

BELARUSIAN ASSOCIATION OF JOURNALISTS

The 2008 Parliamentary Election Coverage in the Belarusian Media Bulletin 5

(August 23 – September 5 2008)

The present analysis covers the period from 23 August to 5 September 2008. It 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.¹

Within this period election commissions have registered candidates seeking election to Parliament, the candidates have launched their campaigns and a number of candidates have given their speeches in state-run media at the time fixed by the CEC.

Main Findings and Some Conclusions

Although the election campaign has entered its most active phase, the state-owned media have not considerably changed their manner of election coverage. They are still focusing on the technical procedures of the election (the CEC and its work) rather than campaigning. Symptomatically, the Belarusian State Radio have turned down the *United Democratic Forces'* proposal to hold candidates' debate (<http://news.tut.by/politics/116046.html>).

It has to be pointed out again that the candidates' media addresses are to be broadcast on TV in Minsk and other big cities from 5.30. p.m. to 6.30. p.m., which means that the majority of voters with jobs, who are either commuting or doing their shopping at the time, will not be able to get an idea of the candidates' agendas. Extremely low funds allotted to the candidates for making campaign materials also considerably limit the candidates' ability to communicate with voters.

As for special programmes on the election that have been launched by the Belarusian TV stations, they do not draw the viewers' attention to the fact that the election is about choosing between different political agendas and platforms, between different social and political scenarios for the Belarusian society rather than some technical procedures that certainly have to be organised by the CEC and local authorities. For example, *'From One Election to Another'* programme lasting over 30 minutes (*LAD TV station, Homiel Regional TV and Radio*) is just a long report featuring one of Homiel's districts. Thus, on 26 August it was dedicated to Lojeu district. *'Turn on the volume of your loudspeakers, those who live in Lojeu district,'* says 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.'*

¹ The BAJ monitoring covers 20 media: *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 Prawda, 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 only thing that brings to mind the election is an advert *From One Election to Another*, which is broadcast at the beginning, in the middle and at the end of the programme, 'From one election to another. Four years of constructive work. A rise in the standard of living. Positive progress towards the future. Homiel's districts summing it up on morning TV, LAD station,' – the only it says.

Thus, the focus is diverted from the problem of choosing between different political and social prospects to 'peaceful and constructive work', interviews with local officials and accent on achievements, which is apparently a method of pre-programming the results, to guarantee success to one of the competing sides, namely pro-government candidates.

The state-owned media are still dominated by a simplistic approach towards the representation of the election actors, with the President and CEC playing the leading roles. In contrast with the other actors, the percentage of the overall election coverage they get ranges from 60 to 99 per cent, depending on the media outlet (see the corresponding charts of *Radiofact (the 1st National Radio Channel)*, www.belta.by, *Nashi Novosti* (ONT), as well as *Respublika* and *Sovetskaya Belorussiya: Belarus Segodnya* papers)

Just like during the previous period, the state-run media have given some coverage to the CIS and western observers. Together, they have received from 8 to 27 per cent of time (see the corresponding charts of *Nashi Novosti* (ONT) and *Radiofact (the 1st National Radio Channel)*).

At the same time, the state-owned media have even more explicitly demonstrated their attitude towards the observers. The articles *Here's Mud in Their Eye* and *First Democratise Yourself* (*Homielskaja Prawda*, 2 September and 4 September 2008) are real telltale marks in this respect. For instance, the latter arrives at the following conclusion, and this is one of the conclusion, 'All the comments and recommendations in the ODHRI/OSCE reports are nothing other than pre-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.' Both the articles are signed by an Alaksiej Nikalajenkau, whose name is absent from the list of the paper's employees. Resorting to a pen-name makes it even more conspicuous that the paper is expressing the position of official propaganda and the actual author was probably ashamed to sign the piece with his or her own name.

The state-owned media, on the contrary, give positive assessment of the CIS observers and their work (see, for example, the charts of *Nashi Novosti* (ONT) and Mahilou Regional Radio programmes). In their turn, the CIS observers assess positively the CEC's and local authorities' work on organising the election. 'The preparations for the parliamentary election in Belarus are going on in a calm manner, just as planned,' said the Head of the CIS Observers' Mission S. Lebedev. 'What we have seen shows that local authorities and the heads of election commissions have taken on full responsibility for organising the election and are doing everything they can to hold a democratic election, take into consideration all the observers' recommendations and guarantee the voters' rights.' (<http://news.tut.by/politics/115729.html>).

