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The District Court of Lenin in Grodno, Belarus, convicted journalist Andrzej Poczobut this July of “insulting the personal honor and dignity” of Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko.

Lukashenko, who has ruled Belarus for seventeen years, is waging war on independent media to maintain his grip on a precious commodity in Belarus: information. As in any high-stakes conflict over resources, there are casualties. Andrzej Poczobut was among the first.

The correspondent for the major Polish newspaper *Gazeta Wyborcza* now faces the threat of a three-year sentence, currently suspended, for defaming Lukashenko, the authoritarian president of Belarus. The prosecution introduced eight articles as evidence against Poczobut, which appeared on *Wyborcza's* website and *Belaruspartisan.org*, an opposition news site.

In the offending articles, Poczobut wrote that Lukashenko was a dictator who rigged elections. In one article, he described the cult of personality surrounding “Batka” (Belarusian for Papa), a nickname coined with Lukashenko's approval. In another, he merely quoted Lukashenko's own frank account during a press conference of how Belarusian election results are predetermined.

In two years, the court will review Poczobut's case. If he is found to have re-offended, the journalist will immediately be taken from his wife and young son and returned to the Grodno prison where he has already spent three months locked in a 4-by-5 foot cell with three ordinary criminals while awaiting his trial's verdict.

A dismissal of the sentence does not seem likely. Poczobut has every intention of continuing to work as a journalist.

“I like this job. I'm not going to stop writing,” Poczobut told me in phone and email interviews from his home in Grodno. “I realize I could be arrested again, but I also realize my case has gained a certain symbolic significance within Belarus.”

True to his word, Poczobut's prison journal was published online within days of his release. Several weeks later, *Gazeta Wyborcza* featured several more articles written by Poczobut, all likely to inflame the authorities.

“Lukashenko wants an FBI” described the dictator's reorganization of the investigative and security services in order to prevent a coup d'etat, according to a former security service lieutenant. “War on the Belarusian Internet” detailed how a man was fined and fired from his job after he posted information about protests.

The Internet has indeed become the front line for Lukashenko's repression of free speech. After the Belarusian president witnessed the role of online media in propelling regime change in the Arab world, he quickly orchestrated legislation to crack down on independent news outlets and activist forums online.

Poczobut believes it was as much his medium as his message that led to his prosecution.

“Frankly speaking, the prosecution did not admit [into evidence] a single print story,” he

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says. "The Belarusian authorities have openly publicized that my case is meant to intimidate online journalists and Internet users critical of the Lukashenko regime."

Andrei Alaiksandrau, a spokesman for the Belarusian Union of Journalists said, "The authorities are less concerned with opposition print media because they have already found an effective way to drive it off the market."

According to Aliaksandrau, as newspapers struggled to convert from print to digital formats, the authorities took advantage of their economic hardship. *Chemik*, a newspaper where Aliaksandrau previously worked, for instance, was forced to shut down after entire print runs were seized. The publication now survives only as a website. Similar actions have closed many news offices.

As opposition regrouped on the Internet, however, the vast numbers of online dissidents became evident. A series of "silent protests" this summer brought crowds of up to 10,000 protesters to the streets of Minsk, standing in silence to avoid arrest by the police. The protests were organized entirely through online forums and social networking sites.

Lukashenko vowed that there will be no Arab Spring or Colored Revolution in Belarus. He has put the resources of his small Eastern European country to the huge task of policing the Internet, generating a blacklist of forbidden websites. Later, the government countered the silent protests by outlawing large groups convened "to carry out action or inaction."

Initially, enforcement of this blacklist was rather crude, a matter of checking browser files for banned sites. Aliaksandrau saw government employees delete their browsing history. One public servant told him that his supervisors randomly checked his computer's Internet history. If he was caught looking at pornography he might be fired, the worker said, but if his boss found blacklisted sites, he would see "other kinds of trouble."

