

Pro-Russian bloggers sentenced: Belarus draws red lines in propaganda war

On 2 February, a Belarusian court sentenced three Belarusian journalists with pro-Russian views to 5 years imprisonment (with 3 years of the sentence suspended). The three have been under investigation since December 2016 on charges of inciting hatred towards the Belarusian nation and language.

Their case sets a precedent. Never before have the Belarusian authorities brought a criminal prosecution for Belarusophobia and pro-Russian propaganda. Yet, surprisingly, the Russian government's official public reaction has been muted.

By trying pro-Russian journalists, the Belarusian authorities draw their red line with regards to propaganda in the bilateral relationship with Russia.

The arrests of pro-Russian bloggers

In December 2016, the Belarusian authorities arrested Dzmitry Alimkin, a watchman in a company in Brest city, Jury Paŭlaviec, a lecturer at Belarusian University of Informatics and Radio Electronics, and Siarhiej Šyptenka, a former lecturer at the Academy of Public Administration. All three were proponents of the 'Russian world' ideology and published their texts on the Russian information portals Regnum, Lenta.ru, and Eadaily.

The Investigative Committee of Belarus officially charged them under criminal article 130 of the Criminal Code, which covers incitement to racial, ethnic, religious or other social

hatred.

A fourth suspect and their alleged supervisor, Jury Barančyk, works as chief editor of the analytical section of Regnum, a Russian imperialist and anti-Western media outlet. Barančyk worked in the Presidential Administration of Belarus in the 2000s but was dismissed and subsequently moved to Russia. Russian police even arrested him in Moscow at the request of Belarusian authorities, but the local court released him claiming that 'the Belarusian side does not possess evidence of his guilt.'

Denying the Belarusian nation and language



The release of convicts on 2 February. Photo: nn.by

Paŭlaviec, according to the prosecutor, denies the historical

heritage of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, demeans the importance of the Belarusian language, artificially presents the attitude of Belarusians towards Russians as hostile, and tries to foment among Russian readers outrage about developments in Belarus.

Quotes from the writings of another of the convicts, Alimkin, say: 'The study of Belarusian language can spoil children's brains'; 'Belarusian education officials are Nazi Hilfspolizei'; 'The Belarusian nation was artificially created in the late 19th century'; 'The vast majority of Belarusians want to unite with their historical homeland – Russia.' According to the prosecutor, Alimkin's articles could contribute to 'the emergence in Belarus of a conflict similar to the one in Ukraine.'

A precedent for Belarus

The case of pro-Russian bloggers set a precedent. Never before have the Belarusian authorities started a criminal prosecution for Belarusophobia and pro-Russian propaganda. Earlier, they only persecuted what they defined as Belarusian nationalist extremism. For example, in 2016 the court convicted [Eduard Palčys](#) under the same article of the criminal code for his [management of a website](#) critical of the Putin regime and Belarus's support for it.

Belarus presented the current case as a move to protect the Belarus-Russia friendship. As the information minister, Lilija Ananič, put it: 'The customers and authors of such articles are trying to sow discord between our countries and nations... to destroy our deep friendship and the process of building the Union State.'

Divided views on freedom of speech

The case fuelled a discussion in Belarusian civil society about the limits of freedom of speech. Some human rights activists, journalists and politicians claimed that no expression of views should be punished and the pro-Russian journalists could be considered political prisoners. The opponents of this view support the authorities' measures to crack down on Russian imperialism in Belarus. The latter, though, represents an overwhelming majority within the Belarusian civil society, which always held anti-Russian and pro-European views.

Reporters Without Borders, who called the detention 'unnecessary', urged the authorities to release the journalists and facilitate a fair investigation. Belarusian nationalists, however, admitted that the use of such methods in the struggle against Russian imperialism has proven reactive and inefficient. They prioritise the defence of regime stability over national development. Instead of increasing the use of Belarusian language in [schools](#), opening a [national university](#), changing the politics of [history](#), respecting the [national symbols](#) and removing Soviet ideology, the authorities instead resort to their favourite and well-tried method – imprisonment.

Russian reaction barely perceptible

Some Russian internet resources, particularly those where the convicts published, accused Belarus of 'Banderisation' and following the path of Ukraine in its anti-Russian policies.



