

Belarusian Association of Journalists

Monitoring: Coverage of the 2010 Presidential Election in the Belarusian Media (November 21 – December 10, 2010)

Bulletin #3

December 14, 2010.

Minsk, Belarus

1. Introduction

The report offers the findings of the 3rd intermediary stage of monitoring the coverage of the upcoming presidential election in the electronic and printed Belarusian media.

This was the most active phase of the election, when the candidates addressed voters in the press, on the radio and TV, presenting their agendas.

2. Summary of Conclusions

- Although the **state-owned** media became more accessible to the candidates, as compared to the previous elections (for further details, see section 3.2), the basic model of the election coverage remained unchanged, which means that
 - attention was focused on one candidate, i.e. the incumbent;
 - subjects that actually perform technical functions, such as regional election commissions or local authorities, were presented as the main actors of the election;
 - the opposition candidates and their actions, as well as the opposition parties were marginalized, both by negative assessment they received and their minimal presence in the state-owned media;
 - inadequate representation of the alternative candidates created the impression that there was nobody to choose from or, to be more precise, that the only option was to vote for the incumbent;
 - the importance of the election was downgraded by being given low-key coverage, when sports, the *Junior Eurovision* show and the All-Belarusian National Assembly were featured much more prominently than the election;
 - the findings of various opinion polls were often cited without mentioning the institutions that had conducted them, which created the impression that the election outcome was predetermined;
 - finally, instead of giving a wide range of voters' opinions, the state-owned media demonstrated a clear tendency to biased coverage by bringing into disrepute the alternative candidates and presenting the incumbent in positive or highly positive light.
- As for the independent press, it continued presenting a wide picture of the election, the presidential runners being featured as its key actors. Besides, in terms of the space given to each subjects, not only did the incumbent get as much coverage as the alternative candidates, but he was even a clear leader in some cases. The assessment of the candidates' actions and their agendas was mainly balanced. The independent press showed no instances of insulting the candidates or manifestly promoting one of them.

3. Main Findings

3.1 State-owned Media

Although this time the *Panorama* (Panorama) news program of the 1st National Channel featured the President less prominently, giving him about 52% of the air time given to all the monitored subjects, it kept ignoring his opponents. (Of them all, Mr. Saŭnikaŭ received most coverage, namely 2.6% of the air time). The *Panorama*, however, still continued presenting them in predominantly negative colors. The trend towards depersonalization of the alternative candidates became even more pronounced, such a subject as ‘a depersonalized candidate’ being given about 36% of the total air time allotted to all the monitored subjects. The explanation is quite simple: the state-owned media are expected to offer such a vision of the opposition that makes it unrecognizable. In other words, the opposition candidates should all look the same.

Compared to the previous monitoring periods, the election received more coverage, i.e. 10.6% or an hour and 23 minutes. However, it did not become a top subject, as the *Panorama* gave nearly two hours to the All-Belarusian National Assembly, including its preparation, proceedings and outcome. Both the delegates’ opinions and journalists’ comments made it clear that the main purpose of the event was to provide support for the incumbent.

The precise figures may differ, but the abovementioned trends were characteristic of the *Nashi Novosti* (Our News) program of ANT TV station. In particular, the program gave the election more coverage, yet, featuring only one candidate, i.e. the incumbent president, and marginalizing the others.

The tendency towards depersonalization of the alternative candidates was even more noticeable in the regional media. Thus, the the *Pervyj gorodskoj* (1st City Channel) (Homiel TV) gave 83% of the total time allotted to all the monitored subjects to ‘a depersonalized candidate’, failing to mention the names of the incumbent’s opponents even once. And *Naviny Rehijon* (Regional News) program of Mahiloŭ TV and Radio did not mention the alternative candidates even in a depersonalized manner.

www.belta.by of BelTA news agency stuck to its general practices in covering the election, bringing CEC, other election commissions and the President in the focus of attention. The other candidates were mainly presented as a depersonalized subject.

The *SB – Belarus Segodnya* and *Respublika* papers this time featured the candidates more prominently. However, it was only due to the fact that the existing legal provisions obliged them to publish the candidates’ agendas.

It should be mentioned that the monitored state-owned media, electronic and printed alike, had not largely publicized the alternative candidates’ TV and radio addresses. When mentioning such addresses, if at all, they did not give the names of the speakers.

3.2 Direct access

Direct access is defined as media presentations of their election agendas by candidates and parties themselves, which cannot be censored by the media that allot them their air time and space. Such presentations can be both free and paid for.

It should be pointed out that compared to the previous elections, access to the state-owned media has improved. For example, it was the first time that the candidates had had an opportunity to appear live on TV and the radio. Secondly, their TV appearances were

scheduled close to prime time and broadcast by the 1st National TV Channel. Thirdly, unlike during the 2008 parliamentary election, re-broadcasts of the candidate's addresses had been planned in advance. As a result, supposedly more voters were able to get an idea of the alternative candidates' agendas. (The incumbent president did not use his TV and radio time.) As they appeared live, the candidates were able to air their views and criticize the current regime free from any censorship or barriers. It was the second time since 1994 that TV debates had taken place. These, however, cannot be considered as full-fledged debates, as the alternative candidates' principal opponent, i.e. the incumbent, refused to take part in them.

As for the National Radio, it is open to doubt whether any tangible audience were able to listen to the candidates, whose radio addresses were on air from 6 to 7 a.m. On December 5 the 1st Belarusian Radio also hosted radio debates between the alternative candidates (some of them did not appear in person but were represented by their proxies.)

The candidates were able to have their agendas published free in the state-owned media. Although formally they were all on equal terms, i.e. each candidate was allotted an equal space, in fact they were presented in very different ways. Thus, the *SB – Belarus Segodnya* and *Respublika* published Alexander Lukashenka's program with a color picture on the front pages of their Saturday/Sunday issues on November 27. The papers began publishing the other candidates' agendas with black-and white pictures on November 30, starting from the third page at best in the *SB – Belarus Segodnya* and the fifth page in the *Respublika*. Jarasłaŭ Ramančuk's agenda was moved as far as the 20th page.

It should also be mentioned that following the candidates' first TV appearances the state-owned media launched a blatant defamation campaign against the presidential runners instead of analyses and discussions. Thus, to give just one example, on November 28, 2010 *In the Focus of Attention* analytical program of the 1st National TV Channel broadcast 21 minutes and six seconds' item under the title *Campaigning begins in Belarus, including candidates' TV and radio addresses. Experts' opinions and Vox Populi*. It was based on *vox populi* in different Belarusian towns and quotes from the Internet, including the independent media. All the respondents slammed the alternative candidates. Here is journalist Andrej Kryvašejeŭ's commentary off stage, *'This week the candidates have poured out the first portion of live TV campaigning. Judging by the first seven days, the Belarusian Radio and the 1st TV Channel, who took on the burden of broadcasting, coped with their task successfully. However, it was at the cost of ratings. A lot of Belarusian citizens admitted they had tried to watch the candidates but could not stand that even for half an hour. The election soap opera was boring and looked less verisimilar than foreign ones. The actors made the audience sleepy, their words sounded like delirium, and their staged movements were old hat.'*

3.3 Independent Media

During this monitoring period, the *Komsomolskaya Pravda v Belarusi* allotted more space to the alternative candidates and, consequently, less space to Alexander Lukashenka. The paper presented Mr. Lukashenka mainly in positive light, whereas the other candidates received neutral coverage exclusively. Just like the state-owned media, it quite often referred to a depersonalized candidate, while the other monitored independent media avoided such a term.

www.naviny.by offered a wide picture of the election, presenting the presidential candidates as its main actors. For example, Jarasłaŭ Ramančuk received about 13% of its Internet space given to the election coverage, Mr. Lukashenka got 12%, Uładzimir Niaklajeŭ received about 10% , Ryhor Kastusioŭ was given 8%, Andrej Sańnikaŭ, Mikoła Statkievič and Aleś Michalevič had over 6% each, Viktor Ciareščanka and Dźmitry Vus received 5% and 3%, respectively. www.naviny.by gave an exceptionally balanced coverage to the candidates' actions and agendas.

The *Naša Niva* paper wrote about virtually all the candidates, but it was Alexander Lukashenka and Jarasłaŭ Ramančuk who were featured most prominently, receiving 33% and 11% of the total space given to the election coverage, respectively. While the President's actions were assessed either neutrally or negatively, Mr. Ramančuk got positive assessment. The candidates continued to be presented as the major actors in the election.

The *Narodnaja Vola* paper focused a lot on the government (40% of the total space given to the election). This actor was mainly criticized by the paper. Alexander Lukashenka's actions were approached in the same critical vein. Unlike the other independent periodicals, the paper published TV and radio addresses of the majority of the alternative candidates.

The *Belorusy i Rynok* paper adhered to predominantly neutral coverage of the election actors. During this stage of monitoring, it did not bring into the focus of attention the candidates' agendas.

4. Media Effects

The notion of media effects refers to instances of distorting and misrepresenting information or giving incomplete, partial or biased coverage in order to influence readers'/voters' opinions.

In addition to the cases reported in the previous bulletins, which can be described as **processing information in order to favor the current government, focusing attention on one candidate only, marginalizing and discrediting the incumbent's political opponents**, a number of other instances of the kind were noticeable, which testifies to a certain model of covering the election.

A new trend for this election, though well-known from the experience of the previous ones, was **associating the opposition with drug trafficking and alcoholism**. Here are two quotes from a piece presented under the title *Young opposition members becoming boozers on a mass basis* (the *Panorama* of November 22, 2010), 'A whole bunch of prominent fighters against dictatorship take drugs,' and 'Alcohol abuse or something harder is a normal practice among the today's young opposition activists.'

