

Part 1. Why test in Belarus?

The ONI considered Belarus to be an important test-case for monitoring the Internet during elections for four reasons: 1) apparent regime motive; 2) the growing importance of the Internet as a “last frontier” of free informational space in the country; 3) past allegations of regime-directed political filtering; and, 4) previous ONI baseline testing and research which proved that the regime has the technical capability to filter the Net. Let us look at each in turn.

In March 2006, Belarus President Aleksandr Lukashenka sought to continue his 12-year reign amidst rumours that a “denim revolution” was about to unfold.⁶ The backdrop to these elections was the President’s increasingly authoritarian regime. Since coming to power, Lukashenka has put in place a pervasive edifice to reinforce his rule, while keeping competitors contained and silenced. On paper, Belarus’ legal and administrative framework appears democratic. Indeed, the regime is characterized by a hyper-legalism wherein all actions – including civilian repression -- require a legal pretext. In practice however, all state bodies function to service the control of the Presidential Administration (PA), and it is the President’s office that determines when laws are to be enforced, and which illegalities are to be prosecuted.

Lukashenka’s architecture of authoritarian control has three key dimensions: political/security, legislative/administrative, and economic. The scope and reach of these elements has expanded in lock-step with the entrenchment of the regime, from the 2001 presidential elections through to the rigged referendum in 2004 (which lifted the constitutional limit allowing Lukashenka to run for a third term), through to this year’s presidential elections (March 2006). Together the troika works to diversify pressure points on both government administrators and ordinary citizens, ensuring compliance with regime interests while maintaining the illusion of legality. (See Annex A for a more comprehensive discussion of Lukashenka’s “matrix of control” with specific reference to the informational sphere and the Internet).

Politically, all key decisions, in all spheres, are made by the President, either in the form of official Decrees or “unofficial” (oral) statements that carry the same weight, and are implemented

Box 1. “Father” knows best

“Batka” -- or “father” as President Lukashenka is called by his supporters -- has brought stability, continuity, and economic security to the lives of the some 55% of Belarus citizens who genuinely support him,* namely the rural, middle-aged workers and elderly. Lukashenka was swept to power in 1994, on the strength of his promises to eradicate rampant corruption and redress the large drop in living standards, which had fallen by half during the country’s first four years of independence. Once voted in, Lukashenka delivered on his promises, rooting out corruption and “normalizing” the economy by redirecting millions of dollars into obsolete industries and collective farms. This both resuscitated livelihoods and secured Lukashenka the lasting loyalty of the workers. He also “stabilized” government by destroying the old elites (mostly the Soviet-era *nomenklatura*) and replacing them with cadres more loyal to himself. And then he embarked on an ever-more-authoritarian project to ensure his continued political rule. He disbanded the Parliament, creating a rubber-stamp institution in its stead, and proceeded to rule by Presidential Decree. He created a “healthier” society by introducing pervasive ideology in support of his policies in schools and workplaces, forcing young people to join the BRSM (*Belaruskii Respublikanski Sojuz Molodzhezhi* - Belarusian Republican Youth League), and limiting foreign travel and contact.

* Statistic comes from a January 2006 Gallup/Baltic Survey

⁶ Insiders suggest that the term “denim revolution” has far more resonance in the Western media than within Belarus itself. Indeed, there was little belief inside Belarus that a “revolution” would follow the election, and the size and persistence of the post-election demonstrations -- with tents set up in October Square -- took many by surprise.

even if they contravene or conflict with existing legislation.⁷ Legislative and administrative bodies, from the National Assembly through to the Ministries on down, function to sanction presidential decisions – either by “proposing” legislation that the PA has “suggested” or rubber-stamping pre-approved legislation. The subsequent enforcement is also subject to presidential directives. Presidential power is underpinned by a solid array of security bodies. In the informational sphere, these include the Committee for State Security (KGB), the Ministry of Internal Affairs (especially Department “K” responsible for computer crime), and the State Center for Information Security. All have wide latitude to investigate, surveil and interrogate citizens (or request same), including the monitoring of any and all communications to “safeguard security.”⁸

