

# **BELARUSIAN ASSOCIATION OF JOURNALISTS (BAJ)**

## **Media Coverage of the 2008 parliamentary elections in Belarus** **Final Report**

*(July 21 – October 12, 2008)*

### **Introduction**

Minsk, 15 October 2008.

This is the final report encompassing the monitoring results of Belarusian media coverage of the 28 September parliamentary elections. BAJ, an independent, non-partisan Belarusian NGO dedicated to freedom of expression and the media implemented this monitoring to evaluate the mass media's performance in providing objective and balanced coverage of the contestants and their platforms. The project's findings were not intended to support any one candidate or political party, but the integrity of the media environment as a whole during the campaign season. The monitored period was from 21 July to 26 September 2008. The report also contains a short review of how the media evaluated the election results and also an overall assessment of the election campaign.

Using quantitative and qualitative method of analysis, BAJ monitored four national and regional TV channels, three radio stations, nine newspapers and four online media outlets.<sup>1</sup> The media monitoring team analyzed the prime-time news programs assessing and producing findings on the time allocated to all contestants running in the elections, as well as the time allocation given to the incumbent President, the government and other relevant entities (35 monitored subjects). The tone of the coverage was also evaluated. Quantitative analysis measures the total amount of time devoted to monitored subjects on news programs. Qualitative analysis evaluates the tone in which the monitored subjects have been portrayed – positive, neutral or negative.

### **HIGHLIGHTS**

The coverage of the election campaign by state-funded nation wide and regional electronic and print media remained to be low-key during the entire monitoring period. Majority of the monitored media devoted insignificant coverage to the elections, failing to fulfil their role to inform the electorate about political choices available to them. Instead, the media devoted significant and heavy coverage to the activities of state authorities, mainly to the incumbent President and the Central Election Commission (CEC). Regrettably, the media did not organize any debates among candidates, which is the most attractive format for viewers, allowing them to learn about candidates' platforms. Instead, there was a tendency to focus intensively on the procedural aspects of the electoral process, with CEC and local authorities receiving substantial amount of coverage. The democratic deficit thus created in the campaign environment by other candidates' lack of opportunity to directly address questions and comments to the incumbents on their performance in office was compounded by the general absence of critical mass media posing such questions in its reporting.

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<sup>1</sup> The BAJ monitoring focused on 20 media outlets: *Nashi Novosti* (ONT), *Panorama Nedeli* (the 1st national Channel), *Naviny Rehijona* (Homiel), *Novosti-Reghion* (Mahilou regional TV); *Radiofact* (the 1st National Radio Channel), *Naviny* (Homiel Regional Radio 101.3 FM) and *Naviny* (Mahilou Regional Radio) TV and radio programmes; *Sovetskaya Belorussiya: Belarus Segodnya*, *Respublika*, *Belorusy i Rynok*, *Narodnaja Vola*, *Komsomolskaya Pravda v Belarusi*, *Brestskiy Kuryer*, *Homielskaja Prauda*, *Mogilyovskaya Pravda* and *Dneprovskaya Nedelya* papers, as well as [www.belta.by](http://www.belta.by), [www.naviny.by](http://www.naviny.by) and [www.tut.by](http://www.tut.by) on-line media and [www.euroradio.fm](http://www.euroradio.fm), the on-line version of the European Radio for Belarus.

As such, instead of informing the public about political and social platforms and agendas available to them, the media reported on technical aspects of the elections. There was a notable tendency to reflect positively on the work and activities of the authorities, through coverage of ceremonial events, such as opening of new factories, or in reports highlighting economic progress of the country.

By contrast, in the final stage of the campaign, the state media coverage of opposition candidates became increasingly negative. However, it should be noted that this negative campaigning was less pronounced within analyzed campaign than during the 2004 parliamentary elections. The media coverage of election observers was twofold – CIS observers were portrayed in an exclusively positive manner whereas the OSCE and PACE observers were shown in a neutral or negative light. As for local domestic observer, they were largely ignored by the media.

By law, candidates were entitled to receive airtime on State TV and radio free of charge. These free-of-charge presentations by candidates however did not appear to have a significant impact on the general character of campaign. First of all, the presentations were aired outside of the peak time hours (from 17.30 till 18.30) when most of population could watch them. In a positive development, the CEC took a decision to rebroadcast the candidates' speeches, but the potential impact on voters' ability to form opinions of candidates remained questionable. It should be also noted that while the presentations were rebroadcast during the prime time, they were aired on a different TV channel (which does not have a high popularity rating) and without any prior special announcements made in the state media.

Thus, by having marginalized the major actors of the election campaign (election contestants), the state media effectively contributed to a general lack of robust competition and a vibrant political discourse.

In contrast to the state owned media, independent press and online media outlets gave a wider and more comprehensive picture of the election campaign. They represented a greater number of political actors, put emphasis on the activities of different political parties, including opposition candidates. In general, independent media outlets presented a much more balanced coverage of the election contestants. However, due to their limited circulation and limited geographical outreach, they could not substitute for the obvious lack of balance and vivid political competition coverage by the state media.

## **BAJ MEDIA MONITORING FINDINGS**

The BAJ media monitoring commenced on 21 July and ran for the whole period of the official media campaign, until the start of the “media silence” on 26 September.

The enclosed monitoring results (see annex – for example *Nashi Novosti* on TV ONT) demonstrate that the campaign coverage in the state-owned electronic and print media was low key. The time devoted to election-related topics was at times less than that allocated to sports or weather. For example, between 1 – 15 August, *Homielskaya Regional Radio 101.3 FM* gave 12 times less coverage to elections than to weather broadcasts. Another regional media outlet *Novosti-Region (Mahilou TV)* dedicated to the elections just two seconds. The state-owned regional newspapers *Homielskaya Prauda*, *Mogilyovskaya Pravda* and *Dneprovskaya Nedelya* adopted a similar approach.

The state-funded newspaper *Sovetskaya Belorussiya* has the largest circulation in the country. Contrary to its public mandate, it failed to inform people about the elections. By contrast, non-State *Narodnaja Vola* provided roughly 10 times more coverage to election-related issues than

*Sovetskaya Belorussiya*. The other state-owned media outlets, which were not under legal obligation to allocate free-of-charge airtime or space to candidates, adopted a similar approach and allocated insignificant coverage to the elections.

By contrast, the incumbent President and the CEC combined received from 60 to 92 per cent, depending on the concrete media outlet. The coverage of international observers, including those from CIS, ranged from 0,5 per cent (in *Sovetskaya Belorussiya*) to 16 per cent (*1<sup>st</sup> National Radio Channel*). The only other subjects mentioned on the state media were local authorities and various pro-governmental organizations. In so doing, the state media failed to keep even minimum standards of pluralism in their content, demonstrating a significant absence of diversity in coverage. Similar to other state media, the online portal [www.belta.by](http://www.belta.by) devoted the bulk of the coverage to the incumbent President and the CEC (together 77 per cent). However, it also covered a wider range of political subjects. Thus, outside the free-of-charge presentations, the state-owned media effectively marginalized candidates as well as opposition parties, ignoring their agendas and platforms.

No coverage of political platforms and agendas was given even in the special programs dedicated to the elections. For example, a regular 30 minute-long programme called *'From One Election to Another'* aired on Hommiel-based regional station Lad TV had little to do with the elections. On 26 August, this programme featured the life in Lojeu district. *'Turn on the volume of your loudspeakers, those who live in Lojeu district,'* said the presenter during a live broadcast. *'You will see familiar faces and places – our programme today is about you and your lives. If there is anything you don't know about your neighbours or colleagues, you will learn a lot about them now.'* The only thing that alluded to the elections was the advertisement *'From One Election to Another'*, which was broadcast at the beginning, in the middle and at the end of the programme. The presenter continued saying: *"From one election to another. Four years of constructive work. A rise in the living standards. Positive progress towards the future."* As such, the programme diverted the focus from the problem of choosing between different political and social prospects to 'peaceful and constructive work', interviews with local officials and focus on achievements, without showing any alternative or dissenting views.

Apart from the simplistic and evasive coverage of the election campaign, the state media demonstrated clear bias when portraying different political subjects or others. On one hand, the work of the President and the CEC was always praised, whereas the opposition, when mentioned, it was predominantly in a negative manner.

A similar bias approach was visible in the coverage of observers – the CIS observers were mainly assessed positively whereas other international observer, including from OSCE and PACE, were covered in a negative or neutral manner. For example, the article *First Democratise Yourselves (Homiel'skaja Prauda, 4 September 2008)* arrives at the following conclusion as regards to the international observers; *'All the comments and recommendations in the ODIHR/OSCE reports are nothing more than ordered political propaganda, aimed at discrediting the current election legislation. We cannot expect any objective monitoring of the present political event, which is of much importance to the country and its citizens, until the partial experts stop using their double standards.'* The article is signed by an Alaksiej Nikalajenkau, whose name is however absent from the list of the paper's employees.

By comparison, the CIS observers and their work received kudos (for example, in *Nashi Novosti* (ONT) or Mahilou Regional Radio news programmes). In their turn, the CIS observers assessed positively the work of the CEC's and local authorities' in organising of the elections. *'What we have seen shows that local authorities and the heads of election commissions have taken full responsibility for organising the election and are doing everything they can to hold a democratic*

*election, taking into consideration all the observers' recommendations and guarantee the voters' rights.'* said the Head of the CIS Observers' Mission S. Lebedev.<sup>2</sup>

In sharp contrast, the opposition was portrayed as playing an insignificant role in the society. BELTA (Belarusian agency - [www.belta.by](http://www.belta.by)), for example, ran an interview with the CEC Secretary Mikalaj Lazavik who criticized the opposition for their "inner conflicts" which in his view caused that *"they lack energy to deal with social and economic issues, which should be at the core of the policy and which voters are concerned with."*<sup>3</sup> In addition, BELTA also attributed the opposition parties' low representation at the polling station boards to their inaction.<sup>4</sup>

The free-of-charge presentations by candidates did not have a significant effect in changing the lacklustre and low key profile of the election campaign. This was partly due to the decision to show the presentations outside of the peak time hours (from 17.30 till 18.30 on *Lad TV Channel*).

