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Commentary:

An Orthography on Trial in Belarus

JAN MAKSYMIUK

[EDITORIAL NOTE: *Belarusian, a Slavic language, is the distinctive tongue of the Republic of Belarus, formerly a part of the USSR. It is written in a version of the Cyrillic alphabet, first standardized around 1906; this version is referred to below as the "traditional orthography." A revised standard, bringing Belarusian script closer to that of Russian, was promulgated under the Soviet regime in 1933. As the following report explains, a recent attempt to revive the earlier system has recently met with official disapproval.*

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In 1997, the Belarusian National Assembly passed a law, "On the press and other media," which allowed the government in May 1998 to issue a warning against the biweekly *Nasha Niva*. An independent newspaper published entirely in Belarusian and with a circulation of some 5,000, *Nasha Niva* was launched by its chief editor, Syarhey Dubavets, in Vilnius in 1991. The

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newspaper is printed in Minsk and distributed by the state network of kiosks and, to a lesser extent, by the editorial staff. It uses the traditional Belarusian orthography, which was changed by decree under Joseph Stalin's regime in 1933. The media law, passed by the National Assembly in 1997 and amended in January 1998, explicitly prohibits the press from "distorting the generally accepted norms" of the language in which it publishes.

In a bid to forestall what seemed like preparations to close down his newspaper, Dubavets filed a lawsuit against the State Press Committee in June, demanding that the warning be revoked as "groundless." He argued that the term "generally accepted norms" is void since there is no legally binding standard for spelling in Belarus. The case is to be heard at the Higher Economic Court on 12 August. If the newspaper loses the case and persists in using the pre-1933 spelling, it can be banned after receiving another two warnings, according to the amended media law. [See "Post-script," below.]

The *Nasha Niva* case, which in most countries would doubtless be regarded as a bizarre example of overregulation by the state, strikes a very tragic note in today's Belarus. Belarusians are gradually losing their language and cultural identity. The number of Belarusian-language books and periodicals has plummeted to a very low level since the May 1995 referendum, which granted Russian the status of an official language, along with Belarusian. The state, which from 1991 to 1994 did a great deal to promote both the formerly neglected Belarusian culture and education in the Belarusian language, has practically ceased to support either under [President Alyaksandr] Lukashenka.

For example, in 1994 there were 220 schools in Minsk whose language of instruction was Belarusian. Two years later, their number had shrunk to fewer than 20. Those students who want to receive a higher education in Belarusian will be hard put to achieve that aim, since Russian is the language of instruction in virtually all university departments in Belarus.

Lukashenka has made a point of ostentatiously promoting Russian-language and Soviet culture in Belarus. In a widely quoted statement, he once asserted that "one cannot express anything deep in Belarusian." Non-Sovietized Belarusian culture and the Belarusian language are developed and supported mainly by non-governmental organizations and an ever-dwindling number of intellectuals. *Nasha Niva* is one of the champions of that movement.

Speaking Belarusian in Belarus is not only a means of communication but also a political declaration of loyalty to the country's indigenous cultural and historical heritage in defiance of the ruling regime. The fundamental

dividing line in Belarus is not between “democrats in general” and the Lukashenka regime; rather, it is between democracy-supporting “Belarusian nationalists” and the Sovietized and Russianized segment of society led by former Communist Party functionaries.

“Having forced the national symbols — the coat of arms [knight in pursuit] and the [white-red-white] flag — to go underground, the government of the Republic of Belarus has now declared war against the non-Soviet-Belarusian orthography,” Dubavets wrote in the 15 June 1998 issue of *Nasha Niva*. He also expressed bitterness toward those Belarusian intellectuals who “have voluntarily remained in the Belarusian SSR in terms of spelling.” The pre-1933 orthography was used at schools among some 2 million Belarusians in pre-war Poland and has never been abandoned by the Belarusian diaspora.

Dubavets is not the only one to oppose the 1933 orthography reform. The *Belarusian Language Encyclopedia*, published in Minsk in 1994, states that the 1933 reform focused “not so much on reflecting the specifically national character of the Belarusian language as on bringing its orthography in line with the Russian orthographic tradition.” In a wider sense, the 1933 ban on the traditional Belarusian spelling reflected Stalin’s idea of merging the globe’s cultures into one with a single language. Presumably, that culture was to be Soviet and the language Russian. In this way, the Belarusian language became a victim of Stalin’s futuristic vision.

Some of the best-known Belarusian linguists have come out in support of the spelling used by *Nasha Niva*. International human right organizations have protested, pointing that the State Press Committee’s warning violates international law — in particular, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to which Belarus is a signatory. But such protests are unlikely to carry much weight with the court. Most *Nasha Niva* supporters fear that, as one columnist put it, “no linguistic or even legal arguments are of any importance” in this case. It is the language that is on trial, not the spelling.

Postscript

According to *Nasha Niva* of 28 September 1998, the following events ensued:

On 12 August in Minsk, after the Higher Economic Court opened the case brought by *Nasha Niva* chief editor Syarhey Dubavets against the State Press Committee, Dubavets asked the court to set up an expert linguistic commission to determine whether his newspaper distorts the “generally accepted norms” of the Belarusian language by using the traditional Bela-

rusian spelling banned in 1933. The court concurred with the request and formed a commission from linguists of the Linguistic Institute of the National Academy of Sciences.

The court formulated three problems for the commission to answer:

- (1) Define the term "generally accepted norms of a language," including the Belarusian language.
- (2) Which legal and/or linguistic sources define the term "generally accepted norms of the Belarusian language"?
- (3) Is the use of the spelling that existed in Belarus until 1933 a "distortion of the generally accepted norms of the used [Belarusian] language"?

The commission at its sitting on 22 September adopted the following answers:

- (a) Modern scientific literature does not use the term "generally accepted norms of a language."
- (b) Legal literature does not include any definition of the term "generally accepted norms of the Belarusian language."
- (c) The use of the spelling that existed in Belarus until 1933 is not a distortion of the generally accepted norms of the Belarusian language. The spelling used before 1933 can be found in [Belarusian] classical literature, while the spelling enforced by the 26 August 1933 resolution of the Council of People's Commissars [i.e. the then government of the Belarusian SSR] is now used in some Belarusian state institutions and is obligatory in instruction at schools, universities etc.

On 22 December 1998, the Higher Economic Court accepted the findings of the expert commission, ruled in favor of *Nasha Niva*, and levied a fine of 2.5 million Belarusian rubles (\$24) on the State Press Committee.

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