Legally, all organizational entities – including political parties, NGOs, television and newspapers, and Internet Service Providers (ISPs) -- are subject to strict rules for registration and licensing, the technicalities of which have often been used to shut down or stifle independent or oppositional organizations, news media, and those who dare to criticize the President in any way. Articles 367 and 368 of the Criminal Code, which make it a crime to “defame” or “slander” the President, are often used in this respect. Beyond this, new amendments to the Code in December 2005 further restrict the public’s capacity to gather, organize and speak. Among other things, the amendments criminalize any activities that “discredit the Republic of Belarus.”⁹

Economically, the formal financial regulative bodies¹⁰ have extensive

Box 2. Economic compellence: The Velcom case

Velcom is Belarus’ first private GSM operator, established in 1999. Initial control of Velcom was split as follows: the Cypriot-owned SB Telecom (49%), the state-owned Beltelecom (31%), and the state-owned Beltechexport (20%). However, Beltelecom was unable to contribute its portion of the statutory capital obligations. The parties signed a new agreement, reducing Beltelecom’s capital obligations to 1%, while increasing the obligations of the foreign founder to 69% (SB Telecom-69%; Beltechexport-30%; and Beltelecom-1%). The agreement further stipulated that Beltelecom would retain 31% share of votes and profits, and that it had the right to “buy back” its extra 30% of shares at a later date.

Within a few years the market value of Velcom rose to several hundred million dollars, and share prices rose accordingly. As Beltelecom continued to be unable to buy back its 30%, the President of Belarus ordered that Beltelecom’s shares would be 31%, to guarantee ‘real state control of company activity,’ (even though it de facto controlled 51% of votes and profits). Velcom partners were requested to “present” a portion of their shares to Beltelecom to raise its official shares to 31%. The state-owned Beltechexport presented 10%. The foreign founder, however, refused to hand over the remaining 20% without compensation.

Suddenly Velcom started to have problems. The MCI threatened to cancel Velcom’s license, due to a licensing “violation” which the Ministry, itself, had previously allowed to occur. The managers of Velcom, including the Cypriot owners, were slapped with a criminal case, accused of abusing custom privileges some years previously. Despite the lack of evidence, the Cypriot owners were arrested and placed in KGB detention. SB Telecom capitulated, handing over 20% of its shares to Beltelecom. The criminal case was closed, and Velcom’s licensing problems disappeared.

Source: *Tomaszevskaya* (2003) on <http://www.ucpb.org/bel/showart.shtml?no=3305>

⁷ For example, during a meeting devoted to the development of cellular communication the President gave the order to cancel the international tender for a third GSM license and instead, to create a completely state-owned GSM operator, BeST. See also Footnote 14.

⁸ Although the privacy of personal communications is enshrined in the Constitution, other laws override this right when it comes to issues of “security.” See Annex A, as well as discussion in Part 3.

⁹ According to recent statements by the Minister of the Interior (Uladzimer Navumau), this law will be used to track down regime dissenters in cyberspace. This discussion is picked up in Part 3 of the report.

¹⁰ That is, the National Bank, State Customs Committee, Tax Ministry, and State Control Committee.

powers to supervise all economic activity and financial transactions in the country. These powers are often used to harass independent entities – from civic groups and organizations, through to newspapers and other information producers as well as businesses -- to pressure them to conform to state ideology and directives. Many critics and businesses have been effectively curbed after being charged with “tax irregularities” or other “economic crimes.” (See Box 2 above. For more details, see Annex A).

From the perspective of this report, one critical result of the regime’s political, legal and economic machinations has been the gagging or shutting down of independently-minded political parties, non-governmental organizations and media.

