

Belarus

Internet content in Belarus remains largely accessible to users despite the declared policy of selective filtering. Access remains largely centralized, as the government aims to retain firm control over the Internet. Self-censorship by online media is encouraged by the political climate, as opposition leaders and independent journalists are frequently detained and prosecuted.



Background

Under President Lukashenka's authoritarian rule, Belarus has been criticized for its repressive and increasingly authoritarian tendencies. The economy and political system remain highly centralized, with executive authority vested in the office of the president. Charges of election fraud have been widespread. Human rights organizations are heavily critical of the regime, including the steady increase in the control over information that has occurred over the past few years. Nevertheless, Lukashenka remains genuinely popular with many citizens, particularly the middle-aged and rural populations who have benefited most from his protectionist economic policies

and the overall stability that Belarus has enjoyed (which contrasts with that of Ukraine and other Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) countries).

Steady economic growth in Belarus has stimulated the development of telecommunications in recent years. However, because of excessive regulation and state control of major participants in the telecommunications industry, the development of telecommunications remains low compared with the rest of the region. The state retains a dominant position over the telecommunications sector, with all Internet connections passing through the state-owned operator Beltelecom. The top-level domain is managed

RESULTS AT A GLANCE

Filtering	No evidence of filtering	Suspected filtering	Selective filtering	Substantial filtering	Pervasive filtering
Political		●			
Social		●			
Conflict/security	●				
Internet tools	●				

Other factors	Low	Medium	High	Not applicable
Transparency				●
Consistency				●

KEY INDICATORS

Source (by indicator): World Bank 2005, 2006a, 2006a; UNDP 2006; World Bank 2006c, 2006c; ITU 2006, 2005

and administered by the Belarus equivalent of the U.S. National Security Agency. Taking into account both the increase in Internet users and the potential of the Internet to spread political ideas, the government is adopting restrictive policies, monitoring content, and placing temporary limitations on access to politically sensitive Web sites. During the February 2006 presidential elections, ONI documented the use of just-in-time methods against opposition Web sites, which included domain name system tampering, network disconnection, and allegations of DoS attacks.¹

Internet in Belarus

The cost of access in Belarus has recently decreased dramatically. This has seen a stark rise in usage and a growing Internet service provider (ISP) market. As of 2005, Belarus had an Internet penetration rate of approximately 30 percent. Nevertheless, prices remain higher than those of neighboring countries, and home access is not affordable for most of the population. In 2005 the cost of Internet access through the state-owned provider Beltelecom was USD0.68 per hour, while an ADSL connection cost USD340 per month—placing the latter

beyond the reach of most citizens, given that the average salary was around USD230 in 2005.²

The most active Internet users in Belarus are in the twelve- to thirty-four-year-old age range, although some 30 percent of Belarusians in this age group have never used the Internet.³ The level of computer penetration in the country remains low. In 2005, 58 percent of schools in Belarus had computers and only 25 percent of the schools had Internet access. The popularity of cybercafés has fallen in recent years, as most users prefer to access the Internet from home or work. Russian is the most widely used language by Belarussians on the Internet, followed by Belarussian and then English.

As Internet usage has risen, related services have developed into fast-growing and profitable businesses in Belarus. In 2005 there were thirty-two ISPs active in the country.⁴ The state-controlled ISP Beltelecom holds the biggest market share, with 187 public Internet access points in the country. All ISPs are required to connect through Belpak, Beltelecom's Internet subsidiary. Beltelecom has a legal monopoly on the external channels of communications. As a consequence, all other ISPs run their traffic through

Beltelecom's infrastructure, often at very high prices.⁵

In recent years, broadband Internet services have begun to develop rapidly. Beltelecom has announced plans to establish 250,000 ADSL connections by the year 2010. Beltelecom holds a monopoly over the fixed-line infrastructure and services. Despite the formal liberalization of the Belarusian mobile market, the government owns a significant stake in all four operators.⁶ Beltelecom is the only operator licensed to provide Voice-over Internet Protocol (VoIP) services in Belarus. The high prices maintained by the monopolist operator encourage the emergence of illegal VoIP providers, which are criminally prosecuted. Under decree of the Ministry of Communication and Information, IP telephony can be used only for noncommercial purposes.⁷

Legal and regulatory frameworks

The Ministry of Communications and Informatization is the main regulatory authority of the telecommunications sector. The ministry is frequently accused of placing unjustified limitations on commercial operators to reinforce Beltelecom's monopoly. Actual information communications technology (ICT)-related policy appears to be mostly created on an ad-hoc basis by President Lukashenka and his administration. The President frequently holds special meetings to issue directives regarding ICT regulation and the implementation of particular policies. The Security Council, chaired by the President, decides on a wide range of questions related to the security of the regime, including information security. Additionally, a number of state entities have significant power to influence and control the Internet. The State Center for Information Security, under the supervision of the President and initially a subdivision unit of the special security services (KGB), is a specialized body responsible for protecting state secrets. The Center also manages the administration of the country's top-level domain (".by").

Although Belarus lacks a well-developed Internet regulatory framework, the authorities appear to be pursuing a legislative basis for achieving control over the Internet. Conscious of the popularity of Internet publishing among opposition groups and private media, authorities compel self-censorship through frequent threats and prosecutions. In addition, in order to avoid public debate of pending measures, authorities often delay publishing laws before their final promulgation. In 2005 the Security Council of Belarus drafted a document entitled "The Conception on Information Security," which was then revised at the President's directive to take into consideration the new challenges to national security posed by ICT. This text is not available to the public.

Officially, Internet filtration and monitoring telecommunications networks is illegal in Belarus. However, authorities conduct surveillance of Internet activities under the pretext of protecting national security. In 2001 a Presidential Decree extended the concept of "national security" to include the Internet as a potential threat.