At the same time, just like at the previous stages of monitoring, there was not a single case recorded of the alternative candidates or opposition activists being given a chance of rebuttal in the state-owned media that gave partial or biased coverage to their actions or the candidates' agendas.

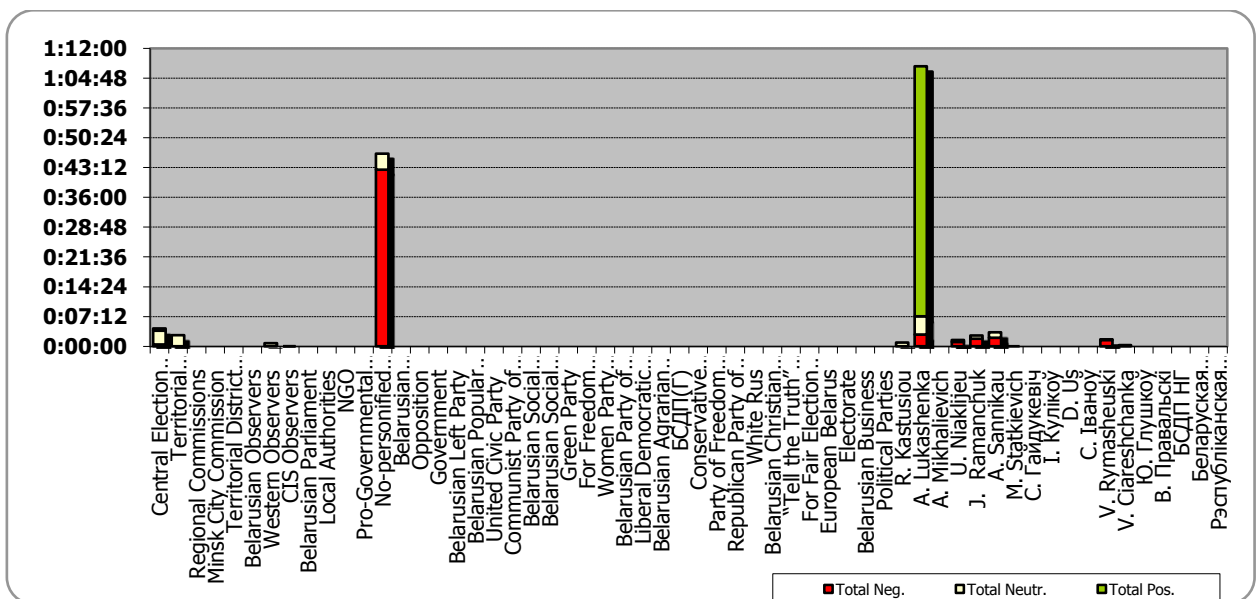
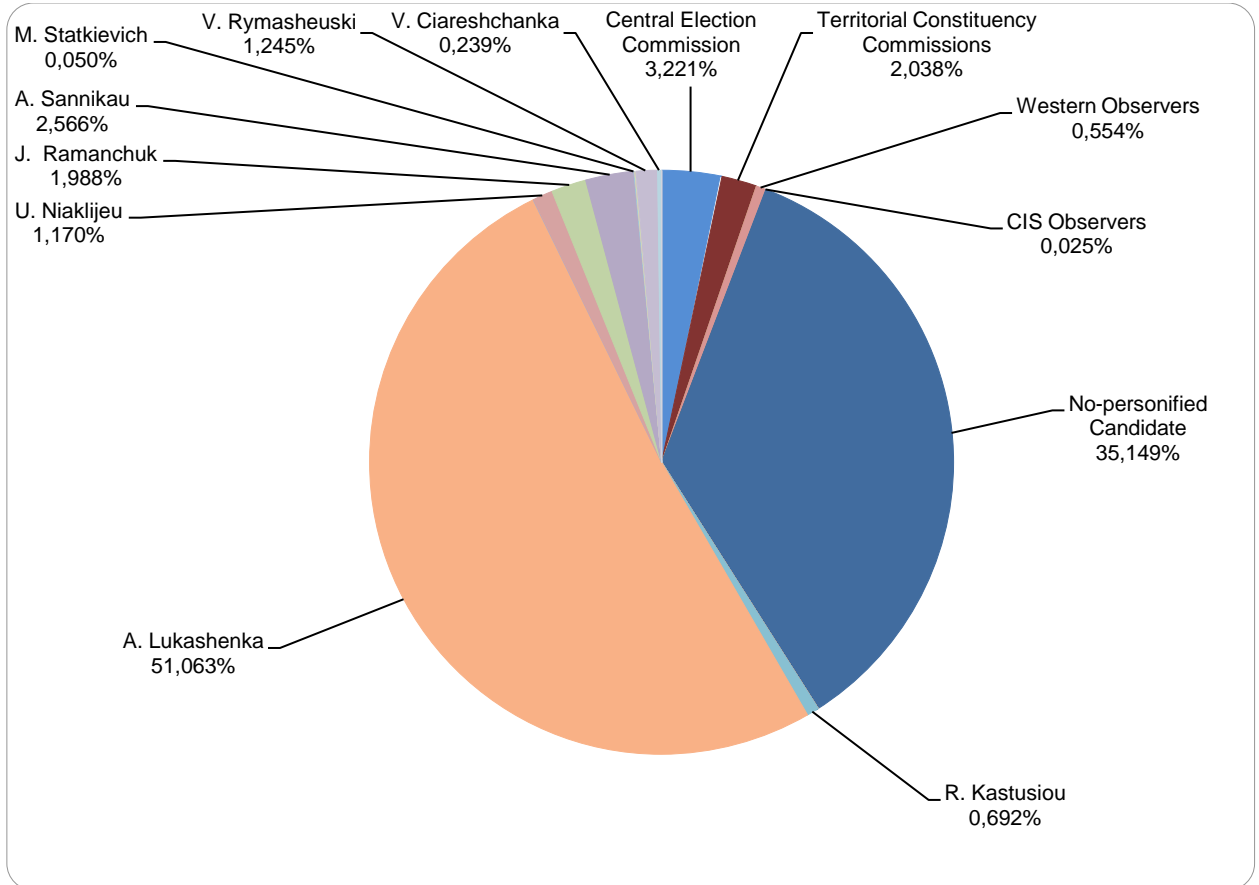