When it comes to the traditional channels of Belarus informational space (press, radio, television), the independent press are rendered particularly vulnerable because of the state monopoly on printing and distribution facilities, which is controlled directly by the Presidential Administration. These facilities can and do suspend the production and distribution of publications that chose to carry “inappropriate” information, and many independent papers have been forced to close. Television and radio are dominated by state-run media, with the remaining independent outlets “choosing” to carry mostly entertainment programmes or local events. International media is limited and declining (See Box 3, next page).

Thus by 2005, a host of foreign and independent observers were expressing grave concern about Belarus’ restrictions on freedom of speech, press, assembly, and association, and the intensified pressure on independent media and NGOs, many of which were forced out of existence through legal technicalities compelling de-registration, or through frequent tax investigations and other state-sanctioned allegations and harassment.¹¹

Against this backdrop, the Internet, whose content remains relatively unfettered for now, is seen by many as the last breach in Lukashenka’s informational blockade on free speech.¹²

¹¹ See, for example *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices - 2004*. U.S. Department of State, released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor. February 28, 2005. <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2004/41671.htm>. Human Rights Watch, 2005, Belarus available on <http://hrw.org/english/docs/2006/01/18/belaru12217.htm>.

¹² See, for example, Valentinas Mite, *Belarus Opposition Politicians Embrace Internet, Despite Digital Divide*, RFE/RL, 07.02.2006.

Box 3. Discipline and punish: Keeping the opposition and media in line

Civic organizations, political parties, trade unions and the independent media form the backbone of the political opposition in Belarus. It is not coincidental, then, that the Lukashenka regime “disciplines” them collectively. Rather than a frontal assault to ban independent organizations and publications, the authorities use multiple legal, economic and administrative methods to limit activities, prevent public gatherings, outlaw funding sources, gag public communication efforts, and shut down communication channels and spaces. Control is achieved through legislation (via an ever expanding array of strict financial, administrative and content regulations), administrative harassment amounting to a “persecution by permits” (with “re-registration” being a proven method to thin out the ranks), hounding by tax authorities, and the threat of being accused of “economic crimes.” More “hands on” tactics like phone-tapping, regular monitoring by the KGB, and other forms of intimidation are also wide-spread but difficult to document. Arrests of opposition activists, and their confinement to “administrative detention,” have increased but charges are rarely overtly “political.” Rather the offenses are classified as “economic” or “hooliganism.” At the most extreme, political opponents -- including a journalist -- have “disappeared.”

For traditional media, the State Press Committee implements state information policy (e.g., ensuring no criticism of the regime) and is empowered to suspend the activity of media outlets, and slap large fines on publications or individuals. A common reason for State Press Committee intervention is to combat so-called “honor and dignity” offenses, that is, any statement that “defames the honor and dignity” of state officials.

The independent press is attacked administratively through restrictive registration and accreditation policies, unfair taxation. And, as noted in the main text, is vulnerable because of the state’s monopoly on printing and distribution facilities. According to Reporters Without Borders, the Lukashenka regime has “... *systematically shut down the country’s few struggling independent newspapers by throttling them financially with huge fines or using ridiculous bureaucratic pretexts.*”

As for television and radio the Belarus Broadcasting Company is subordinate to the President. Remaining independent radio and television outlets operate on shoestring budgets, avoid news programming (so as not to risk license loss) and focus on entertainment and local events.. Licenses are issued on the basis of “political loyalty” and thus can be easily withdrawn.

The penetration of international media is limited and declining. Like domestic media, international publications must be registered (vetted) by the central authorities before being distributed in Belarus. Most individual cable operators, who are responsible for the materials they re-broadcast, have stopped rebroadcasting BBC and CNN, leaving Euronews as the only major international service available to some 30% of cable subscribers. Russian channels, which used to be a source of alternative information, have been fully or partially suspended with Belarus’ content taking their place. The authorities have been known to charge Russian correspondents in Belarus with “honour and dignity” offenses, to prevent them from transmitting (to Russia) materials viewed as unfavorable to the Lukashenka regime.

