

END NOTE

INDEPENDENT AND BELARUSIAN-LANGUAGE MEDIA UNDER ATTACK IN BELARUS

By Taras Kuzio

The independent media in Belarus are subject to a two-pronged attack by the Sovietophile and pan-Slavic regime led by President Alyaksandr Lukashenka. The first attack is on the independent media in general. The second is against Belarusian-language publications as part of Lukashenka's drive to continue Soviet-era Russification. These two elements of Lukashenka's attack on the media are interrelated. Independent media that covers political and economic issues is more than likely to be also in democratic opposition to his authoritarian regime. At the same time, Belarusian-language independent media is, not surprisingly, also opposed to a Russifying regime and is linked to center-right national democrats.

The independent press accounts for only 10-15 percent of the official circulation of printed media and generally consists of local publications that are devoted to entertainment and socioeconomic issues. They are largely devoid of political commentary. Of the 1,000 independent publications only 40 report on social or political themes, Andrei Bastunets, a media lawyer and vice president of the Belarusian Association of Journalists, has stressed. Belarus has only 10 independent newspapers, one independent news agency, and a few local newspapers that provide unfettered political commentary.

The state controls and provides subsidies to a number of large publications, such as "Sovietskaya Belorussiya," with a daily circulation of 2 million. In December 2001 Lukashenka, clearly living in his own fantasy world, ordered the editor of "Sovietskaya Belorussiya" to transform it into a newspaper of a "European level". Official publications receive state subsidies for paper, printing, and distribution.

Publishing costs are much higher for independent media, and high cover prices dissuade many readers. The state has also utilized high taxes and heavy fines to try to close down independent publications. Government authorities have increasingly used the tax police to

impose restrictions on independent publications. The Magic publishing house has been raided on many occasions by the tax police who have confiscated its printing equipment. Magic prints many independent newspapers, including "Narodnaya Volya," "Rabochy," "Belorusskaya Delovaya Gazeta."

The Belarusian Association of Journalists believes that a new draft law, which was submitted to parliament in November 2001, would erode freedom of the press even further. If approved, the law would ban any mention of unregistered parties and NGOs in the media, simplify procedures for the state to close newspapers, and prohibit media outlets from receiving assistance from abroad. In April, the British NGO Article 19 condemned the draft legislation on media and information security as well as articles in the Criminal Code pertaining to freedom of expression, as being in contravention of the European Convention on Human Rights.

Severe punishment of journalists in libel suits, Article 19 claims, aims to intimidate opposition and independent journalists. An ongoing court case against journalist Pavel Mazheyka and Mikola Markevich, editor of the banned newspaper "Pahonya," is an example of how libel charges are selectively used to dissuade journalists from publishing criticism of Lukashenka. Markevich told the court, "It is absurd to try people's thoughts, arguments, and convictions". An issue of "Pahonya" -- with articles accusing Lukashenka of organizing a death squad active against his opponents in the late 1990s -- was confiscated by the police even before it was circulated. Following the re-election of Lukashenka in September 2001, the Minsk regional committee launched a libel case against Iosif Syaredzich, the editor of "Narodnaya Volya", for publishing allegations that the committee head had instructed village-level committees to falsify the election outcome. "Narodnaya Volya" was also warned in April about printing articles on Belarusian involvement in illegal arms trafficking. "Belorusskaya Delovaya Gazeta" was warned in January about articles it ran on police brutality against arrested oppositionists, a frequent occurrence. After two such warnings, the law allows the authorities to close down publications, as was the case with "Pahonya."

The launch of a second channel on Belarusian television in May is not likely to make matters better. The channel will operate on the same frequencies of Russian public TV and will rebroadcast many of its programs. Belarusian Channel 2 will therefore be similar to Ukraine's Inter, which broadcasts on Ukrainian Channel 3. Whereas "Inter" are three quarters in the Russian language, Belarusian Channel 2 runs

only Russian programs. The other difference between them is that Inter is privately owned whereas the state controls 51 percent of Belarusian Channel 2. The use of the same frequencies would allow Lukashenka to select which Russian television programs should be rebroadcast in Belarus. Lukashenka has long complained at the alleged "bias" of Russian media reports on Belarus. NTV correspondent Andrey Savinykh was warned in February by the Belarusian Foreign Ministry about his reports on repression of oppositionists.

The attack on Belarusian-language publications is aimed at both state and independent media. The state-run "Chyrvonaya zmena," in existence for 81 years, has been forced to merge with "Zvyazda." "Chyrvonaya zmena" had never published any opposition material and its closure was not so much political as aimed at reducing the number of Belarusian-language publications. The independent daily "Nasha Niva" was warned in March for publishing information about the unregistered Belarusian Autocephalous Orthodox Church. (Lukashenka backs the Belarusian Orthodox Church, the autonomous branch of the Russian Orthodox Church, because it supports his Sovietophile pan-Slavism.) The closure of "Pahonya" in November 2001 -- after two official warnings -- has left Belarus without any provincial Belarusian-language newspaper which covers politics. "Zvyazda" remains the only Belarusian-language publication that is circulated throughout Belarus, but it is state-owned. Markevich -- the editor of the former "Pahonya" who is currently on trial for libel of Lukashenka -- has been unable to gain official registration for three replacement newspapers: "Hazeta Pahonya," "Holas," and "Muzhytskaya Prauda".

Earlier this year, an Office of Literature and Art was established within the Ministry of Information. The new office has taken over publications ("Polymya," "Maladosts," "Krynitsa," "Literatura I mastatstva," "Neman") previously managed by the Union of Writers, a move that follows earlier confiscation by the state of the union's property. Three reasons account for these moves: First, it represents an attempt to control the country's cultural life as the Union of Writers is sympathetic to the national democratic opposition. Second, the authorities are negatively disposed towards Belarusian language and culture. Syarhey Kastyan, the head of the newly created office, has said, "We must accept that books written in the Belarusian language are not successful in the country." Third, and probably most important, Lukashenka sees the media as instruments through which he can fashion a Sovietophile, pan-Slavic state ideology for Belarus.

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