

Belarus imposes tough new Internet curbs

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The new rules also require all local Internet vendors to register with the authorities and imposes sanctions on those selling their goods in Belarus through foreign websites.

The restrictions came amid an expanding [crackdown](#) on the opposition by President Alexander Lukashenko and sparked confusion on the streets of the capital Minsk about what the new rules actually mean.

Lukashenko's administration said the law in no way limits people's access to foreign websites and is only meant to ensure "transparent" retail operations and help protect people from dangerous and [pornographic sites](#).

"This does not limit citizens' use of Internet resources in any way. Their access to foreign websites is not being restricted," said a statement from Lukashenko's official information and analysis centre.

Officials said the restrictions would still allow foreign retailers such as Amazon to operate in Belarus without registering on the .by domain.

But opposition websites said the list of banned organisations deemed "[extremist](#)" includes leading human rights centres Vyasna (Spring) and Charter 97 -- both based abroad but freely accessible in Belarus.

The law bars state organisations and universities from opening such websites and forces cybercafes and restaurants with Internet access to store information about those who do access them for up to a year.

This rule also extends to home network providers and requires them to "record and store... [personal data](#) of Internet services users and information about the Internet services that have been provided".

"According to independent experts, the authorities' main goal is to control the main opposition websites," the Belarussky Partizan news website said.

The authoritarian Lukashenko has been ostracised by Western nations since rising to power in 1994 and attempting to recreate a Soviet-style command system under which all forms of dissent are condemned.

The wave of restrictions was extended last year following his

controversial re-election and now includes a ban on people's right to stage any form of protest on the streets without permission from the authorities.

Belarus already ranks 154th out of 178 countries on a media freedoms list compiled in 2010 by their Reporters Without Borders watchdog and the new curbs left many asking how far they actually extend.

"We still have no official instructions about which sites we are supposed to be filtered and who makes the decisions about these things," a worker with the Beltelecom state Internet operator said on condition of anonymity.

Private cybercafe owners said the rules were likely to hurt their business because users will be especially careful about keeping their personal data private.

"If we really do have to start switching off sites, we are going to lose a lot of our clients," said a cafe owner who agreed to be identified as Alexander.

Both Vyasna and Charter 97 have been hounded by the authorities for years because of their calls for anti-Lukashenko rallies and detailed reports about those jailed by his regime.

Vyasna's founder Ales Beliatsky was jailed for four-and-a-half years on tax evasion charges in November.

Charter 97 said that hackers last week had accessed its editor's computer and used stolen passwords to create false stories and delete the organisation's archives.

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