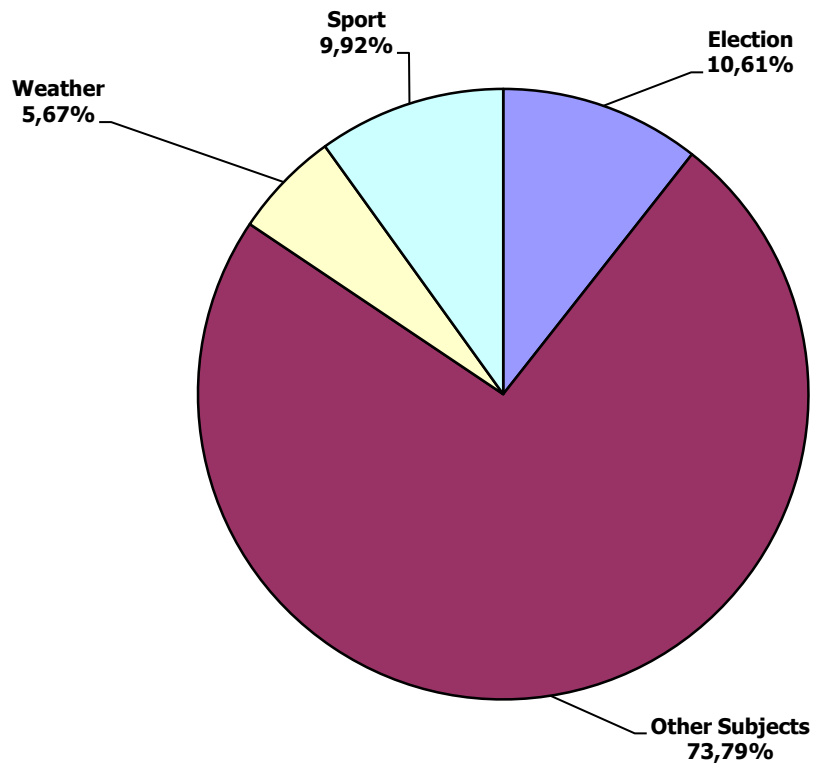
BELARUSIAN PRESIDENT ELECTIONS 2010

BT/PANARAMA

21.11.2010 – 10. 12.2010

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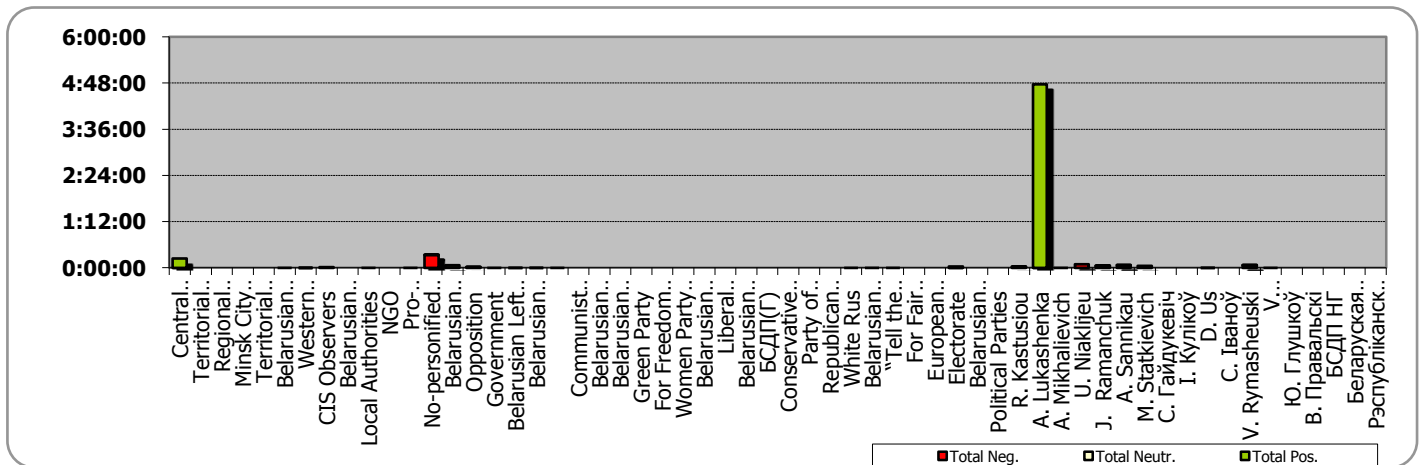
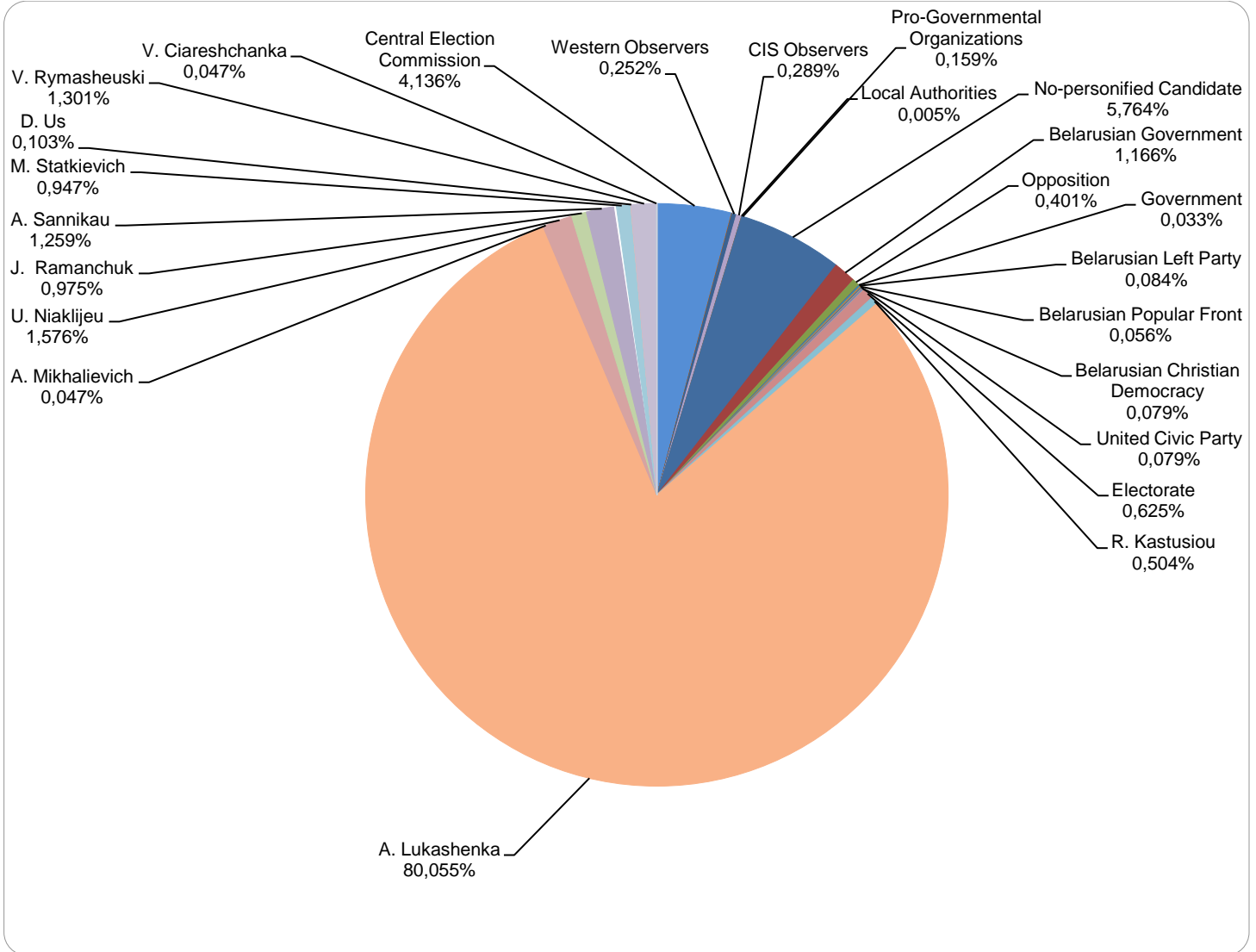