While a CEC decision to rebroadcast the free-of-charge presentations formally increased the time devoted to the campaign by the State-funded media, the potential impact on voters' ability to form opinions of candidates remained questionable. While the presentations were rebroadcast in the peak hours (from 18.00 till 20.00 except Saturday and Sunday) on *STV Channel*, there were no prior announcements. By comparison, similar announcements on the preliminary voting were made by the state media. Regrettably, the CEC decision did not refer to a potential ability of candidates to utilize additional free-of-charge space in the state newspapers for additional publicity.

By contrast, private newspapers and online outlets offered their readers a greater diversity of views and information - not only about political parties and candidates, but also about other subjects which were not covered by the state owned media. For example, while the non-State newspaper *Narodnaja Vola* covered activities of 21 political entities, the newspaper of the presidential administration *Sovetskaya Belorussiya* covered only 7 such entities. It should be noted that *Narodnaja Vola* devoted the bulk of its political and election-related coverage to opposition candidates (42 per cent). Between August 23 – September 5, the independent online outlet [www.naviny.by](http://www.naviny.by) dedicated 26 901 signs to opposition candidates whereas the most powerful state-owned online portal [www.belta.by](http://www.belta.by) gave them 982 signs – all of this coverage was exclusively negative. As for the tone of the coverage by [www.naviny.by](http://www.naviny.by) and *Narodnaja Vola*, opposition candidates were portrayed not only in a positive light, but there was also some neutral and negative coverage. Owing to the limited circulation and the current geographical outreach, the independent press and online media outlets could not substitute for the lack of balance by the state media.

As for the reporting on the election results, the state-owned media appeared to have emphasized that no one opposition candidate could become a member of the Parliament. For example, a lengthy article titled "Good direction" published in *Sovetskaya Belorussiya* (30 September 2008) read.: *'It is surprising... that the opposition could not use those opportunities which were given them at these elections. At several stages of the campaign, there was an impression that the opposition was not only hampered, as some of its representatives stated it, but even helped in every possible way to enter the parliament.'*

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<sup>2</sup> See <http://news.tut.by/politics/115729.html>

<sup>3</sup> See [http://news.belta.by/ru/news/archive?date=22\\_08\\_2008&page=1&id=260683](http://news.belta.by/ru/news/archive?date=22_08_2008&page=1&id=260683)

<sup>4</sup> See [http://news.belta.by/ru/news/archive?date=20\\_08\\_2008&page=1&id=260735](http://news.belta.by/ru/news/archive?date=20_08_2008&page=1&id=260735)

The state-owned media made it also clear that no violations took place, ruling out any falsification or fraud. For example, *Narodnaya gazeta* (4 October 2008) in its article titled 'Ready to handover' emphasized "a special attention that CEC gave to the last phase of the election campaign and the vote count which was made openly and with participation of observers".

Finally, the incumbent President has stated that the elections were as transparent as they could be and that they demonstrated democratic character of the existent system of power in Belarus.<sup>5</sup> By contrast, the non-state press and online media outlets exposed violations and irregularities (in particular, the fact that observers were not allowed to be present during the vote count), with analytical papers focusing on further prospects of the Belarus-EU relations.

## CONCLUSION

The media coverage of the campaign in the state media was lacklustre and low-key. It was directed towards minimising political competition between different political forces, excluding the voters from the competition and marginalising alternative programmes (and alternative possibilities) for the Belarusian society and its development.

The failure by the state-owned media to cover candidates, other entities, different political platforms and agendas as well as important election-related issues was in no way a short-term anomaly, but a general trend. This trend is furthermore confirmed by the fact that these media neglected to offer any airtime or opportunities to alternative views by citizens to challenge the political opinions of the current establishment. As recipients of public resources, the state-funded media have an enhanced duty to inform voters on the election campaign, different political platforms and agendas. Moreover, their duty is also to present a fair and balanced view on all the political contestants.

The results further indicate that the state media did not serve as a forum for the exchange of opinions, public debate, confrontation, investigation and commentary that would offer the public objective, analyzed and assessed views of persons seeking elected office. As such, they were not helpful for the voters to make an informed choice at the ballot box.

The CEC decision to rebroadcast all candidates' speeches did not change the general character of the election campaign coverage in the state media. Coverage of election results by the state-owned media was also biased in favor of the current establishment.

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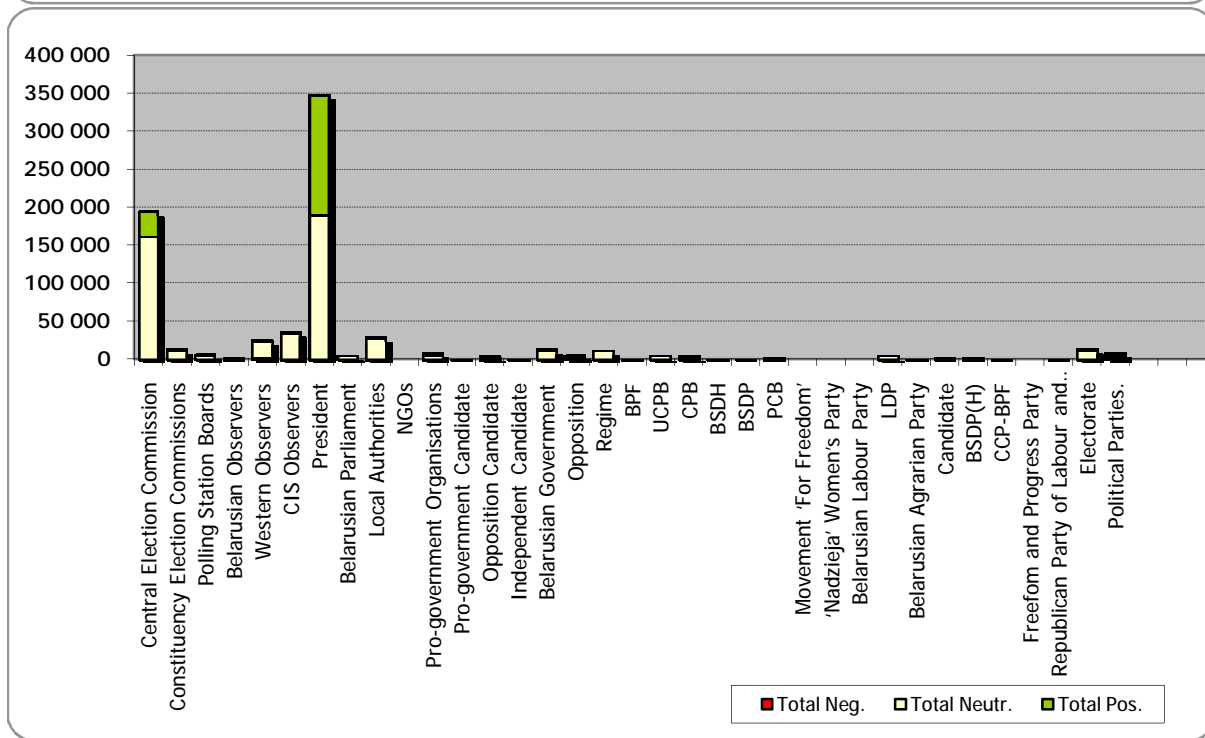
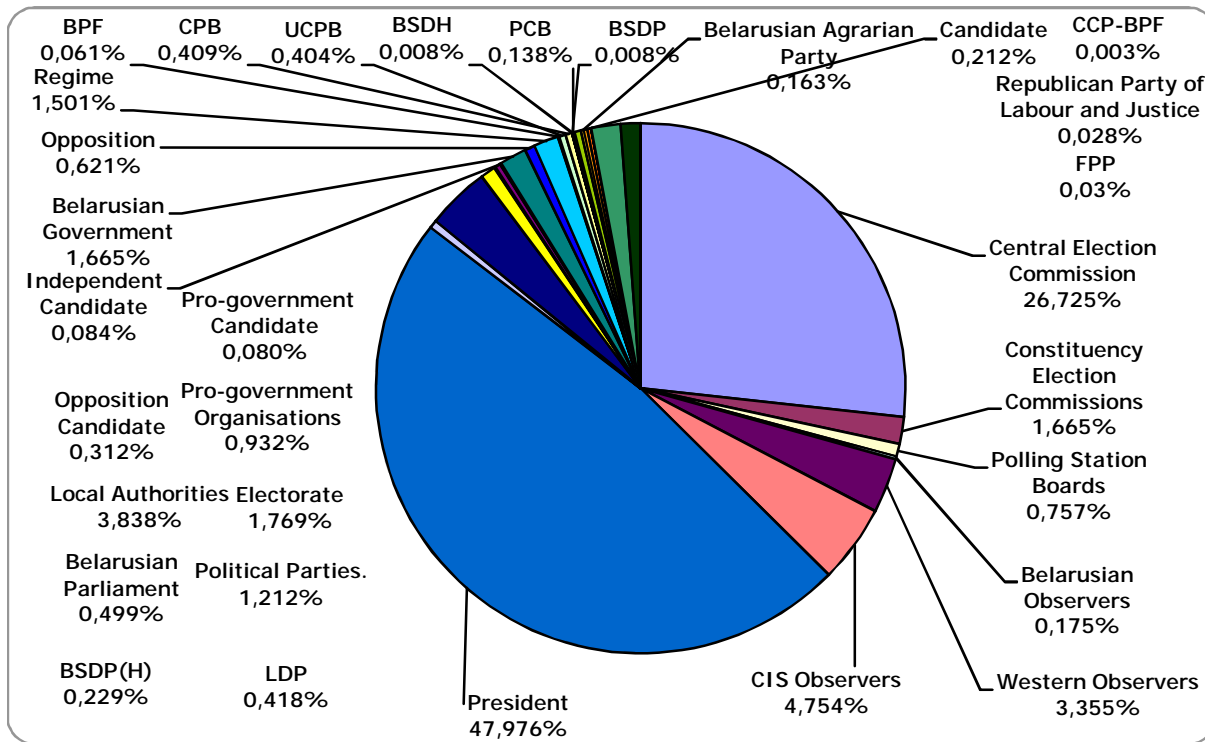
<sup>5</sup> See [http://naviny.by/rubrics/politic/2008/10/07/ic\\_articles\\_112\\_159353/](http://naviny.by/rubrics/politic/2008/10/07/ic_articles_112_159353/)



