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<http://www.rsf.org/belarus-opposition-journalists-and-cyber-03-09-2012,43321.html>

Europe/Ex-USSR - Belarus

Intimidation

Opposition journalists and cyber-dissidents hounded in run-up to election

3 September 2012

The Belarusian authorities are keeping up the pressure on independent and pro-opposition journalists and news outlets in the run-up to the parliamentary elections scheduled for 23 September.

"As usual, the regime is 'preparing' the elections with an all-out crackdown," Reporters Without Borders said. "The judicial harassment of journalists and Internet users critical of the government has just one aim – to keep them under pressure and make them feel permanently threatened.

"The call for an election boycott by some opposition figures has joined the long list of subjects that are off limits. Those who mention the boycott, such as opposition groups on social networks, are immediately sanctioned. It is illusory to talk of free elections in such a media environment."

The human rights group [Viasna reported on 31 August](#) that the mobile phone company [BelCel](#) had blocked access to the pro-opposition news websites [Charter97](#) and [BelPartizan](#). Despite a semblance of pluralism, the Electoral Commission [has censored](#) many election addresses on state TV, including those by the United Civil Party, containing boycott calls or references to the plight of political prisoners or Belarus's serious economic crisis.

Few candidates have shown any interest in participating in the televised debates that are being billed as a major innovation of this election campaign. The Belarusian Association of Journalists (BAJ), a Reporters Without Borders partner organization, will tomorrow [present the initial findings](#) of its election campaign monitoring from 20 to 31 August.

On 30 August, the State Security Committee (KGB) arrested at least four presumed moderators of two pro-opposition groups – called "We've had enough of this Lukashenko" and "Only SHOS" – on the Russian social network [VKontakte](#).

The KGB agents interrogated them and beat some of them in a bid to get their passwords. They also searched their apartments and confiscated laptops. A fifth activist, **Syarhei Biaspalau**, avoided arrest and announced the next day that he had fled the country.

Pavel Yeutsikhiyeu, one of the moderators of the "We've had enough of this Lukashenko" group, was sentenced by Minsk's Kastychnitski district court on 31 August to five days in prison on a charge of disturbing public order. He had been interrogated in front of his mother after being arrested at home.

Andrey Tkachou, the administrator of the "Only SHOS" group, was sentenced to seven days in prison on the same charge. **Raman Pratasevich**, 17, was released because Belarusian law prohibits trying minors before civil courts. **Aleh Shramuk**, who was arrested in the northeastern city of Vitebsk, was released late at night after a long interrogation about his online activities.

The authorities succeeded in [hacking into two online discussion groups](#) with a total of 52,000 members, obtaining the names of their presumed moderators and administrators. Much of the content of these groups was removed, [as was the case](#) with the "Revolution through social

networks" group in 2011.

Andrzej Poczobut, a well-known journalist based in the western city of Hrodna who was released conditionally on 30 June, is meanwhile still being investigated on a charge of libelling President Lukashenko. The city's Bureau of Investigations has formed a special commission to pursue the case.

Its spokesman, Syarhey Sharshnevich, announced on 29 August that the investigation was being extended until 21 September. The Polish newspaper *Gazeta Wyborcza's* correspondent, Poczobut received a three-year suspended prison sentence last year on a similar charge. He is now facing the possibility of an actual jail sentence of up to five years in prison.

Anton Surapin, a young blogger [arrested for posting photos of an airdrop of teddy bears with pro-democracy messages](#), was finally released on 17 August after a month of arbitrary detention. But he is now under house arrest and he is still charged with helping a light aircraft to enter Belarusian airspace illegally.

(Picture: <http://bymedia.net/>)

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