

RWB: Government extends its control over all media

05. Februar 2010

Statement by Reporters Without Borders, 2 February 2010

Reporters Without Borders regrets that President Alexander Lukashenko yesterday signed a decree establishing extensive control over Internet access and online content. The decree is due to take effect on 1 July.

“The fears we expressed at the start of last month (see release below) have been realised,” Reporters Without Borders said. “The Belarusian authorities are trying to tighten their control over the Internet as they already did with the traditional media.”

The press freedom organisation added: “By subjecting online access to an identity check or to prior online authorisation that depends on the content and the applicant, this decree will force people to censor themselves. This is obviously the intention, regardless of the government’s insincerely reassuring comments about online free expression.”

Decree No. 6 concerning “national Internet network improvement measures” requires that all online access devices such as computers and mobile phones be identified and registered with Internet Service Providers. This will ensure that the government controls the means by which its citizens access the Internet.

At the same time, anyone going online in an Internet café or using a shared connection (for example, in an apartment building) will have to identify themselves, while a record of all online connections will have to be kept for a year. All these measures will inevitably discourage people from visiting independent and opposition websites.

The decree also envisages the creation of an “analytic centre” attached to the president’s office that will be tasked with monitoring content before it is put online – clearly establishing censorship at the highest level of government. It is this centre that will distribute domain names and thereby have control over everyone’s online existence.

Every request by the centre for a website’s closure must be carried out by the ISP concerned within 24 Hours. Even an ordinary Internet user’s request can result in closure as the decree encourages informing.

The government made no bones about its goal of ideological censorship when it said it intended to follow the Chinese model. Usievalad Yancheuski, head of the ideological department in the president's office, also made it clear when he said: "Our ideology will have a presence on the Internet, and it will be an effective one." Such comments give the lie to Lukashenko's claims that everyone will be free to say what they want online.

These measures appear also designed to reinforce the government's political control in the run-up to the next presidential election, due to be held in the spring of 2011.