

On 9 January the Economic Court of Minsk charged the Lohvinaŭ book store with unauthorised book sales and ordered the confiscation of its whole year's profit. This is perhaps the largest fine ever received by civil society in Belarus.

Until 2013 Lohvanaŭ was also the largest independent publisher in Belarus and one of the chief supporters of Belarusian language authors. However, the authorities withdrew its license after the store published a photo album, which the siloviki considered as extremist. In reality, it only contained photos of large protests.

Ironically, the persecution of the publisher happens at a time when the regime is evidently implementing a new national identity policy. Fearing the "Russian world" on Belarusian borders, the elites have demonstrated support for the Belarusian language and culture in their latest speeches. The regime has always seen civil society as the enemy, but now it should realise that it is undermining its potential partner in the building of national identity.

### **A Major Supporter of Belarusian Literature**

In December 2014 the Ministry of Information ordered the Minsk Tax Inspection to check on the Lohvinaŭ bookstore. The inspection service stated that Lohvinaŭ was breaking the law by selling books without registration. According to Belarusian law, all booksellers are required to be registered with the Ministry of Information. The Economic Court of Minsk supported the charges and on 9 January the bookstore was fined \$350 and its entire \$56,000 income for 2014 was confiscated.



The Lohvinaŭ publishing house, a non-profit cultural organization, has been one of the chief supporters of Belarusian language authors. The firm brought in little profit and worked more like a self-financed cultural organisation.

In recent years, Lohvinau has become a central independent literary and intellectual platform in Minsk. Book launching events and book readings took place almost every day. The publishing house also attracted many tourists, who could find there rare Belarusian books, banned from official bookstores.

At a press conference on 20 January Ihar Lohvinaŭ, the director of the store, complained that Belarus has the most absurd legislation with regards to book publishing and trade. Around the world book publishing is usually subsidised by the government, while in Belarus a private entity has to use its own funds and on top faces constant repression. Lohvinaŭ said he had applied for registration six times over the course of the year, but each time received rejections on trivial grounds, such as indicating the wrong zip code.

Lohvinaŭ urged the public to help him to pay off the drastic fine. If the publisher fails to collect the necessary sum, the firm will go bankrupt and Lohvinau may face criminal charges for his inability to pay. Activists have [launched a web site](#) where anyone can donate to save the bookstore.

### **“Extremist” Literature Threatens the Regime**

Belarusian authorities thoroughly control book publishing as a potential source of anti-government literature. Books which negatively portray the regime risk being considered extremist and banned from public distribution. Editions which show alternative historical view or discuss symbols regarded as oppositional also face censorship.

In 2013 the authorities used one of such cases to withdraw the publishing licence from Lohvinaŭ. The court charged the publisher with extremism for printing album [Press Photo 2011](#). The album contained photos of the 2010 post-election as well as the 2011 [“silent protests”](#).

A year earlier, in 2012 the authorities targeted another bookseller, Alieś Jaŭdacha, who sold books by post. The persecution started after he initiated distribution of a book about the Youth Front - a famous opposition youth organisation. Accused of conducting illegal enterprise, Alieś Jaŭdacha was charged with a year of incarceration and awarded a large fine.

Similarly, in 2012 the authorities confiscated over 5,000 books from independent publisher and bookseller Valier Bulhakaŭ. According to the authorities, the books projected extremist ideas. In reality, they presented an alternative view of World War II, inconsistent with that of the government.

Several people [were sacked](#) from Hrodna University for publishing a textbook supported by a Polish grant. The textbook contained [Belarusian symbols](#) that are not officially recognised by the government.

## A New National Identity Strategy

The prosecution of Lohvinaŭ clearly diverges from the new policy on supporting Belarusian identity [initiated in 2014](#). On 20 January at the 42th Congress of the pro-government youth organisation BRSM Lukashenka stated that only Belarusian (as opposed to Russian) culture, language and history can help forge national identity.

In concordance with Lukashenka's statement, the Minister of Information Lilija Ananič encouraged parents and schools to teach children both official languages. As an effect of the previous policies of hampering the Belarusian language, many children don't speak the language on daily basis and view it as foreign.



On 21 January the recently appointed Minister of Education Michail Žuraŭkoŭ expressed the Ministry's intention to foster the use of the Belarusian language in education. Žuraŭkoŭ promised that in future half of all subjects in Belarusian schools would be taught in Belarusian. According to the most recent policy, geography and history in schools will be taught only in Belarusian.

The events in Ukraine, where the military conflict has sharpened the divide between the Russian and Ukrainian identities, alerted the Belarusian authorities to the need for a new national identity strategy. Years of suppression of Belarusian language and culture have formed a society with a weak national consciousness and strong pro-Russian sentiments, vulnerable to Russian TV propaganda.

To eliminate the Russian threat, the authorities have evidently decided to launch a new strategy of for consolidating the Belarusian nation. Even Lukashenka himself has publicly acknowledged that his previous attempts based on Slavic ideology have failed.

## Civil Society: Enemy or Partner?

Belarusian writer Uladzimir Arloŭ called governmental moves against Lohvinaŭ ridiculous

since most senior Belarusian officials claim the importance of national values, language and culture. “Maybe the left hand does not know what the right hand is doing?” Arloŭ said. “If the authorities indeed want to support Belarusian language and culture, they should take Lohvinaŭ's side. Otherwise their claims are meaningless.”

Nevertheless, the reasoning of the authorities appears quite understandable. The government simply wants to eliminate any areas of public life that it cannot control directly, regardless of their nature and implications. Over the course of Lukashanka's regime total control has been installed in all spheres of public life. Whatever their focus, civil society groups were dismissed as hostile and restricted. Searching for enemies at home has become an established practise for Belarusian bureaucrats.

Now, the enemy clearly lies outside, not inside, and the authorities have to accept the civil society as its best partner in strengthening Belarusians' national identity.

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