The special bodies of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the KGB have the right to seize data distributed through any channel of communication⁸ in order to fight criminal activity and guarantee state security. This law establishes the right of the KGB to obtain any data considered to be "relevant" from state entities and from private or public organizations, and also gives the KGB unlimited access to the information systems (including log files and so on) of communication providers.

Belarus does not have systems monitoring Internet traffic analogous to the Russian SORM-II. However, it is likely that the Belarusian and Russian special services cooperate in this sphere. Over 70 percent of Belarusian Internet traffic goes through Russia and part of it is processed through the Russian system SORM-II. Some providers confirm that the authorities have

unofficially requested that all user logins be kept for up to one month and be turned over to the security services on demand.

Extensive governmental regulation, a strict licensing regime, and the state-owned Beltelecom monopoly are major impediments to the development of Internet services in Belarus. Beltelecom is under the direct supervision of the Ministry of Communications and Informatization. This may change in 2007 because of the World Trade Organization (WTO)'s accession requirements, which demand that Beltelecom be privatized and end its monopoly on external communication channels. The ministry has agreed to privatize Beltelecom, but it is likely that the government will become the controlling shareholder. The ministry has also declared that Beltelecom's control over external communication channels will remain after privatization, with licenses given only to those operators that have built their own external communication infrastructure.

E-commerce is regulated by the state. All Internet retailers are legally obliged to register domain names with the State Center of Information Security, as well as to obtain a license for retail trade by e-commerce activities. International electronic payment systems are seriously limited in Belarus. All international monetary transfers must occur through banks that notify the tax authorities of all fund transfers from abroad.

ONI testing results

ONI tested five leading ISPs: Aichyna, Belinonet, Beltelecom, BN, and Solo. The testing could not ascertain blocking, although filtering of content is suspected, given the government's declared policy of blocking selected Web sites. The filtering of gay and lesbian Web sites has been an official policy since the beginning of 2005, on the basis that they contain pornographic material. Interestingly, these Web sites were inaccessible on all ISPs except for the state-owned Beltelecom.

ONI suspects that Internet filtering in Belarus has a deliberate but episodic character. Beltelecom's control over external connection channels allows for the creation of an effective system for regulating Internet traffic. During presidential elections, access to opposition and independent media sites appear to have been temporarily blocked. In 2006 ONI documented just-in-time tampering (indirect filtering) of opposition sites. Some specialists have suggested that, during presidential elections, Beltelecom established so-called shaping practices—that is, deliberately slowing down access to specific IP addresses. Beltelecom allegedly received special "requests" by authorities to block certain Web sites for a limited period.

Self-censorship by Internet users has become a pervasive phenomenon. In 2005 the popular Belarusian portal www.tut.by refused to put up banners advertising opposition Web sites. It is unknown whether this activity was a result of pressure by the authorities or merely an attempt to protect its own business.

ONI researchers confirmed that most cybercafés restrict access to sites containing pornography, terrorist material, and proxy-related material. Cybercafés install software that either blocks URLs within the list of forbidden sites or alerts the administrator if such a URL is visited. The restricted URL list includes Web sites forbidden for distribution by the Republic Committee on Prevention of Pornography, Violence, and Cruelty Propaganda. Administrators often require passport identification of customers. Some cybercafés also limit the volume of Internet traffic and decrease the download speed when exceeded. On the request of state security services, administrators keep the logs of users' network activity.

Conclusion

As Internet use in Belarus has risen significantly in recent years, the government seems intent to extend its firm control over all forms of information flows within the country. All ISPs in Belarus

must connect to the Internet through channels of the state-owned ISP Beltelecom, thus facilitating government's control over all traffic. The president has established a strong and elaborate information security policy, and has declared his intention of exercising strict control over the Internet under the pretext of national security. Based on periodic testing, ONI suspects sporadic but sophisticated blocking of Internet content related to political events in the country.

NOTES

1. See OpenNet Initiative, ONI Internet Watch 001, The Internet and Elections: The 2006 Presidential Elections in Belarus (and Its Implications), April 2006, <http://www.opennet.net/belarus/>.
2. See Weekly Digest of Belarusian News, "Embassy of the Republic of Belarus in the USA," <http://www.belarusembassy.org/news/digests/092505.htm>.
3. Paul Budde Communications Pty Ltd., 2006: Belarus – Telecoms Market Overview & Statistics, April 2, 2006.
4. According to the statement of Ivan Rak, Deputy Minister of Communications and Informatization, more than fifty providers in 2005 had licenses for providing Internet access services. See "Belarus coordinated with WTO questions regarding liberalization of the telecommunications market," April 7, 2005, ByBanner.com, <http://www.bybanner.com/article/779.html> (accessed April 29, 2007) (in Russian).
5. The only exception is the network of the National Academy of Sciences of Belarus (BasNet), which has its own satellite channel.
6. See Paul Budde Communications Pty, Ltd., 2006: Belarus – Telecoms Market Overview & Statistics, April 2, 2006 at 10.
7. ByBanner.com, "The Ministry of Communications and Informatization allows Skype," March 3, 2006, <http://www.bybanner.com/article/1747.html> (accessed April 29, 2007) (in Russian).
8. Two legislative acts are significant in this respect: The Law on Operational and Investigative Activity of July 9, 1999, http://pravo.by/webnpa/text_txt.asp?RN=H19900289 (accessed May 2, 2007) and The Law on the Authorities of State Security of the Republic of Belarus of December 3, 1997, <http://www.kgb.by/legaltexts/act01/> (accessed May 2, 2007) (both in Russian).