# BELARUSIAN PARLAMENT ELECTIONS 2008

belta.by  
21.07-27.09.2008

Measured in symbols

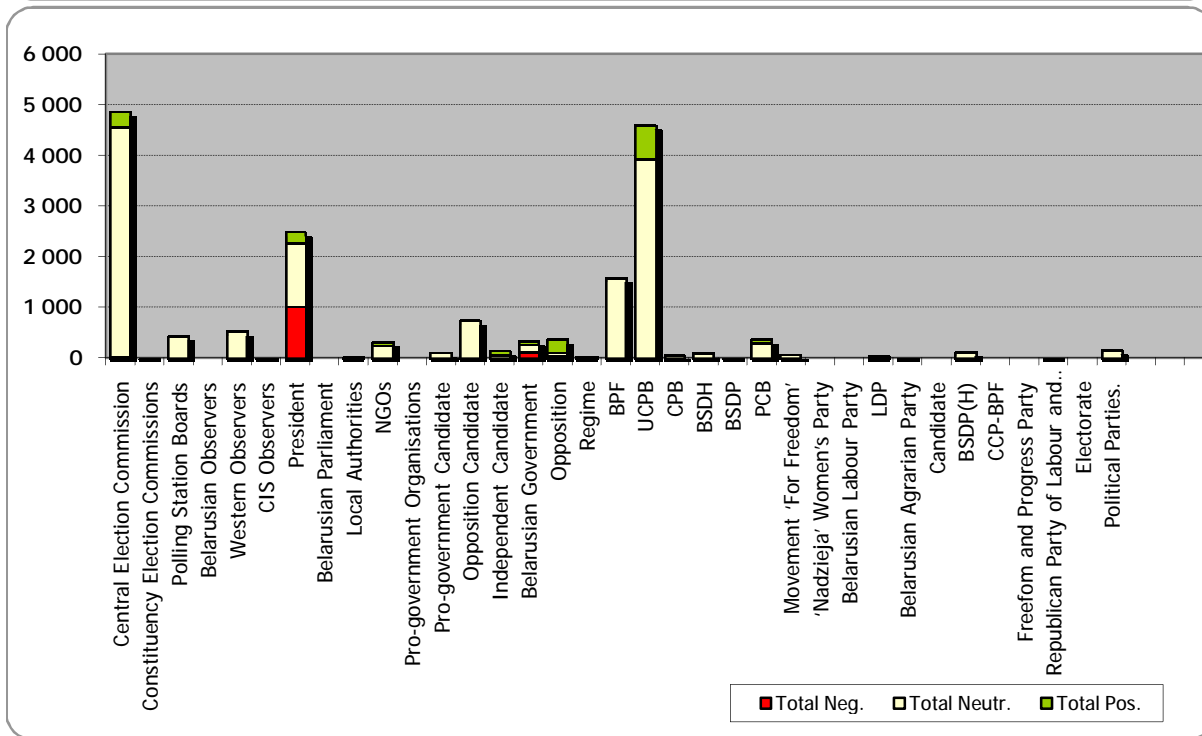
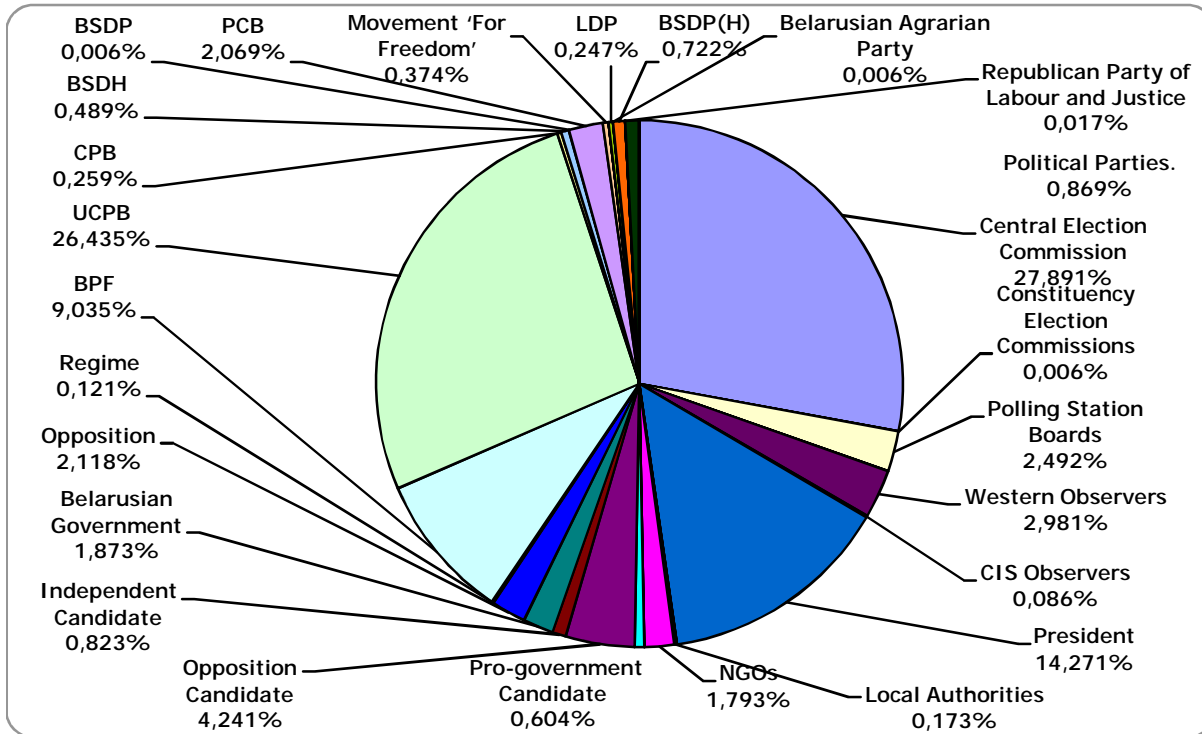




# BELARUSIAN PARLAMENT ELECTIONS 2008

Belorusy i Rynok  
21.07-27.09.2008

Measured in cm<sup>2</sup>



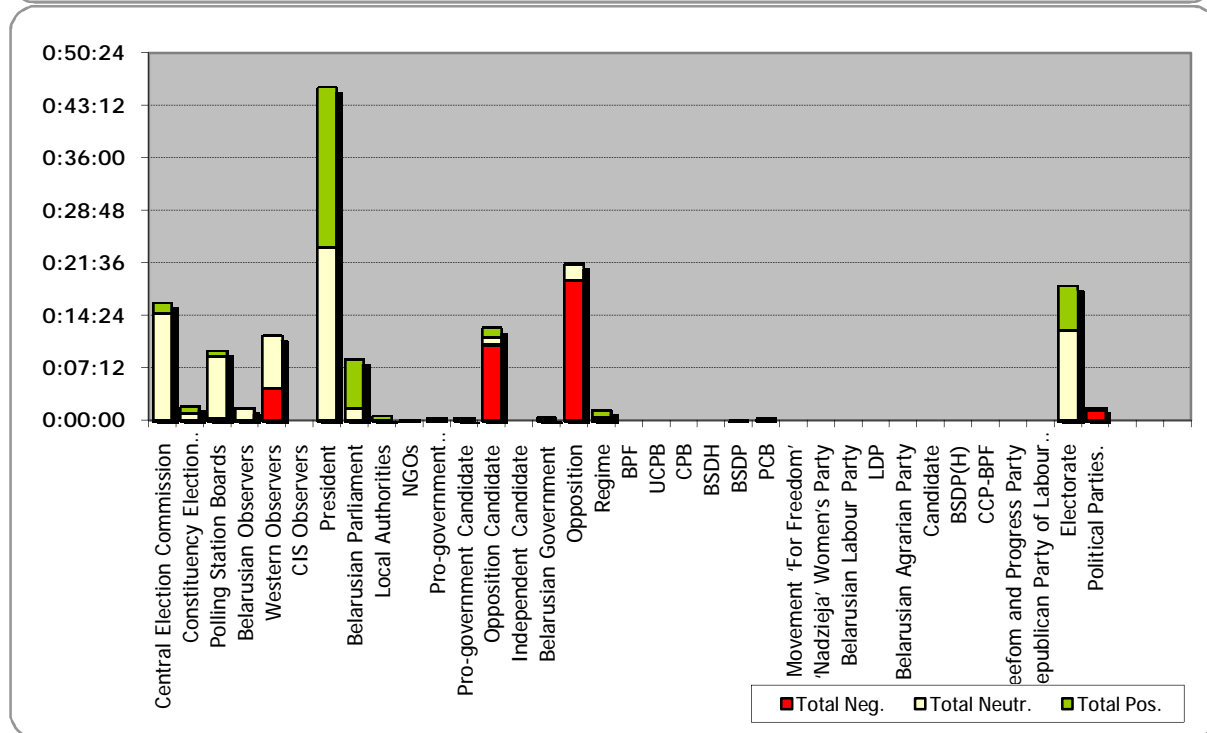
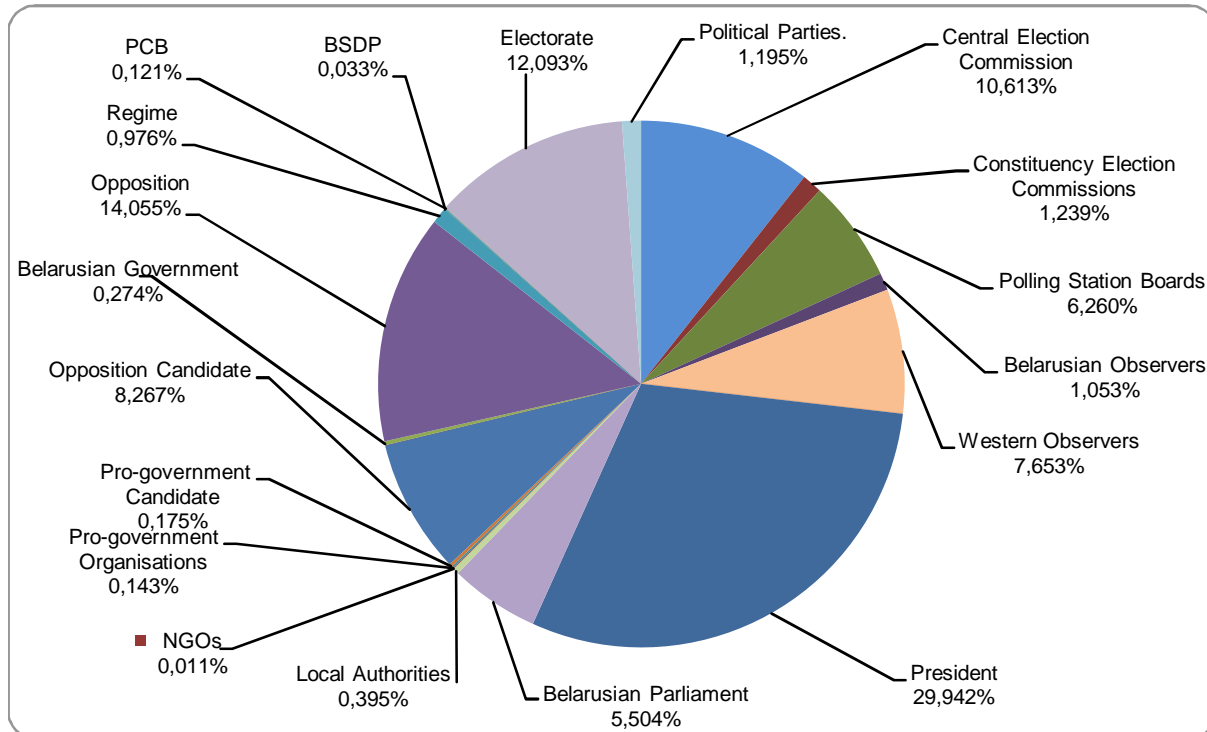