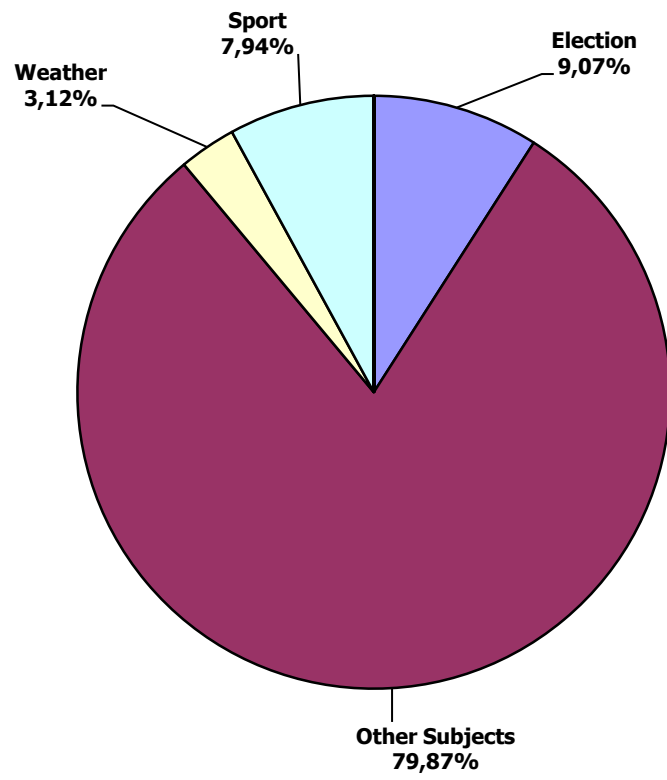
BELARUSIAN PRESIDENT ELECTIONS 2010

ONT/NASHI NOVOSTI

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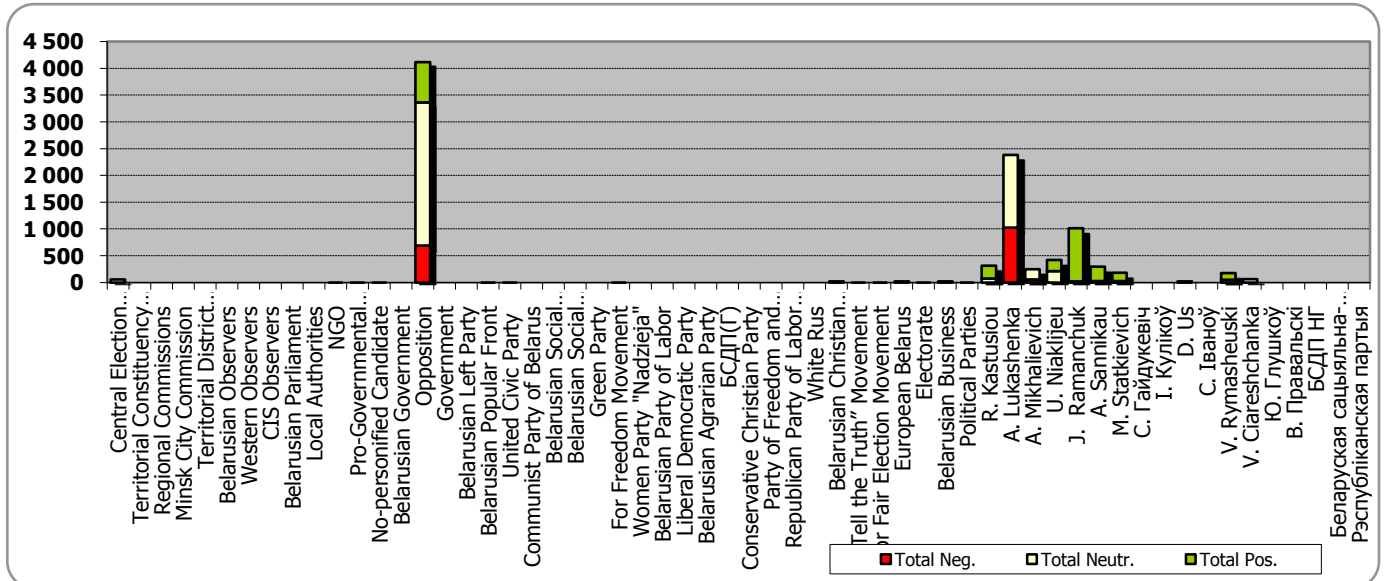
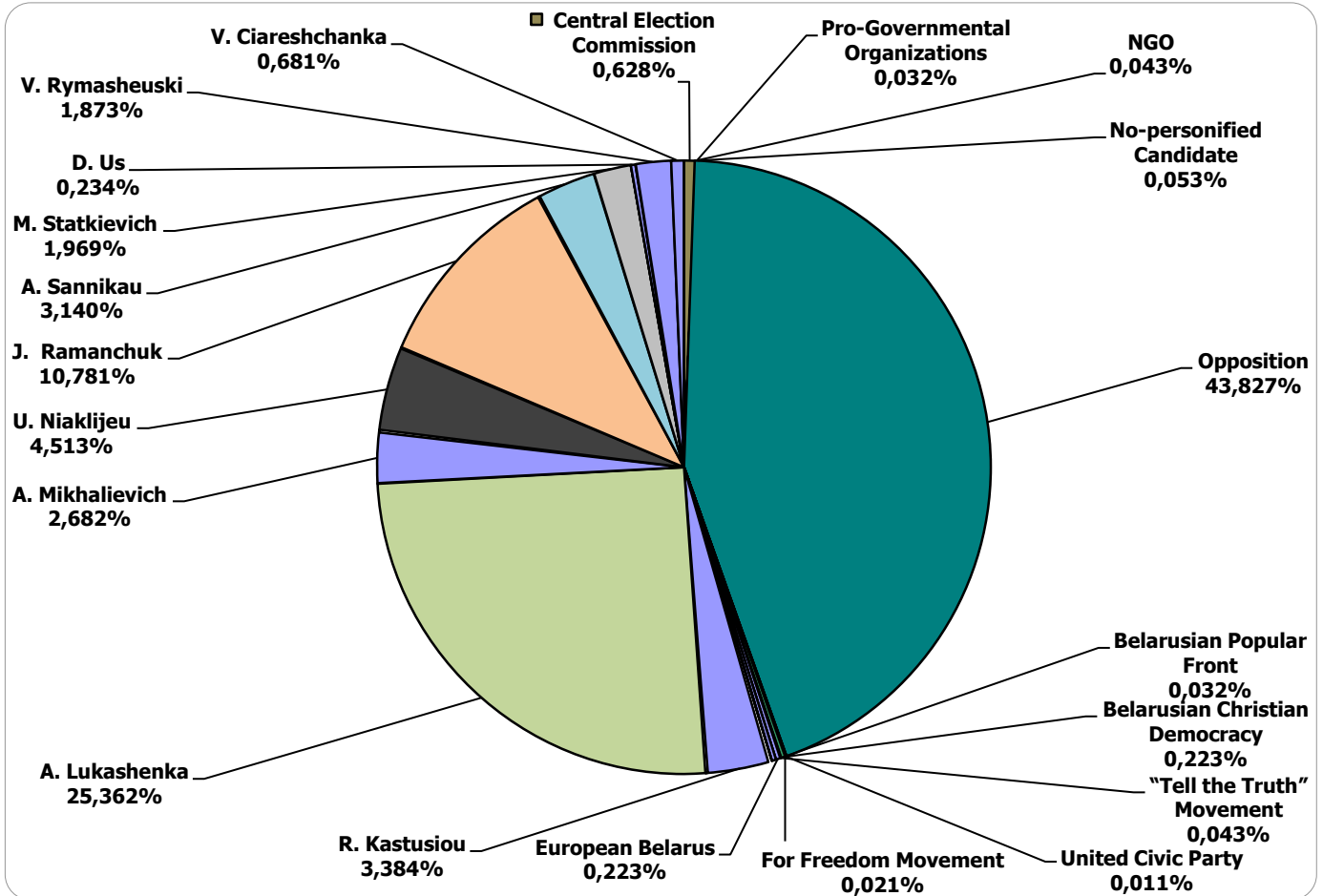


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NASHA NIVA

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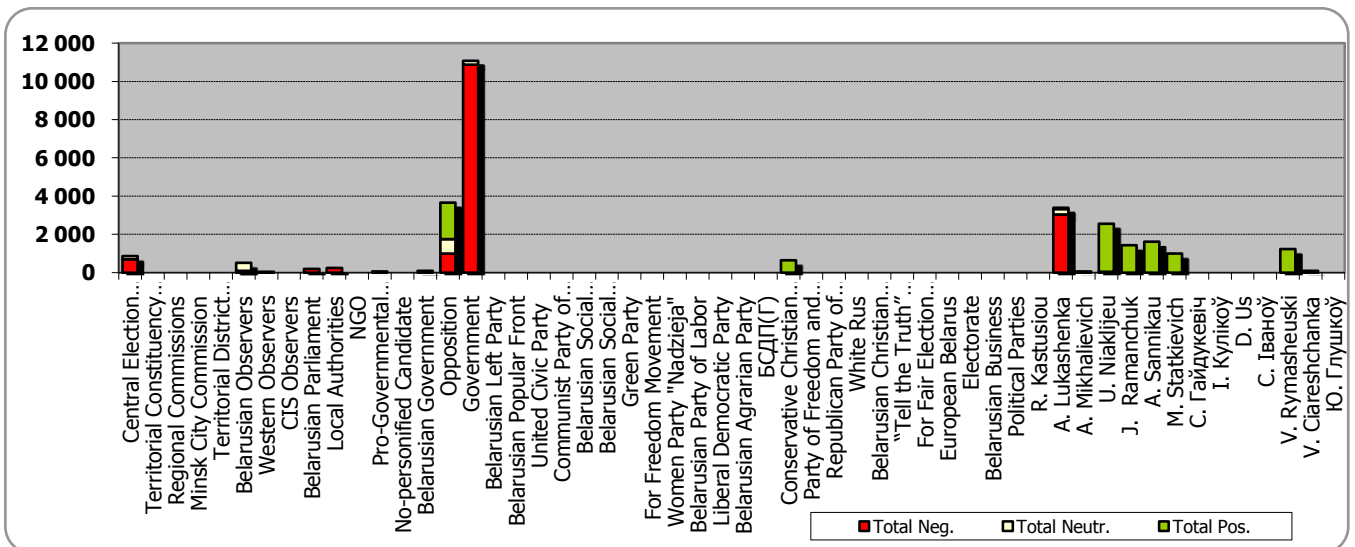
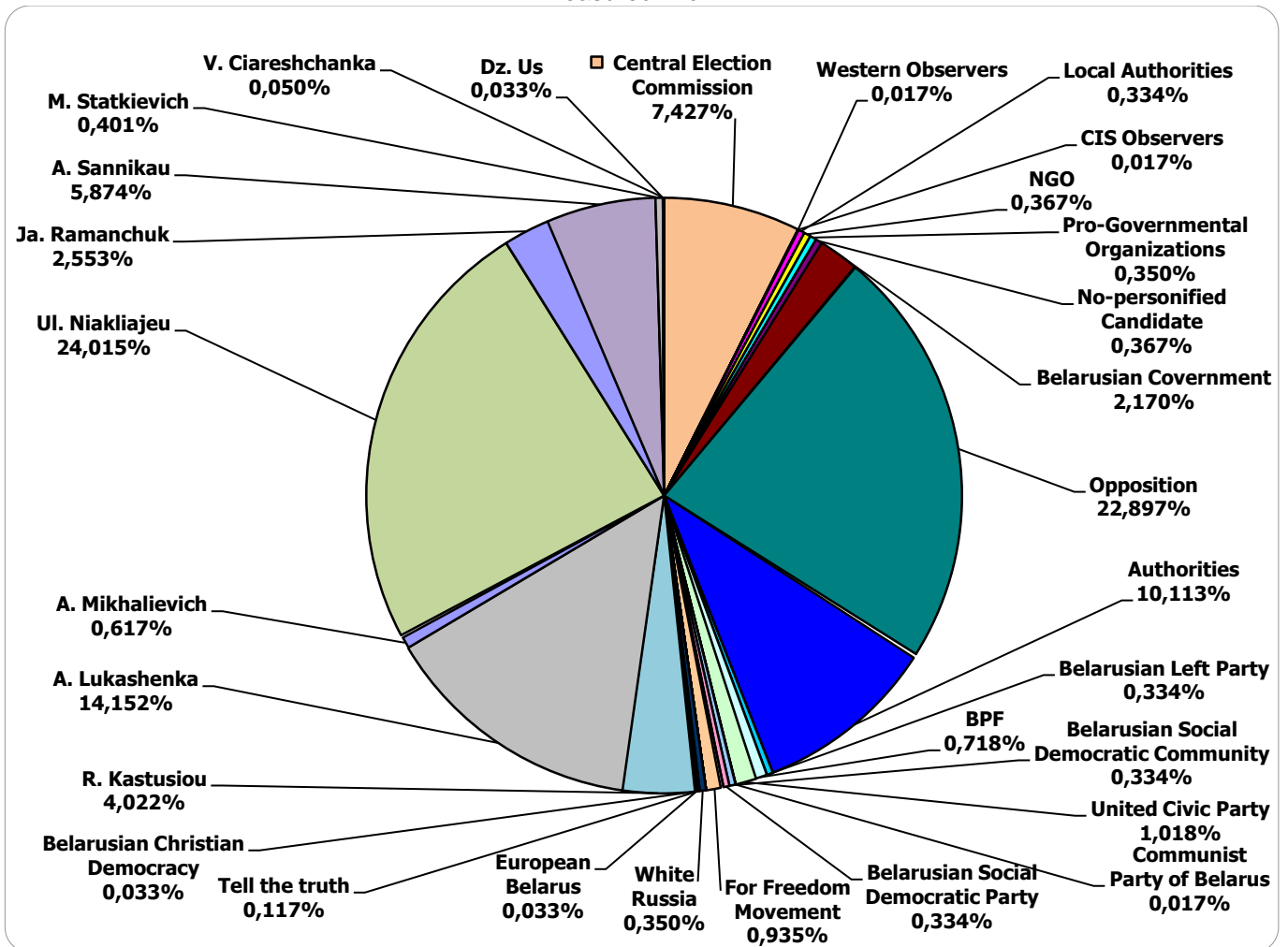


