

The Coverage of the 2012 Parliamentary Elections in the Belarusian Media

Final Report

(31 July – 17 October 2012)

Introduction

During the given time span, the non-governmental organisation Belarusian Association of Journalists (BAJ) monitored the coverage of the parliamentary elections, held on 23 September 2012, in the Belarusian media.

The monitoring aimed to:

- *assess whether the Belarusian media gave an exhaustive and comprehensive coverage of the election process and whether they followed the guidelines of ethics in journalism and the internationally accepted standards in their election coverage;*
- *draw the attention of the journalists' community in the country to the fact that it is a direct duty of the professional media to provide voters with balanced and comprehensive information about the election process, as well as the candidates' and their supporters' political and social agendas and opinions;*
- *analyse how the media influenced the voters' electoral choice.*

The report sums up the findings of the monitoring and presents an overview of assessments that the polling and the whole election process received in the Belarusian media following the voting day and the formal announcement of the election results.

The monitoring covered seventeen Belarusian media, both state-owned and independent, electronic and printed, nationwide and regional.¹ The content analysis was based on both qualitative and quantitative data, *ie* we assessed the manner in which the election actors were presented and the amount of space/air time given to the election coverage in the printed and electronic media, respectively.

Key Findings

The state-owned media covered the elections in their typical low-key manner, *ie* they sometimes gave the elections less coverage than sport and the weather. The Central Election Commission (CEC), instead of candidates or political parties, was presented as the main actor. This fact

¹ *The electronic media* are *Panorama (Panorama)* news program on Belarus 1 TV station; *Nashi Novosti (Our News)* news program on ONT TV station; *V tsentre vnimaniya (In the Focus of Attention)* weekly analytical program on Belarus 1 TV station; *Radyjofakt (Radiofact)* on the 1st Channel of the National Radio; *Naviny Rehijona (Regional News)* on the Homiel Regional TV and Radio Company; *Naviny (News)* on Homiel FM; *Naviny Mahiloŭ (Mahiloŭ News)* on the Mahiloŭ Regional TV and Radio Company; *Naviny (News)* on the Mahiloŭ Regional Radio; *the Internet resources* are www.naviny.by, www.belta.by; and *the printed media* are *The Belarus Segodnia (Belarus Today)*, *The Narodnaja Vola (People's Will)*, *The 7 Dniey (7 days)*, *The Naša Niva (Our Field)*, *The Komsomolskaya Pravda v Belorussii (YCL Truth in Belarus)*, *The Homielskaja Praŭda (Homiel Truth)* and *The Mogilevskaya Pravda (Mahiloŭ Truth)*.

shows that the elections were a matter of only marginal importance to the state-owned media. At the same time, their chief information source was the CEC.

These media presented an all too simplistic picture of the elections, which means that they centred on the coverage of only five actors, namely *the CEC (or constituency commissions), the President, the CIS observers, the OSCE observers* and *a depersonalised candidate*. The state-owned media focused their attention on organisational and technical details of the elections, which became a highly typical feature of their election coverage.

As for the manner in which different election actors were presented, *the OSCE observers*, the role they played and their work were characterised negatively, particularly at the initial stage of monitoring. *The CEC, the president* and *the CIS observers* were presented in the state-owned media in a positive and neutral light.

The presence of oppositional political parties whose members stood for parliament in the state-owned media was about zero. They received negative or highly negative coverage, if any at all. There was not a single instance of giving voice to opposition members, independent experts and political analysts or NGOs. One-sided information, a negative portrayal of the opponents and *the OSCE observers*, manifest denial of the right to rebut, shadowing political parties' and their supporters' opinions, as well as polar extremes in the presentation of *the government* and *the CIS observers*, on the one hand, and *the opposition* and *the OSCE observers*, on the other were characteristic of the election coverage in the state-owned media.

The state-run media did not provide a proper information support to the campaign. Nor did they do anything to help as many voters as possible to get an idea of the candidates' agendas. They did not announce candidates' TV and radio addresses or debates, did not give the candidates' names in the listings or in any way draw the audience's attention to the candidates' political affiliation. In contrast to all the other content, candidates' recorded messages and debates were not presented on the TV and radio stations' websites. This type of election coverage in the state-owned media was intended not only to marginalise the key actors but also effectively to block voters from getting an idea of candidates' programmes and discussing them. Furthermore, the state-run media were able to censor candidates' addresses and debates, as they were pre-recorded instead of going on air live.

In comparison with the state-owned media, their independent counterparts presented a wider picture of the elections. They did not limit themselves to official information, released by *the CEC* and *the government*. In some cases they were critical of these two actors and widely publicised the instances of censorship. At the same time, their manner of presentation was more balanced than that of the state-owned media. However, there was not any meaningful competition in the elections and their outcome was totally predictable. These factors accounted for obvious indifference to election coverage, displayed by the independent media.

The election scenario had not undergone any tangible change, as compared to the previous elections. This produced a situation in which the media were 'tired of the elections'. The symptoms of 'election fatigue syndrome' were present in the election coverage given by both state-run and independent media.

The monitoring findings at the post-election stage came as a surprise. Unlike all the previous elections monitored by BAJ, both state-owned and independent media lost interest in election-related subjects pretty soon after the polling.

The following chapter substantiates and elaborates on what is stated above. The **Conclusions** attempt to conceptualise the changes that have taken place in the election coverage.

Detailed Findings

Further on we are going to rely on both the aggregate data and specific findings made at each of the four monitoring stages.

If we compare two main TV news programmes – *Panorama* on *Belarus 1* and *Novosti* on ONT, they gave the elections more or less equal attention. From 31 July to 21 August election coverage received 7.18% of the air time in the former and 5.68% in the latter. Meanwhile sport was given 17.44% and 19.39% of the air time, respectively, and the weather reports took up 2.76% and 3.36% of the air time. In *Radyjofakt* on the 1st National Radio Channel the weather and sport even prevailed over election-related subjects, receiving 10.32%, 9.41% and 6.81% of the air time, respectively. A similar proportion was also typical of the regional electronic media.

As stated above, the state-run electronic media focused their attention on *the CEC* and its work. CEC representatives were the primary information source on such issues as the establishment of election commissions, initiatives to nominate candidates, candidate nomination, campaigning, etc. The CEC representatives were far from being neutral and impartial. This is, for example, what CEC Secretary Łazavik said, *'I have analysed the nomination to the election commissions at the polling stations in the 49th constituency of Hrodna only. In that constituency the United Civil Party proposed eighteen nominees to the election commissions at the polling stations. When we analysed what sort of people they were, it turned out that ten out of the eighteen had been charged with criminal and administrative offences and nine are out of work. What kind of respect can they enjoy with the voters?... Such types should not be allowed to the election commissions.'* (*Belarus 1, V Tsentre Vnimanija, 12 August, 2012*)

During the same monitoring stage, the state-owned electronic media extensively featured what the President had to say about the opposition: *'If today our... well, they do not deserve to be called the opposition, though there are perhaps some opposition-minded people in their ranks... so if our fifth column and the opposition felt they were going to win, they would never claim that the elections lacked legitimacy. This would automatically mean that their MPs lacked legitimacy. If they do say so, it only shows that they know all too well that in today's conditions they will flop... Whatever tactics they are going to opt for is going to be decided in their dirty games. Please, believe me that their dirty games are all about one thing only – money. It may be little money, because the West no longer gives them big money, but it would be enough to support themselves and pay for the petrol to fill their cars, which, once again, the West helped them buy, and maintain the mansions they built when they promised the West they would rise to power in Belarus. At that time the West gave them a lot of money, so they built their mansions, which now need maintenance. In order to receive at least this portion from the West, they are willing to yell and scream, blow up bombs and shoot. All foul means are good for them – that's their politics... We see the same faces, shabby and scruffy. They went abroad and betrayed their country. And poisoned the people.'* (*Belarus 1, Panorama – 9 August, 2012*)

The role of the OSCE observers looked just as clear: *'You can see that we have invited all these reeves, whether they have already been here or not. Let them take a close look. We know everything they are going to write and we are already receiving their first reports and information coming from them. It's a long way before the elections, but we have already read what they have to say. We made a conscious decision. We know they are going to screw us, no matter how we hold the elections.'* (*Belarus 1, Panorama – 9 August, 2012*)

During the initial monitoring stage, from 31 July to 17 August, the state-run TV stations presented the head of the OSCE PA observer mission in a particularly negative light, *'Matteo Mecacci is a radical Italian politico. In his home country he actually supports the plans to legalise*

prostitution, online paedophilia and soft drugs more than he advocates the freedom of expression. The majority of the Italian society stigmatises Mecacci and his ideas.' (ONT, *Nashi Novosti*, 15 August, 2012)

The second monitoring stage, which lasted from 20 August to 31 August, showed, however, certain new election coverage trends in some state-owned media, namely for the most part neutral presentation of some election actors. It was true, for example, of *Radyjofakt*, *The 7 Days* weekly, and to a certain extent of the regional media. This was especially noticeable when contrasted with *V Tsentre Vnimaniya* weekly analytical program on *Belarus 1* TV station and its ideologically biased coverage of the election actors, as well as against the background of the first monitoring stage, when *the opposition* and *the OSCE observers* received highly negative coverage. Even though the state-run media went on presenting *the opposition* in a negative light, the manner in which *the OSCE observers* were featured changed to chiefly neutral.

At the same time, these media tended to give the election process a rather simplistic coverage by ignoring a lot of political and non-political actors engaged in the run-up to the parliamentary elections. For example, throughout the monitored time span, *Panorama* on *Belarus 1* presented twenty three actors; however, the biggest proportion of the air time was given only to *the CEC* together with constituency and polling stations commissions (nearly 37%), *the CIS observers* (about 11.5%), *the President* (11.1%) and *the OSCE observers* (nearly 8.5%). Of the other actors, *a depersonalised candidate* and *political parties* received just a few per cent, while *the opposition political parties* were given only a few points.

The candidates were entitled to address voters via the state-owned media. They went on air at more favourable time, as compared to the 2008 parliamentary elections, *ie* from 7 pm to 8 pm. (In the run-up to the previous parliamentary elections, candidates' messages were broadcast on TV from 6 pm to 6:30 pm, in Minsk and other big cities – from 5:30 pm to 6:30 pm.) On the radio the candidates also received better time – from 6 pm to 7 pm. However, instead of being broadcast live, the candidates' messages were pre-recorded, which facilitated their censorship.

According to the chairperson of the United Civil Party Anatol Labiedzka, thirty two addresses of the party's candidates did not go on air and papers did not publish eleven candidates' programmes: (http://naviny.by/rubrics/opinion/2012/09/14/ic_articles_410_179201/). The head of CEC Jarmošyna admitted censorship: *'Why have they been banned from air? Because there were calls for a boycott of the elections during these debates.'* (<http://www.svaboda.org/content/article/24704611.html>)

Moreover, the monitored state-owned media failed to announce TV and radio addresses by particular candidates or their debates. They did not give the candidates' names or focus the voters' attention on what parties the candidates represented. These media limited themselves to only giving the number of the constituency and the corresponding date (see, for example: <http://www.tvr.by/rus/raspisanie-debaty.asp>). The TV listings of the stations that were to broadcast the candidates' messages and debates, announced them simply as *'Elections '2012'* rather than *'Parliamentary candidates' addresses'* or *'Debates'*. On top of that, the candidates' messages and debates did not find the way onto the websites of the TV and radio stations.

This type of election coverage went well with the assessment of the parliamentary elections by the head of the CEC Jarmošyna: *'After all, this is not a presidential election, when candidates represent the whole country and certainly voice quite different opinions. In the upcoming elections the main issues to be debated will be of local interest to voters in each particular constituency. That is why perhaps they will be rather low-key.'* (*Belarus 1, Panorama*, 23 August 2012). Thus, the state-owned media covered the elections as a low-key local event rather than a high-profile political process of nationwide importance.

In fact, the purpose of the bleak campaign coverage and the censorship of the candidates' media appearances was to undermine the tension of electoral competition and depoliticise the elections. A highly revealing fact: of the thirteen constituencies in the Mahiloŭ region, only four had candidates who debated on TV and only three constituencies' candidates debated on the radio. The way the parliamentary elections were covered in the state-owned media, they looked devoid of any political contestation, any meaningful competition of political platforms, candidates' visions or a wide range of voters' opinions.

Of the independent media, www.naviny.by offered the most extensive election coverage, presenting thirty four actors all in all. Its presentation of different actors in the election process was free from the disproportionate featuring of *the President* and *the CEC*, characteristic of the state-run media. www.naviny.by also did not depersonalise candidates or any other political actors. It did not give preference to any political parties or NGOs. The printed independent media presented a much narrower picture of the election process than www.naviny.by. Thus, *The Narodnaja Vola* wrote about eighteen election actors. Even so, by the amount of space and the number of contributions on election-related subjects, it was far ahead of the pro-presidential daily *Belarus Segodnya*. The *Naša Niva* weekly did not give the elections much attention.

The above-mentioned independent media outlets may have criticised *the government* and *the CEC*, but they also spoke critically of the opposition and other actors. The *Komsomolskaya Pravda v Belorussii* was an exception, as in its thick edition it presented in an exclusively neutral light information released by the CEC.

As we have said above, after the polling both state-run and independent media soon lost interest in the elections. The evaluation of the elections dealt with such issues as their democratic or non-democratic character, conformity or lack of conformity to the provisions of the Belarusian election legislation and the internationally accepted standards, voter turnout and ballot count. The assessments differed a great deal.

The state-owned media argued that the elections had conformed to all the requirements of the Belarusian legislation: *'The Belarusian elections are held in accordance with the national legislation rather than foreign regulations,' says Jarmošina.* (http://www.belta.by/ru/all_news/politics/Vybory-v-Belarusi-sootvetstvujut-natsionalnomu-zakonodatelstvu-a-ne-zarubezhnoj-vedomstvennoj-instruktsii---Ermoshina_i_609626.html). *'The parliamentary elections in Belarus have been held strictly in conformity with the legislation... This is the conclusion of the CIS observer mission that Sergey Lebedev presented to the head of state.'* (*Radyjafakt, the 1st National Radio Channel, 25 September, 2012*).

