University: <https://fly-uni.org/partnery/обзор-законодательство-республики/>.



inevitably leads to the growing influence of pro-Russian activism within the country. This applies to many spheres of culture at different levels: from changes in the official historical discourse (“rewriting history”, deheroization of fighters for the independence of Belarus, etc.) and the use of messages of the ideology of the “Russian World” in current politics to the suppression and discrimination of manifestations of Belarusan national identity.

### 3. Adaptation of actors of the independent sphere of culture to the changed situation

**The gradual construction of an independent cultural field outside of Belarus** in forms similar to those in which it existed in Belarus before 2020 (institutionalization through non-profit organizations and project activities). The difference is that, while in Belarus, independent actors were forced to adapt to the legal, political, and economic conditions of the authoritarian state, now they have to adapt to the conditions of other, mostly democratic, countries, and this requires the development of new norms and practices (legal, financial, managerial). Simultaneously, areas that are “difficult to move” abroad, for which the connection with authentic Belarusian material is important, are undergoing quite significant transformations (primarily, it concerns such segments as work with tangible and intangible cultural heritage, protection of cultural and natural monuments). However, even in these cases, there are new formats of work that allow one to act and develop in isolation from artifacts (e.g. the platform for audio guides to Belarusian sights).

**Culture online.** During the active phase of the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic in Belarus, creative workers began to actively master remote forms of interaction with audiences, and the politically motivated mass emigration of many cultural figures and organizations made the online format one of the main ways to adapt to the situation of a geographical gap with consumers of cultural products. This trend has significantly expanded the Belarusians’ possibilities to participate in cultural production and consumption; however, such forms of interaction do not fully replace full-fledged “live” communication. In addition, online consumption of cultural products is accessible to the majority of, but not all Belarusians.

**A gradual reorientation of Belarusian cultural figures and organizations towards foreign consumers**, and not just towards the Belarusian diaspora and audience within Belarus. There is an active familiarization of foreign cultural markets, marketplaces, etc. In general, it can be stated that as of 2023 the period of conservation and focus on the Belarusian consumer (both in the diaspora and within the country) is over; now Belarusian cultural figures and organizations are looking for access to a wider audience.

**The widening of practices of interdisciplinary and cross-sector collaborations.** We are talking about the emergence of projects in which various areas of culture, art, new technologies, etc. are combined in a way that is not typical for the Belarusian cultural sphere.



**Improving professional qualifications through participation in foreign educational programs.** Many Belarusian cultural figures, having found themselves in exile, began to actively take advantage of educational opportunities, training programs and scholarships from the EU member states and the USA, which in the future promises an increase in the level of professionalism in the cultural community, and also opens up opportunities for nurturing a new generation of Belarusian art managers, curators, artists, etc.

**Search for new models of financing and self-financing.** Many creative teams and organizations, responding to financial challenges, are making attempts to go beyond the system of donor assistance — looking for new methods of crowdfunding, commercial niches and development strategies (creative industries, etc.).

**Development of network and infrastructural elements in the field of independent cultural actors.** We are talking about the development and expansion of the facilitating activities of a number of long-existing Belarusian cultural organizations, as well as the formation of new players with the potential to consolidate diverse cultural actors, develop a strategic vision for the entire sector, provide it with resources, etc. (Belarusian Council of Culture, InBelCult 2.0). This also includes the creation of unions and associations in certain thematic sectors of culture (Belarusian Independent Film Academy (BIFA), Belarusian Filmmakers' Network (BFN), initiatives to create a Belarusian Theater Institute, a Belarusian Book Institute, etc.).

**Renewing “apolitical” cultural production.** If, in the wake of the political events of 2020, the main topic for Belarusian independent cultural actors was solidarity and cultural protest, then recently cultural projects and initiatives have begun to emerge more and more, with their agendas not containing references to Belarusian politics and national themes in general. Such initiatives strive to create a cultural product taking into account the needs of an international audience, while maintaining contact with creators located in Belarus, which forces them to distance themselves from the Belarusian socio-political agenda, so as not to expose them to the threat of falling under repression.

**The semi-underground or partisan mode of existence of independent culture within Belarus** is progressing in the situation of ongoing repressions and the liquidation of a large number of public organizations and initiatives operating in the non-state cultural field.