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NARODNAJA VOLIA

21.11.2010 – 10. 12.2010

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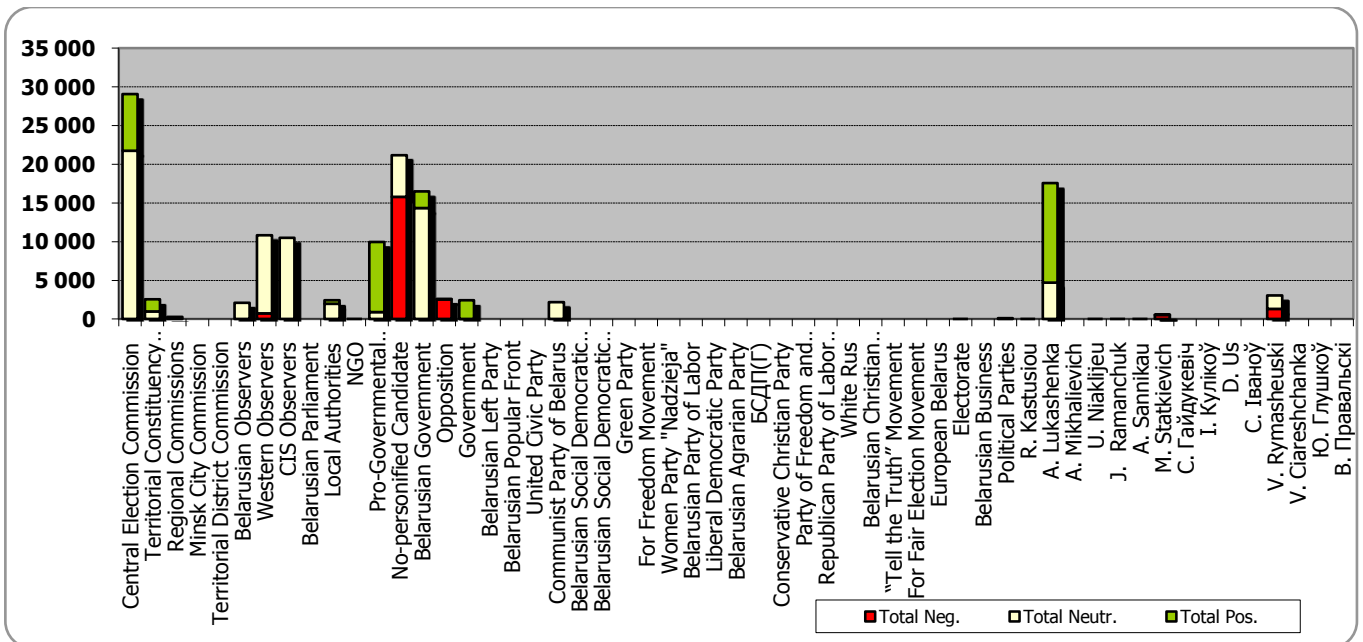
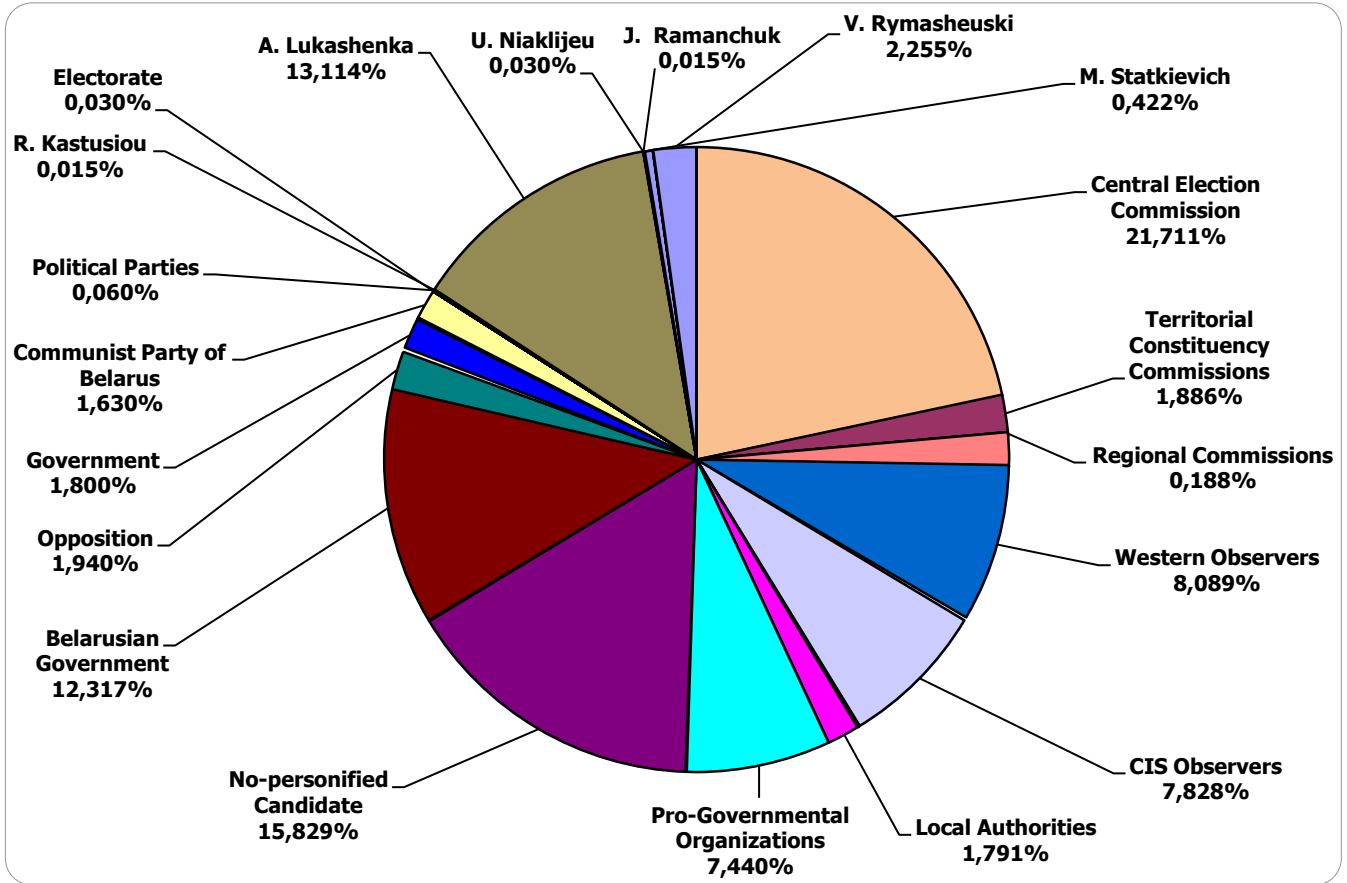