Sources: “Viasna ‘96” monthly reports catalogue cases of intimidation, harassment and persecution, see: www.spring96.org ; Belarus Helsinki Committee’s Annual and Monthly Reports (bhc.unibel.by); *Reporters without Borders, Worldwide Press Freedom Index 2005*; IREX, *Media Sustainability Index 2004 and 2006*; [Jan Maksymiuk](http://www.rferl.org), *How Lukashenka has dealt with independent media*, RFE/RL Reports, 26 December 2000, Vol.2, No.48.

Internet: Lukashenka's "Trojan Horse"?

As traditional media have become either state-run, state-sanctioned, or shut down in Belarus, the Internet as a medium for information has grown in importance.¹³ Given that some see the Internet as Lukashenka's "Trojan horse," it is not without irony that his regime has made significant effort to expand Belarus' telecommunications capacities as part of the plan to modernize the state. State policies also demonstrate Lukashenka's desire to get telecommunications capacities into the hands of his rural supporters. Beltelecom's cross-subsidization of local telephone calls is one example of this, as are the aggressive policies for universal access.¹⁴

Although Internet penetration in Belarus remains amongst the lowest in Europe, the user-base is on the rise. Estimates suggest that the number of Internet users doubled between 2002 and 2005, and now reaches close to some 2 million or 20% of the population, although only some 5% are thought to be "permanent" users due to the high cost of access.¹⁵ Surveys suggest that most users are young, educated and urban, based in Minsk or the regional centers.¹⁶ 40% of users are also government employees, which has important implications for constraining their civic or oppositional cyberactivism.¹⁷

In this respect, the majority of Lukashenka's core constituency – the rural workers, middle-aged and elderly – are not active Internet users as of yet. A 2003 survey on the political attitudes of Internet users and non-users found Internet users were more likely to be skeptical of the Lukashenka regime's policies and propaganda, trust independent news sources more than state-run organs, and were more inclined to actively support the opposition.¹⁸

The opposition takes to the web...

Even three years ago, most "independent" websites in Belarus – of oppositional political parties, human rights groups, non-governmental organizations – offered little more than slogans, basic contact information or "wire service" information without analysis. During the October 2004 parliamentary election campaign, for example, the websites of non-regime candidates offered a few oppositional slogans and minimal information on some of the hopeful contenders.

13 For example, Reporters without Borders asserts: "*The Internet is an efficient source of independent news in a country where traditional media are under constant government pressure and online material is not censored much.*" See also: "*Belarus Protesters turn to the Internet,*" http://i-policy.typepad.com/informationpolicy/2006/03/belarus_protest.html

14 See discussion of the state-owned Beltelecom monopoly below. BeST is a fully state-owned mobile phone operator enacted in 2004 to ensure a roll-out of mobile services to rural and poorer regions of the country, which would not be encumbered by market considerations. According to the license terms, the new GSM operator must provide special pricing for low-income subscribers and cover remote rural areas. The government expects the BeST network to cover 90% of the population by 2008/9.

15 See "*Internet Users in Belarus*" at <http://www.e-belarus.org/news/200506021.html>. Estimates of users vary considerably. Non-regime sources suggest a significant rise in Internet users since 2002, from 809,000 users in 2002 (Reporters without Borders, *Internet under Surveillance 2004*) to 1,391,900 in 2003 (CIA World Factbook 2006). Based on the official estimate of 2 million in 2005, it would seem the user-base has doubled in the space of three years.

16 A 2003 survey found that 33% of active users were aged between 20-24, 50% were university graduates, 23% lived in Minsk and a further 46% lived in regional centers.

17 In 2004, all government employees in Belarus (which represent 80% of all employed people) became "contract employees," with contracts renewable annually. As such, they are now much more vulnerable to job dismissal, which discourages participation in non-state sanctioned activities, including critical commentary. See Annex A.