The same media cited *the CIS observers* that the elections were democratic and met the international standards: *'The Belarusian parliamentary elections met the internationally accepted standards,' says the CIS observer mission (VIDEO)*

(http://www.belta.by/ru/all_news/politics/Parlamentskie-vybory-v-Belarusi-sootvetstvovali-obshepriznannymi-mirovym-normam---missija-SNG-VIDEO_i_609619.html). *'The Union State Parliamentary Assembly observers acknowledged that Belarus had created all the necessary conditions for fair and transparent elections.'*

(http://www.belta.by/ru/all_news/politics/Nabljudateli-ot-PS-Sojuznogo-gosudarstva-konstatirovali-sozdanie-v-Belarusi-vsex-uslovij-dlja-provedenija-spravedlivyx-i-otkrytyx-vyborov_i_610022.html).

In the run-up to the elections a number of opposition parties had spoken in favour of election boycott. In this connection the voter turnout on the polling day became quite an important issue, accentuated in both independent and state-owned media. Here are some typical news items.

'Heavy polling is recorded in all the regions. The Viciebsk region is in the lead.' *'Thirteen parliamentarians were to be elected in the Mahiloŭ region... About 11 am voters could be seen queuing before the polling booths.'* *'All the districts of the Homiel region showed heavy polling. At many polling stations the voter turnout exceeded 50% before noon.'* *'Although the turnout in Minsk is traditionally not the highest possible, the citizens have performed their public duty in all the constituencies of the capital.'* (Radyjofakt, the 1st National Radio Channel, 24 September, 2012)

The state-owned media also drew attention to a transparent ballot count: *'Igor Borisov: Observers had a possibility to monitor the voice count visually.'* (http://www.belta.by/ru/person/opinions/Igor-Borisov_i_513325.html).

Meanwhile, the state-run media were critical of the OSCE ODIHR findings: *'Jarmoŭyna: A short time before the voting day the OSCE observers were pumped with negative information.'* (http://www.belta.by/ru/all_news/politics/Ermoshina-nezadolgo-do-dnja-golosovanija-nabljudatelej-ot-OBSE-nakachivali-negativom_i_609734.html). The OSCE observer mission was also criticised by the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs: *'The Russian Foreign Office criticises the OSCE ODIHR for their politically-motivated approach to the Belarusian parliamentary elections... "Un fortunately," says the commentary, "the dissenting opinion of the OSCE ODIHR, as usual, struck a discordant note. Its preliminary conclusions once again demonstrate a politically-motivated approach..."'* (Belarus Segodnya, 26 September, 2012)

The independent online resource www.naviny.by threw light on what was behind this criticism of the OSCE observer mission, *'The OSCE observers did not see free elections in Belarus'* (http://naviny.by/rubrics/elections/2012/09/24/ic_articles_623_179324/). *'Mecacci says it was impossible to observe the elections in military units due to wrong information'* (http://naviny.by/rubrics/elections/2012/09/27/ic_news_623_402414/).

'The EU: the Belarus elections were held against the background of overall repression' (http://naviny.by/rubrics/elections/2012/09/25/ic_news_623_402199/).

Belarusian observers gave their negative evaluation of the elections, too: *'Hulak: The elections did not conform to either the OSCE standards or the Belarusian legislation'* (http://naviny.by/rubrics/elections/2012/09/24/ic_news_623_402151/). *'For Fair Elections: None of the Mahiloŭ polling stations had a transparent vote count'* (http://naviny.by/rubrics/elections/2012/09/25/ic_news_623_402300/). Moreover, the independent media, in contrast to their state-run counterparts, presented opinions of a very wide range of election actors.

The independent media also published various contributions on the voter turnout. In doing so they pointed at the discrepancies in the numbers of voters that went to the polls: *'The turnout figures recorded by observers and polling commissions on the voting day differ by 173%'* (http://naviny.by/rubrics/elections/2012/09/25/ic_news_623_402200/).

Conclusions

As we compared the media coverage of the parliamentary elections in 2008 and 2012, in one of the interim bulletins we noted that there were no essential changes. However, the monitoring data has revealed some new developments:

- The vertical model of holding elections, which has so far been practiced and in which the state-owned media play a key role, has significantly contributed to the general depoliticisation of the Belarusian society; this has entailed a drop in election participation among not only voters, but also such key actors as candidates and political parties;

- The same model of controlled elections has caused increased voter alienation and probably widened the gap between the current regime and the electorate;
- This model also blocks any meaningful political competition, making the election outcome totally predictable; this is one of the main causes why the election coverage in both state-owned and independent media was bleak and dull;
- Paradoxically enough, the model aimed to depoliticise the society has resulted in a tangibly less fervent smearing campaign against the opponents of the regime, as compared to the 2008 elections;
- Last but not least, the existing model has turned elections into a mere ritual, where most of the participants, if not all of them, are well aware that the elections are devoid of any real meaning. When the media hastily ‘summed up’ the election results and were eager to forget about them the sooner the better, it gave more evidence for a purely ritualistic nature of this performance. The most recent monitoring data of the post-election phase shows that the state-run media are beginning to cite the incumbent, speaking about a need for modernisation of the country’s political system. There is certainly no question of its liberalisation.

Minsk, 16 October, 2012

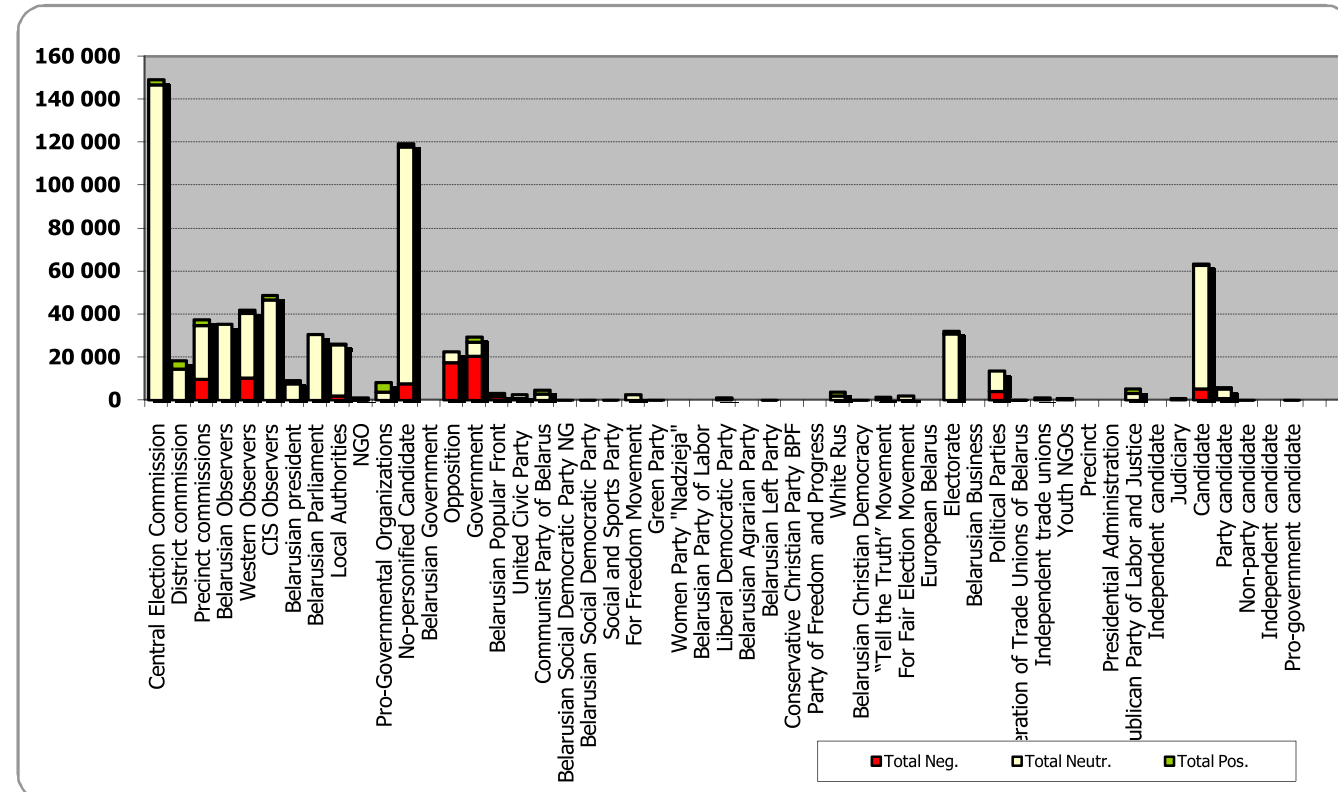
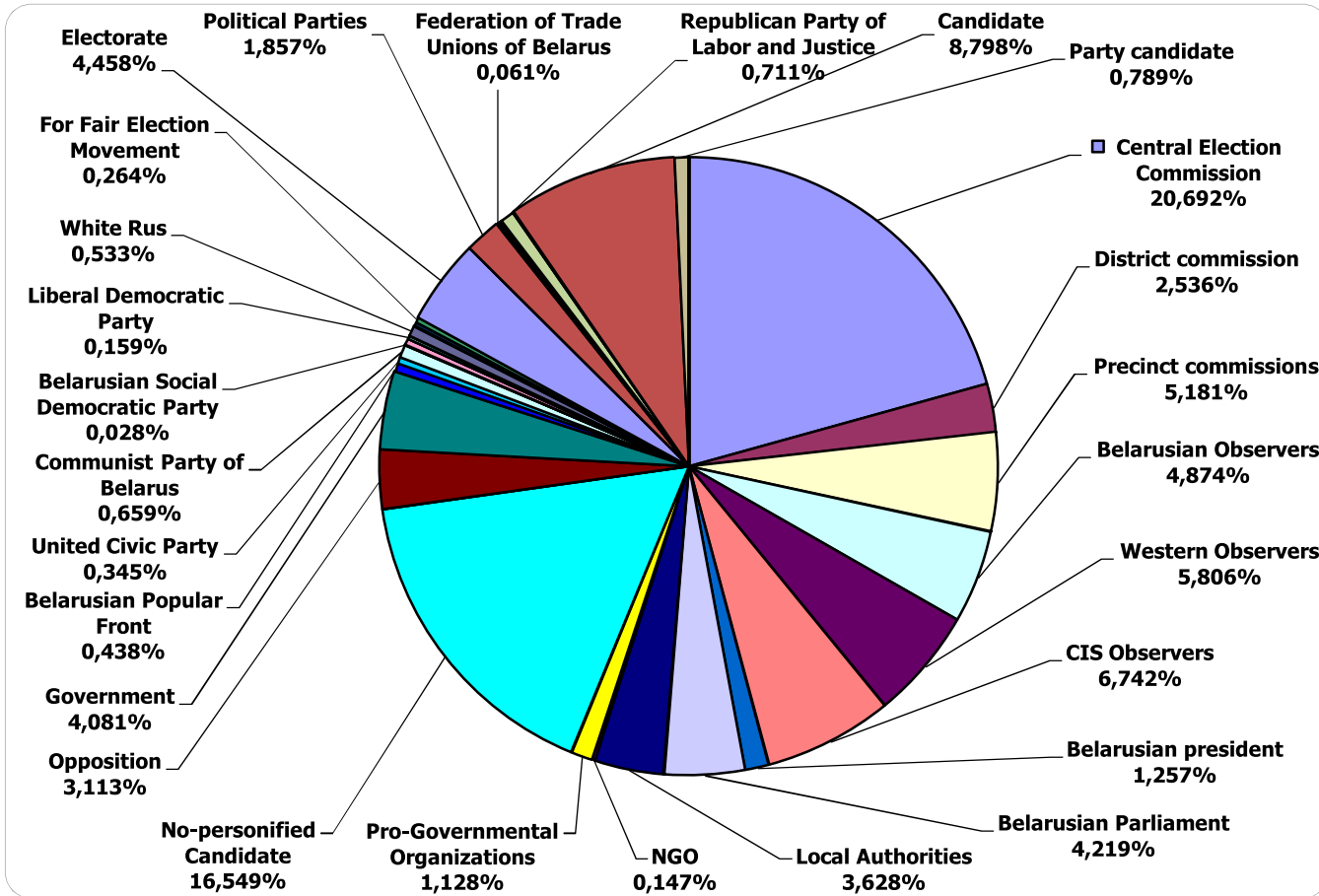