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BELTA

21.11.2010 – 10. 12.2010

Measured in symbols

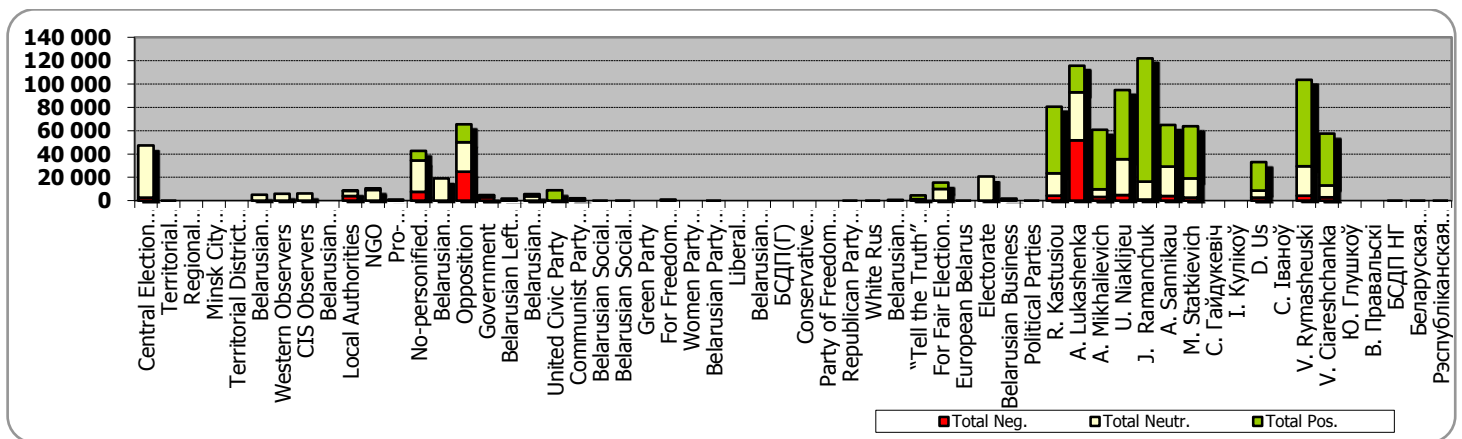
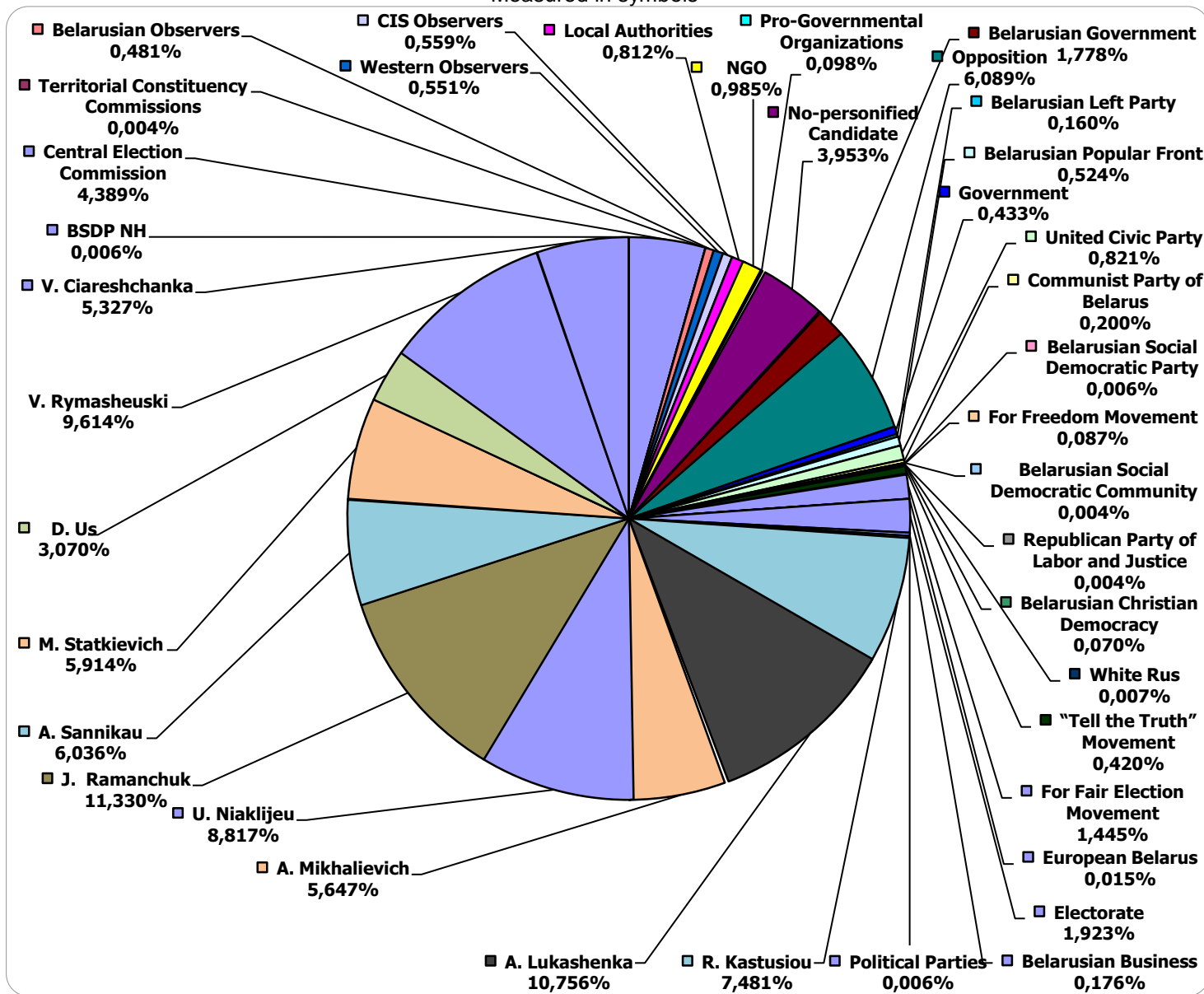




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NAVINY.BY
21.11.2010 – 10. 12.2010

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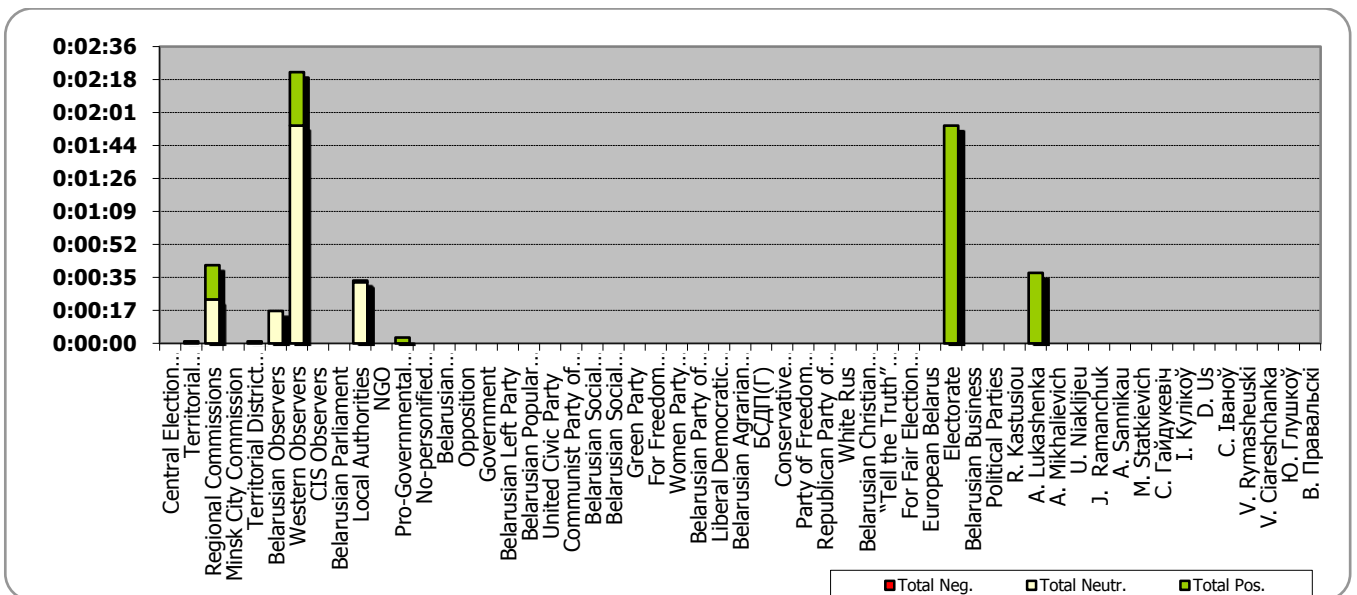
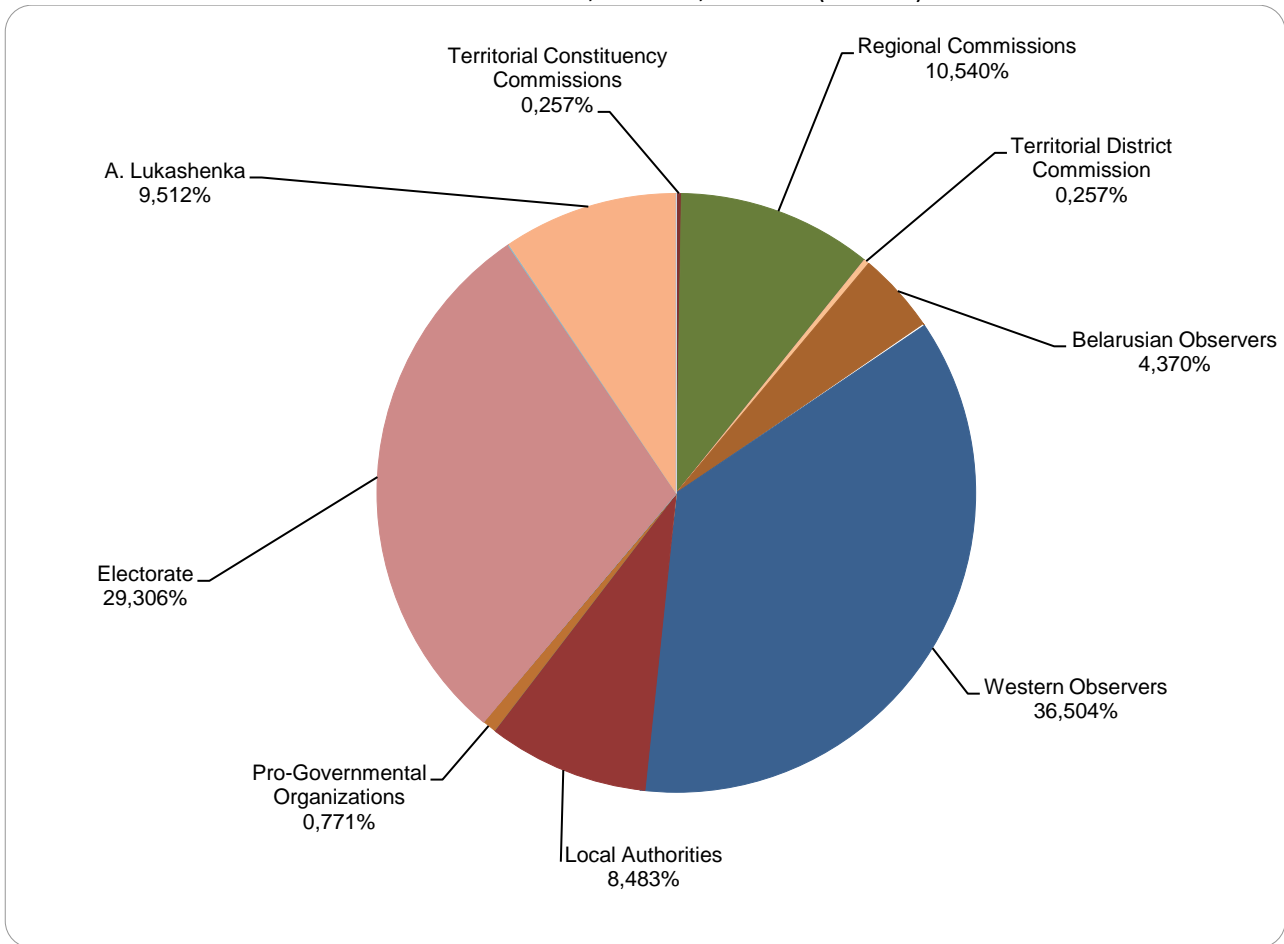