18 Source: Belarus Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Research, 2003 Survey.

The contrast with 2006 is stark. In the run-up to the elections, the main opposition candidates signalled their intent to leverage the Internet's communicative and organizational power.¹⁹ Aleksandr Milinkevich had a site up and running almost immediately following his nomination²⁰ and the United Civic Party began distributing a regular e-mail bulletin, while dramatically improving the informational content and appeal of its website.²¹ Beyond this, websites concerned with human rights in Belarus carry an abundance of news and analysis (see, for example, Annex C and D), and some independent papers and oppositional publications have moved on-line.²² Certainly, the information and commentary contained on the websites of opposition groups and independent news sources throughout the election and post-election protest period would not have been allowed to appear in the strictly controlled Belarus' newspapers, radio or television.²³

Moreover, the 2006 election period saw new and spontaneous uses of the net for political organization -- as forums and blogs were used by "ordinary" people to connect and coordinate action. There was a rash of "flash mob" political gatherings in Minsk and other centres that were not organized by the official opposition, but by young people who coordinated their gatherings via the Internet and text messaging (see Part 3).

...and anticipates the spider

Given the Internet's growing importance to the opposition, a significant subplot of the 2006 elections was whether or not the regime would seek to "shut down" the websites of oppositional candidates and independent news sources. Indeed, the loudly critical "Charter 97" website -- an opposition site that is particularly popular with Western audiences because it also carries English -- anticipated that the authorities would seek to filter it, and posted information on how users could find alternative access routes.²⁴

In the event, however, Internet freedom did not alter the election results. On the 19th of March, Lukashenka won, claiming some 82.5% of the vote, with Milinkevich garnering a mere 3%. Protests erupted as the opposition called foul-play, and carried on for the following week. While these rallies at times reached some 10-15,000 demonstrators, the "denim revolution" did not ignite.²⁵ By week's end, momentum had flagged, and the police were sent in to root out the diehards.

19 Milinkevich told Radio Svoboda: "There is no equal access to the media [in Belarus]. We bank on the remaining independent newspapers, samizdat [underground press], and the Internet." (RFE/RL-25.01.2006).

20 <http://by.milinkevich.org/>.

21 www.ucpb.org.

22 In December 2005, for example, the opposition newspaper Solidarnasc ceased printing and became an exclusively on-line newspaper. See: Belapan, 14.02.2006, www.gazetaby.com.

23 Although observers noted the extraordinary appearance of opposition candidate Kozulin on television prior to the elections, where he delivered a highly critical speech, which later found its way to Internet sites. See: "Daring to criticise Belarus' President," on http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/programmes/from_our_own_correspondent/4790912.stm See also "Belarus stifles critical media" on <http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/europe/4818050.stm>.

24 See: www.charter97.org. The site provides news, commentary, and an active opposition blog. During the elections, the blog provided up-to-the minute information on election protests and events. Charter 97 has made various allegations in the past of being disabled by way of regime-directed "denial of service" (DoS) attacks (e.g., February 2005). A DoS attack involves flooding the server with packets (requests) to overwhelm its capacity and thereby causing it or its network connection to fail.

25 These figures are cited by most independent media accounts. Opposition sources claim higher figures of 20-40,000.

Past allegations

Allegations of Internet blocking in Belarus are not new. During the 2001 presidential elections, various independent or oppositional groups claimed that their sites were inaccessible, and that the Lukashenka regime was deliberately blocking access. By contrast, the authorities issued the entirely plausible counter-claim that Internet problems were caused by access overload: too many people were trying to access the sites all at once during the elections.²⁶ In June 2003, the www.bakte.net site was allegedly blocked on the order of the secret police (KGB) because it had posted the text of a book criticizing the President, which the Ministry of Foreign Affairs had called “political pornography.” During the 2004 parliamentary elections and referendum (which allowed President Lukashenka to amend the constitution so he could continue his reign), oppositional websites again reported access problems, albeit on a lesser scale.²⁷ In 2005, various websites claimed they were victims of deliberate blocking by state authorities or DoS attacks.²⁸ However, none of these accusations has been independently verified on the basis of testing. And in the absence of this, the Lukashenka regime’s claim that any Internet problems stem from overloaded servers is at least conceivable.