The Russian ambassador to Minsk, Alexander Surikov.
Photo: sb.by

However, the official reaction of the Russian government to the persecution turned out to be modest. The Russian ambassador to Minsk, Alexander Surikov, on the contrary, called the prosecutions 'radical' and accused them of inciting strife: 'I very much doubt that these people are the real patriots of their country.' Interestingly, during the investigation, Paŭlaviec acknowledged that he received money for his articles from the Russian embassy in Belarus. However, the Russian-side apparently had no desire to bail rank-and-file bloggers who held Belarusian citizenship.

This implies that the Russian government does not at present seek to depict Belarus as next Ukraine. Despite limited policies aimed at [strengthening independence](#), Belarus remains Russia's closest ally and a member of both the Eurasian Economic Union and the Collective Security Treaty Organisation.

Yet Belarusian commentators often take the publications on Russian media sites like Regnum as the official position of the government, which most probably has nothing to do with it.

A red line for Russian propaganda

Pro-Russian experts dominate talk shows on Belarusian TV channels and in newspapers. They advocate Belarus's Eurasian integration and remain suspicious towards the country's relation with a liberal West. So why have the authorities arrested one group of pro-Russian experts while letting others dominate the media space?

The reason is that the former criticise the Belarusian leadership while the latter fully support it. Regnum authors accused Lukashenka of nurturing Belarusian nationalism and 'Banderisation'.

Lukashenka monopolises relations with Russia since he amounts to the chief factor in the Belarusian economy and security. He did not let any strong pro-Russian group rise and develop in Belarus during his 25-year rule.

The turn away from Russia after the start of the conflict in Ukraine, combining policies to strengthen Belarusian independence and to balance its foreign policy, caused a [negative reaction](#) and criticism from some Russian media. The image of Belarus following the Ukrainian path could seriously damage relations with Russia, and also support for Lukashenka from within the Russian society.

By trying the three journalists, Belarusian authorities demonstrated their red line in respect of pro-Russian propaganda.

Belarus parliamentary elections 2016 – live updates from Minsk

Belarus Digest provided live online coverage of the parliamentary elections in Belarus scheduled for 11 September: the most important developments as well as reactions to the process and results.

We featured a collection of stories from international and Belarusian media, videos, pictures, and comments from experts.

[Read continuous coverage.](#)

Should you have any questions for our experts or further comments on our coverage please contact [our team](#) in Minsk.

[\[View the story “Belarus Parliamentary Elections 2016 – Live Updates from Minsk” on Storify\]](#)

Toilet Paper-free Sausage, Journalists Fined, Potential Russian Pork Ban – Western

Press Digest

The Belarusian economy received the brunt of the Western press' attention in October. Belarus is apparently looking to continue exporting sanctioned EU foodstuffs to Russia, while Russia is trying to stop it from entering the country. The IMF is still very sceptical about Belarus's economic situation and is not willing to provide it any financial support without serious reforms.

Lukashenka spoke to journalists and voiced his concerns about Russia's behaviour towards Ukraine, while a freelance journalist was fined for writing about the illicit food trade on the Belarusian-Russian border. Dozens of Belarusian and Ukrainian football fans were detained by police after a match where they sang a famous inflammatory song about Vladimir Putin.

Lukashenka assured reporters that Belarusian sausage was not cutting corners with any hidden additives in their products, unlike their Russian counterparts. All of this and more in this edition of the Western Press Digest.

Economy

[Czech Business Heading for Belarus](#) – Czech trade with Belarus has grown 167% over the past 5 years and is a leading destination for Czech business reports the Prague Post, referencing a local business newspaper article. Belarus has invested substantial sums into improving its infrastructure which has gone a long way in attracting Czech business to it. Czech exports are mainly technology related and include machinery, computer technology and equipment for telecommunications and other technology or transportation related goods.

Czech firms find that their Belarusian counterparts are prompt

in making payments and it is easier to do business with them than, for example, Ukraine. Several large projects, including a hydro-electric station in Grodno, have been completed by Czech firms with encouraging results. A bid to build a third line for the Minsk underground was recently made by a Czech company, a sign of their continued interest working inside of Belarus as well.