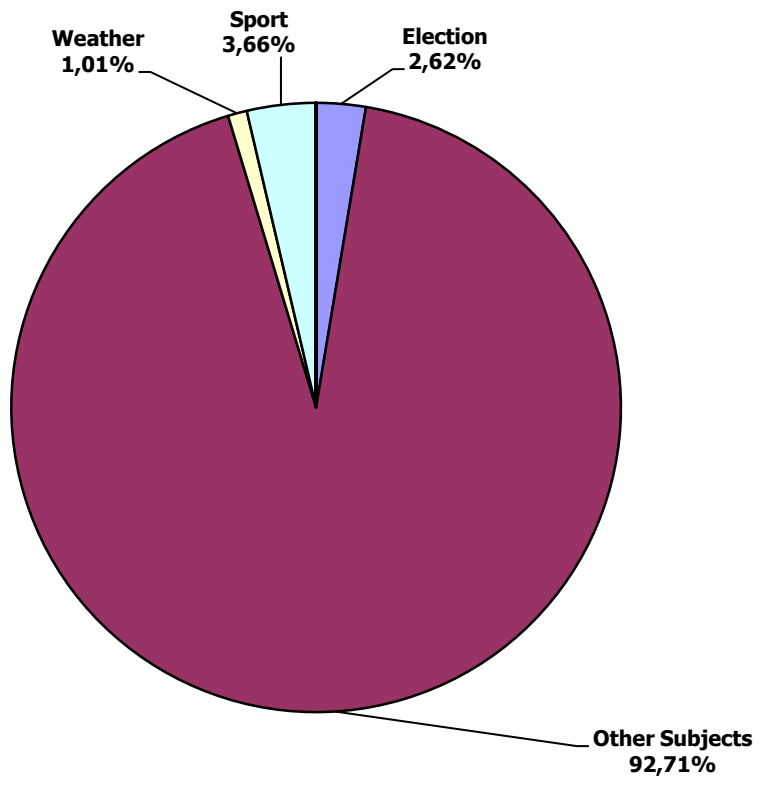
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Television TRK MAHILIOU/NAVINY

21.11.2010 – 10. 12.2010

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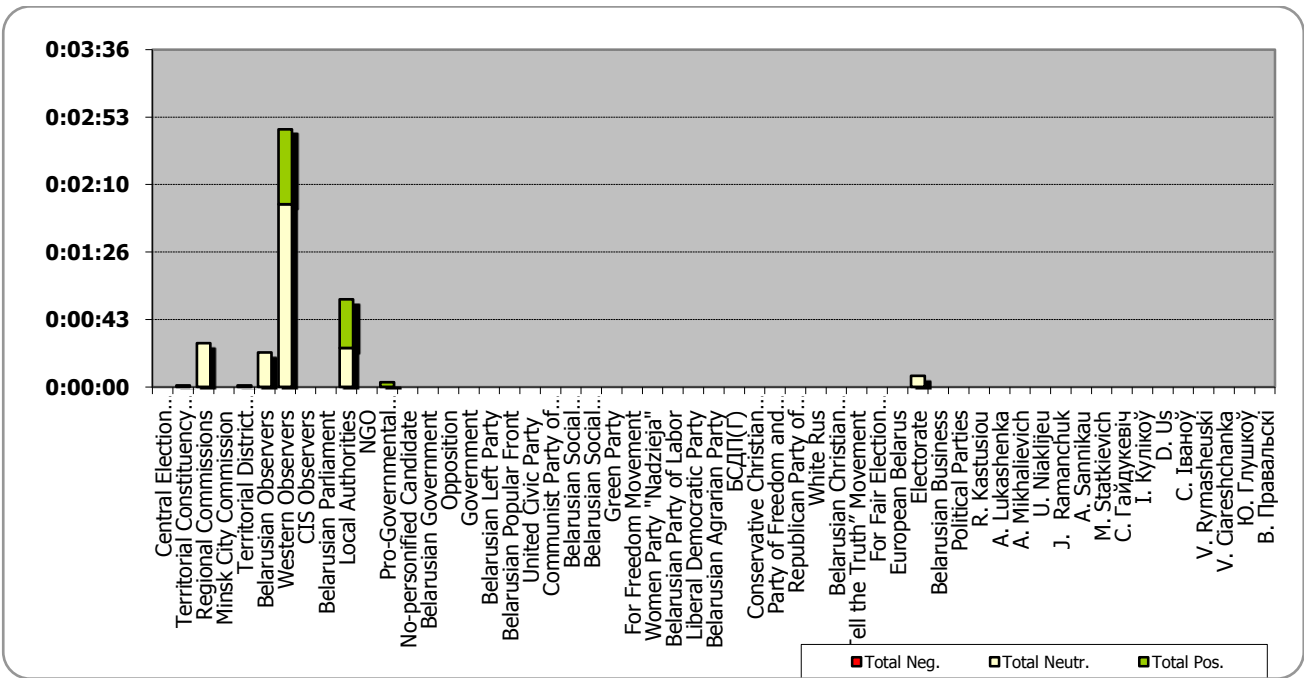
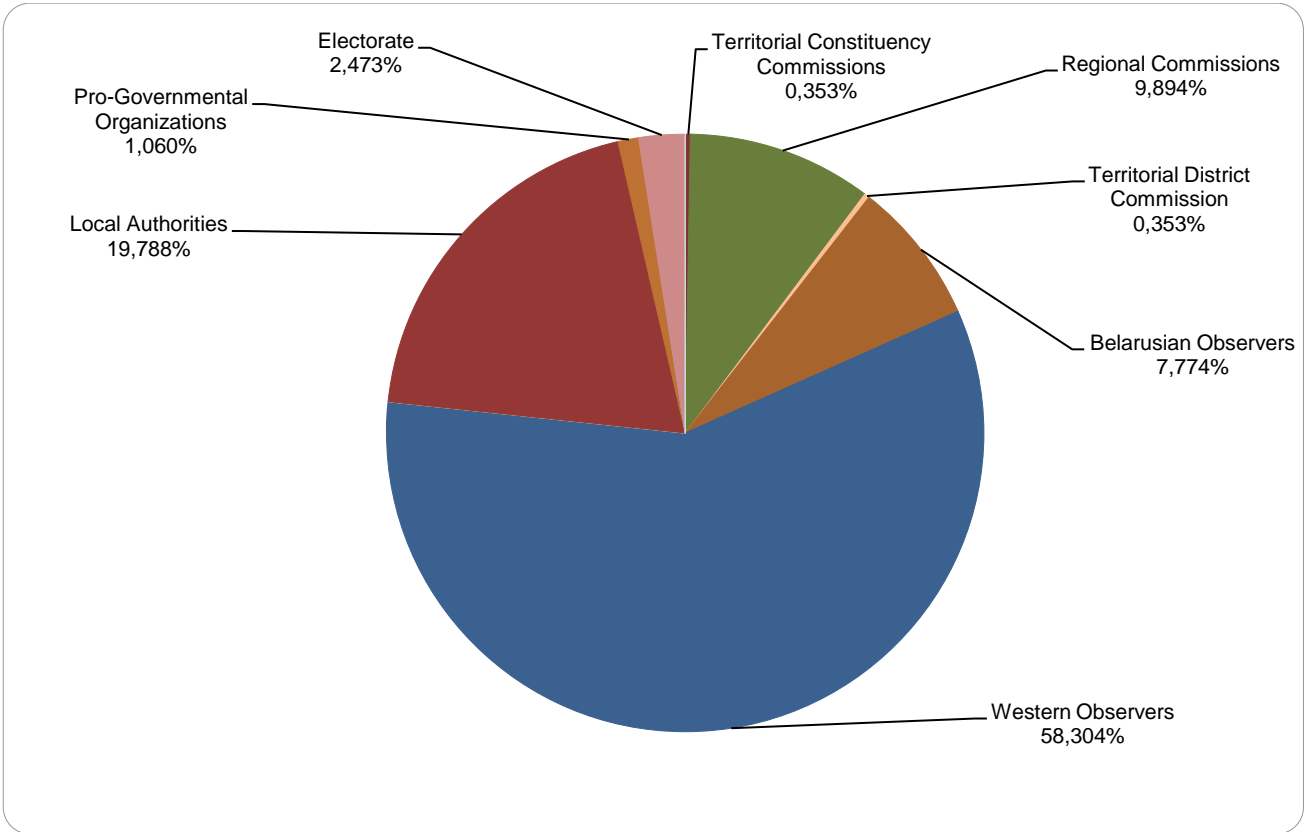


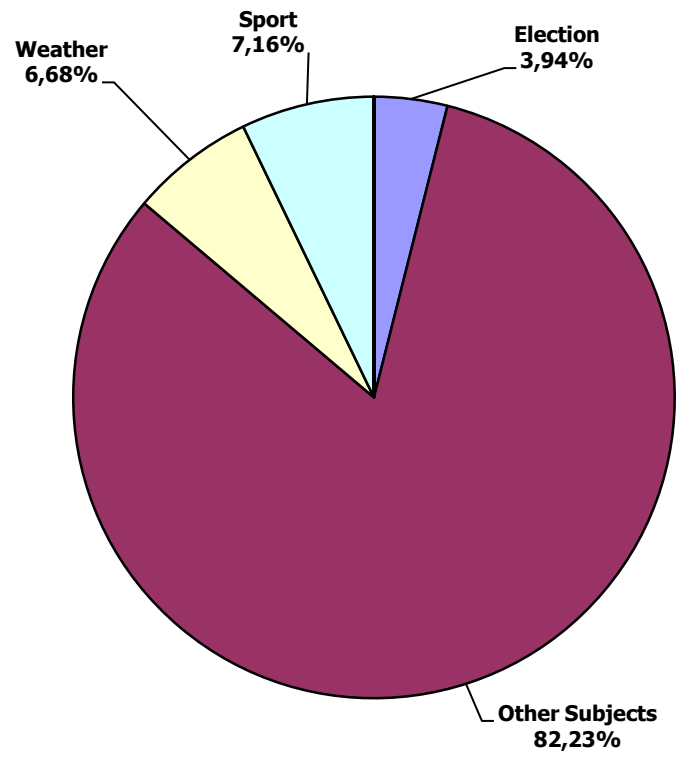
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Radio TRK MAHILIOU/NAVINY

