

Belarusian Association of Journalists

Monitoring: Coverage of the 2010 Presidential Election in the Belarusian Media (October 11–30, 2010)

Bulletin #1

November 1, 2010

Minsk, Belarus

1. Introduction

The report summarizes the findings of a three-week monitoring of the Belarusian electronic and printed media from the perspective of the 2010 presidential election coverage.

According to the Central Election Commission (CEC) schedule, this period involves collecting signatures to nominate potential presidential runners.

The monitoring aims to:

– assess the effectiveness and exhaustiveness of coverage of all the spectrum of the candidates and their supporters' opinions on social and political matters in the Belarusian media;

– draw the attention of the country's journalist community to the fact that it is the duty of the media to provide voters with comprehensive information about the election process, the candidates' political agendas and opinions, as well as the role played by other actors, keeping to the internationally recognized professional standards;

– provide different actors involved in the election with information that can reveal whether the state-owned and independent media have offered objective and unbiased coverage of the election;

– contribute to creating a full picture of the presidential election.

2. Summary of Conclusions

- The presidential election was far from a top subject for the state-owned electronic and printed media, judging by the fact that the election related topics received twice or thrice less coverage than the weather.
- The state-owned media offered no contributions specifically covering the procedure of collecting signatures for potential nominees. And when this procedure was mentioned, if at all, the dominant tone towards the opponents of the incumbent President was both ironical and disparaging.
- Meanwhile, the state-owned media promoted a positive image of only one potential runner, i.e. the incumbent President. The other potential nominees' names were either ignored or just mentioned in passing.

- Apart from the President, other actors noticeably represented in the state-owned media were the CEC, territorial election commissions and local authorities. Political parties taking part in the election were not in the focus of the state-owned media's attention. The opposition was referred to as a depersonalized subject and in the negative light exclusively, if at all.
- During the whole monitored period and in its final part in particular, the state-owned media kept offering contributions that create an impression that the election outcome is already predetermined.
- The state-owned media also demonstrated a number of 'media effects', i.e. instances of election coverage that do not meet internationally recognized professional standards or ethical principles in journalism.
- The independent press¹ gave a wider picture of the election process. Whereas the state-owned media virtually ignored the potential nominees except the incumbent President, the independent media gave them more coverage. Some of the independent media presented the potential runners as main actors at this stage already.
- The independent media gave more balanced assessments of the actors involved in the election. The same refers to their style, which was not marked by abusive, provocative or insulting language.

All the conclusions are based on the processing of the monitoring data given below.

3. Main Findings

3.1 State-owned Media

Thus, the **Panorama (Panorama)** news program of the 1st National TV Channel gave nearly 75% of its time allotted to all the monitored subjects to the President. The CEC received 19% and election observers from the CIS countries got 6%, while potential candidates Messrs. Niaklajeŭ, Barysaŭ and Pravalinski were just mentioned, receiving less than 0.06% of the whole time, and Mr. Hajdukievič was given 0.1%. The **Panorama** assessed the President and his work in positive terms exclusively, spoke neutrally of the CIS election observers and referred to the CEC in neutral or positive terms.

The same news program allotted 0.86% of its total time to the election process, 3,45% to the weather and 17,4% to sport. The rest was given to other issues, ranging from economy and politics to culture and social problems.

¹ There are no independent radio and TV stations in Belarus.

A similar picture was characteristic of **Nashi Novosti (Our News)** program of the **ONT TV** station and **Radyjofakt (Radiofact)** program of the **1st National Radio Channel**. They gave respectively 69.7% and 79.8% of their air time allotted to the monitored subjects to Mr. Lukashenka. The other potential candidates were either completely absent or only briefly mentioned. Some of them, such as Messrs. Ryzhou and Ramancuk, were referred to by **Nashi Novosti** only.

The **ONT** program gave the election about twice as little air time as it did to the weather, while **Radyjofakt** gave the election trice less coverage than the weather.

“Region News” Program of **Mahilou TV and Radio Company** was characterized by an even more low-key approach to the potential runners for presidency. Thus, the President received 7% of coverage given to all the monitored subjects and Mr. Hajdukievic obtained about 0.6%. The other potential nominees were completely ignored. The same program allotted 1.6% of its air time to the election, while the weather and sport received 6% and 4.2% respectively. The rest was given to other issues.