# BELARUSIAN PARLAMENT ELECTIONS 2008

Panorama Nedeli (the 1st National Channel)

21.07-27.09.2008

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





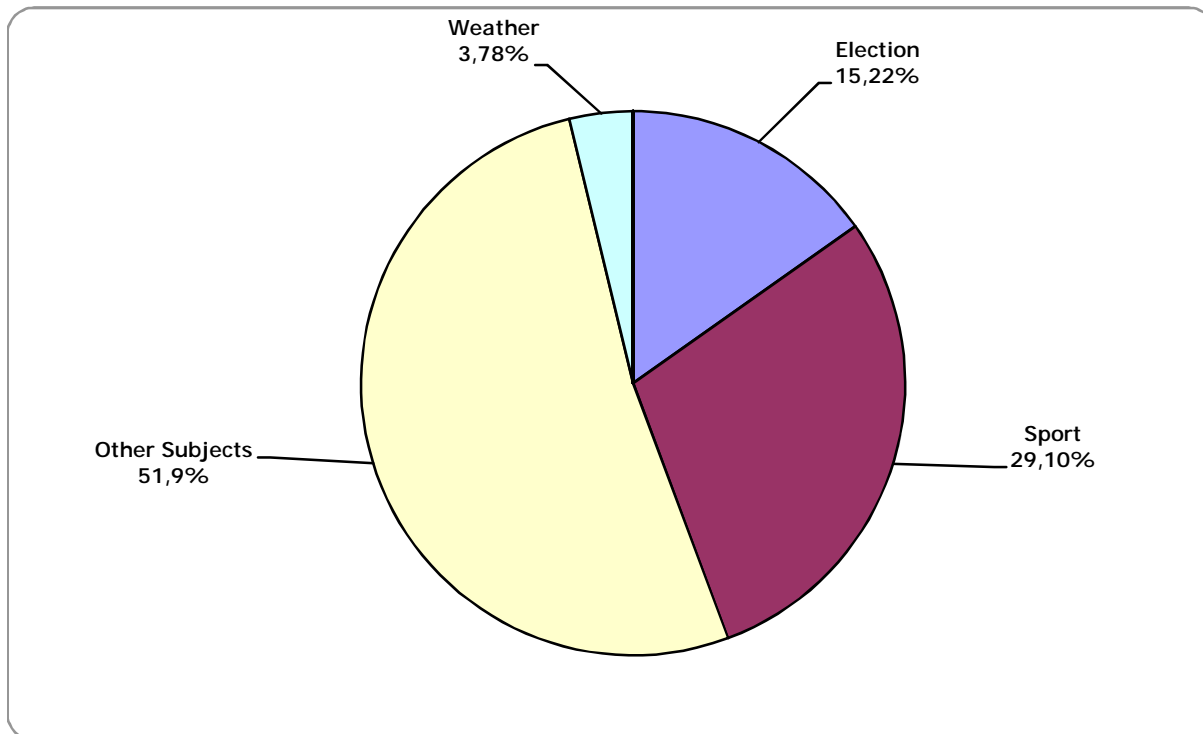


## BELARUSIAN PARLAMENT ELECTIONS 2008

Panorama Nedeli (the 1st National Channel)

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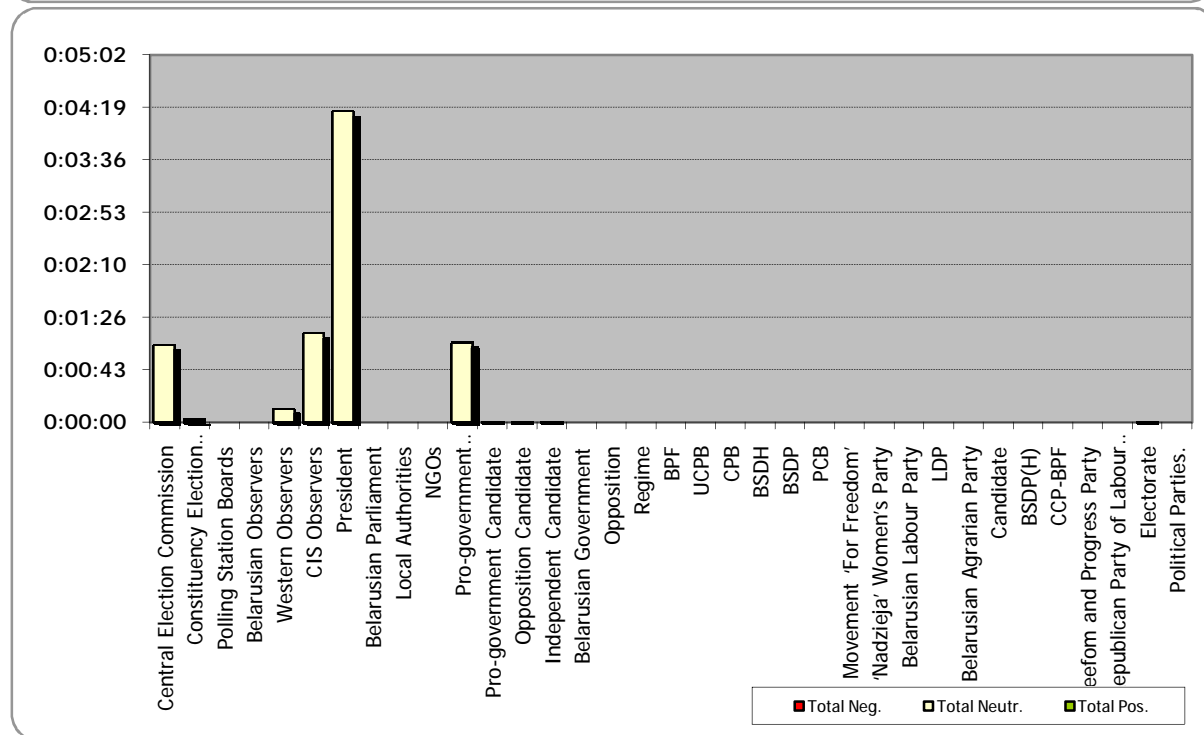
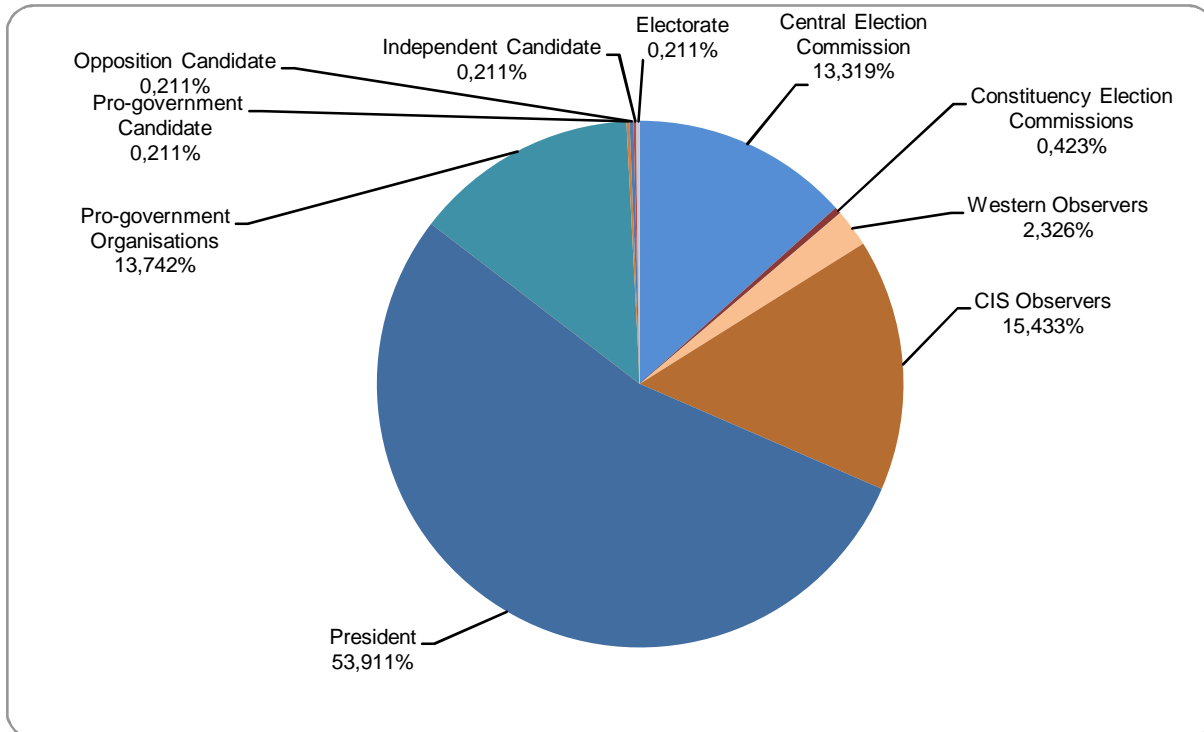