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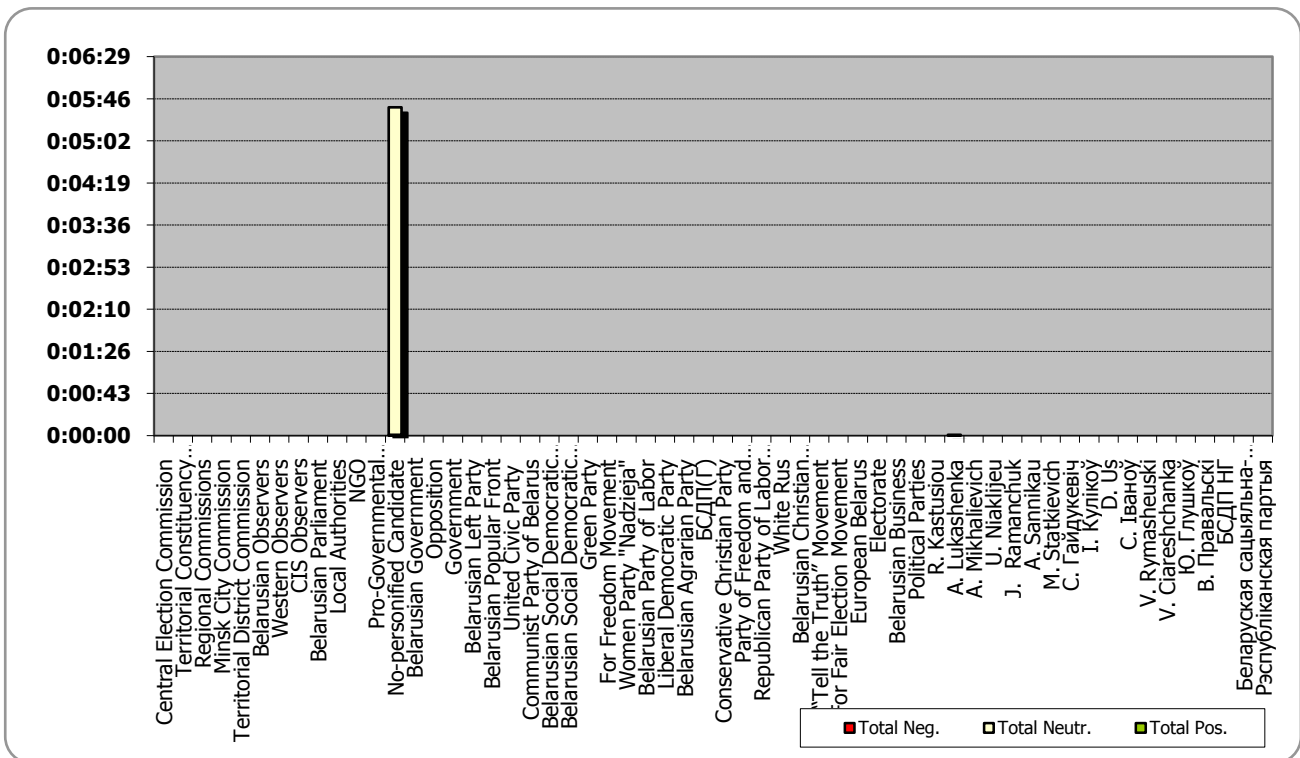
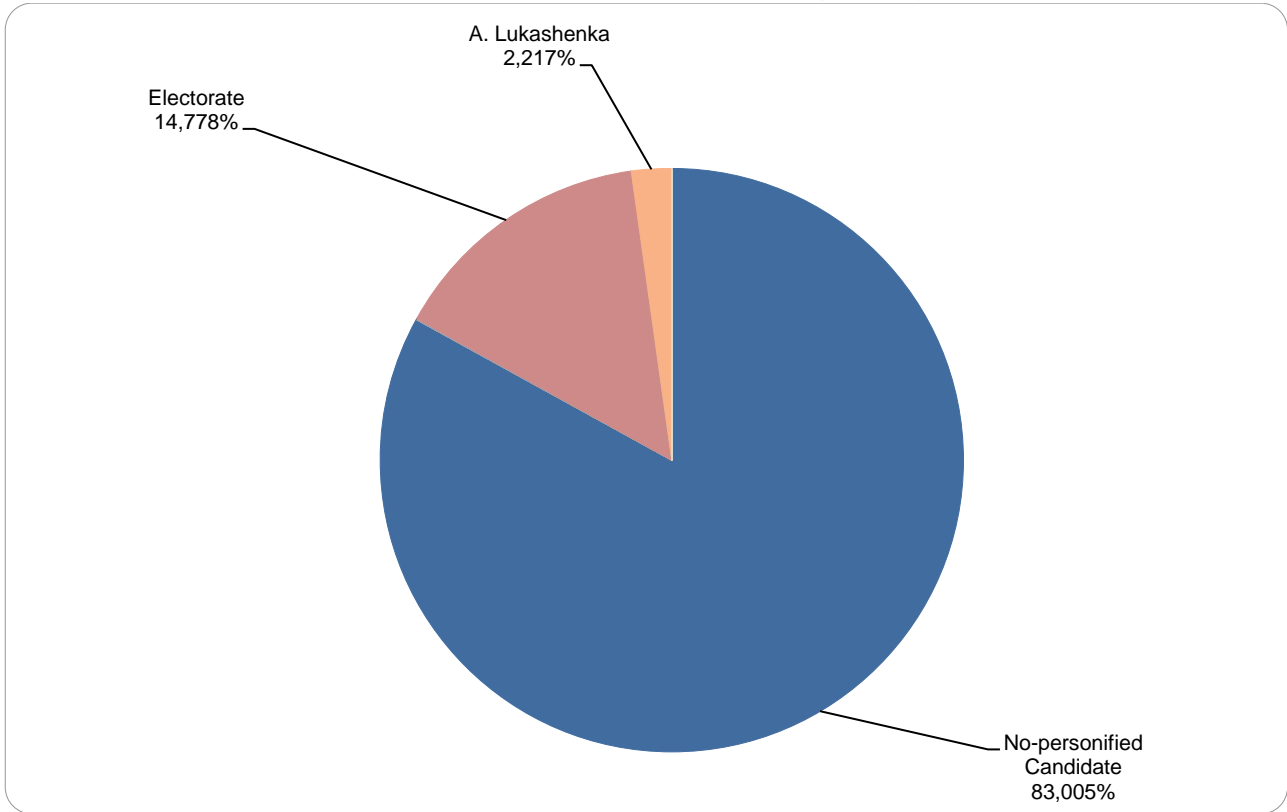


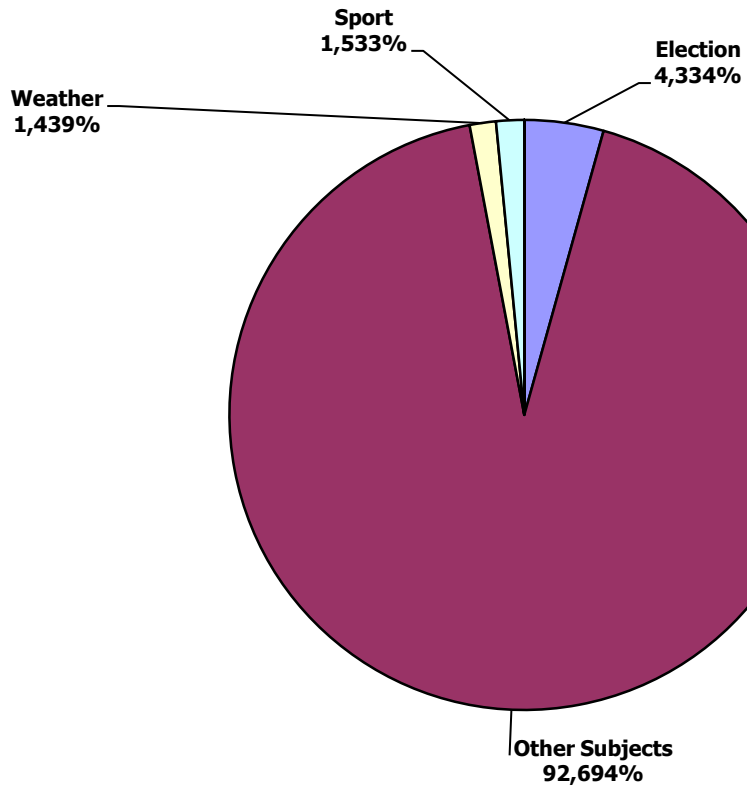
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Television Homel "NAVINY REHIONA"

21.11.2010 – 10. 12.2010

Measured in hours, minutes, seconds (0:02:45)







BELARUSIAN PRESIDENT ELECTIONS 2010

HOMEL FM/RADIO 101.3 "NOVOSTI"

21.11.2010 – 10. 12.2010

Measured in hours, minutes, seconds (0:02:45)

