

BELARUSIAN ASSOCIATION OF JOURNALISTS

The 2008 Parliamentary Election Coverage in the Belarusian Media Bulletin 2

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The 2008 Parliamentary Election Coverage in the Belarusian Media monitoring aims to find out how exhaustively the Belarusian media have covered the election and the work of the subjects involved (both individuals and institutions), as well as the degree to which media contributions meet the key principles of journalistic ethics and professional standards of covering elections. The present bulletin focuses on the period connected with slating and of candidates' initiative groups' formation and registration.

The monitored objects have been as follows: *Nashi Novosti* news programme (ONT), *Panorama Nedeli* weekly analytical programme (the 1st National Channel), *Naviny Rehijona – Homiel* regional news programme (the 1st National Channel), *Novosti-Reghion* (Mahilou regional TV); *Radiofact* (the 1st National Radio Channel), *Naviny* (Homiel Regional Radio 101.3 FM), *Naviny* (Mahilou Regional Radio); *Belarus Segodnya*, *Respublika*, *Belorusy i Rynok*, *Narodnaja Vola*, *Komsomolskaya Pravda v Belarusi*, *Homielskaja Prauda*, *Mogilyovskaya Pravda* and *Dneprovskaya Nedelya* papers, as well as www.belta.by, www.naviny.by and www.tut.by on-line media and www.euroradio.fm, the on-line version of the European Radio for Belarus (the total 19 media). The time span for both qualitative and quantitative analysis was ten days.

Main Findings and Some Conclusions

Although the government gives the parliamentary election much more political significance as compared to the 2004 election, the state-owned media are still covering it in their traditional manner, i.e. by allocating to it much less time and space than to sports and weather.

The subjects participating in the election are also featured in the traditional manner: it is the Central Election Commission that is presented as the leading actor, whereas the other subjects are either ignored, or mentioned only, or represented in a depersonified way.

Quite a lot of state-run media have not mentioned the observers and, if have mentioned, did not pay any considerable attention to the problem of election observation.

The independent media have been covering the election in a much more detailed way. They have allotted the election related topics, the CEC included, several times as much space as the so-called 'country's leading paper' *Belarus Segodnya* and other state-owned periodicals. The same can be said about the other actors, ranging from the observers to political parties. Thus, compared to the independent media, the state-owned ones have been giving the election just a minimalist coverage, limiting mainly to official information released by the CEC.

In their manner of representing the different actors the official media still stick to ideological dogma, which maintains that the country has an efficient and productive government on the one hand, and an infantile and destructive opposition on the other. Their views of the CIS observers and the western observers are totally different, too, the former being generally represented in a positive or neutral way, the latter receiving either negative or neutral coverage. So it can be stated that the state-owned media already tend towards biased election coverage.

Online and Electronic Media

Covering the election process the state-owned online and e-media have so far restricted themselves to the CEC's official information only. No journalists' commentaries or election analyses have been recorded. It is the CEC representatives exclusively who have been giving their assessment of this stage of the election. Thus, CEC Chairperson Lidzija Jarmosyna claims this campaign is more open and democratic than the previous ones were. During an online conference on www.belta.by she also announced that a lot of observers are going to monitor the election, 'No one else has more observers than we do.' (http://news.belta.by/ru/news/archive?date=24_07_2008&page=2&id=247183). Later on BELTA quoted the CEC Chairperson saying that Belarus is not going to limit the number of observers. (http://news.belta.by/ry/news/archive?date=29_07_2008&page=1&id=248421).

In his turn, Milalaj Lazavik, CEC secretary, stressed that the registration of initiative groups had been more 'liberal' this year, 'Only 5% of all the initiative groups to nominate candidates to stand for Parliament have been denied registration. During the previous election the number exceeded 10%.' (http://news.belta.by/ry/news/archive?date=29_07_2008&page=1&id=248367).

