

Mr. Uladzimir Rusakevich
Minister of Information
11 Masherova Avenue
Minsk 220004
Belarus

Phone: (37517) 223-9231
Fax (37517) 223-5825

Paris, 10 June 2008

Dear Minister,

Reporters Without Borders, an organisation that defends press freedom worldwide, would like to share with you its concern about the Internet in Belarus, especially after learning of the comments made by your deputy, Liliya Ananich, on 2 June on the subject of online regulation. Belarus is already one of the former Soviet republics that most controls the Internet, and we think that Ms. Ananich's remarks constitute an appeal for censorship.

During a round table organised by the magazine *Belaruskaya Dumka*, deputy minister Ananich said: "The information ministry is unambiguously committed to the legislative regulation of the operation of Internet mass media. Those of them that would like to act as mass media (request information, distribute information, be present at press conferences and so on) should be registered in accordance with the established procedure. The procedure should be defined either by the Mass Media Law or a regulatory act of the government."

She also referred to the use of Chinese expertise to block access to foreign websites liable to have a "bad influence" on the Belarusian Internet. We would like to know what kind of sites are targeted by such filtering and on what precise grounds.

Another round table participant, Oleg Proleskovsky, who heads the informational analysis centre at the office of the president, said: "In organisational terms, it is necessary to use so-called content-filtering software. This is software that helps users or local network administrators block access from computers, for which they are responsible, to sites containing information that conflicts with current legislation or public moral standards."

We regard this manifest desire to control content as a threat to online freedom of expression. It is all the more reprehensible that you envisage a partnership with China, the world's leading online censor.

Most Belarusian citizens are regular Internet users. We are aware that it is important to regulate website content but we are also convinced that freedom of expression should not suffer as a result. We would therefore be grateful if you would send us the provisional findings of the working group you set up last year to study Internet legislation in various countries in order to identify regulations that could be applied in Belarus.

Mr. Proleskovsky also said that the government wanted to increase the use of Internet technologies in political life in order to help "building the state for the people." We share a concern to develop the Internet and democracy together, and we urge you not to give free rein to the censorship of Internet users who are just exercising their right to free expression.

The Belarusian government maintains a monopoly of telecommunications and does hesitate to block access to the websites of the opposition and independent news media whenever it feels this is necessary, and it even blocks news and information "preventively." The Belarusian version of the *Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty* website, for example, could not be accessed for more than two weeks around the time of the demonstration in Minsk to mark the 22nd anniversary of the Chernobyl disaster, regarded as the biggest demonstration of the year.

This was a serious violation of press freedom. Reporters Without Borders deplores such behaviour and fears that Ms. Ananich's comments conceal a desire to make online controls even stricter, to this freedom's detriment.


Since President Alexandre Lukashenko's comment on 2 August 2007 about the need to "put an end to the anarchy reigning on the Internet," three websites in particular have been the target of blocking measures during important political events. They are the sites of Charter 97, Belarus Partisan and the United Civic Party (a liberal opposition party).

All three sites were blocked in January, for example, during protests that were being held regularly in Minsk in protest against a measure by President Lukashenko banning small entrepreneurs from hiring more than three relatives. We ask you to explain the reasons for this repeated blocking.

The Internet sector's success should not be hampered by government decisions that threaten free expression. We hope you will take the necessary measures to allow the steadily growing number of Belarusians going online to have access to a free Internet.

We trust you will give our various requests your careful consideration.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "R. Ménard", with a horizontal line underneath it.

Robert Ménard
Secretary-General