The SB – Belarus Segodnia (Belarus Today) paper ignored all the potential runners except the incumbent President, who received 68.3% of the total space given to all the monitored subjects. Among other subjects the paper wrote about in the context of the election, were the opposition (13.6%), the CEC (11.3%), pro-governmental organizations (5.1%) and the CIS election observers. The only actor that received negative assessment from the **SB – Belarus Segodnia** was the opposition as a depersonalized subject, which, in its turn, further emphasized positive assessment of the President and his actions

The remaining monitored state-owned media showed no significant deviations from the abovementioned trends in the election coverage. These included such TV programs as *V Tsentre Vnimaniya (In the Focus of Attention)* of the **1st National Channel**, *Piervy Gorodskoy (The 1st City Channel)* of **Homiel TV**, *Novosti Reghiona (Region News)* of **Mahilou TV**, radio programs of *Ekspres 101.3 FM* in **Homiel** and *Ablasnoje Radyjo (Regional Radio)* in **Mahilou**, *www.belta.by*, as well as the *Respublika*, *Homielskaja Pravda* and *Mogilovskaya Pravda* papers.

3.2 Independent Media

During the same monitoring period, **Komsomolskaja Pravda v Belarusi** paper featured prominently the potential presidential candidates, mentioning eleven names. However, most of its space allocated to the presidential runners, namely 82%, was given to the incumbent President, who was mainly presented in positive light. The remaining ten potential nominees received 18% of the space, being presented neutrally

Unlike the abovementioned state-owned media and **Komsomolskaja Pravda v Belarusi**, www.naviny.by Internet resource offered a particularly versatile picture of the election, which included forty actors. It is both the potential runners for presidency and the CEC and some political parties and movements that were featured as the main actors. The potential candidates received a rather balanced coverage, i.e. both neutral and positive or negative in some cases.

Naša Niva paper also gave a rather wide picture of the election, featuring prominently the potential candidates. Judging by the amount of space given to the monitored election subjects, of all the alternative potential candidates the paper favors Mr. Niaklajeŭ, who received 29% of the space. The paper gave about 20% less space to Messrs. Ramančuk, Kastusioŭ and Us, presenting in predominantly positive light Uładzimir Niaklajeŭ, Ryhor Kastusioŭ and Dźmitry Us.

Compared to *Naša Niva* or www.naviny.by, the **Narodnaja Vola** paper presented fewer election subjects. It featured most prominently the authorities, who were chiefly approached from a critical stance. The paper presented only seven of all the potential candidates, obviously favoring Mr. Niaklajeŭ, who received about 14% of the total space given to all the election actors, which is 10% more than Mr. Sańnikaŭ.

The **Belorusy i Rynok** paper presented twice fewer actors than www.naviny.by. The paper gave exclusively neutral assessment of the potential candidates and their actions. None of the six potential presidential runners that received coverage in the **Belorusy i Rynok** had any essential advantage in terms of space given to them.

4. Media Effects

Media effects are instances of distorting and misrepresenting information or giving incomplete, partial or biased coverage in order to influence the readers'/voters' opinions.

The 1st National Channel, **V Tsentre Vnimanija** weekly analytical program of October 10, 2010. The presenter spoke of political parties in a condescending tone, saying, *‘Political parties are being very slack. Only 66 people expressed their willingness to observe the work of the territorial election commissions, only four of them representing political parties. It is quite possible that political activists are lost now that we have a liberal election legislation and free competition of ideas. In the past they could any moment slam the door under the pretext of oppression, but now they have nothing to complain about. What can they complain of if the incumbent president in person has asked the people to give their signatures to other potential candidates?’*

The 1st National Channel, **V Tsentre Vnimanija** weekly analytical program of October 17, 2010. The presenter said of the opponents of the government, *‘There are about two weeks left to collect signatures. It is quite enough to get a hundred*

thousand autographs, even if one gets round to work only now. That is, if a politician really runs for presidency in order to win or if he stands a chance of winning the election. But with the opponents of the government it is just the opposite. They are taking part in the election in order to lose, without standing any chance of winning. What makes me say so? A politician that runs for presidency in order to win, would not call upon people to protest against the outcome of the voting two months before the voting day. It is absurd. Nobody knows the outcome yet, but the opposition is already calling for rallies. However, this absurdity can have only one explanation. The opponents of the government are well aware that they will lose, and all they need is to organize a parade of losers, so that they can tick it off in their report to the donor. Thus, such politicians' campaign is no more than just a farce. Here is a simple litmus test. When asked to give your signature to anyone, ask the potential candidate if he is going to have a rally after the election. If he says 'yes', he is an ordinary conman. Your signature means nothing to him and he does not care about your vote, because he is not going to be the President and only pretends to be running for presidency.'