BELARUSIAN PARLAMENT ELECTIONS 2012

BELTA.BY

31.07 - 21.09.2012

Measured in symbols



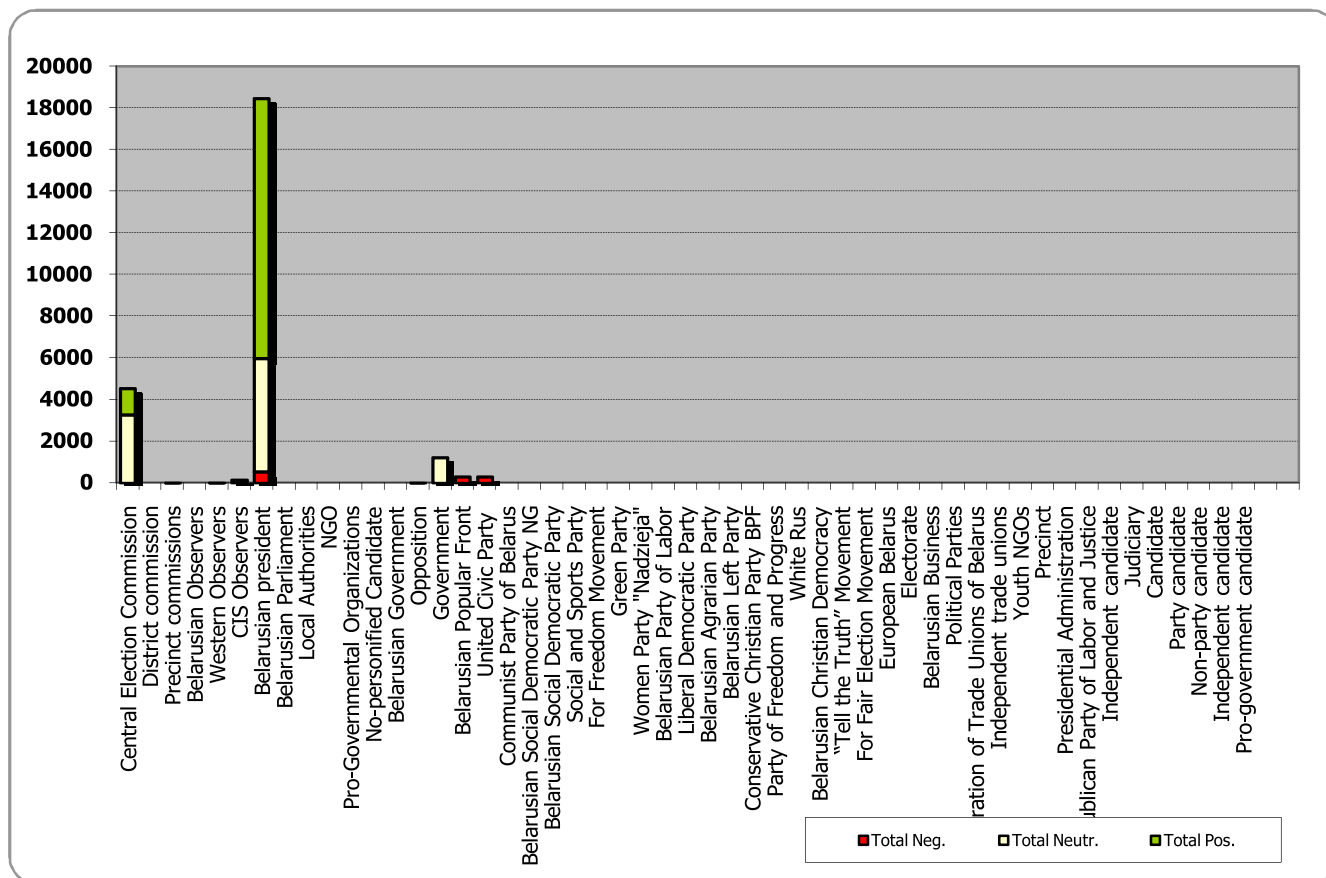
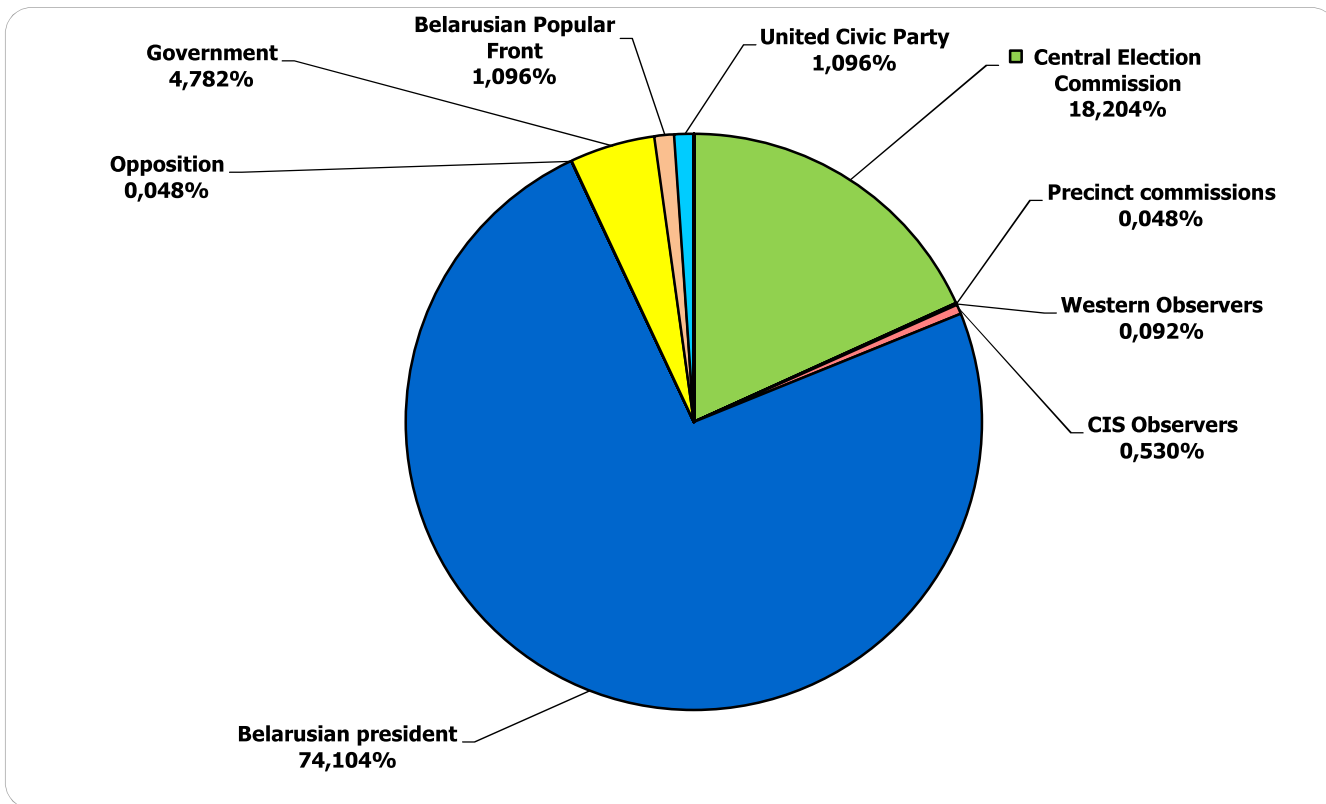


BELARUSIAN PARLAMENT ELECTIONS 2012

"Sovietskaja Bielorrussija"

31.07 - 21.09.2012

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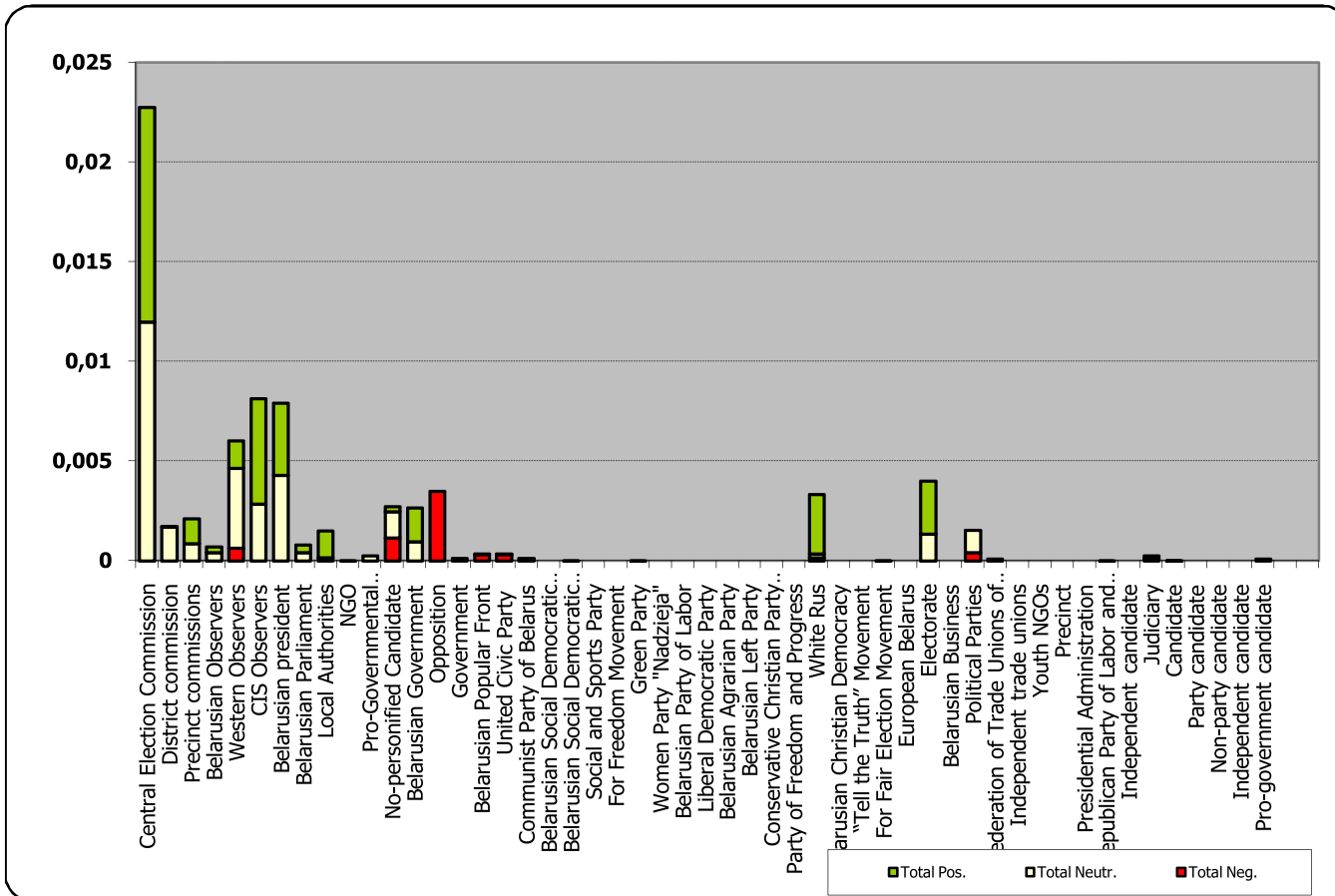
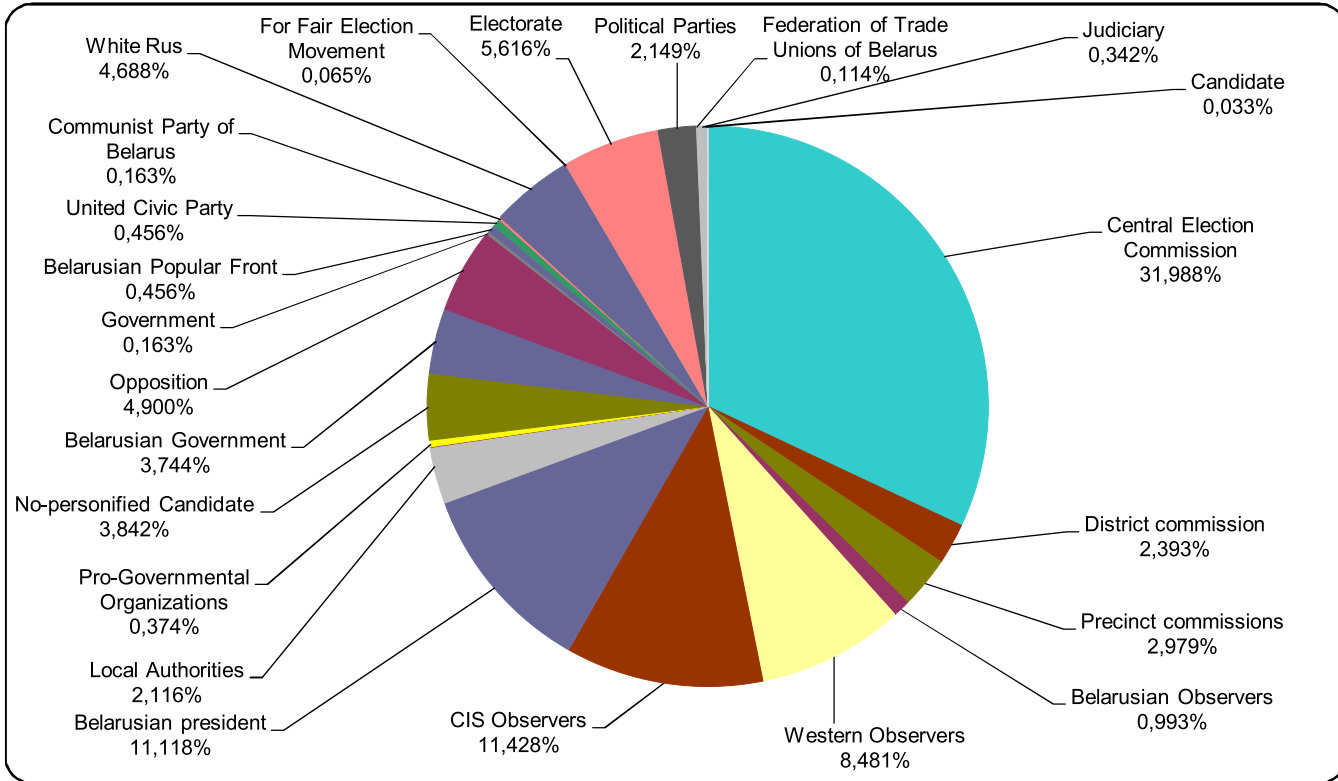


BELARUSIAN PARLAMENT ELECTIONS 2012

Panorama

31.07 - 21.09.2012

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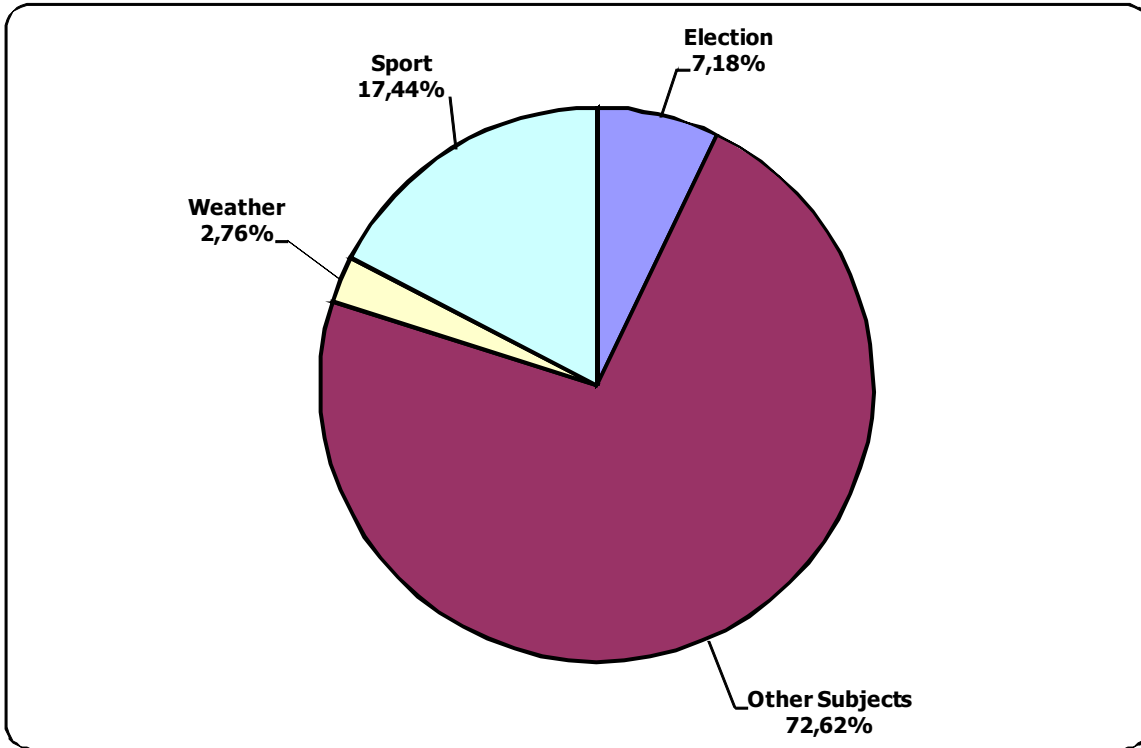