ONI baseline testing in 2005

To explore allegations of politically-motivated regime blocking of sites, ONI undertook baseline testing between June 2005-January 2006. The results confirmed that filtering was taking place -- but *not* of political or independent sites, which remained up and unfettered. Rather, the only “high impact” websites²⁹ being filtered in Belarus at that time were Russian gay porn sites: ONI attempts to access these “gay” sites from within Belarus consistently resulted in a “connection refused” error, even though the sites could be reached from a control location outside Belarus.

In fact, the authorities have formally admitted to the filtering of the Russian sites, which they said were “legally” and openly blocked because of their deemed unacceptable pornographic nature.³⁰ What is of note here is that the regime felt obliged to make the legal case for this action, which was put together in 2004. As noted above, the government is characterized by a hyper-legalism, with all state actions requiring a legal basis (even if this stems from a Presidential decree and laws are applied in a highly selective manner). Non-lawful blocking of the Internet could be considered a violation of the Belarusian constitution which on paper “guarantees” free speech. As of yet, there is no law on the books that specifically addresses the right of the state to regulate or block websites, although, as we shall see in Part 3 below, this law is probably on its way.

²⁶ No official documents confirm that the government blocked any sites. However, on 10 September 2001, Letvinskiy Zubr – the “code name” for an anonymous but well-known commentator on the Internet in Belarus -- wrote a letter to Belarus Media claiming insider knowledge that the decision to block the Internet was “made on the highest level” with the First Deputy Head of the Presidential Administration giving orders to the Ministry of Communication to “fix the Internet and anti-president and anti-national slander...”.

²⁷ Some sites which claimed vote rigging on the referendum were allegedly blocked for most of election day. However, no testing was conducted to confirm this was the case. By way of analogy, it is interesting to note that several online newspapers, such as www.naviny.by, had their phones turned off for the day. See Freedom House, *Nations in Transition 2005*.

²⁸ For example, in August 2005 a site with cartoons about President Lukashenka was reportedly blocked, and the two youths who had placed the cartoons online were charged with the criminal offense of slandering the President (see Part 3 below).

²⁹ The ONI “high impact” test list is one that is tailored specifically for the country being tested, and is comprised of sites that are likely to be a potential target of state action because of their sensitive or critical (political) nature (See Annex B).

³⁰ A senior figure from the Ministry of Communications officially acknowledged the blocking in an interview with Radio Svoboda. For information on how the legal case for blocking the sites was built up in 2004, see: Belnet, 12.10.2004.

They have the technology

ONI testing in 2005 confirmed that the Belarus authorities have the technical capacity to filter websites. The testing revealed that Russian sites were filtered by ISPs configuring their routers to reject requests for the offending sites' IP address (a method called IP address blocking or null routing). Further infield investigation by the ONI team revealed that the state's capacity to control the physical functioning of the Internet lies at three levels:

The first level is the State Center for Information Security (GCBI), a body that used to be part of the KGB but now reports directly to the President and is roughly equivalent to the US National Security Agency although its focus is domestic rather than international. Among other things, the GCBI controls the top level Internet domain (.by), meaning it is in charge of registering all sites within that domain. This also means the GCBI is in a position to tamper with the DNS records of any website within its registry to render it inaccessible, should this be of interest. Indeed, during the 2001 presidential elections, the opposition accused the GCBI of just such tampering when some of their websites went down.

