

Belarusian Association of Journalists

**Monitoring**

**Coverage of the 2019 Parliamentary Elections in Belarusian Media**

Report 1

# *(16 September – 18 October 2019)*

# 1. Introduction

# The monitoring, which is conducted by the Belarusian Association of Journalists (BAJ), aims:

# - to promote a highly professional model of election coverage in Belarusian media;

# - to draw journalists’ attention to their duty to provide unbiased and comprehensive information about the election process, candidates’ agendas, as well as present their supporters’ and opponents’ opinions;

# - to find out to what extent media contributions meet the internationally recognised principles and standards of election coverage and ethics in journalism;[[1]](#footnote-1)

# - and to reveal the overall nature of election coverage, assessing the roles played by state-run and independent media in this process, on the basis of qualitative and quantitative analysis.[[2]](#footnote-2)

# The monitoring covers fourteen Belarusian media, both state-run and independent, electronic and printed, nationwide and regional.[[3]](#footnote-3)

# During the analysed period of time, election commissions were formed, initiative groups for candidate nomination were registered, and aspiring candidates were nominated and registered to stand for parliament.

**2. Key Findings**

1. Election coverage in the analysed state-run media was dominated by technicalities, such as CEC meetings, the formation of election commissions and initiative groups for candidate nomination, as well as observers’ arrival, etc. As a rule, these media offered statistics instead of names or actual cases when the rules of collecting signatures for candidate nomination were allegedly breached.
2. The main actors of the election process were the President and the CEC, represented by its Chairwoman Lidzija Jarmošyna. They gave guidelines on how the elections should be held and what the composition of parliament should be.
3. An overwhelming majority of other actors, such as political parties, aspiring candidates and groups for their nomination or NGOs, were presented anonymously or not presented at all. However, a few exceptions to this rule included CIS and OSCE/ODIHR observers and several pro-governmental organisations.
4. The media coverage did not show that elections are first and foremost about competing political ideas and visions or contesting political parties with their programmes and agendas. Instead, the state-run media often employed Soviet-era rhetoric of elections as a celebration and citizens’ honorary duty.
5. The monitored independent media were quite reticent in election coverage. They allotted only a little space to technicalities and mainly kept a neutral tone.

These and other conclusions are based on the following quantitative and qualitative data.

**3. Quantitative and qualitative data**

*3.1 State-run media*

The *Panarama* news programme on *Belarus 1* national TV station featured the President (nearly16 percent of the total coverage given to all monitored actors) and the CEC (nearly 13 percent) as the main election actors. They received positive coverage. The other actors were left a long way behind, except for the opposition (nearly 6 percent), which was presented in a depersonalising manner and cast in a negative light. Only a few pro-governmental organisations, such as the Belaya Rus’ (White Rus’), the Belarusian National Youth Union (BNYU) and the Belarusian Women’s Union, were recognisable.

*Panarama* allotted a bit less than 3 percent of its total airtime to the elections. Meanwhile, weather forecast made up 7 percent, and sports accounted for 10 percent of the total airtime.

Another nationwide news programme, *Nashi Novosti* on *ONT*, gave the President about 25 percent of the time allotted to all election actors.

It gave election coverage a bit more than 3 percent of its airtime, while sports and weather forecast received about 14 percent. (The charts offer a clear visual picture of these and other figures, showing the coverage given to different election actors.)

*Radyjofakt* on the *First National Channel of the Belarusian Radio* offered a largely depersonalised picture of the elections, with the exception of the country leader, government representatives, election commissions and CIS observers. The other actors were given no voice or were not mentioned altogether.

*Radyjofakt* allotted about 5 percent of its airtime to the elections, while sports received about 9 percent and weather forecast was given a bit more than 6 percent of the total airtime.

There were no significant differences in election coverage on BelTa internet portal ([www.belta.by](http://www.belta.by)), except for promptness, compared to the other state-run media. The state-owned papers covered the elections in the same low key.

Some quotes disseminated by the electronic media and the press are worth closer attention.

They widely publicised the President’s opinions on the election process and the future composition of parliament. For example, on 16 September 2019 *Panarama* (*Belarus 1*) quoted the President, *‘Parliament should represent all segments of our society, from fledglings just embarking on adult life to old people. All groups should be represented. Secondly, I would like active NGOs and parties, if they are real parties, in accordance with the law, to represent and back up their candidates. Starting with the trade unions. I have already discussed this with Orda* [Michail Orda, Chairperson of the Federation of Trade Unions of Belarus – translator’s note]*, and they are nominating a lot of their candidates. Starting with the Belarusian National Youth Union, which I call ‘the youth party’. Women, women’s party. The military, officers. The Communist party. If we have real opposition parties, they must represent their candidates, nominate them and back them up in the campaign.*’

