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Belarus Erects New Online Barriers

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Belarus' authoritarian government has further tightened its control over citizens' access to the Internet with a new law that obliges service providers to monitor users.

Reporters Without Borders, the media rights watchdog, condemned the new law in the former Soviet republic as the latest "stage in the government's escalating control of the Internet, adding new weapons of repression."

Belarus' President Alexander Lukashenko, who Western rights group have called "Europe's last dictator," has been in office since 1994, consistently suppressing opposition and cracking down on independent media.

The new legal amendments — announced Friday — now bar Belarussian businessmen from using outside Internet resources such as online stores registered in other countries.

The amendments formalize earlier restrictions on Internet use introduced by Lukashenko's decree, which required Internet service providers to monitor users and report them to authorities if they visit opposition web sites blacklisted by the government.

Lukashenko won another term in office in a December 2010 vote that was marred by fraud and criticized by international observers.

That election sparked massive anti-government protests brutally dispersed by police, who arrested about 700 people.

Some are still in jail, including presidential candidates Andrei Sannikov and Nikolai Statkevich.

“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,” Reporters Without Borders said in a statement.

Last year saw a wave of Internet-

organized demonstrations against Lukashenko’s rule by people who clapped their hands, stomped their feet or simply smiled.

Initially caught by surprise, police quickly started rounding up demonstrators, and the parliament passed amendments that gave authorities formal justification for dispersing such protests. Authorities often blocked opposition sites during protests.

Under rules introduced by Lukashenko in 2010, Internet users going online in an Internet cafe or using a shared connection have to identify themselves and a record is to be kept of each user’s Web history.

Authorities also have drawn up a list of web sites that employees of state-run companies and organizations, as well as cultural and educational institutions, are forbidden to visit. The list includes web sites belonging to leading opposition groups.

Fyodor Korolenko of the Internet company Akavita said the list isn’t part of the new law but that authorities began enforcing it last year.

He said users still can get access to the sites using their home computers or cell phones.

Reporters Without Borders listed Belarus as a country “under surveillance” in its annual report on “Enemies of the Internet” and ranked it 154th out of 178 countries in the 2010 press freedom index.

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