The Moscow Times
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Belarus on Censorship Spree Amid Currency Plunge

December 21, 2014



People stand in line to withdraw money at an automated teller machine (ATM) of a bank in central Minsk.

Belarussian authorities have blacklisted leading independent news websites as the country's currency entered a free fall that the government is attempting to curb with draconian regulations.

Belarus' central bank imposed a 30 percent commission on buying foreign currency on Friday, Interfax reported.

The move came after the U.S. dollar exchange rate grew about 800 Belarussian rubles to some 11,750 per dollar in two days, Interfax reported.

Some travel agencies and online retailers attempted to save themselves by using a rate of 15,000 Belarussian rubles per dollar to make up for losses, Interfax said.

The situation reportedly prompted Belarussians to flock to currency exchanges and shops in a

bid to get rid of the national currency.

The Belarussian government banned price hikes and shut down 13 leading online retailers, the Odsgomel.org news website reported Saturday.

Soon afterward, access to independent websites, including Belapan.com, Naviny.by, Udf.by, Zautra.by, Belaruspartisan.org, Gazetaby.com and Charter97.org, was blocked in Belarus without warning, Belaruspartisan.org said Saturday.

The country's President Alexander Lukashenko blamed the crisis on Russia, whose own ruble currency has lost 46 percent against the dollar this year.

But Lukashenko — in power since 1994 and known for quashing opponents with an iron hand — pledged to restore the situation to normal with his usual harsh measures.

"We'll stabilize in half a year thanks to the system we have in Belarus — a system of a tough power vertical, tough requirements," he said.

Independent economist Yaroslav Romanchuk predicted in comments to Interfax that there would be a rate of 20,000 Belarussian rubles per dollar by the spring.

But authorities were unperturbed: The central bank also denied economic causes of the crisis and blamed a simple — and amendable — lack of banknotes.

"Airplanes with foreign currency are on the way," the bank's deputy head Taras Nadolny said Friday.

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