The second level is by way of the state-owned Beltelecom telecommunications monopoly, which is controlled by the Ministry of Communications (See Box 4). Beltelecom's monopoly extends over all external communication lines, and as such functions as Belarus' central ISP. The thirty or so local ISPs have been granted licenses to connect through Beltelecom facilities, and no operators have fully independent external links to the Net, with the exception of the academic and research network (BasNet), which comes under a different set of controls.³¹ Thus, most Internet traffic within Belarus flows through one state-owned choke point, making for an ideal monitoring or filtering set-up. A filter installed on the main router of Beltelecom can block IP-addresses of external sites that are hosted outside of Belarus regardless of their

Box 4. Beltelecom monopoly: Revenue, power and control

Beltelecom is the main source of revenue for the Ministry of Communications (MIC). Various MIC regulations suggest that protecting Beltelecom's market hegemony is a priority. One such example is the ban on transceiver satellite antennas for commercial providers. Another is the essential prohibition of IP-telephony services by commercial providers, which, if this were allowed, would undercut Beltelecom's lucrative earnings from international telephone communications. Currently, Beltelecom provides IP-telephony services at a substantial profit, (charging only 30% less than regular telephone costs). Some clandestine IP-telephony operators tried to provide services at vastly reduced rates, and generated some \$200,000 USD worth of business before caught by the KGB, fined, charged and shut down (See Annex A).

Formally, the monopoly exists only in relation to external communication lines, as any operator may provide services for local telephone calls. However, in practice, Beltelecom operates a cross subsidizing system, using profits from the very high charges for international phone calls and Internet to subsidize local call costs, which means that commercial operators cannot compete. In addition, extra profits from Beletelcom subsidize the otherwise unsustainable collective farms and outmoded industries which provide essential jobs to Lukashenka's main powerbase (rural workers).

The state's financial interests in the telecommunications 'market' are substantial. In 2004 the market totalled USD 700 million with mobile communications accounting for 39% of the market, and fixed telephony, Internet access and data transmission equalling 61%. The growth of the stationary communications segment totalled 40%, and the mobile communications market had doubled. The government, which has controlling shares in all mobile operators, has been the single greatest beneficiary.

³¹ Basnet is effectively a government network – see Annex A. Note also that the major wireless service operators -- Velcom, MTS, and BelCel -- are obliged to use Beltelecom hardware facilities for all international traffic.

domain name. This means, for example, that an opposition site hosted in the United States and registered as .org can be rendered inaccessible to anyone trying to access the site from within Belarus. At various times, the opposition has accused GCBI of installing filters at Beltelecom.³² Beyond this, there is official acknowledgment that other state security organs like the Ministry of the Interior have comprehensively surveilled and intercepted Internet traffic to catch a variety of “cybercriminals” (See Annex A and Part 3).

The third level for potential filtering of websites is at the level of the non-state owned ISPs themselves.³³ In some ways this capacity is superfluous, given Beltelecom’s overarching control. However, any ISP could install filters to block Internet sites, and no doubt would do so if directly requested by a state security body. ISPs, like all non-state organizations in Belarus, are inherently vulnerable to state persecution by permits, fines or criminal charges (See Part 3 below). During the 2001 presidential elections, the ISP “Open Contact,” which also administers the central database for the .by domain (on behalf of GCBI), was accused by the opposition of blocking various websites within Belarus by way of DNS tampering.

But are they using it?

Just because the regime has the capability to shut down the Net and there have been allegations that it has, does not prove the reality of active filtering for political purposes. With this question in mind, ONI commenced its monitoring of the Internet during the 2006 elections.

³² There have also been persistent rumours, reported in the Polish press that the authorities have procured technology for filtering from China. See: <http://www.bybanner.com/show.php?id=1295>; <http://www.charter97.org/2005/11/25/filtr> . Note, however, that ONI has not verified any patterns of filtering consistent with those used in China. See the ONI report on China.

³³ As of 2005, a total of 32 providers are connected to Internet access nodes through Beltelecom. According to ISP assessments, the dial-up services market totalled some USD 24 million in 2004, which was up USD 17 million from 2003. Beltelecom has established 187 Internet access points with 732 ‘work places’. It is planned to put into operation 92 more ‘work places’ in 2005 and 115 in 2006-2007.
