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<http://www.rsf.org/belarus-belarusian-authorities-impose-24-12-2014,47420.html>

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Europe/Ex-USSR - Belarus

Cyber-censorship

## Belarusian authorities impose alarming Internet controls

24 December 2014

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The already very limited freedom of information in Belarus has been drastically reduced even further by government moves in the past few days that include the blocking of many independent news websites and the passing of a new media-Internet law.

Media law amendments that tighten the information ministry's grip on the Internet were quietly passed by parliament on 17 and 18 December and were signed into law by President Alexander Lukashenko on 20 December.

At the same time, many independent sites were blocked on 19 and 20 December against a backdrop of economic tension.

### Most independent sites blocked

Most independent news sites were blocked shortly after information minister Lilya Ananich asked the Belarusian media on 19 December to toe the official line in their coverage of the Belarusian economy following a drastic [devaluation](#) in the Belarusian ruble.

At the same time, the government adopted a series of measures to address the devaluation, including a "temporary" 30 percent tax on foreign currency purchases and a ban on price hikes.

*"This mass website blocking without any government explanation or court order is both illegal and unjustified,"* said Johann Bihl, the head of the Reporters Without Borders Eastern Europe and Central Asia desk.

*"Censoring public debate will not improve the economic situation or dispel any possibility of panic. Quite the contrary. We call on the authorities to take responsibility for their actions. The public's need of the blocked websites is greater than ever during a crisis. Access must be restored at once."*

Access to the independent sites [Charter97.org](#), [Belaruspartisan.org](#) and [Gazetaby.com](#) was blocked on 19 December by Beltelekom, the state-owned telecom company that controls broadband Internet. Beltelekom nonetheless denied any responsibility and [blamed](#) the blocking on a DDoS attack.

UDF.by, Zautra.by, 21.by and the *BelaPAN* news agency's three websites – [belapan.by](#), [belapan.com](#) and [naviny.by](#) – were [blocked the next day](#) because of articles criticizing the government's economic policies.

Their privately-owned hosting company, Hoster.by, changed their IP addresses on 21 December to circumvent the blocking but the new addresses were also blocked by mid-afternoon.

*BelaPan* editor **Ales Lipay** condemned the blocking as an act of censorship and sent several letters to the authorities, who have not as yet replied. The sites could only have been blocked on the government's orders, he said. Although *BelaPan's* three official IP addresses are still blocked, [Belapan.com](#) and [Naviny.by](#) managed to circumvent the [blocking](#) again on 22 December.

[Thirteen online retail sites](#) have also been blocked since 20 December for posting their prices in another currency as well as the Belarusian ruble.

### Cyber-censorship legislation

It was against this backdrop that a number of media law amendments [allowing](#) increased government control over information, including information circulating online, were signed into law by President Lukashenko on 20 December. They will take effect at the start of January.

Discreetly passed by the lower chamber on first and second reading on 17 December and then approved by the upper house the following day, they dashed the hopes of journalists who had been calling for legal status for freelancers and simpler procedures for registering media and getting accreditation.

*"These amendments provide the authorities with the tools they need to systematically block any news sites and blogs that give them problems,"* Reporters Without Borders deputy programme director Virginie Dangles said.

*"This is a declaration of war on the Internet and the freedom it gives to 5 million Belarusian Internet users, a declaration of war that was made without Belarusian society being given any chance to debate it."*

Published only after adoption by parliament on 19 December, the text of the amendments does not explain how they would be implemented.

**Andrey Bastunets**, the deputy president of the Belarus Association of Journalists (BAJ), a Reporters Without Borders partner, said the amendments were rushed through in order to avoid a public debate.

Under the amended media, law, news websites, [blogs](#) and other sites providing information will henceforth be treated in the same way as traditional media, without having to register as such, and will be subject to oversight by the information ministry.

The information ministry will therefore be empowered to send official warnings to [all websites accessible in Belarus](#) if they publish informational content that is deemed to be illegal. Sites receiving warnings will have to withdraw the offending content and post any requested correction within 24 hours.

The ministry will be able to restrict access to sites that get two or more warnings in the space of a year. The list of banned categories of content has also been extended. As well as information supporting "war and extremism" and content of a "pornographic, violent or cruel" nature, it now also includes content that could "harm the interests of the Belarusian nation."

The amendments also provide for the creation of two registers for "distributors" of print and audio-visual information, including the owners of websites that publish or relay information, who will have to apply to the information minister for inclusion on the registers.

"Distributors" will not be able to exist legally if they are not registered. At the same time, those that manage to register will be removed from the list and will lose their information "distributor" rights if they get two warnings within the space of a year.

Those who distribute audio-visual content, including online audio-visual content, will also be required to notify the ministry of any programming changes two days in advance.

With the stated aim of protecting Belarus and its citizens from "destructive foreign influences" and content which, according to the information ministry, could be "contrary to their interests," the amended law also reduces the maximum permissible foreign shareholding in any media from 30 to 20 percent.

Shortly before *Charter97's* website was blocked on 19 December, its editor, **Natalia Radzina**, told Reporters Without Borders: "The media-Internet law is directly aimed at *Charter97*, Belarus's most popular independent website."

On 4 December, interior minister Ygor Chunevich [cited](#) the need to combat drug trafficking as grounds for wanting to fully block all websites with restricted access. This would include *Charter97*, which has been inaccessible in all public places since 2011.

Belarus is ranked 157th out of 180 countries in the [2014 Reporters Without Borders press freedom index](#).

(Photo : [belaruspartizan.org](http://belaruspartizan.org))

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