Russia Tightening Control Over Belarusian Food Imports – Reuters reports that a dispute is brewing between Customs Union members as Russia looks to enforce its sanctions on EU food product imports. The imports under question are not destined for Russia, but Kazakhstan. Russia is said to want all food imports that travel through its territory and are destined for Kazakhstan to be inspected by their own customs service.

Speaking to Russian news agency RIA Novosti, Head of Federal Service for Veterinary and Phytosanitary Surveillance Sergey Dankvert said that food products that are going through Belarusian territory are being re-labeled to hide their EU point of origin. Pork originating in Belarus may be banned as well according to Dankvert. Russian officials are concerned about an outbreak of African swine fever in Belarus.

Belarus Needs to Implement Structural Reforms if it Wants IMF Loans – Additional external financing from the IMF is very unlikely without serious reforms being carried out according to the International Business Times. The IMF says that a 20% inflation rate and high wage growth remain a symptom of poor policymaking on the part of the Belarusian government. While some basic steps have been taken by the authorities in Minsk, no serious structural reforms appear to be underway, including privatisation. With Belarus's trade balance set to worsen once more, its economy is in for a rough times ahead.

International Relations

[Belarus Growing More Concerned about Russia](#) – In a blog for the Wall Street Journal, journalist Nick Shchetko says Belarus is starting to become a little more guarded in its relationship with Russia. Quoting recent comments that Aliaksandr Lukashenka made during a 5 hour long conversation with journalists, Shchetko notes that Lukashenka has been critical of Moscow's behaviour towards Ukraine, but been careful not to step over the line.

Lukashenka, the blog states, is being particularly mindful of next year's presidential election as he looks to prolong his rule over the eastern European country. In closing his talk with the journalists he issued a veiled statement to intellectuals using crude language, reminding them to remember where they come from and apparently placing some of the blame on the relatively low level of development in the country on them.

Civil Rights

[Belarusian and Ukrainian Football Fans Detained at Match in Belarus](#) – Dozens of Belarusian and Ukrainian football fans were arrested after a match between their national teams in the Belarusian city of Borisov. Newsweek reports that the fans were singing a famous song in the region that mocks Russian President Vladimir Putin. The fans also shouted out Belarusian and Ukrainian nationalistic chants together.

Police state that 41 fans were arrested on charges of "mild hooliganism" or "drinking in a public place", though a local independent newspaper said that more than 100 individuals were detained. At the time of the report, 12 Belarus fans had already been released after paying a fine.

[DW Reporter Fined €500 by Belarusian Court](#) – Several recent cases against journalists writing for foreign media have been popping up in Belarus. DW reports that the official reason for these fines being leveled against the reports often has to do

with their not receiving the proper accreditation, a notoriously difficult process in Belarus which the OSCE has criticised. The freelance Belarusian Alexander Burakov was fined for the "illegal generation of a product for the mass media."

Burakov wrote a story for DW's Russian-language service on how food traders were managing to get around Russia's import ban on foodstuffs of EU origin. Before the case began, the accreditation issue was mentioned before the hearing began by the presiding judge. Another journalist was fined €400 by a Belarusian court. The fine is apparently in connection with a report they made for Polish radio.

Other

[Belarusian Sausage: Made without Toilet Paper](#) – Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty reports that Belarus's charismatic head of state cleared the air with Russian reporters on the quality of Belarusian sausage. Lukashenka said that unlike Russia, Belarus had maintained a high level of food inspection and quality since it gained independence from the Soviet Union. Russian food producers, however, have been known to have "toilet paper, soy, all kinds of additives". RFE/RL notes that both toilet paper and sausage were in low supply at the end of the Soviet era.

Devin Ackles

Internet Activism Under Siege

in Belarus

Until recently, Internet has been the only oasis of freedom in Belarus' political sphere.

But as Belarusian authorities realise that Internet is a powerful means of communication and mobilisation, more and more effort is being put into suppressing online opposition activities. The events related to the upcoming parliamentary elections prove this trend.