# BELARUSIAN PARLAMENT ELECTIONS 2008

Naviny (Homiel Regional Radio 101.3 FM)

21.07-27.09.2008

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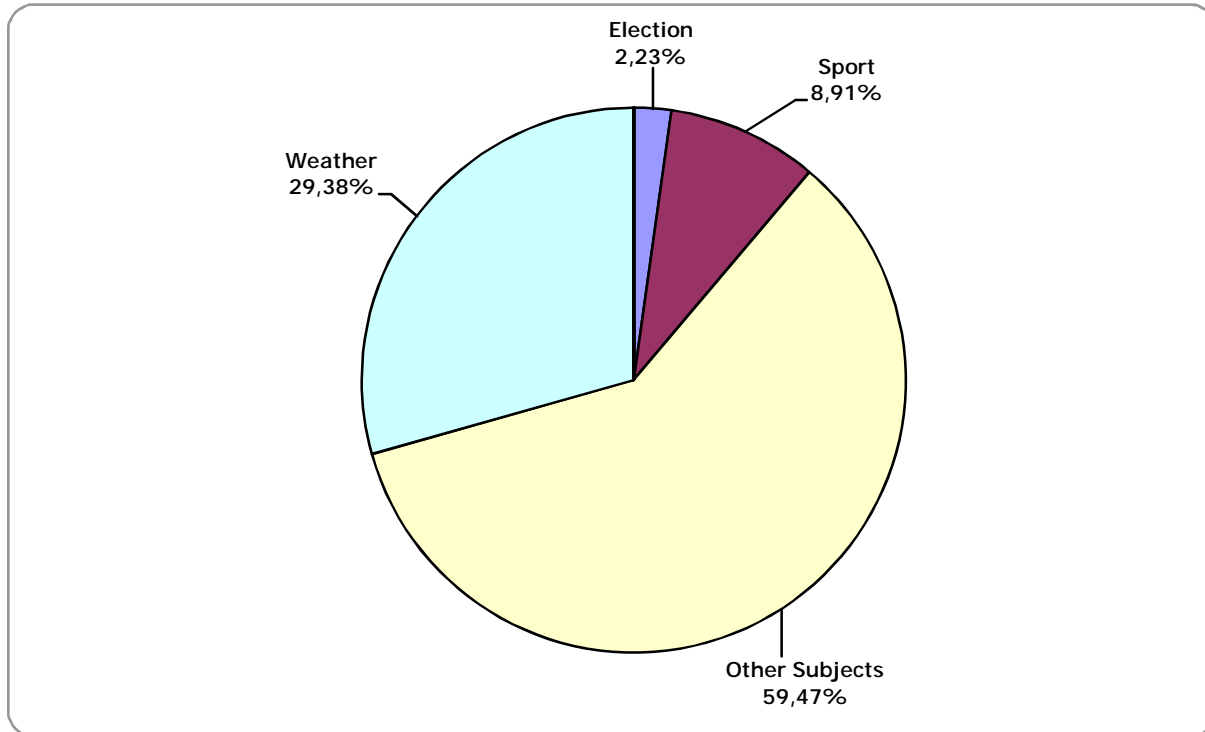


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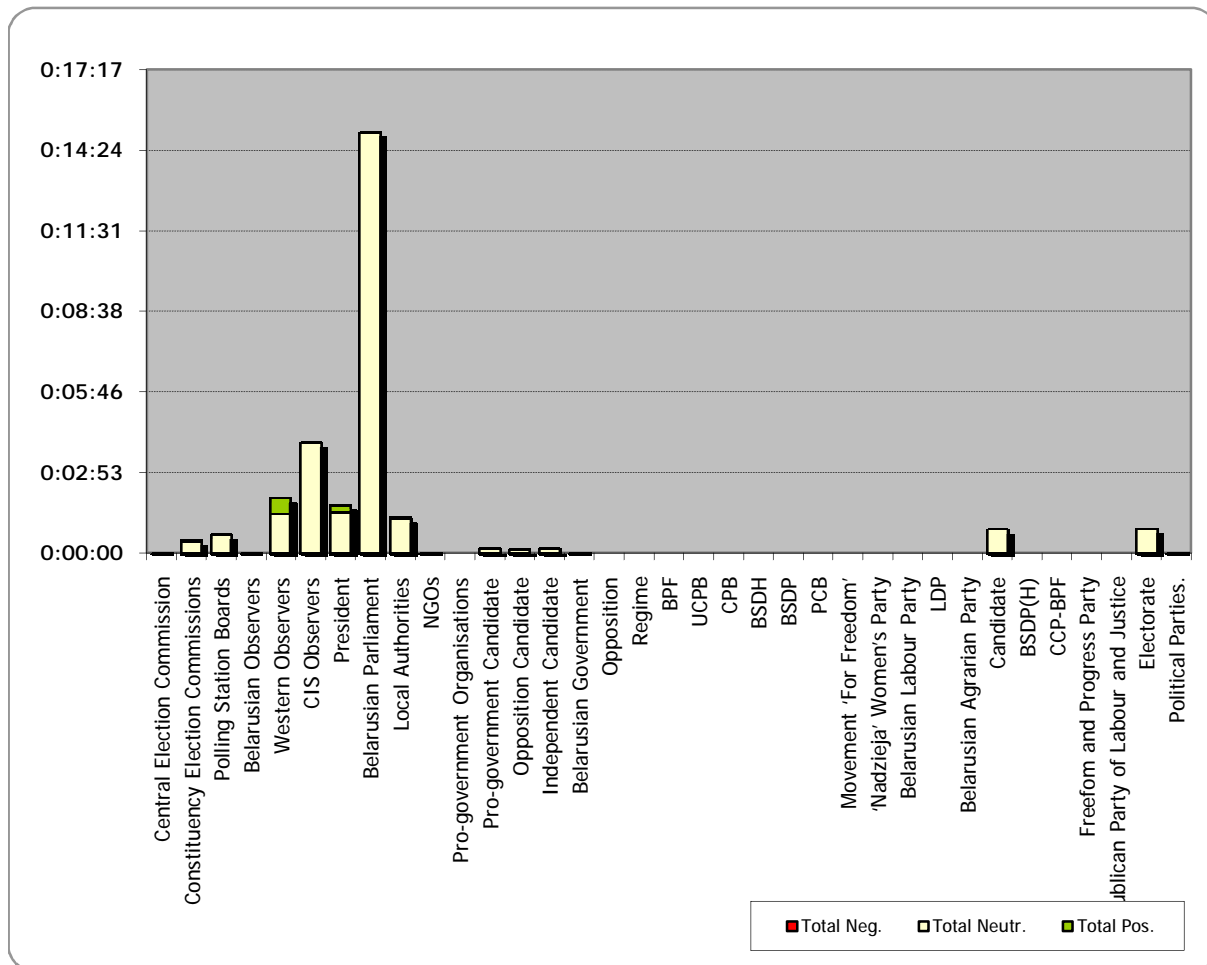
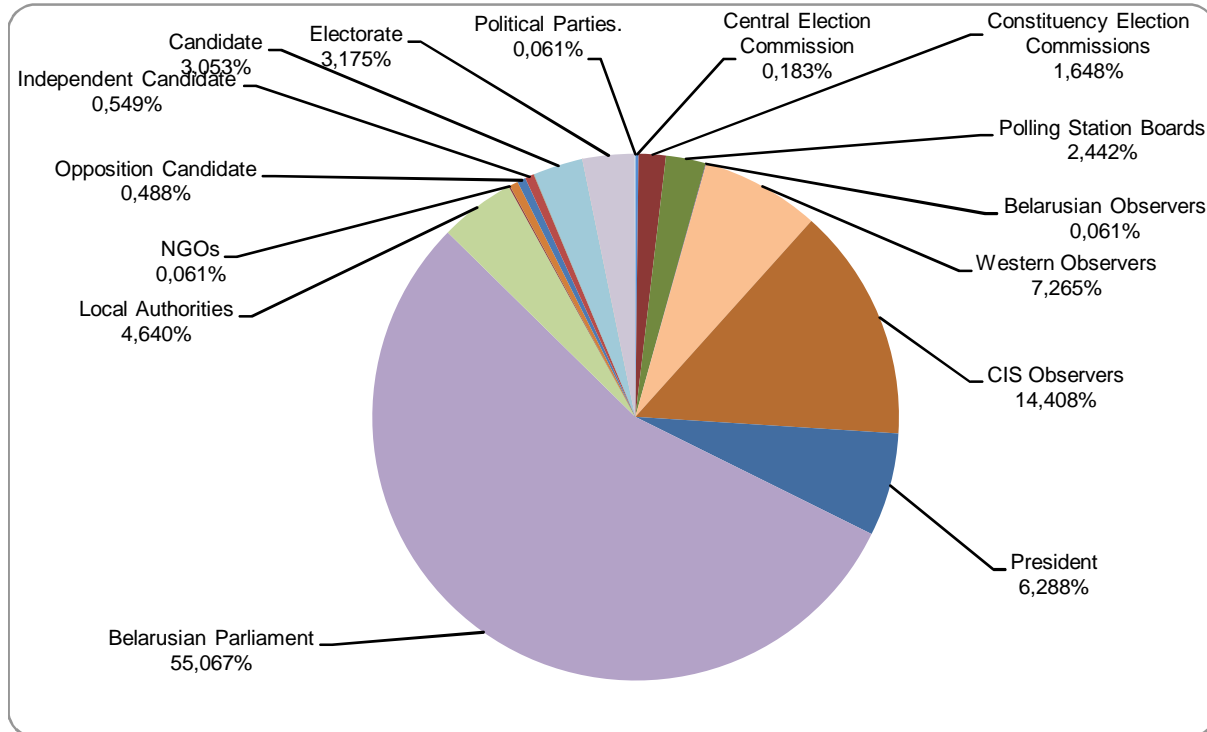