Belta (http://www.belta.by/ru/all_news/politics/V-Minske-obrazovano-702-uchastka-dlja-golosovanija-po-vyboram-Prezidenta-Belarusi_i_528132.html), October 18, 2010. 702 polling stations are organized in Minsk. This contribution creates an impression that members of territorial election commissions were elected democratically.

'It has been reported that Minsk City Election Commission will include the maximum possible number of members, namely 13. 4 of them represent political parties and the remaining nine represent NGOs. The nine district election commissions also have a maximal possible membership of 13, the total number of their members being 117. 90 of them represent parties and NGOs, 16 people are representatives of local citizens and 11 of them represent staff of local enterprises and institutions.

The contribution does not say, that *'the opposition political parties nominated 92 people to the territorial election commissions, but only 14 of them were granted membership. It is 0.7% of the commissions' total membership. More than a third of the candidates to the territorial election commissions were nominated by NGOs and the unions. Just five pro-government NGOs, namely Belaja Rus NGO, the Belarusian National Youth Union, the Federation of Trade Unions of Belarus, the Belarusian Union of Women and the Belarusian Public Association of Veterans nominated 79% of all the NGOs' and unions' candidates,' said Stefanovič* (<http://news.open.by/politics/37444>)

Homielskaja Praŭda paper, October 21, 2010, issue 160-161 (22431-22432), contribution entitled *Officers Are for Positive Outcome*. Written as an ordinary news item, the contribution published on the front page quotes a statement concerning the agenda of the pro-governmental organization, *'Members of the regional branch of the Belarusian Union of Officers are going to educate the local population 'about the opposition's true aims and its attempts shared by external forces to destabilize the social and political situation in the country.'*

Nashi Novosti, ONT, October 23, 2010. A reporter touched upon the issue of ex-potential runner Siarhiej Ryžoŭ giving up collecting signatures. The reason Mr. Ryžoŭ quoted was that he had realized it would be impossible to collect the required number of signatures. Having praised Mr. Ryžoŭ for his honesty, A. Michalčanka went on to

criticize him for his statement that the authorities had put obstacles to collecting signatures. A. Michalčanka said it was *'a lie.'*

In the same item A. Michalčanka gave the audience his account of civil society activist Michaś Bašura's 'problem,' saying, *'Michail Bašura, co-ordinator of the movement Tell the Truth got caught for forging his income record. The forged document enabled him to get a loan on privileged terms.'* Then he said, *'Then Bašura joined the movement Tell the Truth, which miraculously turned an ordinary conman into a political figure.'* The journalist went on to ask, *'Perhaps a pedophile should be regarded as an opponent of the regime, if he rapes only pioneers and BNYU members?'*

Michalčanka offered the following lead to his report, *'The freckled redhead throws in the towel. The chief of entrepreneurs longs for an organized crime network. The coordinator of the movement Tell the Truth gets caught cheating.'*

Finally, a number of contributions to the state-owned media created an impression that the outcome of the election is already predetermined. Here is just one quote from the article given under the headline *The Government Does its Best* in the **SB – Belarus Segodnya** of October 30, 2010 (<http://sb.by/post/107481/>). [the President] *'stressed that he was interested in political competition, 'I asked the people to sign for other candidates.'* Now Alexander Lukashenka is disappointed at some potential challengers' behavior. He stated, *'Today they are thinking of withdrawing themselves from the election.'* He gave his explanation for the opponents' behavior, *'They know they will get 0.2 percent [of votes] in the election. So they think, "Why should I make a fool of myself?"'* The President stressed, addressing the citizens of Brest, *'I have never had a fraudulent election! You always grant me a landslide victory.'*

The statements quoted above were multiplied in other state-owned media.