On the 30 August, several moderators of Internet community *Nadoyel nam etot Lukashenka* (We are sick of Lukashenka) were detained. The community exists in the largest Russian-speaking social network V Kontakte and has around 37,000 members. The aim of the Belarusian security services was to get access to the community's administrators and delete its content as well as intimidate activists.

Two of the group's administrators, Paval Yeutsikhiyev and Andrey Tkachou, were sentenced to seven and five days in jail for a misdemeanor charge of hooliganism, which is a typical way to isolate activists in Belarus. Another activist, Raman Pratasevich, was shortly released as a juvenile, but reports of him being physically abused while interrogated have surfaced. Meanwhile, Siarhej Biaspaly and Aleh Shramuk fled abroad. Eventually, KGB got access to community's administrative controls and deleted its members and content.

Persecution of Internet activists garnered a negative reaction within the Belarusian sector of the web and were condemned by the international community. On 4 September the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media, Dunja Mijatović, expressed her deep concern with the detentions and arrests of administrators of political social media groups in Belarus, which she described as a crackdown on

online dissent.

Preventive Actions on Parliamentary Elections' Eve

A new crackdown on Internet activists looks like a response to pre-election Internet activity, and more precisely to calls to boycott the coming parliamentary elections, which are traditionally regarded as sham in authoritarian Belarus. Internet communities decided to join boycott campaign, started by other political opponents of the regime, and launched it on the web. A closer look at the current foreign policy of Belarus as well as domestic political situation suggests that a mass boycott is not the best scenario for Lukashenka.

The last two years saw a sharp decline in Belarus' relations with western democracies. This caused an imbalance, where Russia became by far the most important and influential partner. Despite numerous public claims of strategic partnership between the two countries, a fear of being seized by Russia is widespread among the Belarusian elite. This makes a need to normalise relations with the West an important foreign policy objective, though not openly proclaimed.

However, if we set aside the foreign agenda and turn to domestic affairs, a boycott is the least desirable outcome for the regime too. In Belarus' case, where no party politics exists and the parliament has lost its political power long ago, many view elections more as a sign of support to the personalist regime. A mass boycott would openly indicate a lack of trust in authorities and their social contract with Belarusians, which has been eroding due to global crisis and economic model effects. To put in a nutshell, public support is badly needed for both internal and external reasons, and anti-electoral propaganda is clearly a challenge to the regime of Lukashenka.

The Echo of "Silent Protests"

As former administrator of the community

Maxim Charniauski says, the prosecution of Internet activists began last year during famous "[silent protests](#)". His online community was one of the online platforms which supported the protests. Such communities sprung up on the Belarusian Internet and were inspired by the Arab Spring. The initiative was named "Revolution through Social Networks" and occurred in a form of weekly peaceful street actions. Social networks, such as V Kontakte, Twitter and Facebook, played a major role in mobilisation of protests.

Although they failed to gain true mass support, the protests brought a lot of disturbance to the regime. They also revealed its repressive nature to citizens not actively engaged in opposition activity. During these events, community administrators were summoned and interrogated by KGB officers, who wanted to know passwords, logins and other relevant information. However, their efforts were not successful. Maxim himself managed to escape and currently lives in Poland.

This time the KGB had more success, but fortunately for the community, the V Kontakte social network is a Russian legal entity. This means that Belarusian authorities can hardly exert administrative pressure on its owners and managers. As a result, the community was fully restored on the 3 September at the request of administrators. The supervisory administrative rights were, as an exception, transferred to a person who did not create the community and who lives abroad.

Social Networks: a New Target for Lukashenka Regime

Until recently, the Internet was believed to be the only space for political oppositional activity and media freedom, not controlled by the Belarusian government. In fact, most of activity on the part of regime's opponents has occurred online. The Belarusian government did not take any serious steps against such online activity, for it apparently did not perceive it as a threat to regime's stability. However, in recent years some trends have made Lukashenka regime take the

Internet more seriously.

The number of Internet users reached roughly half of the population in 2012, and without a doubt the younger and more active half portion of the population. Recent studies on Internet usage in Belarus shows that it is poorly integrated into the global network and remains oriented towards regional Russian-speaking .ru and .by domains. Hence, V Kontakte is the most popular social network, while such services as Facebook, Twitter and Google+ are still underrepresented in Belarus. It is no wonder V Kontakte has the biggest politically engaged communities, and becomes the primary object of pressure on the part of the regime.