In general, the state-run e-media have featured the election as a well-organised event with the CEC at its head. As for the other subjects, it is the CIS observers and western observers that come second. Yet, the time and space allotted to them have been very small. Thus, *Nashi Novosti* (ONT) gave the CEC 3'9'', whereas the CIS observers and the western observers received 42'' and 7'', respectively. *Radiofact* (the 1st National Radio Channel) allotted about three times as much time to the CEC. Once again, the CIS observers were the second (4'20'') and the western observers were the third (2'33''), the former being represented positively or neutrally, the latter negatively or neutrally.

The regional e-media paid even less attention to the above-mentioned actors or ignored the observers altogether. What characterises this period is that the state-owned e-media either have not distinguished any other political actors (e.g., different political parties) or in giving them coverage, if any, have only mentioned them or used depersonified generalisations, such as 'the opposition' instead of naming an opposition party directly. In a way, BELTA website makes an exception, mentioning other actors apart from the CEC. It is the Belarusian President who has been featured most by the state-owned e-media during this period. Of all the election subjects, the above-mentioned *Nashi Novosti* (ONT) gave 74% of its time to Alaksandar Lukashenka. The same programme allotted about twice as much time to the weather

as it did to the election. This is typical of all the other state-owned e-media with the exception of *Radiofact*, which gave the election twice as much time as to the weather.

The independent online media (www.naviny.by, www.tut.by and www.euroradio.fm, the online version of the European Radio for Belarus) have presented a much wider range of actors. Besides the CEC and the observers, they have given coverage to virtually all the participants in the election, from political parties to candidates-to-be. It is noticeable that, for example, www.naviny.by has allotted an equal amount of its space (measured in symbols) to the CIS observers and western observers. In addition, the website offers experts' and analysts' opinions.

Printed Media

Like their electronic counterparts, in covering the election the state-owned papers have limited themselves to brief official information only. The CEC appears to be its main actor. *Respublika* has allotted 425 cm² to the CEC activities and mentioned the CIS observers (24 cm²). *Belarus Segodnya* has given even less space to the CEC (290 cm²) and ignored the observers altogether. As for the opposition, *Belarus Segodnya* has given it a meagre 42 cm² of its space, all of it presenting the opposition in the negative light.

Compared to the nationwide papers, the regional press has given the election even less coverage. For example, *Mogilyovskaya Pravda* and *Dneprovskaya Nedelya* together have given the CEC not much more coverage than *Belarus Segodnya* has to the opposition. However, on 22 July 2008 the state-owned *Homielskaja Prauda* published a number of contributions on the election, as there was a workshop being held at the time, in which CEC Chairperson Lidzija Jarmosyna took part. In one of the contributions the paper lambasted the opposition for its alleged reluctance to stand for parliament and to especially to win in the election, '*It must be an **utter disgrace** for a politician first to holler like mad that the corrupted tyrants and bureaucrats won't let such a talented, honest and wise person as he is get into power, and now that all the hindrances have vanished to admit that he is actually not up to the job... So here come all sorts of **teenage excuses**, like 'what's the point in getting into this Chamber if it is still illegitimate?'* The article also mentioned some political figures, '*It must be only logical that Alaksandar Milinkievic said in his interview to a Polish media outlet that he is going to stand for parliament in order to stir a discussion rather than win. Well, one doesn't know really if the opposition is laughable, or pathetic, or... For candidates who stand for parliament just in order to stir a discussion, which simply means shooting their mouths off, deserve **not even pity but contempt**.*' Finally, the opposition was described as helpless and incapable, '*the opposition members are going to rely on the state leader to take them by the hand and bring them to Parliament, like small children.*'

Like the independent online media, the independent papers have tried to present a wider range of the election actors. They have written much more not only on the opposition parties and politicians, but also the CEC work.

For example, *Belorusy i Rynok* has allotted ten times as much of its space to the CEC than the presidential *Belarus Segodnya*. *Belorusy i Rynok* has given all the actors mainly neutral coverage or written positively both about the CEC and the opposition.

The independent *Narodnaja Vola* has also given a balanced coverage to each actor. Compared to *Belarus Segodnya*, it has also allotted more of its space to the CEC.

So has the Russian *Komsomolskaya Pravda v Belarusi*. However, it has only just mentioned some other actors, without giving them any noticeable amount of its space, except for President Lukashenka, who was presented mainly in positive light.