

Part Four. Summary: Wither Belarus?

This ONI Internet Watch has shown that the Belarus regime has the technical capability to filter and block the Internet. However, ONI testing during the 2006 election period did not yield conclusive proof that the regime chose to fully exercise this capability. ONI confirmed that some 37 important political and independent news websites experienced access problems at certain times, and also found other suspicious access anomalies.

ONI was unable to verify unequivocally whether the confirmed Internet problems were due to deliberate regime interference, although the problems centering on the Beltelecom network are highly suspicious. The one firm conclusion is that any regime filtering or interference that took place was neither comprehensive nor systematic. Websites on the Internet may have been “squeezed” at times, but were never under full blockade.

This report, however, does not argue that Internet openness in Belarus is robust and guaranteed. Rather, analysis of the political and legal context revealed that the regime has both the will and capability to clamp down on Internet openness, and that its capacities to do so are more pervasive and subtle than outright filtering and blocking, with growing pressures for self-censorship. Regime surveillance of the Net’s informational space is likely to grow as more independent and oppositional voices take to the web to organize and get their message out, as the 2006 elections showed.

When it comes to outright Internet filtering, the formal legal architecture that would enable the state to lawfully block and filter Internet sites is not yet fully in place. Perhaps this explains why the regime, always careful to have a legal basis to pursue its actions, has not pursued overt and sustained political filtering to date. But there are new laws in the works which promise to bring websites and website content into the same regulatory framework that have been used to effectively stifle the traditional media in Belarus – both domestic and foreign. As such, the day may be approaching when Belarus’ cyberspace will be legally and overtly restricted and monitored, with any potentially offending sites being blocked outright. And in the meantime, the precedent has been set to apprehend and prosecute those who choose to slander the President or his regime in cyberspace.