Furthermore, the Belarusian authorities seem to be very “impressed” by events of the Arab Spring, where online media played a significant role. Subsequent “silent protests” only proved these fears. The regime started to introduce some regulative measures towards the Internet before the mentioned events, but after them it seems to pay even more attention to its Internet security. As a result, a policy trend of restrictive regulation of the Internet as well as pressure on active users has taken shape, especially social network activists. The last haven of political freedom is under siege.

Vadzim Smok

**Press Freedom Act: Government
in Belarus imprisoned**

journalists



Belarus was mentioned in the text of the Daniel Pearl Press Freedom Act signed into law by President Barack Obama last Monday, May 17. According to the Voice of America [*](#), the U.S. State Department will be required to evaluate press freedom in countries around the world and highlight governments that condone and facilitate repression of the press. Pressure on journalists has recently increased in Belarus. Two criminal cases have been initiated against independent news website [charter97.org](#). According to [charter97.org](#)[*](#), their office was searched and computers were seized and journalist Natallya Radzina was beaten during the search. The editor of the opposition newspaper "Tovarishch" Syarhei Vvaznyak has recently been arrested after a search in his apartment.

Obama Signs Press Freedom Act Voice of America Editorial
The United States continues to be a staunch defender of press freedom. In support of this fundamental liberty, President Barack Obama recently signed the Daniel Pearl Freedom of the Press Act. The law is named in honor of the American journalist who was kidnapped and beheaded in Pakistan by terrorists on February 1st, 2002. The Daniel Pearl Freedom of the Press Act, said President Obama, "sends a strong message from the United States government and from the State Department that we are paying attention to how other governments are operating when it comes to the press." Under the new law, the State Department will be required to evaluate press freedom in countries around the world and highlight governments that condone and facilitate repression of the press. "Oftentimes, without this kind of attention," said President Obama, "countries and governments feel they can operate against the press with

impunity, and we want to send a message that they can't." The attention is warranted. In a recent statement on the occasion of World Press Freedom Day, President Obama noted that last year was a particularly bad one for freedom of the press worldwide. While people gained greater access than ever before to information through the Internet and cell phones, governments like North Korea, Ethiopia, Iran, and Venezuela curtailed freedom of expression by limiting full access to and use of these technologies. More media workers were killed for their work last year than any year in recent history. The high toll was driven in large part by the election-related killings of more than 30 journalists in the Philippine province of Maguindanao. In addition, journalists were killed with impunity in Somalia and Honduras. Even more journalists have been imprisoned. "Iran, following its crackdown on dissent after the last elections," said President Obama, "now has more journalists behind bars than any other nation. Governments in Belarus, Burma, China, Cuba, Eritrea, North Korea, Tunisia, Uzbekistan, and Venezuela imprisoned journalists who wrote articles critical of government leaders and their policies." The United States honors those who carry out the vital task of reporting the truth to their fellow citizens, despite the many challenges and threats they face. All nations should. Article 19 of the United Nation's Universal Declaration on Human Rights protects freedom of expression including the right to a free press. There can be no doubt that a free and independent press is central to a vibrant and well-functioning democracy.

Internet Censorship in Authoritarian Belarus

Belarusian Review
Spring 2010

GUEST EDITORIAL

by Viachaslau Bortnik

Something that every internet user in Belarus feared has finally happened. On February 1, 2010, Alexander Lukashenka signed a decree imposing censorship on the internet, approximately one year before the next presidential election. Lukashenka had previously been criticizing “anarchy on the internet”. After placing most of the traditional media under its control, the regime is pursuing an offensive against new media. The presidential election is scheduled to take place in early 2011 and Lukashenka plans to “win” again, (the last two presidential elections wherein Lukashenka retained power were widely viewed as fraudulent). Thus far, the internet has been one of the last places to express independent opinion in Belarus. The political opposition is fearful of being without any media access during the upcoming elections.