BELARUSIAN PARLAMENT ELECTIONS 2012

Panorama
31.07 - 21.09.2012

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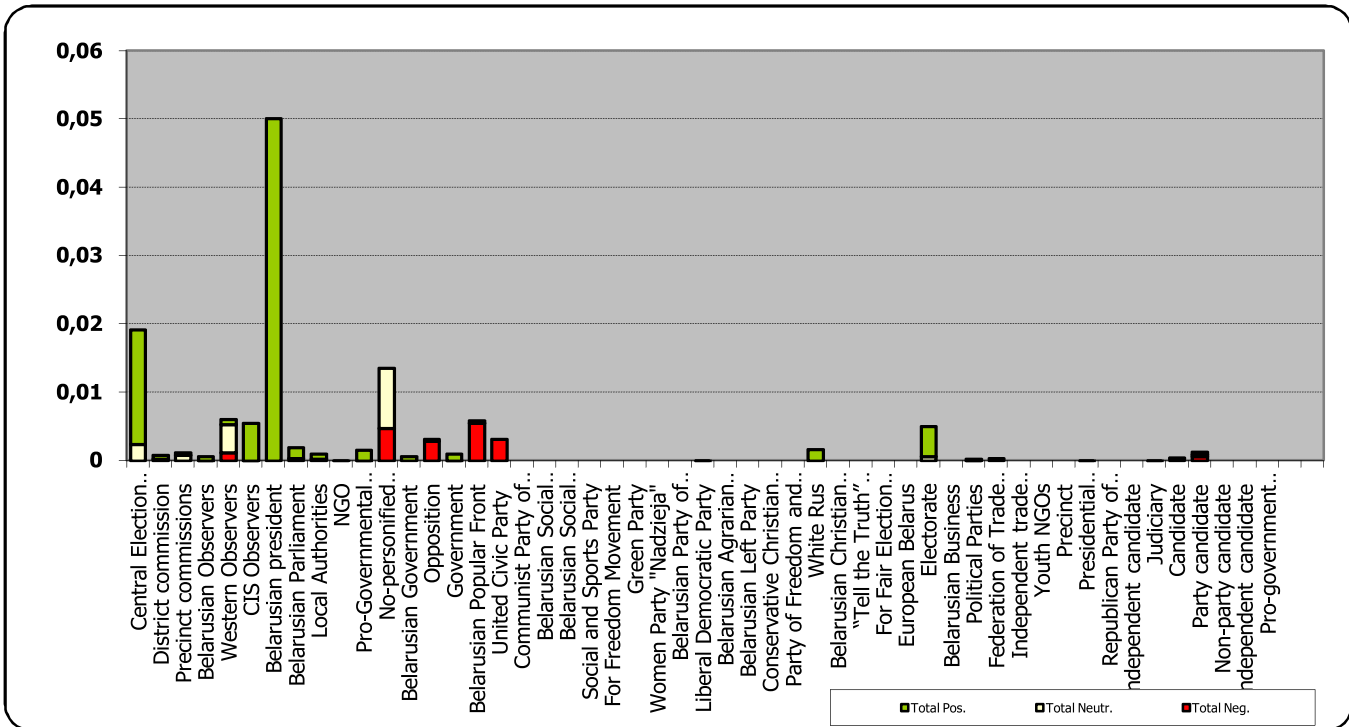
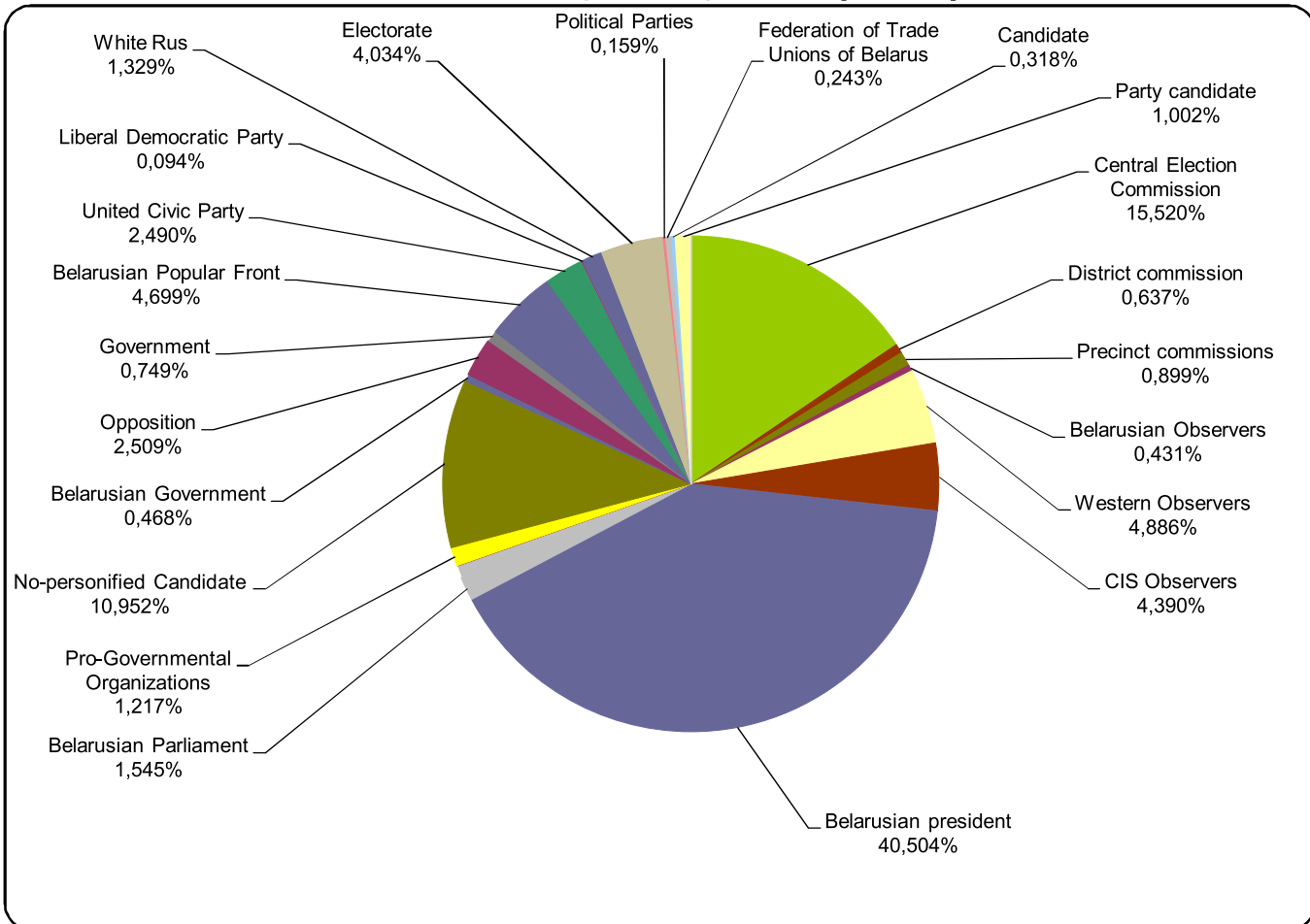




BELARUSIAN PARLAMENT ELECTIONS 2012

ONT/NASHI NOVOSTI
31.07 - 21.09.2012

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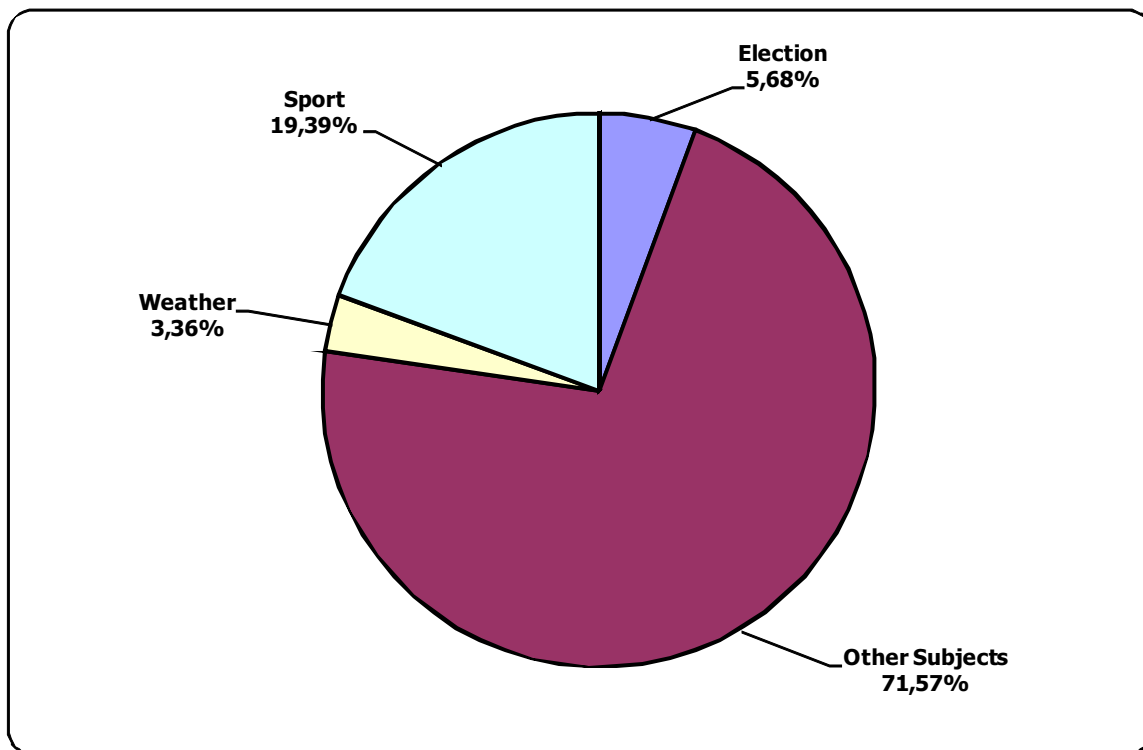


BELARUSIAN PARLAMENT ELECTIONS 2012

ONT/NASHI NOVOSTI

31.07 - 21.09.2012

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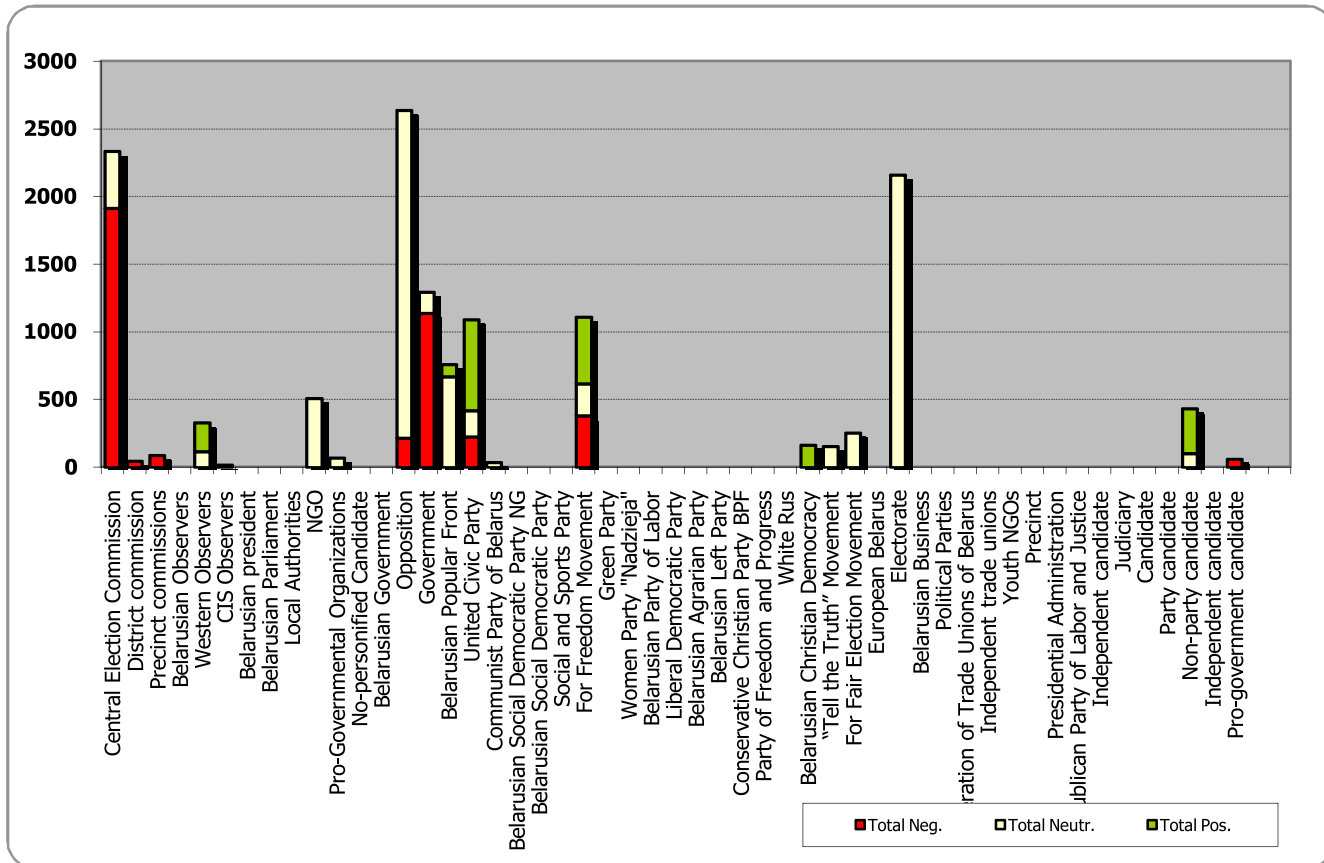
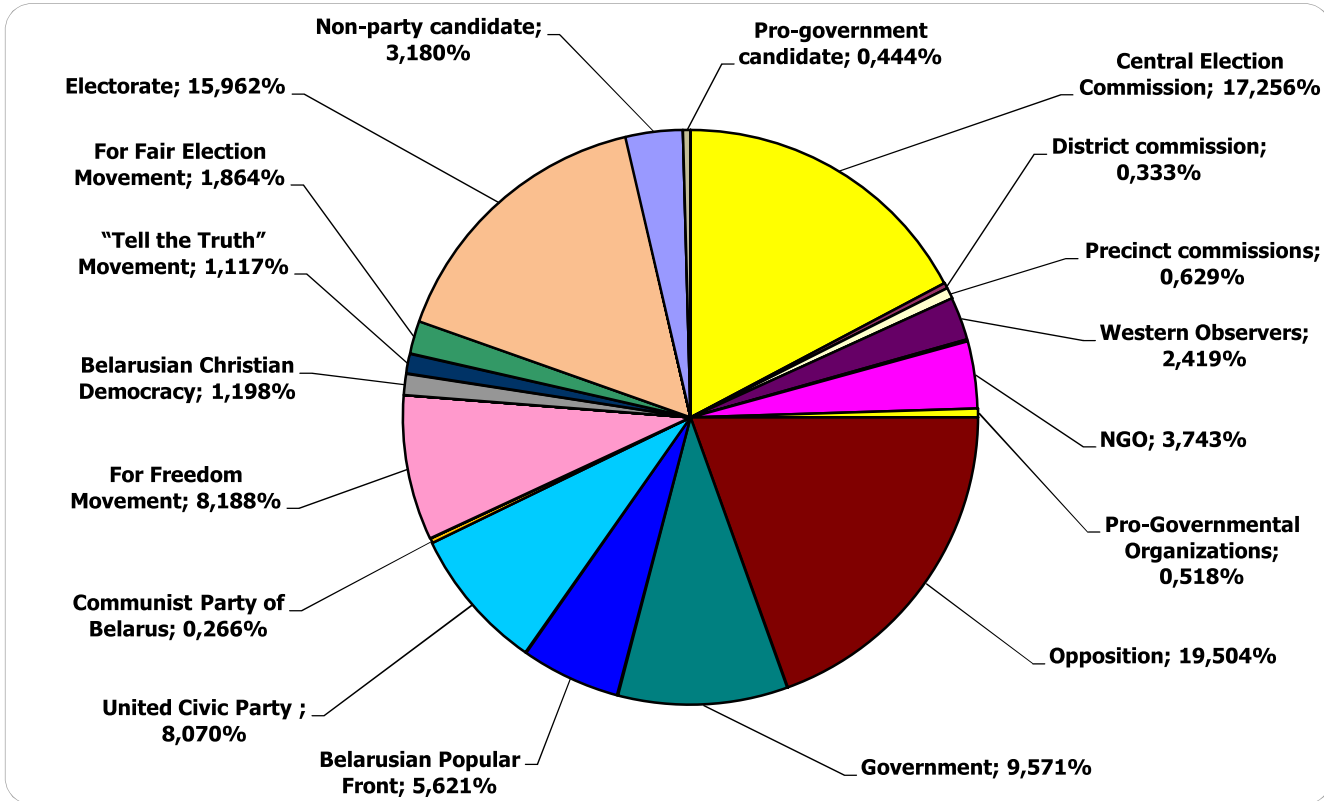