# BELARUSIAN PARLAMENT ELECTIONS 2008

## Navya Rehiyona (Homiel)

21.07-27.09.2008

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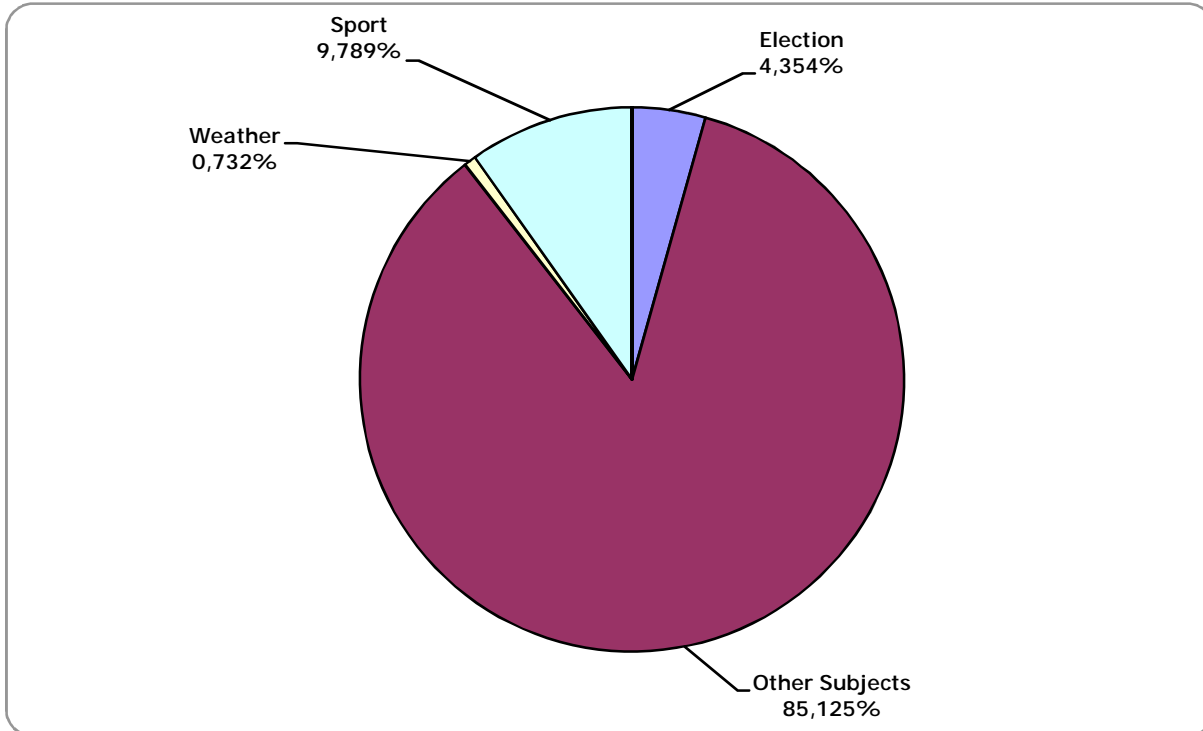


## BELARUSIAN PARLAMENT ELECTIONS 2008

Naviny Rehijona (Homiel)

21.07-27.09.2008

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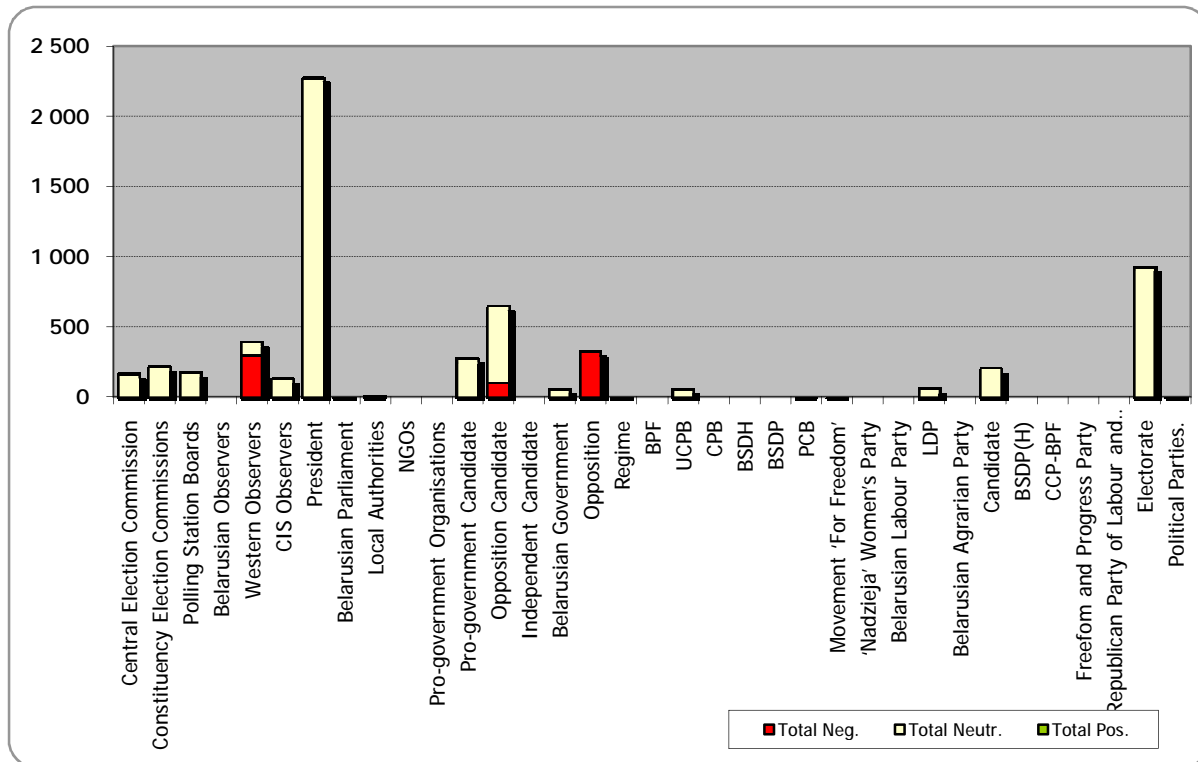
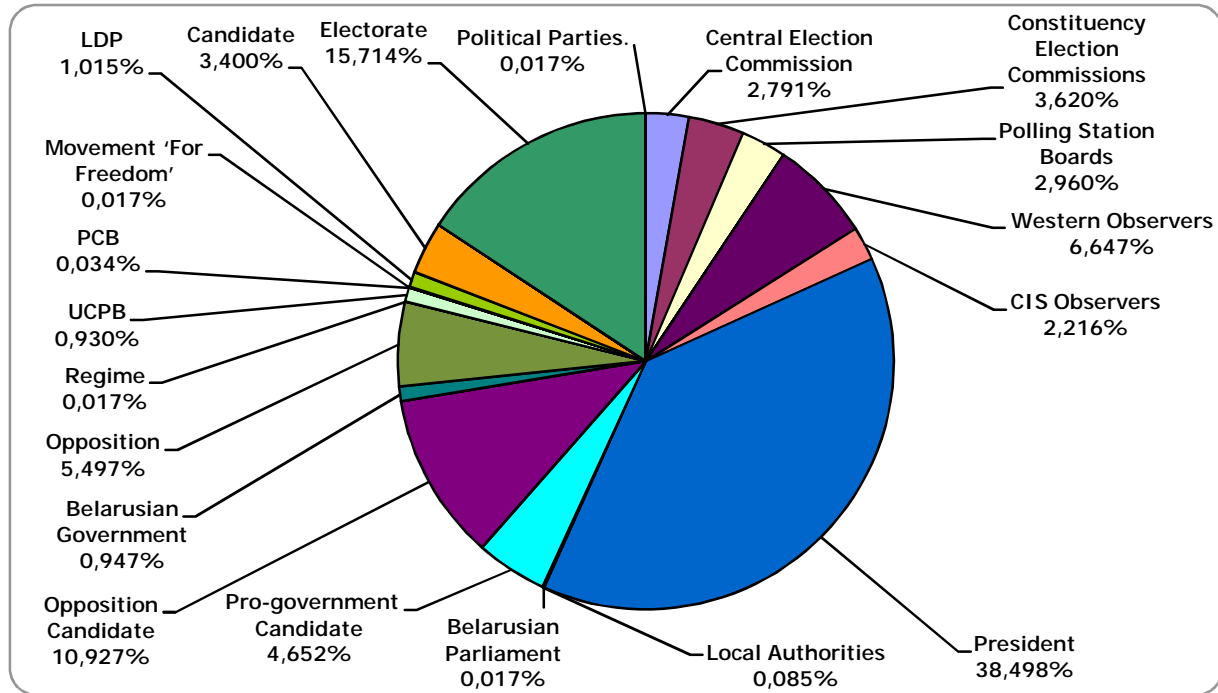