Under the new decree, internet providers, websites and internet users will be strictly controlled by the government and a special unit of the Presidential Administration – the Operating and Analytical Center. According to the decree “On Measures for Revising Use of the National Segment of the World Wide Web”, through an agreement with the President, the Center will define the list of “telecommunication operators, which have the right of direct access (interconnection) to international telecommunication systems, and authorized Internet service providers”. Any activity of a provider can be

stopped by a decision of the Council of Ministers. The Center will be able to forbid access to information considered to be illegal according to Belarusian legislation and will control the registration of “.by” domain names. An internet service provider will be able to stop rendering internet service to anyone in cases that they find to constitute a “gross violation of law, further violation of the decree, and other acts of legislation”.

Although it is not yet clear how the decree’s provisions will be utilized in the new legislation, which takes effect on July 1, 2010, there is no doubt that behind the extensive control over internet access and online content, President Lukashenka has the obvious intention of reducing free expression in Belarus. Comments of Belarusian officials suggest that there is nothing positive on the horizon. The Belarusian Minister of Communication, Mikalai Pantsyalei, pointed out that visitors of internet cafes will have to show their passports for identification. Natallia Pyatkevich, the deputy head of Lukashenka’s Administration, said that the ideologists should serve as the original source of information, not oppositional websites. Behind the extensive control over internet access and online content President Lukashenka has the obvious intention to reduce free expression in Belarus.

Introduction of the scandalous decree resulted in criticism by the international community including the EU, OSCE, human rights organizations and the Belarusian Diaspora worldwide. The EU’s foreign policy chief, Catherine Ashton, said that the decree “is going to further restrict freedom of speech and freedom of media in Belarus after it takes force”. The EU regards this issue as an important step in the wrong direction and hopes the Belarusian authorities will review it. The OSCE has prepared an expert assessment of the decree, and provided the Belarusian government with a set of recommendations that include the following:

- Abolish mandatory identification of internet service users

and their technical means used to connect to the internet.

- Clarify the meaning and procedure of introducing limitations and bans on spreading illegal information.

- Clarify the scope of responsibility of internet service providers in the event of failure to comply with an order by a relevant body to eliminate violations or to suspend internet services.

- Envision requiring state bodies and other public organizations to publish information not only on their activities, but also information which results from these activities.

- Abolish the requirement to include hyperlinks to the original information source in media outlet materials disseminated via the internet.

At the same time, activists of the Belarusian-American Association staged numerous protests against internet censorship in Washington and New York. The recent protest in front of the Newseum in the U.S. capital was supported by the international press watchdog group, Reporters Without Borders and covered by Voice of America. "Last year, the Belarusian government claimed that China was a model in terms of internet control. This year, President Lukashenka signed a decree subjecting online access to an identity check or to prior online authorization dependent on the content and the applicant. Now, in Minsk, people will censor themselves, which is the worst violation you can impose on freedom of speech", said Clothilde Le Coz, Washington Director of the Reporters Without Borders, in her address to the protesters. In its monitoring of online freedom, Reporters Without Borders has, until now, classified Belarus as a country "under surveillance" because it has only one internet service provider, (Beltelekam), because access to opposition websites is blocked during major political events, and because internet café owners are required under a February 2007 decree to alert the police about customers who visit "sensitive" sites and keep a record of all the sites visited during the previous 12

months on each computer, making the information available to the police if requested. If more far-reaching internet censorship is imposed in Belarus, as contemplated by the new Decree, the country would be added to the list of countries such as North Korea, China and Iran, which are notorious for blocking internet freedom.

The Decree "On Measures for Revising Use of the National Segment of the World Wide Web" is to take effect on July 1, which does not leave much time to work out a comprehensive strategy. For years, the internet has been viewed by international experts as a key vehicle for promoting democracy in Belarus. In a worst case scenario, the internet will not be an area of free speech anymore. This would force the international community to find answers to tough questions. The U.S. and the EU should work together to facilitate international pressure on the Belarus government to compel a review of the onerous decree. The international community should promote public discussion on internet censorship in Belarus by organizing information campaigns, protests, conferences, mobilizing media and other grassroots activities. In this difficult situation, sufficient support should be provided to satellite TV and FM radio broadcasting.

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