BELARUSIAN PARLAMENT ELECTIONS 2012

"Narodnaja Vola"

31.07 - 21.09.2012

Measured in cm2

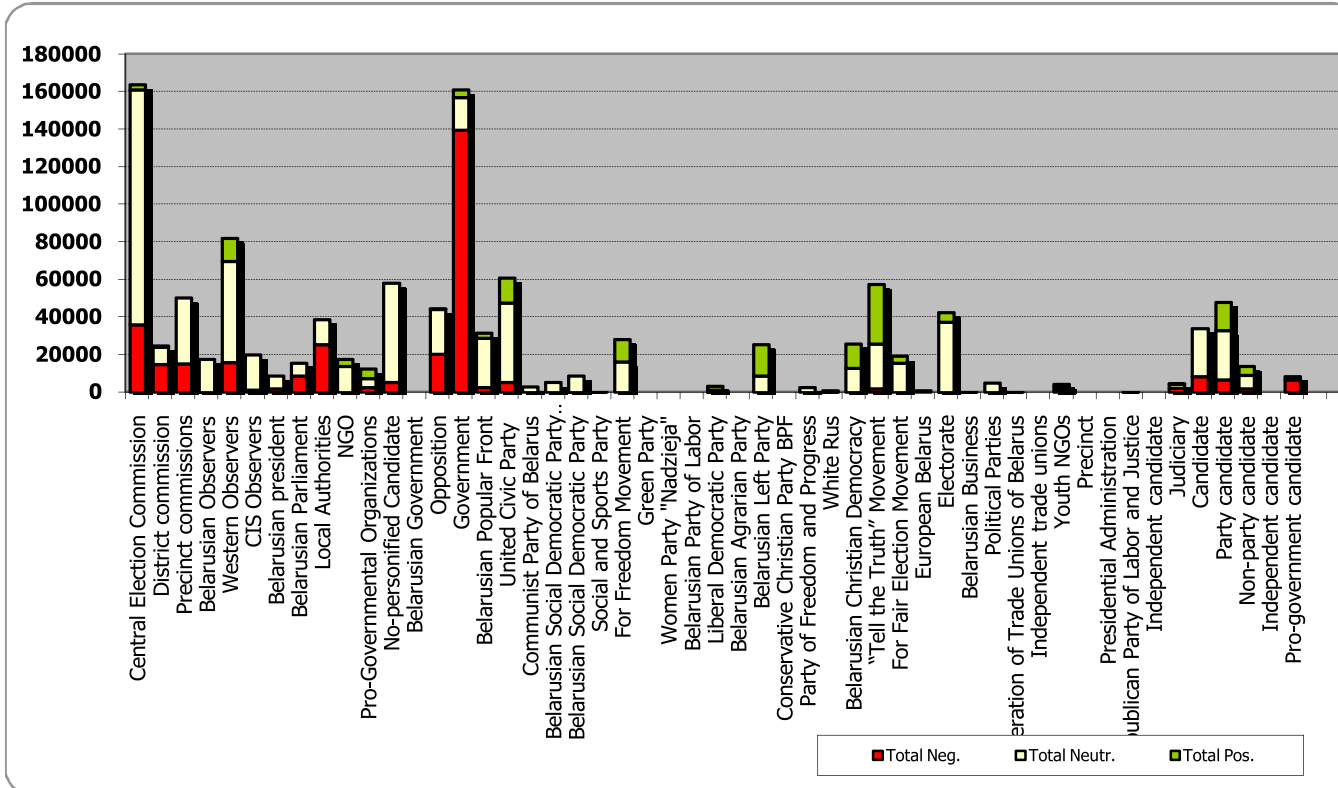
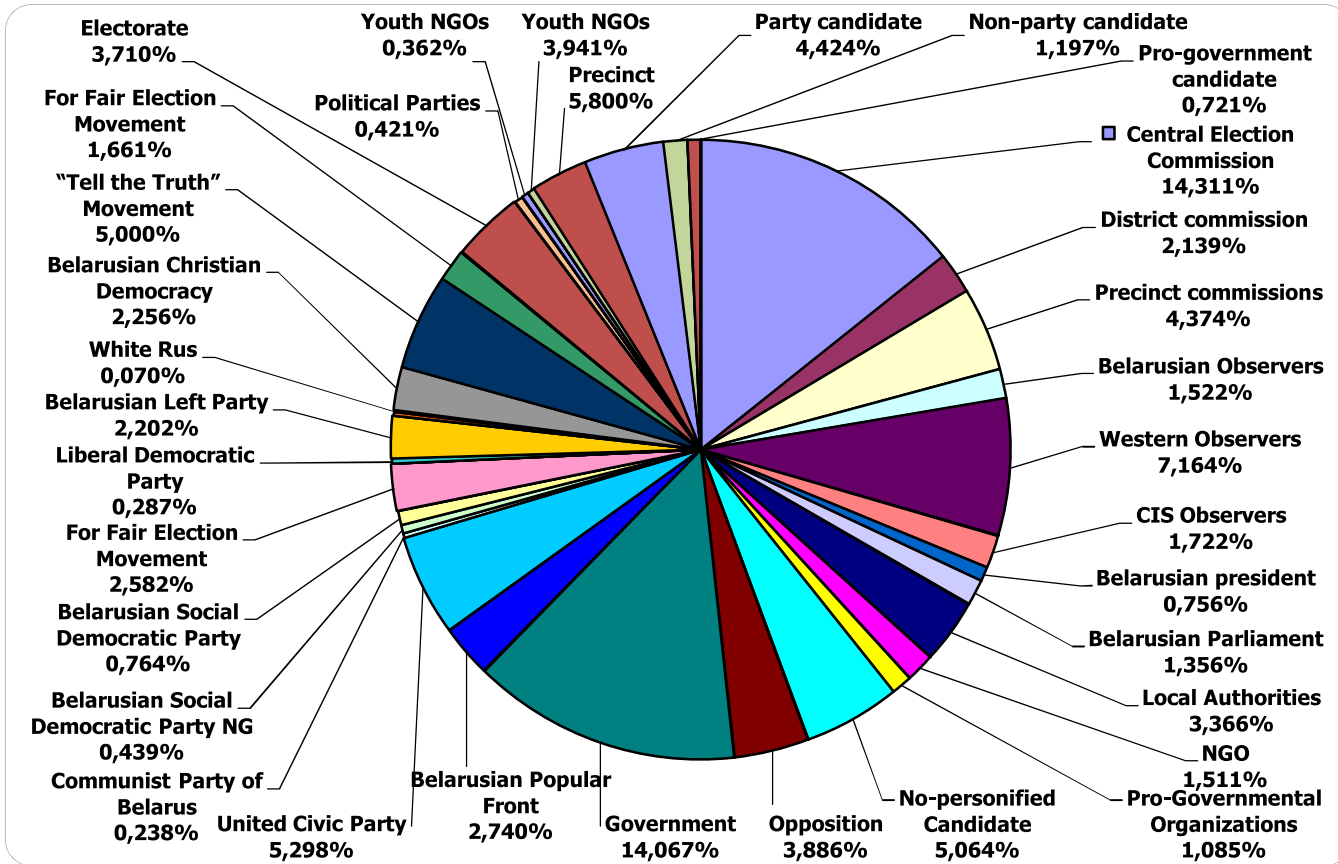