Since the silent protests, however, the government's efforts to combat free speech online have evolved. Local news reports claimed that domestic servers were denying access to websites popular with activists like Charter97.org, and Vkontakte.com, a Russian social network comparable to Facebook.

Lukashenko's grand strategy of censorship also contains a personal side – singling out individuals for punishment to intimidate society. Poczobut thinks the real reason the authorities targeted him boils down to a personal animosity resulting from years of his relentless reportage.

"Without a doubt, my writing had an impact on the decision to prosecute me," says Poczobut. "It was an attempt to silence me."

Shortly before his arrest he wrote an article titled "How the Belarusian KGB spreads fear," which gave readers a first-hand look at the Belarusian security forces, which still retain the infamous Soviet initials.

Equal parts satire and first-person reportage, the article detailed one of Poczobut's prior

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arrests by two KGB agents. One he nicknamed "Glamor" for his faux-Armani styling. The other was "Rabbit" for his narrow and lank features. The two interrogated Poczobut with laughable results, trying to determine whether he was involved with post-election protests. But the humor abruptly vanished as Poczobut described how "Rabbit" savagely beat and stomped him. In a final act of defiance, Poczobut reported "Rabbit's" real name – Aleg Gricawiec.

Both the national authorities and the local KGB had additional reasons to silence Poczobut. Beyond the journalism, his Polish heritage and his connection to a Polish newspaper doubtless also contributed to the Belarusian government's decision to make an example of Poczobut.

Poczobut was a leader of the Union of Poles in Belarus, an organization that represents the nearly 20 percent of the population in the city of Grodno with Polish roots. The city, Poczobut's hometown, sits less than 10 miles from the Polish border and has longstanding historical and cultural ties to the EU member state. As the unofficial capital of Poles in Belarus, it has become a home base for activists, independent journalists and the few remaining foreign correspondents still residing in Belarus.

Poczobut characterizes the Polish minority in Belarus as "hostages" who Lukashenko periodically represses to spite Warsaw for its policies promoting democracy. Aliaksandrau agrees that Polish-Belarusian animosity plays a secondary role in Poczobut's prosecution.

"We have absolute confidence that Andrzej Poczobut is innocent of any crime. He was persecuted for performing his duties as a journalist," the association spokesman said. "But a second reason the authorities dislike him is his role as a leader of the Polish-Belarusian community."

Sergej Chatboko, who runs s13.ru, a news blog that offers its 100,000 readers objective reporting on local events in the city, said users are drawn to the site for the simple chance to express their opinions freely. A frequent topic of discussion is how much Lukashenko hates Grodno. Chatboko claims that in recent years the dictator imported most of the city's local authorities from Minsk.

But even in Grodno public opinion is divided over the Poczobut case, according to Chatboko. Bloggers, journalists and Internet users generally support the journalist. But for those without Internet access, the issue is not so clear-cut. Many Belarusians know only what little was reported about the case on state television.

Closed proceedings reinforced the primacy of state television accounts. Because the process took place outside of the public eye, the judge was relieved of any need to feign impartiality, Poczobut said.

"The trial took place from start to finish under the direction of the KGB," he said. "None of my arguments were accepted. It was a farce. They simply denied me the right to defense."

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To prove his innocence, Poczobut needed to demonstrate in court that Lukashenko was an authoritarian and no free elections had been held in Belarus since the dictator consolidated power during a 1996 constitutional referendum.

The defense suggested that the testimony of international election observers and even Lukashenko's own frequent descriptions of his authoritarian grip on Belarus might prove their case. Like the rest of Poczobut's defense, these arguments were denied.

After appealing his verdict in Belarusian courts, Poczobut said he will take his case to the UN Committee for Human Rights, the only international body that still investigates complaints from Belarus. Poczobut realizes that, in practical terms, any UN finding would likely have no bearing on his treatment, but believes his attitude of perseverance can bring comfort to others inside Lukashenko's Belarus.

Until his case is finally resolved, Poczobut says he will continue calling Lukashenko a dictator – both in print and online.