**Geographical distribution of stages of the cultural cycle.** The point is that, due to restrictions to demonstrate and distribute in Belarus cultural products of independent creators, the latter are forced to look for opportunities to present their creativity abroad, while the very creation of a cultural product is carried out within Belarus.

## 4. Main challenges for the development of the Belarusian cultural sphere and strategies to surmount them

**Difficulties to preserve the Belarusian context.** The reorientation towards foreign audiences and markets taking place in many segments of cultural production inevitably leads to a decrease in the production of cultural products with a pronounced Belarusian component, in a language understood by the Belarusians, etc.

**Financial difficulties.** In addition to difficulties with financing and the lack of infrastructural support necessary for many cultural practices, there are also difficulties in navigating in the system of donor assistance and not knowing where exactly to apply for financial support for the implementation of a particular cultural project. In addition, foreign donor assistance is often more focused on other areas of activity of Belarusians: protecting human rights, supporting media and pro-democratic political activity, etc. The situation inside Belarus is even more complicated: after the deterioration of relations between the Belarusian authorities and Western countries, obtaining international donor assistance in a legal manner has become actually impossible.

**Management and promotion.** One of the “classic” problems of the Belarusian cultural sphere is the lack of competence in promotion and self-representation among cultural figures and initiatives, which slows down their integration into international cultural circulation. We shall add here that often platforms and projects designed to help cultural figures promote their products (pitchings, etc.) do not provide a real opportunity to “connect” with potential investors.

**Lack of “connecting links” in various branches of cultural activity.** In that part of Belarusian independent culture that is being formed and developed outside of Belarus, today there is a shortage of active leaders of cultural niches who would unite or infrastructurally connect (through activities and by solving specific problems) certain areas and sectors of cultural activity. Major initiatives, such as the Belarusian Council of Culture, InBelCult 2.0, and the representative office for national revival under the United Transitional Cabinet, do not fully cover this request and in their agenda they strive to cover all independent culture, often without taking into account the specifics of individual industries. Network and infrastructure associations that exist or are being formed in certain sectors of cultural activity (theater, cinema, literature, book publishing, etc.) are still in search of tactics and strategies that are adequate to the situation.



**Difficulties in arranging a full-fledged professional infrastructure for the production, demonstration, and distribution of Belarusian cultural products outside of Belarus.**

Despite the fact that many platforms and art spaces created by Belarusians themselves have appeared and are developing outside of Belarus in recent years, often both their technical and personnel insufficiency does not allow them to have a full-fledged cultural process on them. This is especially true for such areas as theater, contemporary art, etc. As a rule, representatives of these areas have to turn to local venues, galleries, halls, theater stages, etc. available in their countries of residence as part of the implementation of one-time performances, projects, exhibitions.

**Reduced infrastructural capabilities for the development of the state sphere of culture.**

Inside Belarus, the repressions and strengthening of ideological control create obstacles to the development of not only an independent cultural field (there is an almost complete collapse of infrastructural opportunities for development), but also for the state-run sphere of culture and art (there is a shortage of personnel, dismissals of professional workers continue for political reasons). In particular, areas that are institutionally dependent on the state and its support, such as restoration, preservation of tangible and intangible cultural heritage, etc., suffer from personnel drain.

**Lack of any “image of the future” and a development strategy.** In the changed conditions, among Belarusian independent cultural figures, there is a demand for developing a common understanding of what Belarusian culture is/must be today, what are the prospects and directions of its development, but the mechanisms for developing a common strategic vision are still unclear.

**Lack of full-fledged media platforms and an information strategy to spread Belarusian culture,**

which would adequately work both in relation to the sphere of culture in emigration and within Belarus. The situation is complicated by the “asymmetry of publicity”: cultural activity outside the country exists in a situation of normal publicity, and inside it is often in a semi-underground state, which makes it “invisible” to external observation and research, and makes its coverage in independent media unsafe. The latter circumstance gives rise to an attitude towards the cultural situation in Belarus as a “scorched earth”, which contributes to the accumulation of contradictions and misunderstandings between cultural actors inside and outside the country.

**Education and training of professional personnel in the field of culture.**

The emergence of mass interest in Belarusian culture, as well as the relative ease of entering into cultural activities, in addition to positive effects, also contributed to the emergence of a large number of projects and initiatives of a low professional level. This is partly explained by the limited supply of high-quality specialized education for Belarusian creators. It is worth noting that recently there have been many offers of short-term courses, seminars, and intensive courses

for Belarusians seeking to improve their professional level and master new skills and competencies in the field of culture, but such forms, by definition, are not full-fledged educational projects.