BELARUSIAN PARLAMENT ELECTIONS 2012

NAVINY.BY
31.07 - 21.09.2012

Measured in symbols



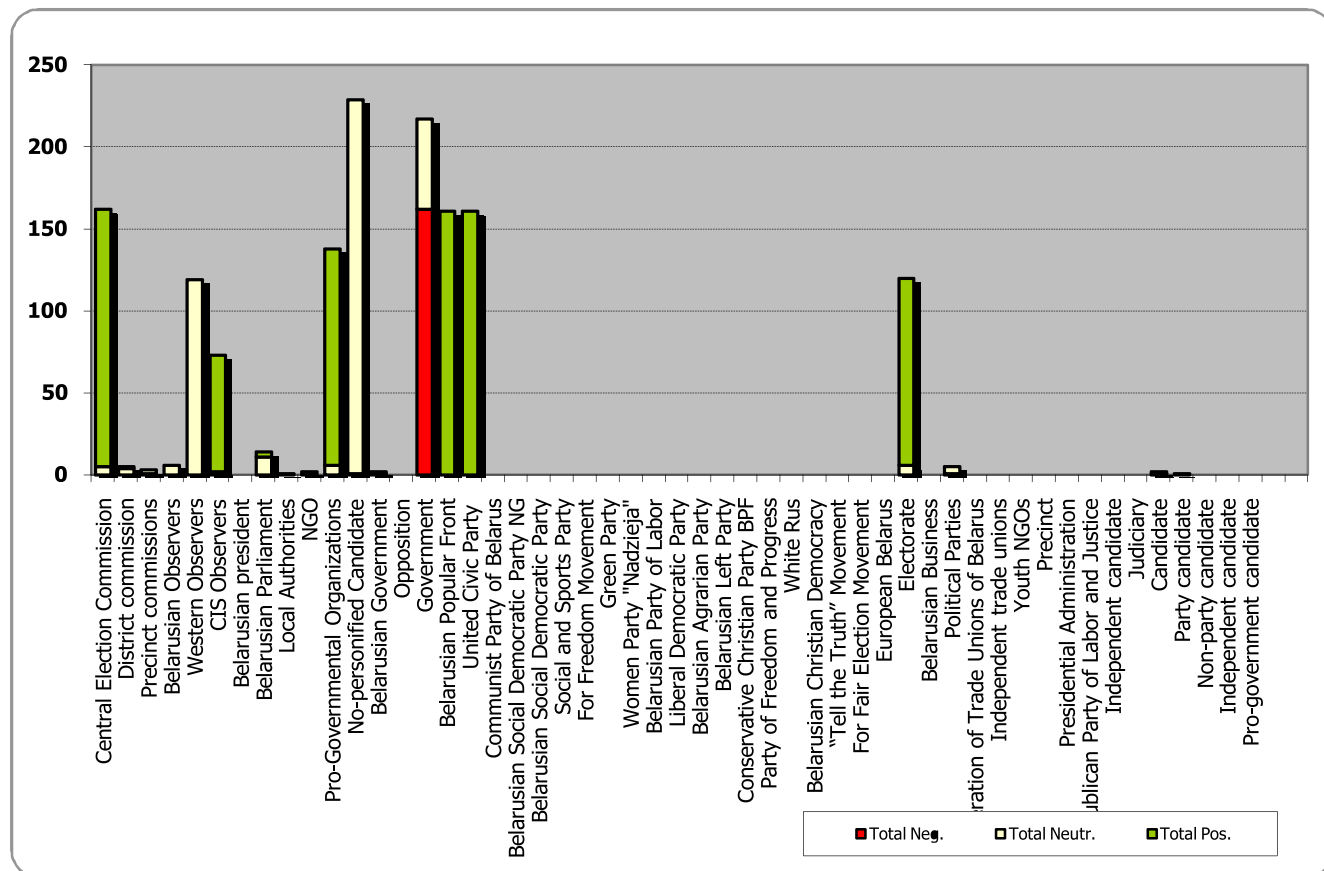
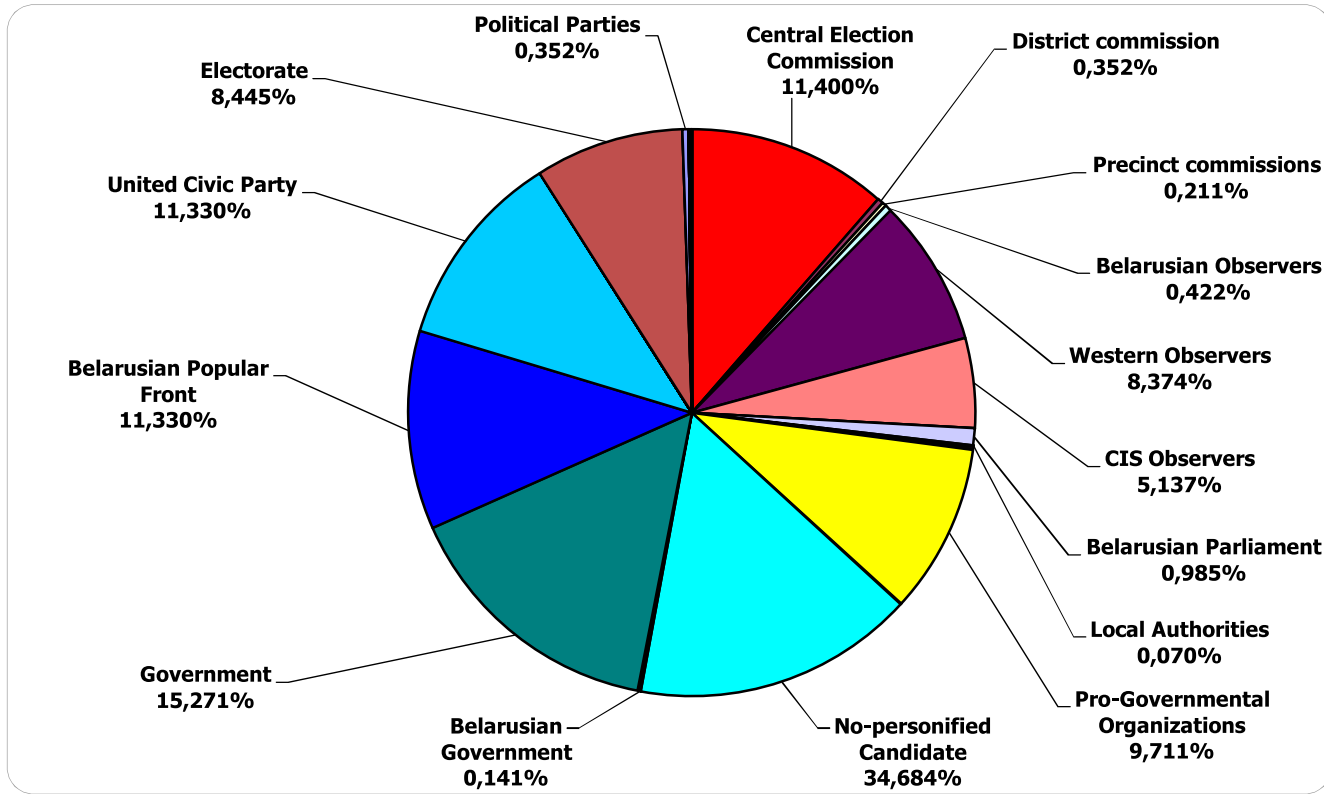


BELARUSIAN PARLAMENT ELECTIONS 2012

“Mogilevskaja pravda”

31.07-21.09.2012

Measured in cm2

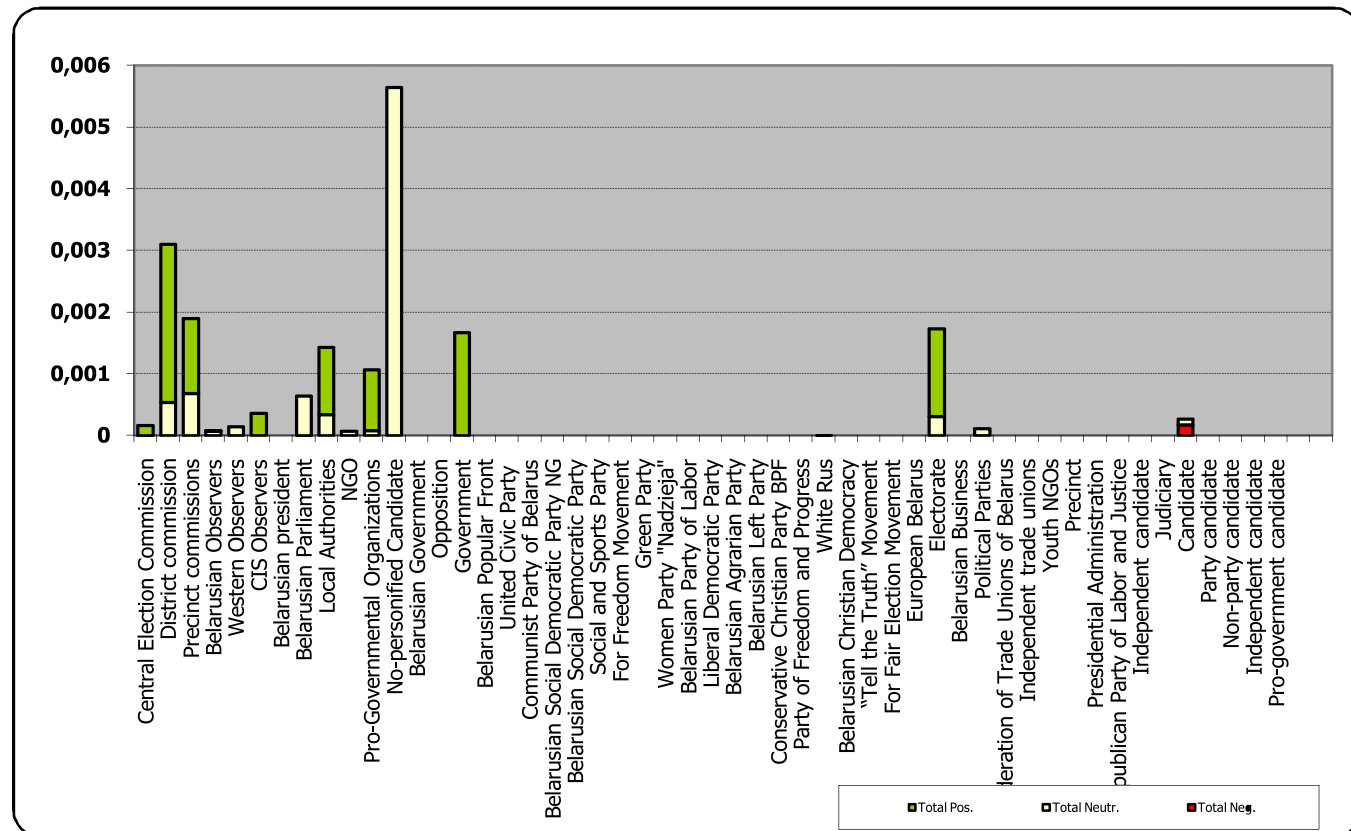
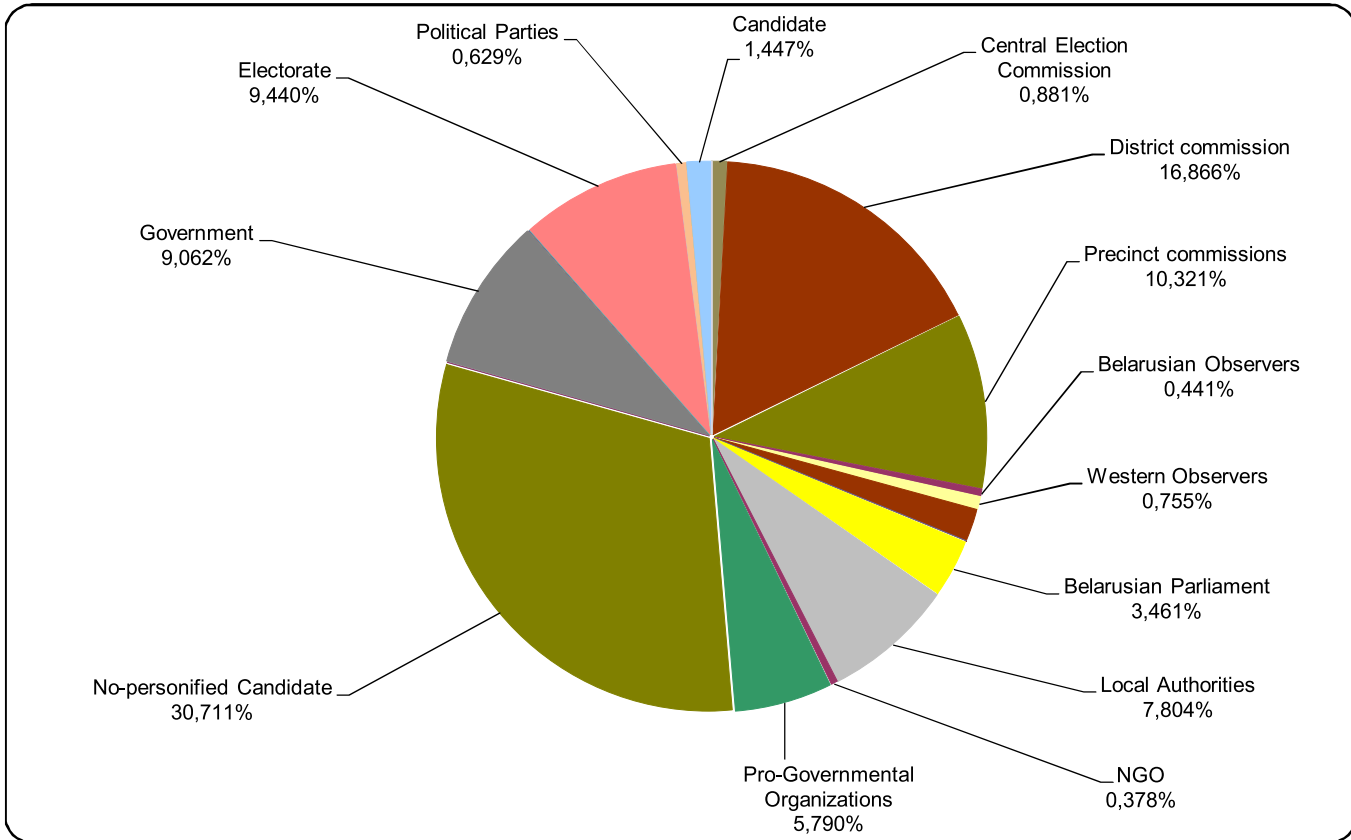




BELARUSIAN PARLAMENT ELECTIONS 2012

TRC "Mahilou"/Radio "News"
31.07 - 21.09.2012

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



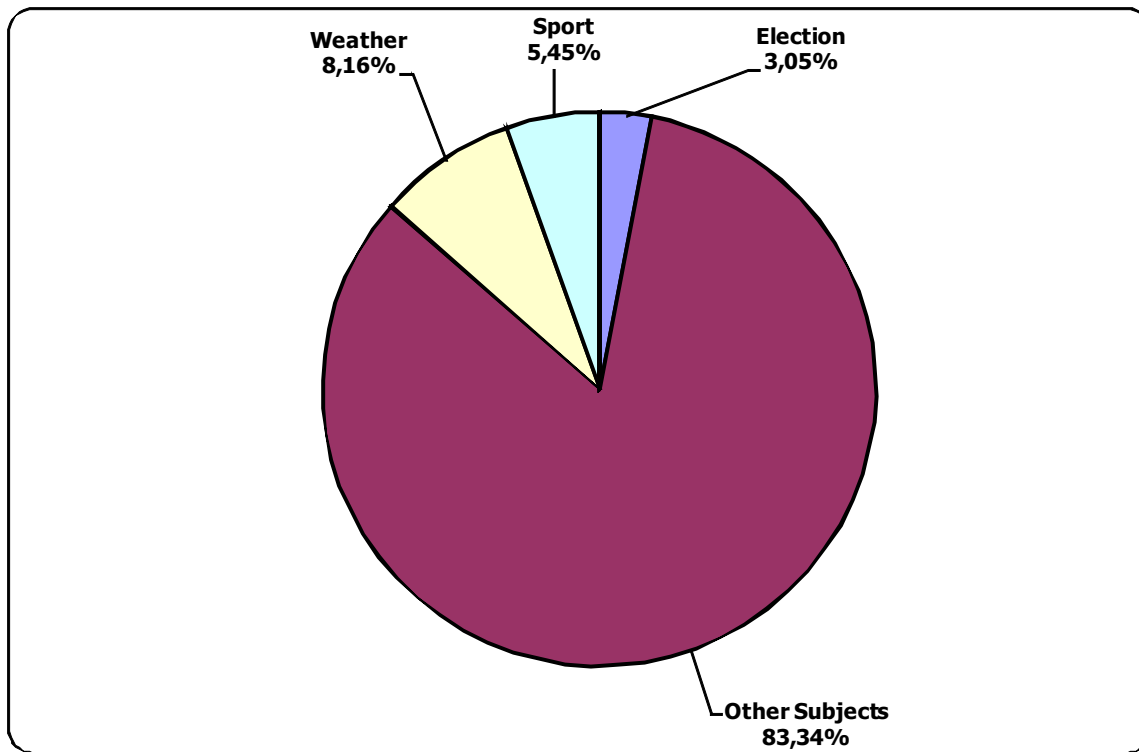


BELARUSIAN PARLAMENT ELECTIONS 2012

TRC "Mahilou"/Radio "News"