# BELARUSIAN PARLAMENT ELECTIONS 2008

Homielskaja Prauda

21.07-27.09.2008

Measured in cm<sup>2</sup>

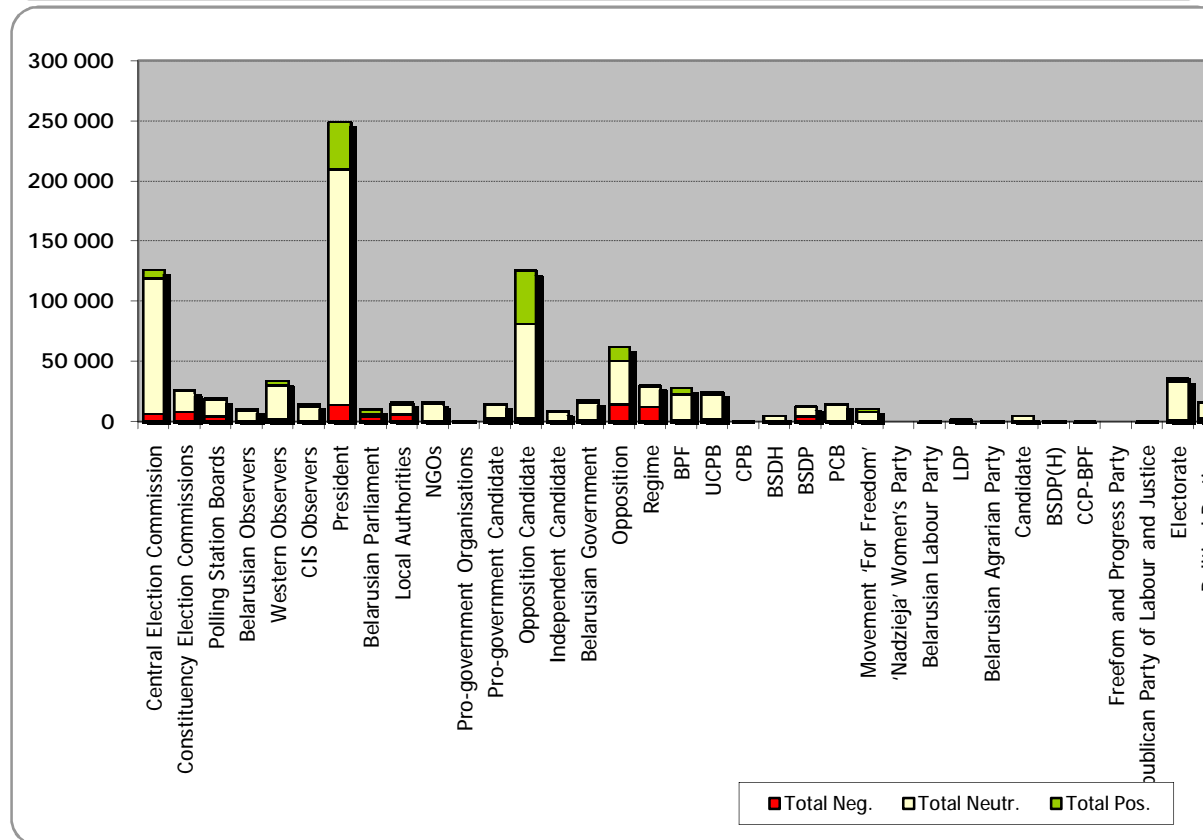
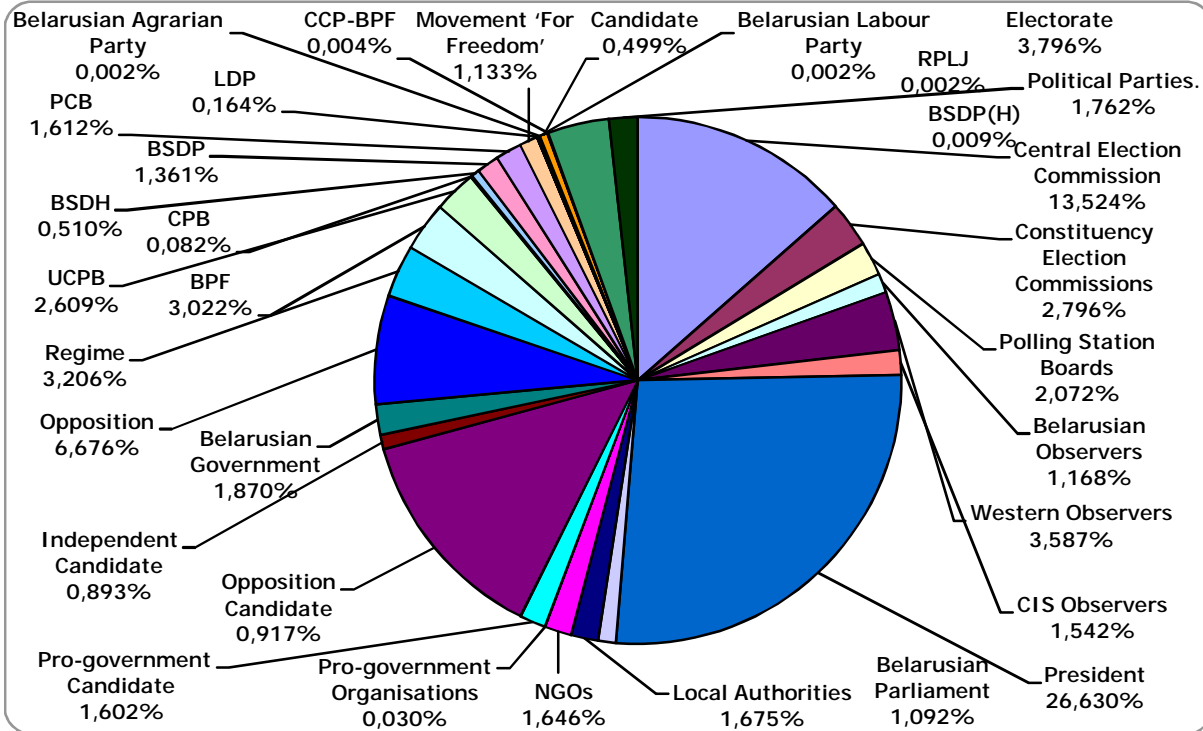




# BELARUSIAN PARLAMENT ELECTIONS 2008

NAVINY.BY  
21.07-27.09.2008

Measured in symbols



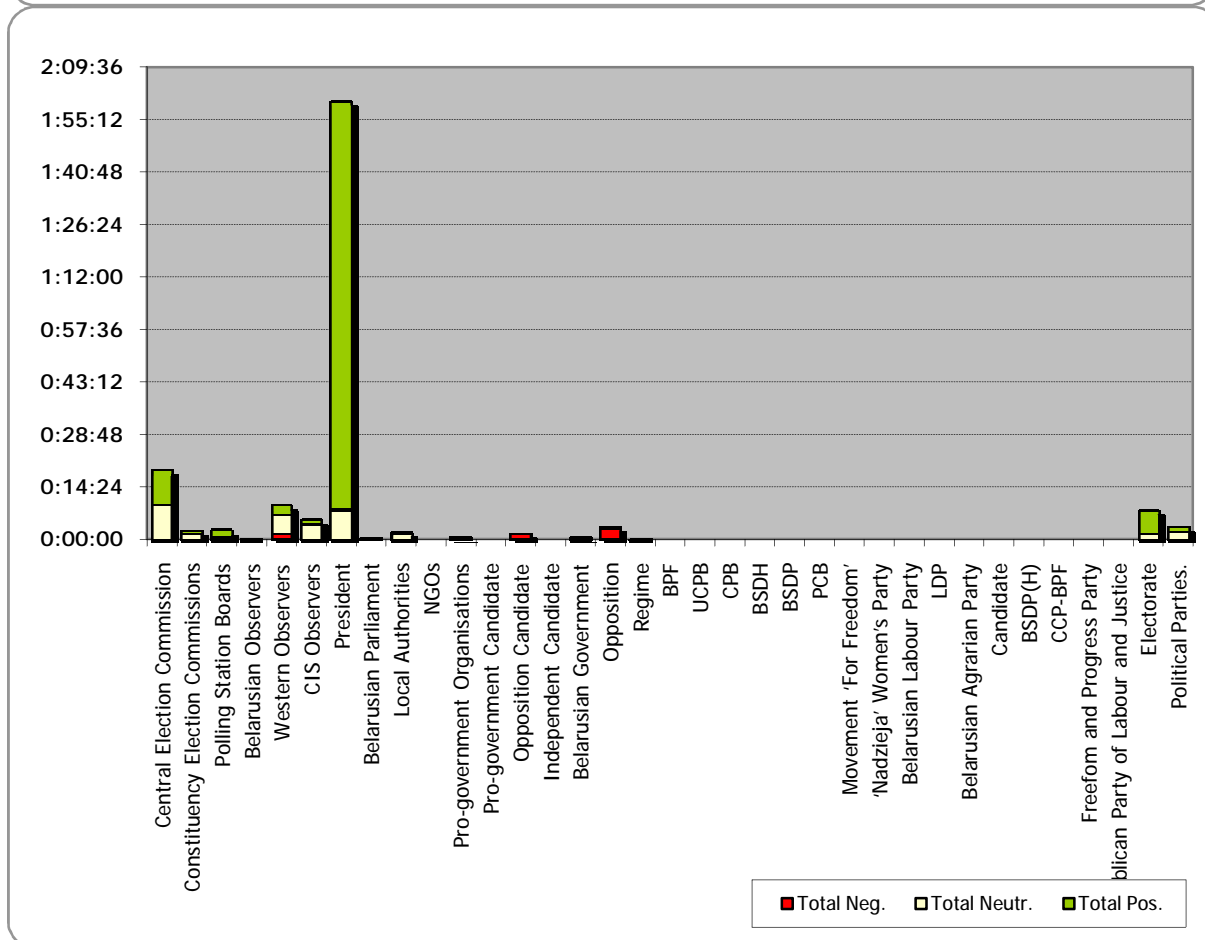
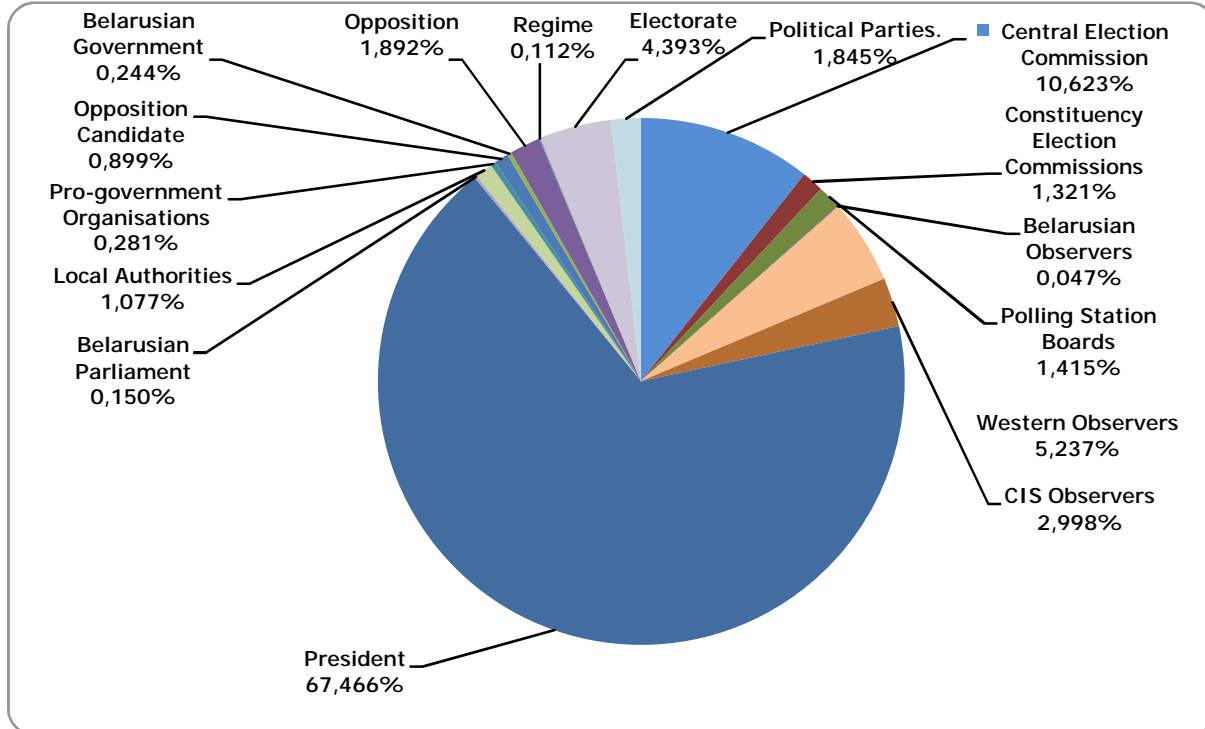