A few days later, on 20 September 2019, *Nashi Novosti* (ONT) reported on the President’s visit to Kareličy, quoting him say, *‘We will hold the election campaign smoothly and quietly, as usual.’*

On 22 September 2019 *Kontury* (ONT) quoted the head of state say, *‘I have never been cagey about the fact that there are people the government supports. The President wants to see such parliament.’*

At the same time the media occasionally compared elections in different countries. According to colleagues from the state-run media, elections in other countries left much to be desired in comparison with Belarus. For example, reporting on the European Parliament and *‘power reset in Ukraine’* on 19 September 2019, *Radyjofakt* spoke of the Ukrainian CEC stopping functioning amid allegations of partiality and engaging in politics. On 21 September 2019, an ONT commentary stated, *‘The Belarusians are in the habit of voting in elections in the same old and thoughtful way. This explains why elections are always smooth in this country. Elections in the US and neighbouring Russia and Ukraine are more of a high-stake game with no holds barred.’*

In their assessment of the election, several media quoted a CIS Executive Committee spokesman Mr Khutaryan, *‘I have been [as an observer] to Belarus twice, and I can say that, based on my observations, elections in Belarus are held like a celebration’* (*Panarama* on *Belarus 1, 4 October 2019).* Head of the CIS Observer Mission Lebedev was quoted saying, *‘Frankly speaking, we are happy to see these quiet and orderly preparations for the elections’ (*Panarama on *Belarus 1, 16 October 2019).*

To sum it up, the state-run media presented the elections as a well-organised and smooth event, bringing joy to voters. Interestingly, the reporters’ opinions were always in line with the official position, voiced in the same media by government representatives.

*3.2 Independent media*

[*www.tut.by*](http://www.tut.by)did not limit itself to official information and technical details only. The online portal avoided depersonalisation in election coverage. It offered quite a lot of aspiring candidates’ names and brief items about some of them. At the end of this monitoring stage it mentioned a number of registered candidates.

At the same time, some political actors participating in the elections were absent from the general picture. Certain aspiring candidates, such as Belarus beauty queen Maryja Vasilievič, and certain organisations, e.g. the BNYU, were much more recognisable than other actors.

The *Narodnaja Volia* gave coverage to the CEC, key political parties and some NGOs whose members were going to stand for parliament. These actors were portrayed in a neutral light. The paper described the local authorities in negative terms and spoke of the CEC and the opposition United Civic Party (UCP) neutrally or negatively.

The *Komsomolskaya Pravda v Belorussii* informed the readership about the upcoming elections only a few times and briefly wrote about three opposition parties participating in them.

**Preliminary conclusions**

There have been no significant changes in the way these elections are being covered in state-run media as compared to the previous parliamentary campaign.[[4]](#endnote-1) The basic elements of this model include selective coverage of elections and – most importantly – their actors, prevalence of technical details, depersonalisation of the government’s opponents and simply active figures, promotion of pro-governmental organisations and their candidates, and focus on ensuring ‘smooth and quiet’ elections. Another important feature of this model is marginalisation of election-related issues.

In their turn, the independent media have been reticent in their election coverage. However, they have shown a clear tendency toward minimising the technicalities, personalising participants in the elections, and giving coverage to key political actors and opponents of the government. The monitored independent media employed a wider scale to assess participants in the parliamentary elections.

1. The documents that form the basis for the qualitative analysis are The Code of Ethics in Journalism (adopted at the BAJ Congress in 2006); The Declaration of Principles of Professional Ethics in Journalism; Election Coverage in Media (Belarus), 2016 edition; and International standards of election coverage in media (Legal and ethical standards, recommendations to media and individual reporters). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For further details, see: Monitoring Methodology (Appendix 1). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. It should be noted that state-run media account for the larger part of the list, as they dominate the country’s media field and in fact make part of the current regime’s ideological structure. *The electronic media include the* Panarama *news programme on Belarus 1 TV station, the* Nashi Novosti *news on ONT, the* Glavny Efir *weekly programme on Belarus 1, the* Kontury *weekly programme on ONT; the* Radyjofakt *radio programme on the First National Channel of the Belarusian Radio, and* Naviny-rehijon*, broadcast by Mahilioŭ TV and Radio Company. The online resources include* [www.tut.by](http://www.tut.by) and [www.belta.by](http://www.belta.by). *The print media are the* SB. Belarus Segodnia*, the* Narodnaja Volia, *the* Komsomolskaya Prada v Belorussii*, the* Zviazda*, the* Minskaja Praŭda*, and the* Mahilioŭskaja Praŭda. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. In 2016 the BAJ also monitored the parliamentary elections.

**APPENDIX. Monitoring Methodology**

*The summarising charts are available on the BAJ website:* [*www.baj.by*](http://www.baj.by)*.* [↑](#endnote-ref-1)