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Europe/Ex-USSR - Belarus

Big Brother is watching

Belarus authorities turn up the heat on the Internet

6 January 2012

Reporters Without Borders condemns a law due to take effect on 6 January that will reinforce the Belarusian government's control of the Internet and impose additional restrictions on online free expression in a country regarded as Europe's last dictatorship.

"[Law 317-3](#) represents a new stage in the government's escalating control of the Internet, adding new weapons of repression," Reporters Without Borders said. "Among the main features of [Decree 60, issued in February 2010](#), were the recruitment of Internet service providers and cybercafés to citizen surveillance and giving the authorities the option of ordering any site deemed to be extremist to be blocked. The new law is intended to determine the penalties for anyone who violates its provisions. "

"This reinforcement of censorship is a survival reflex on the part of a government weakened by [the unrest](#) that followed President Lukashenko's disputed re-election in December 2010."

The new law reaffirms the duty of owners of Internet cafes and those responsible for a shared connection (for example, in an apartment building) to monitor Internet users and report them if they visit foreign or banned sites. Failure to report illegal online activity could result in fines.

As envisaged by Decree 60, anyone going online in an Internet café or using a shared connection will now have to identify themselves, while a record will have to be kept of everyone's surfing history for a year.

Although non-commercial entities seem not to be directly concerned by this law, which requires the sites of Belarusian companies to be hosted or properly registered in Belarus, the authorities may still draw up a list of banned sites whose access must be blocked by service providers at 24 hours' notice in official institutions and cultural and educational institutions.

Cybercafé owners and other administrators of shared access must also make sure these sites are blocked.

A list of banned sites is issued by the State Inspection on Electronic Communications on the basis of decisions by several institutions such as the Operational and Analytical Centre, an offshoot of the president's office.

Criteria for inclusion on the list include content that is pornographic or advocates violence or "extremism", which is much more vague and regularly leads to overblocking and the closure of opposition websites.

Major news websites such as [Charter97](#), [Belaruspartisan](#), and [the blog of the humorist Yauhen Lipkovich](#) are already on the blacklist.

Meanwhile, there has been no let-up in harassment of online journalists. The opposition news website *Charter 97* was targeted by an unprecedented series of DDoS attacks on 29 December. Hackers also managed to obtain administrator passwords and began to post provocative content and delete the site's archives. According to the website's editor, **Natalia Radzina**,



who had to flee the country in earlier 2011 following an unprecedented crackdown, hackers also got into the email accounts of Andrey Sannikau, the site's co-founder, and his wife, the journalist **Irina Khalip**. The circumstances surrounding the death of *Charter 97* founder [Oleg Bebenin](#), who was found hanged on 3 September 2010, have never been clarified. The judicial authorities quickly concluded that he took his own life.

[Belarus](#) is listed as a country "[under surveillance](#)" in the Reporters Without Borders annual report on "Enemies of the Internet" and is ranked 154th out of 178 countries in the 2010 press freedom index.

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