31.07 - 21.09.2012

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



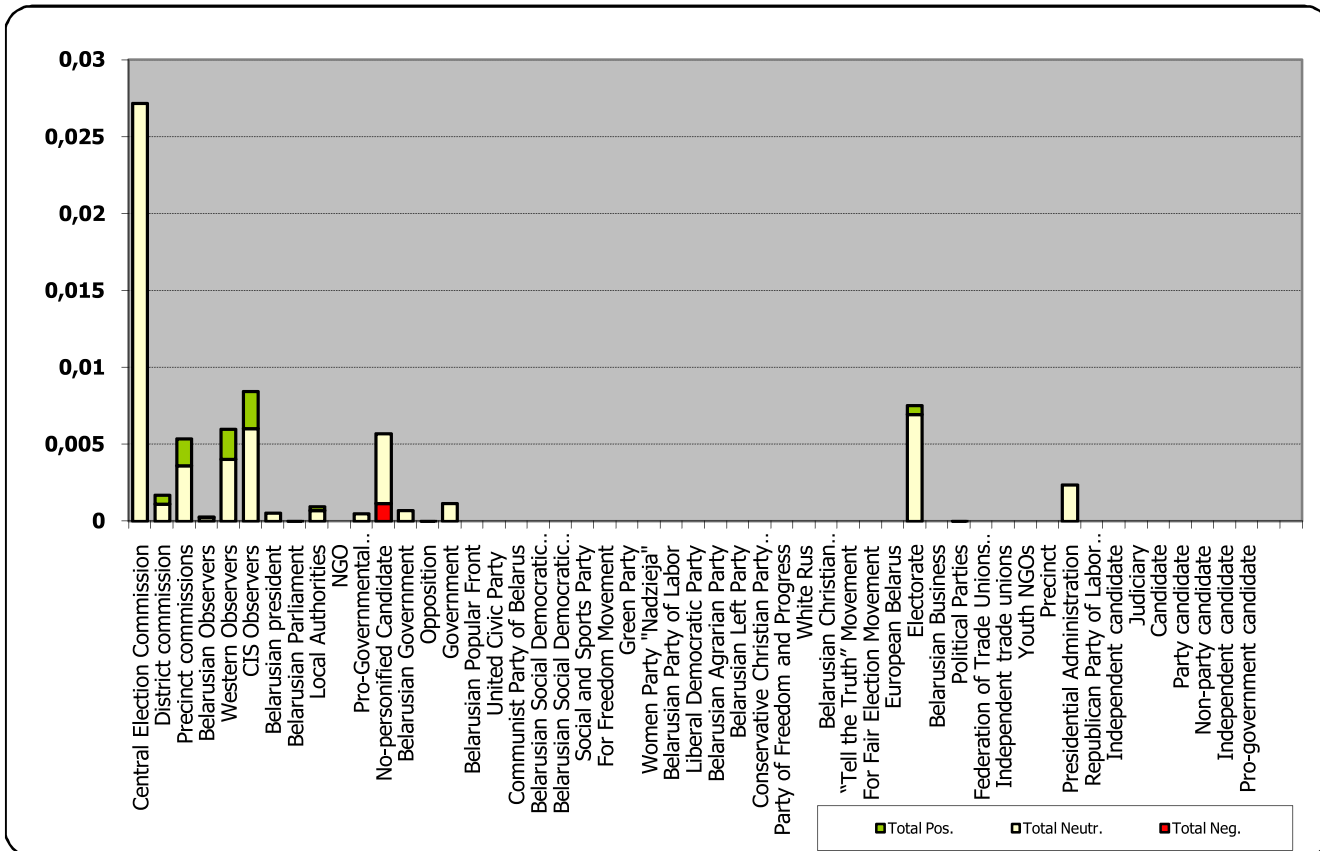
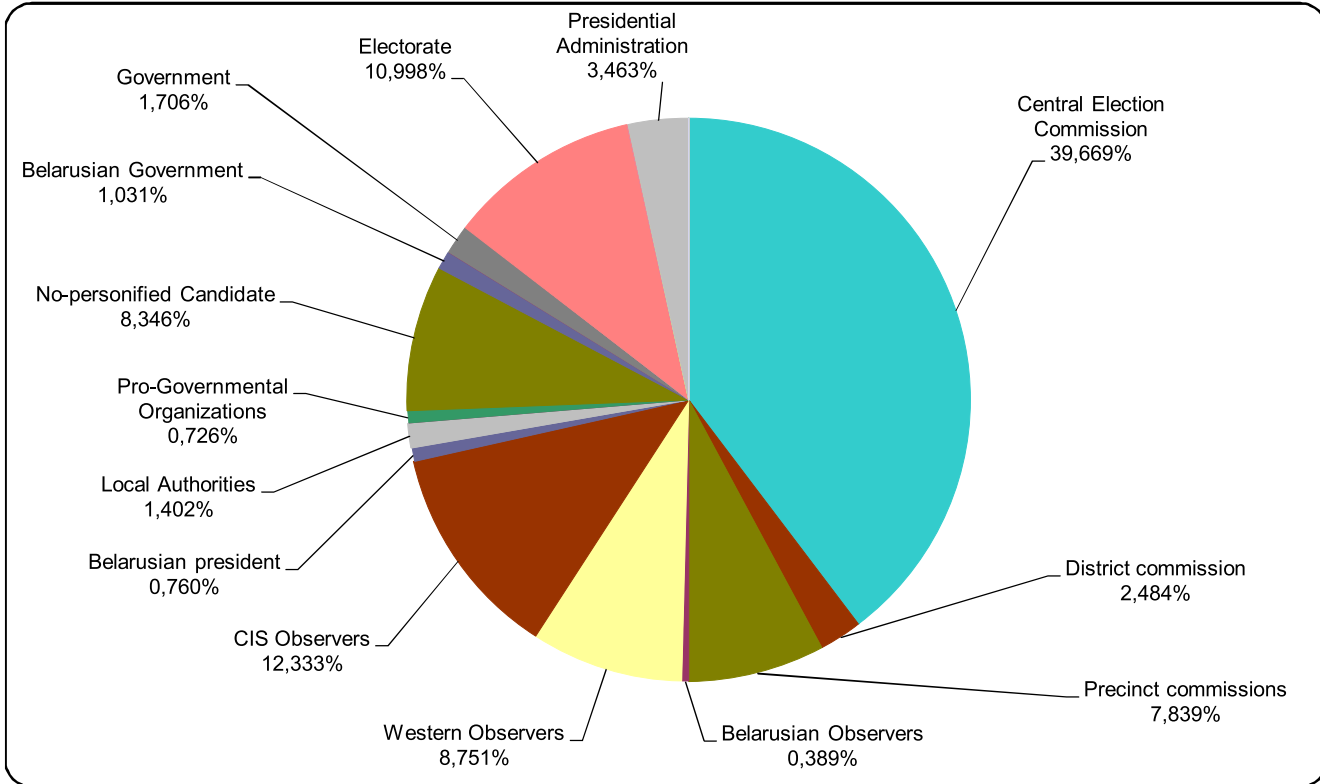


BELARUSIAN PARLAMENT ELECTIONS 2012

First National Radio "Radiofact"

31.07 - 21.09.2012

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



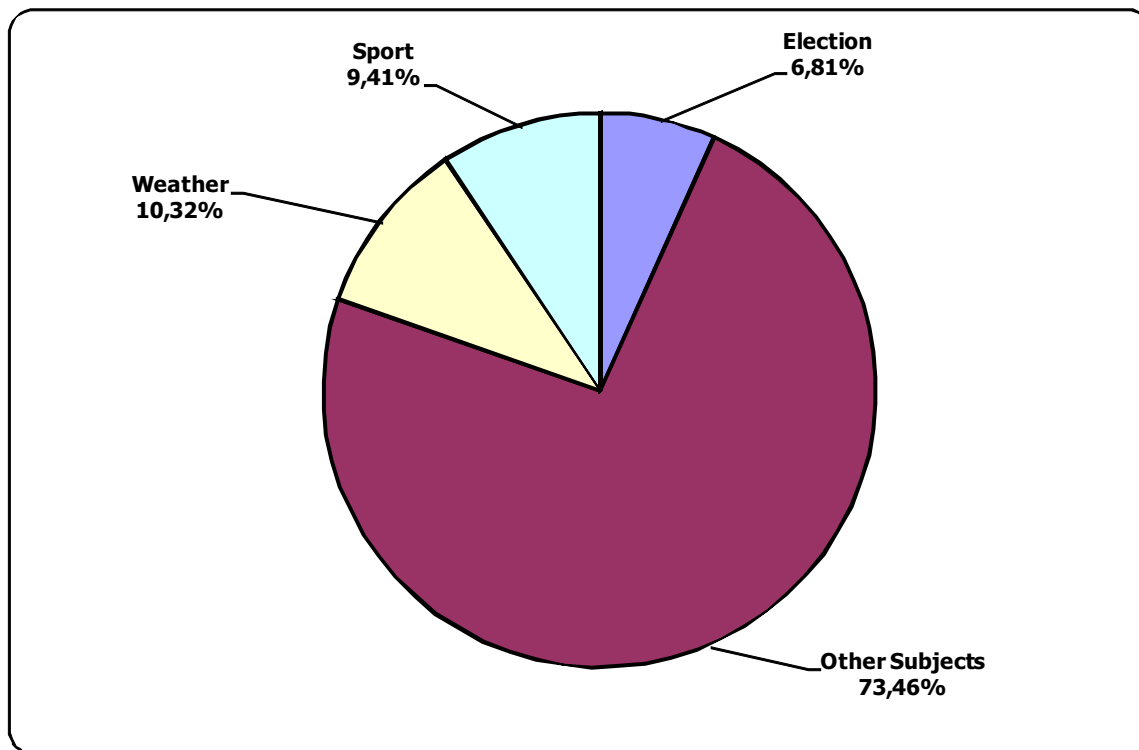


BELARUSIAN PARLAMENT ELECTIONS 2012

First National Radio "Radiofact"

31.07 - 21.09.2012

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



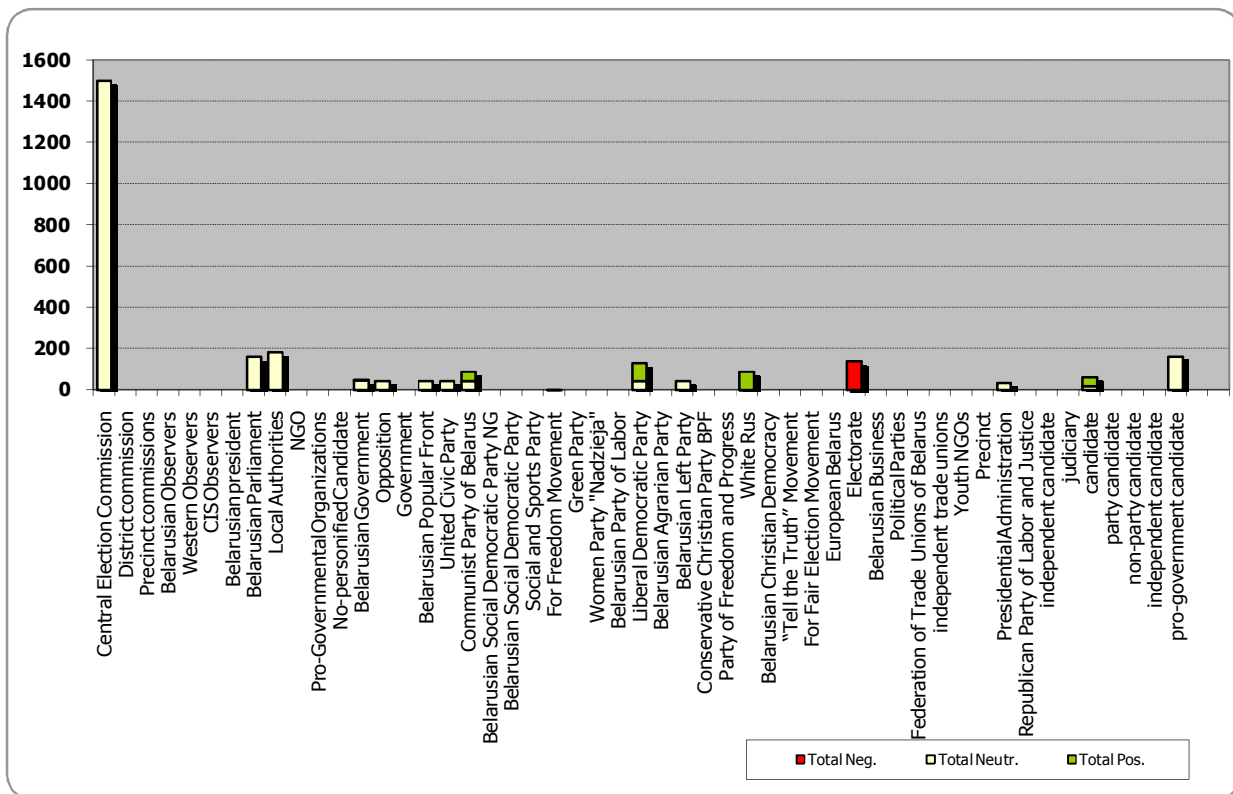
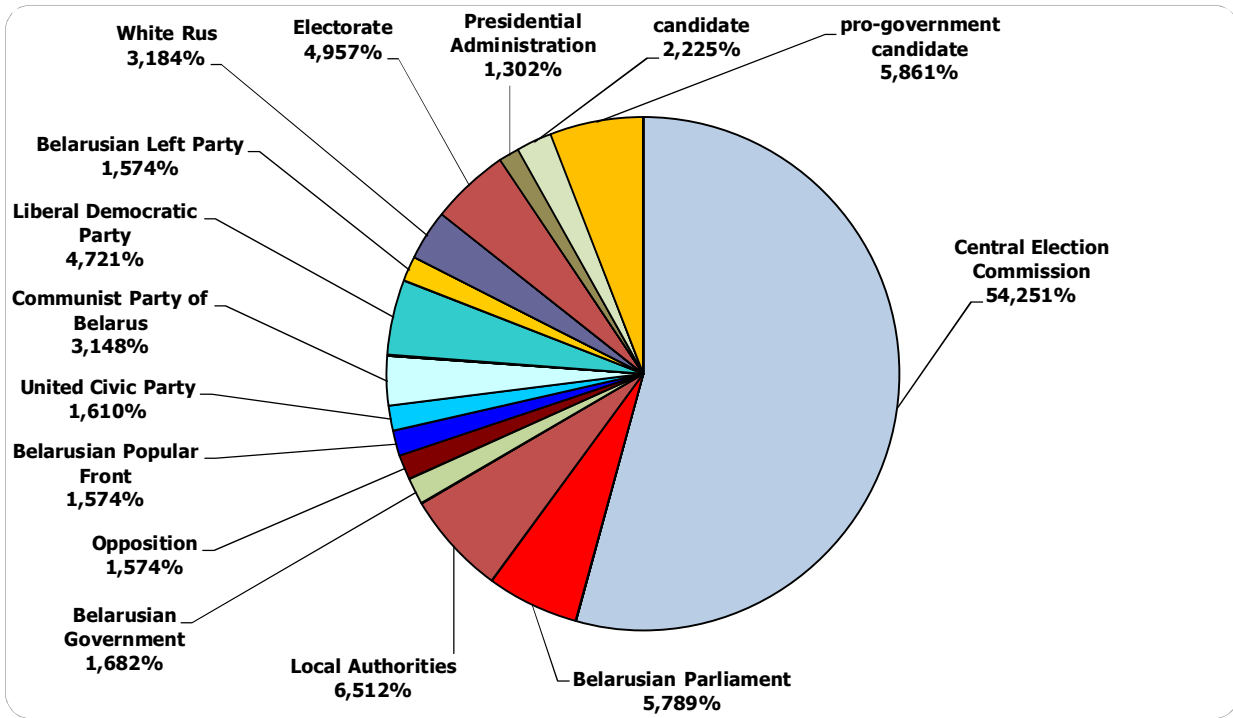