# BELARUSIAN PARLAMENT ELECTIONS 2008

Nashi Novosti (ONT)

21.07-27.09.2008

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





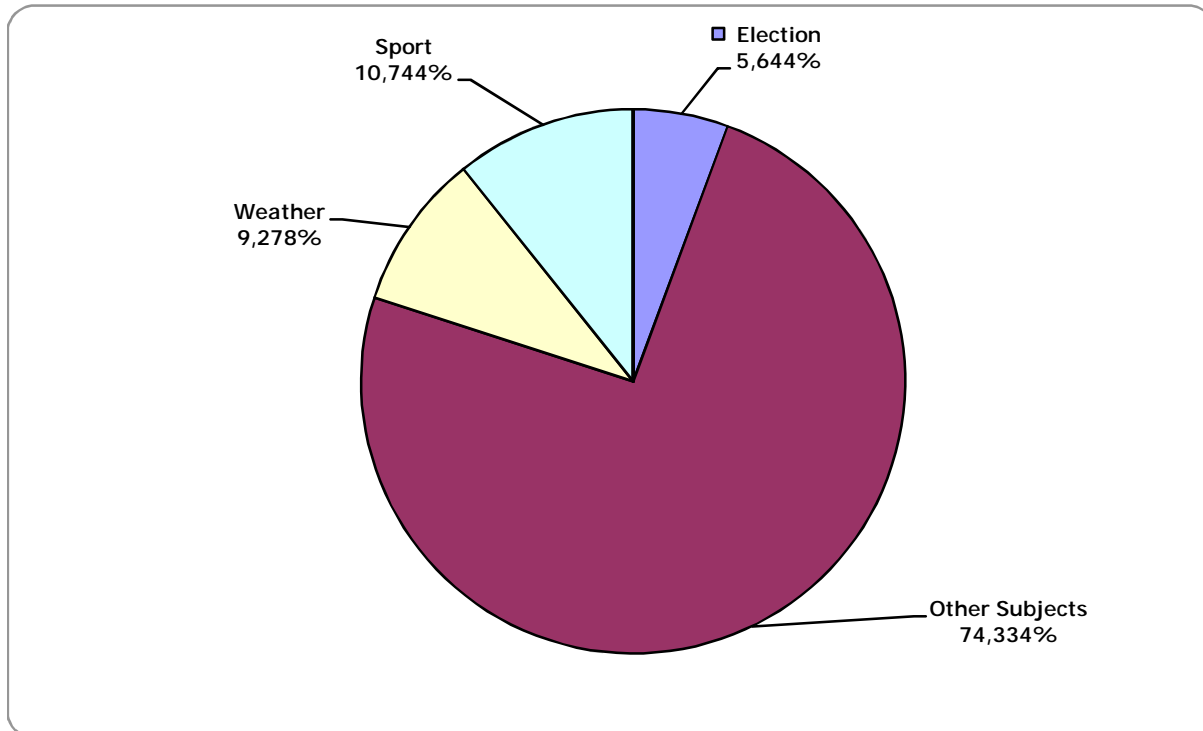


## BELARUSIAN PARLAMENT ELECTIONS 2008

Nashi Novosti (ONT)

21.07-27.09.2008

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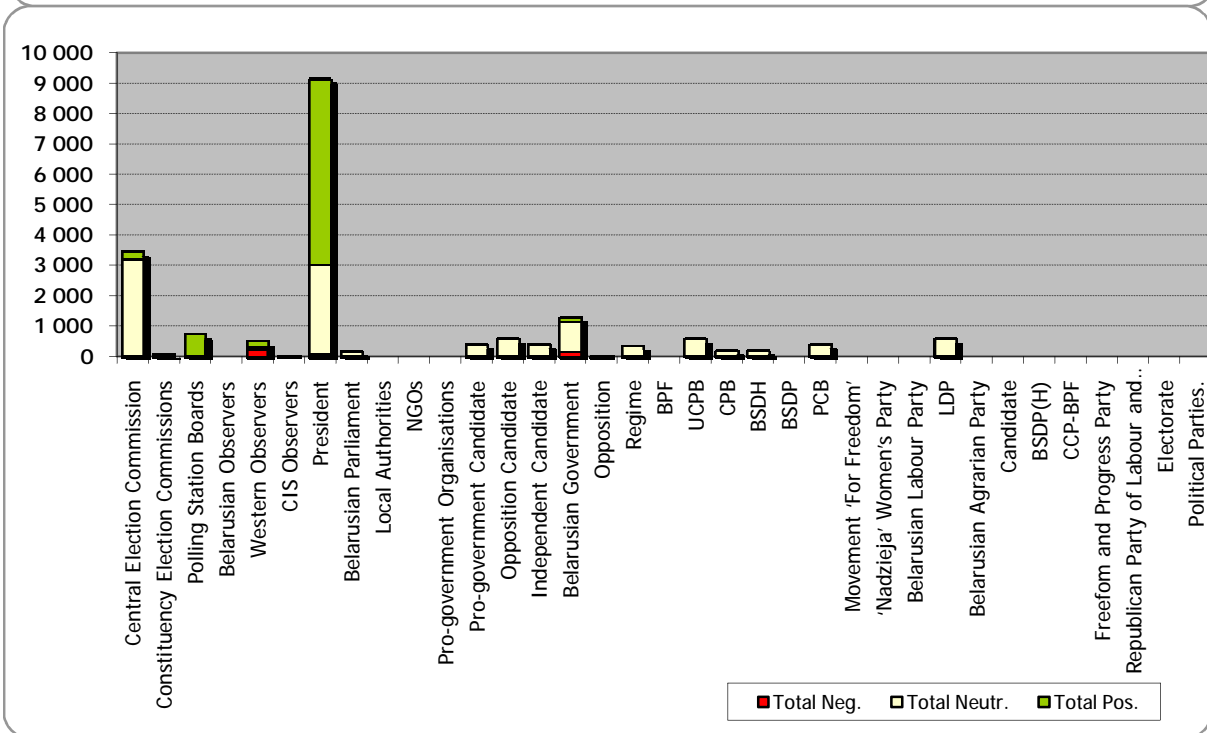
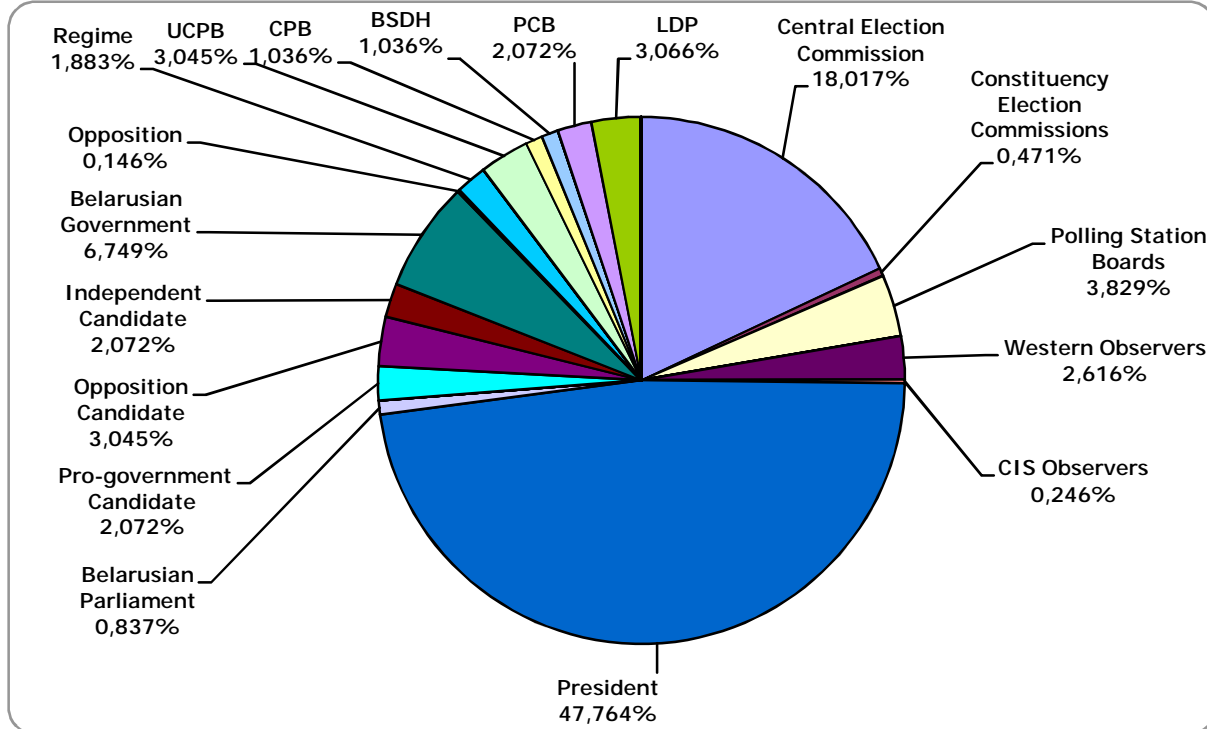




# BELARUSIAN PARLAMENT ELECTIONS 2008

Respublika  
21.07-27.09.2008

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





# BELARUSIAN PARLAMENT ELECTIONS 2008

Sovetskaya Belorussiya: Belarus Segodnya  
21.07-27.09.2008

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