# **Main conclusions and results of the analysis**

Thus, over the past three years, we have observed a radical reformatting of the Belarusian cultural field: the ongoing political repressions, the liquidation and cessation of the activities of public organizations and initiatives, which caused a mass “exodus” of cultural figures from Belarus, the severance of long-established ties — but at the same time: the establishing of new partnerships, the forming of alternative centers among the Belarusian emigration, the increasing of the level of knowledge about Belarus and Belarusian culture outside the country.

Before the events of 2020, the Belarusian state did try to monopolize the definition of the general strategic and conceptual framework of the cultural policy. But if earlier the authorities, while regulating the cultural sphere in order to create better conditions and competitive advantages for state-run cultural institutions if compared to other actors, still allowed coexistence with an independent cultural field, today the main goal of the state policy in the cultural sphere is the complete marginalization, displacement and destruction of any independent and uncontrolled activity.

One of the long-term consequences was the reformatting of the Belarusian cultural field in terms of activity status, the ability of various entities (the state, the public sector, businesses) to influence the cultural situation in Belarus. The greatest changes in this regard have occurred in the independent segment of the cultural sphere, where, on the one hand, actors previously active in the cultural field, in the wake of political mobilization and growing interest in independent cultural content, received greater, in comparison with previous years, opportunities for self-presentation and broadcasting their products and achievements; on the other hand, the repressions, the closure of cultural organizations, the emigration of many cultural figures and the “collapse” of public space within the country forced them to look for other ways to continue their activities.

Most of the problems and challenges identified in this review in the Belarusian cultural sphere are caused by the unfavorable socio-political situation in the country, the deterioration of political, legal, economic and social conditions for the normal development of the Belarusian cultural sphere. The situation of the emigration of many cultural figures from the country, the impossibility of the public existence of independent culture within Belarus, the ideologization of the part of the cultural sphere affiliated with the state, the ongoing repressions — all this not only determined radical changes in the models of existence of cultural actors, but also raised the question of general strategies for the development of the Belarusian sphere of culture.



***Based on the topics of problems and challenges described above, it is possible to formulate tactical and strategic steps to overcome difficulties and enter a positive path for the development of the Belarusian cultural sphere. Due to the actual impossibility of influencing the segment of official culture, these proposals are formulated primarily for independent cultural actors:***

- Continuation and expansion of practices to reach an international audience and international markets, master global experience, fit Belarusian culture into the pan-European and global context.
- Development of areas in which there are now obvious shortcomings in various areas of culture: first of all, these are infrastructural elements for a number of areas (hubs, distribution systems), cultural management and criticism and rating systems.
- Maintaining connections with cultural actors within Belarus by including them in cultural production at those stages that allow compliance with safety requirements. Combating the stigmatization of cultural actors and figures who remain in Belarus and use, among other things, state infrastructure; their symbolic and informal support.
- Expansion (mainly in online and remote forms) in Belarus of the distribution network of Belarusian literature, cinema, and other cultural products produced today outside the country. Since “delivery” and “demonstration” of such products in their natural form is today quite risky and can be a matter for individual enthusiasts, problems can be systematically solved through electronic publications of new books, increasing the number of channels and resources that collect new book releases, film and theater criticism, etc.
- Systematic research and monitoring of development processes in the cultural sphere and their impact on Belarusian and foreign audiences. Monitoring the processes of Russification in Belarus, developing new strategies to counter them.
- Development of practices for promoting Belarusian cultural products and reaching large audiences of their consumers. The production of Belarusian cultural content has increased significantly since 2020, and this circumstance sets prospects for expanding the bearers of the Belarusian identity (language, nationally oriented ideas), however, at the moment there are no major players who could take on the role of producing this entire cultural array and providing reaching large audiences.
- Formation of a “field of mutual orientations” for subjects of the cultural sphere through the organization of representation and discussion platforms for public discussions and proposals for “policies” in the field of cultural development. These kinds of platforms are extremely important for building flexible management mechanisms through demonstrating “success stories”, setting samples, trends, compiling and publicly presenting cultural ratings, presenting reports on the activities of entities vying for system-forming positions in the sector, etc. Thus,



cultural actors will have the opportunity to independently choose the most suitable development models for themselves, focus on successful or attractive cases, and join certain practices.

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