

Belarusian media claim gov't attack on their websites

October 5 2015, by Yuras Karmanau

Belarusian independent media outlets on Monday accused the government of blocking their websites less than a week before presidential elections, describing it as an attack against free press.

Most Belarusian media are under either direct or indirect government control with just a few struggling to deliver independent reporting.

Websites of the BelaPAN news agency and online publication naviny.by have been unreachable since Saturday because of what is known as a distributed denial of service, or DDOS, attack. The publications said their sites were attacked after they ran stories about university students being forced to go to a public prayer attended by President Alexander Lukashenko and his 12-year-old son.

Both BelaPAN and naviny.by keep their computer servers in Belarus with a state-owned telecommunications monopolist.

"Such actions ahead of the election make (the vote) pointless since they mean that a censorship for online media has been effectively introduced," said Andrei Bastunets, chairman of the Belarusian Association of Journalists.

Lukashenko has been in office since 1994 and is widely expected to be re-elected in the Sunday election.

The authoritarian leader, who has been slapped with Western sanctions

for his crackdown on dissent, has in recent years skillfully maneuvered between Russia and the West, wary of Moscow's military resurgence. Lukashenko did not publicly support Russia's annexation of Crimea in March 2014, and Western officials have recently said that the sanctions against Lukashenko could come under review.

Belarus adopted a bill in February, allowing authorities to block websites without obtaining a court order.

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