BELARUSIAN PARLAMENT ELECTIONS 2012

"Komsomolskaja pravda"

31.07 - 21.09.2012

Measured in cm2

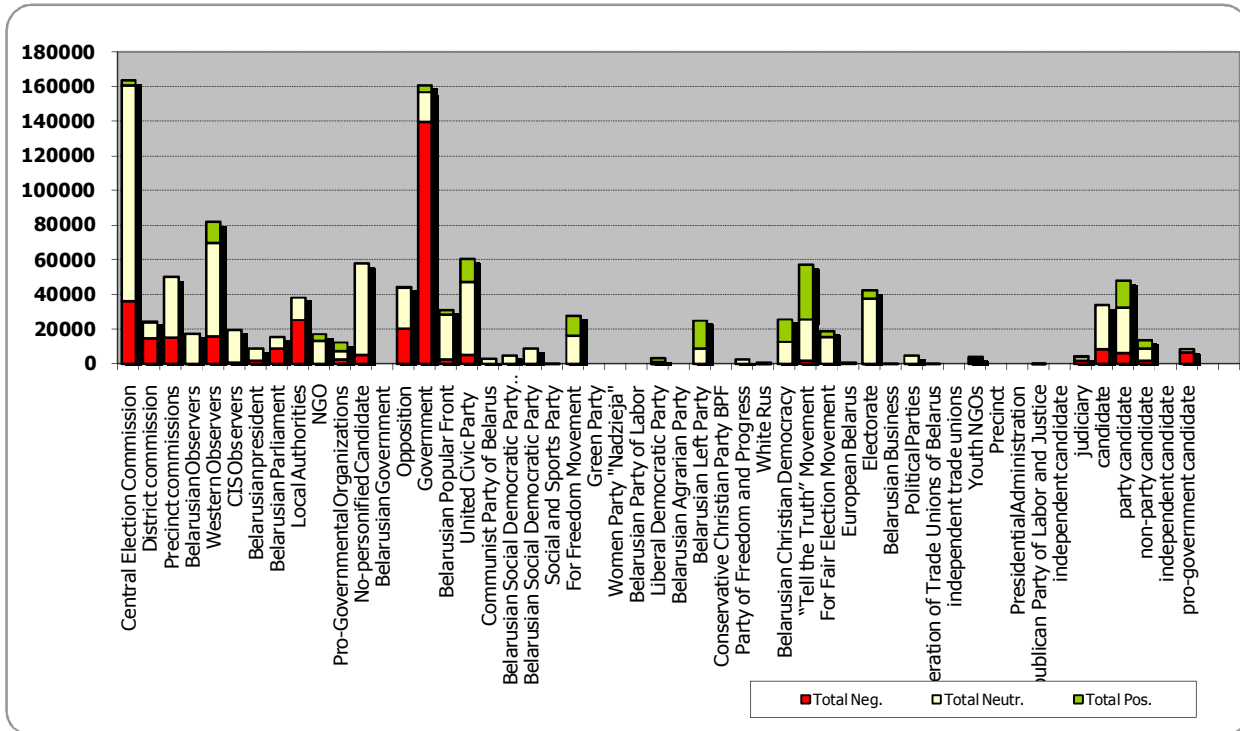
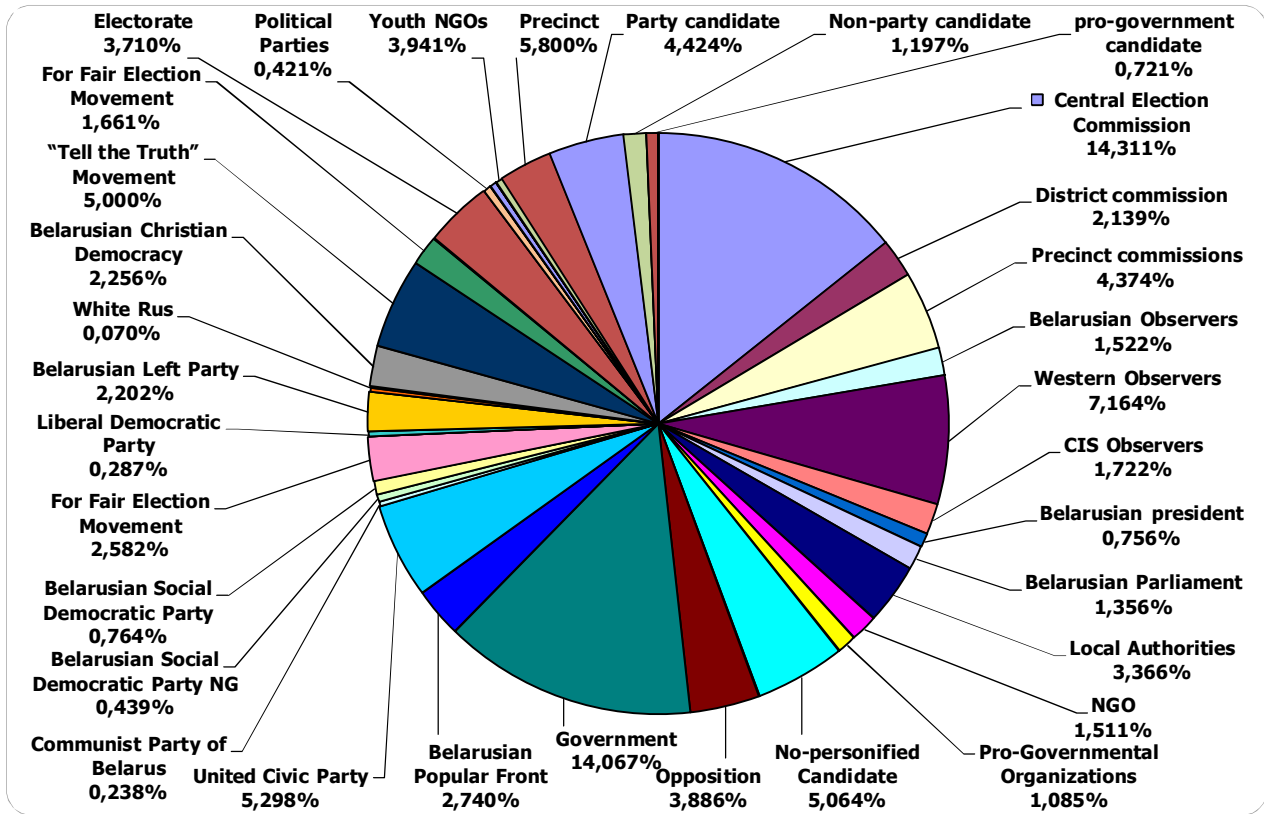




BELARUSIAN PARLAMENT ELECTIONS 2012

NAVINY.BY
31.07 - 21.09.2012

Measured in symbols



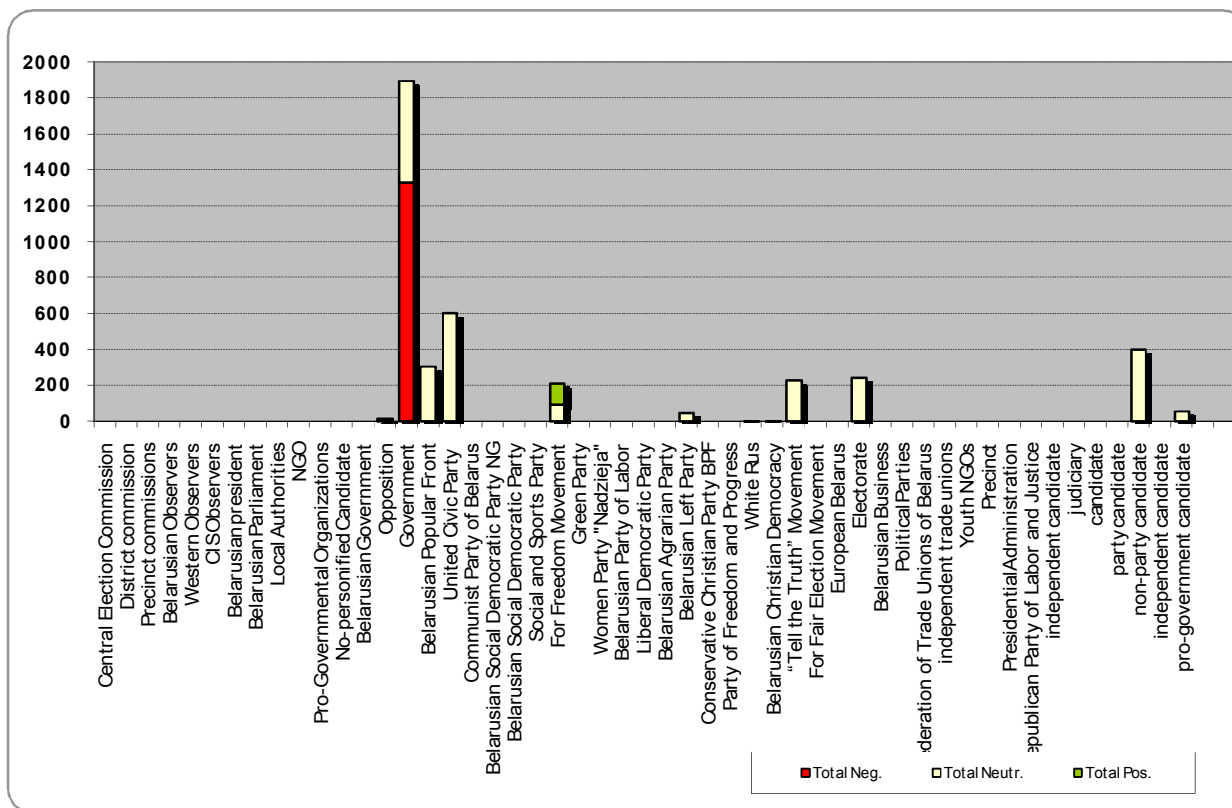
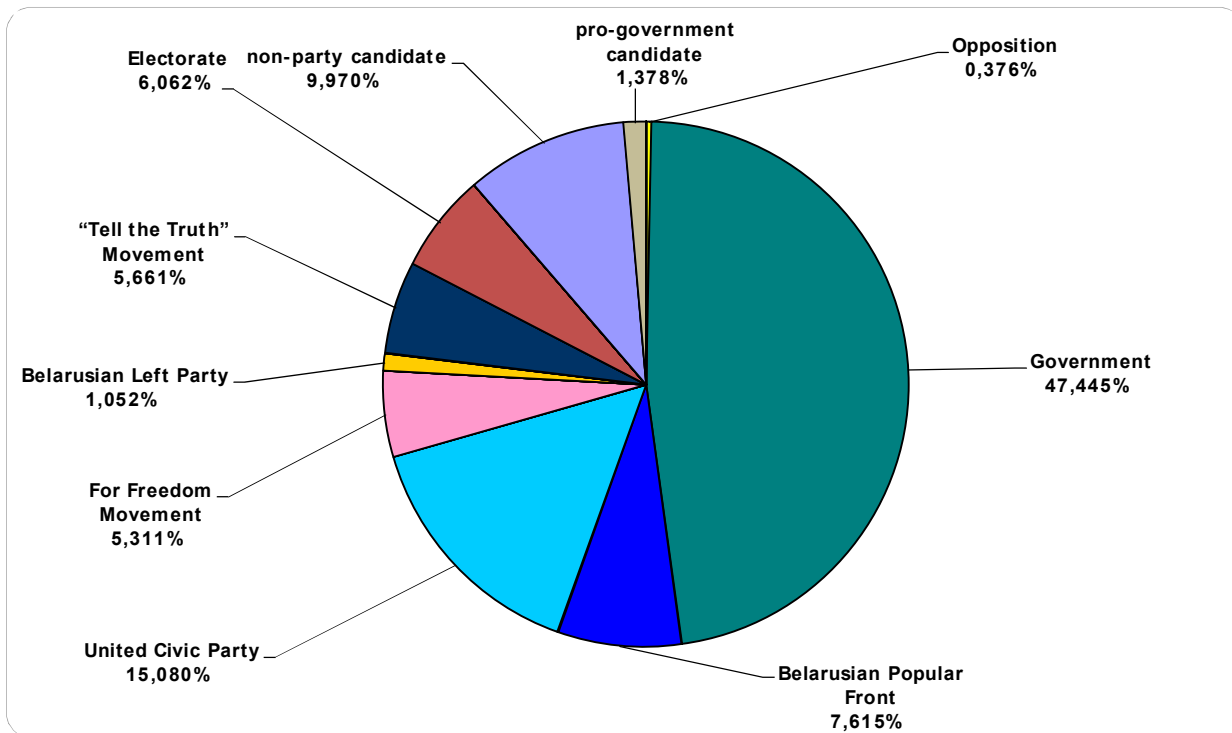


BELARUSIAN PARLAMENT ELECTIONS 2012

“Nasha Niva”

31.07 - 21.09.2012

Measured in cm²





BELARUSIAN PARLAMENT ELECTIONS 2012

“Narodnaja Vola”

31.07 - 21.09.2012

Measured in cm²