Apart from the five above-mentioned actors (the President, the CEC, local authorities, the CIS and western observers), all the others have received virtually zero coverage in the state-owned media. For example, *Nashi Novosti* (ONT) has given only 2,7 per cent of its time to the

anonymous opposition and anonymous political parties, as compared to the other election actors. As for *Sovetskaya Belorussiya: Belarus Segodnya* papers and *Respublika* papers, this time they have completely ignored political parties, giving them neither positive nor negative coverage at all.

The independent press, alongside featuring the CEC and its work, has written much more about the other election actors. The same is true as regards the independent online media. However, it has to be admitted that the audiences of the independent papers are hundreds times less numerous and the independent online media are considerably behind the state-run e-media. Consequently, it is in fact the state-owned media that determine the format of the election coverage (i.e. the election should be perceived as a well-organised procedure of forming the election commissions and polling station boards, as well as registering the candidates, which is efficiently run by the CEC and local authorities). The independent media, with their relatively small audiences stand no chance of altering this format in order to contribute to real competition between the candidates' different agendas and programmes.

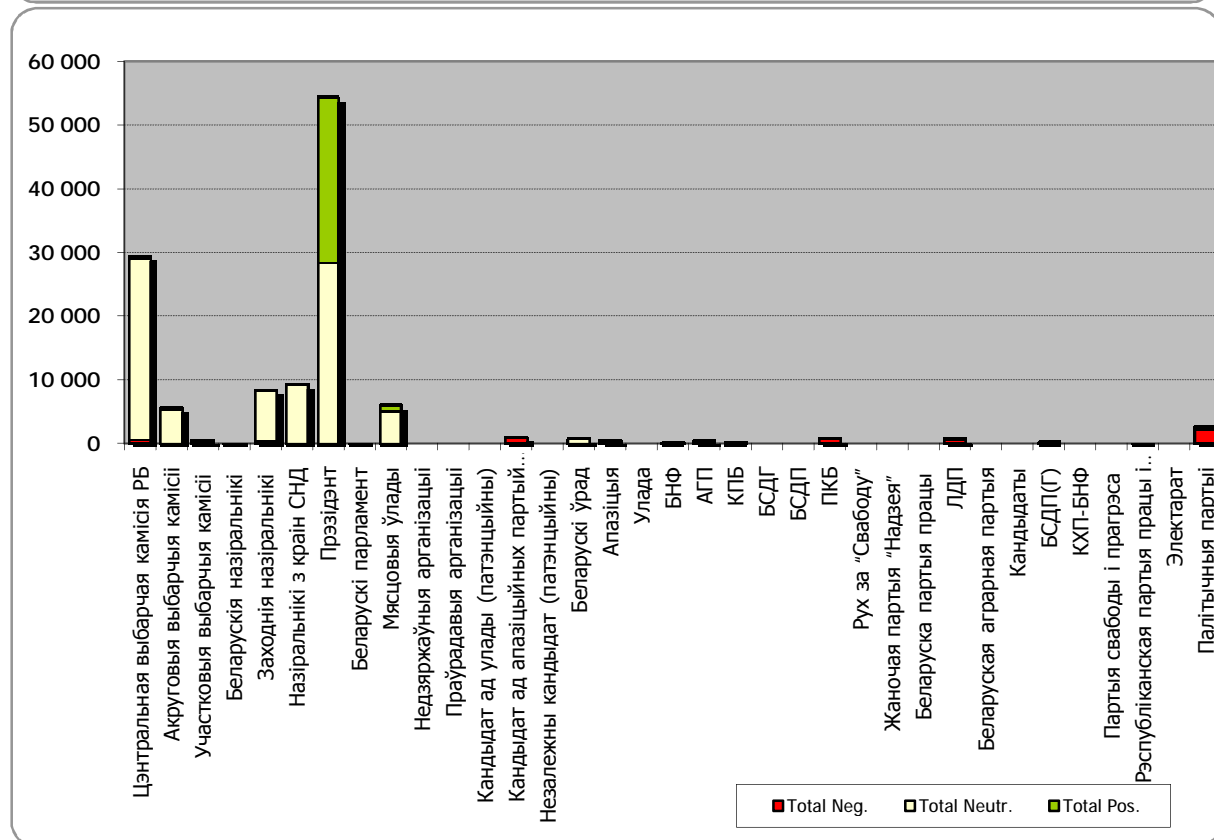
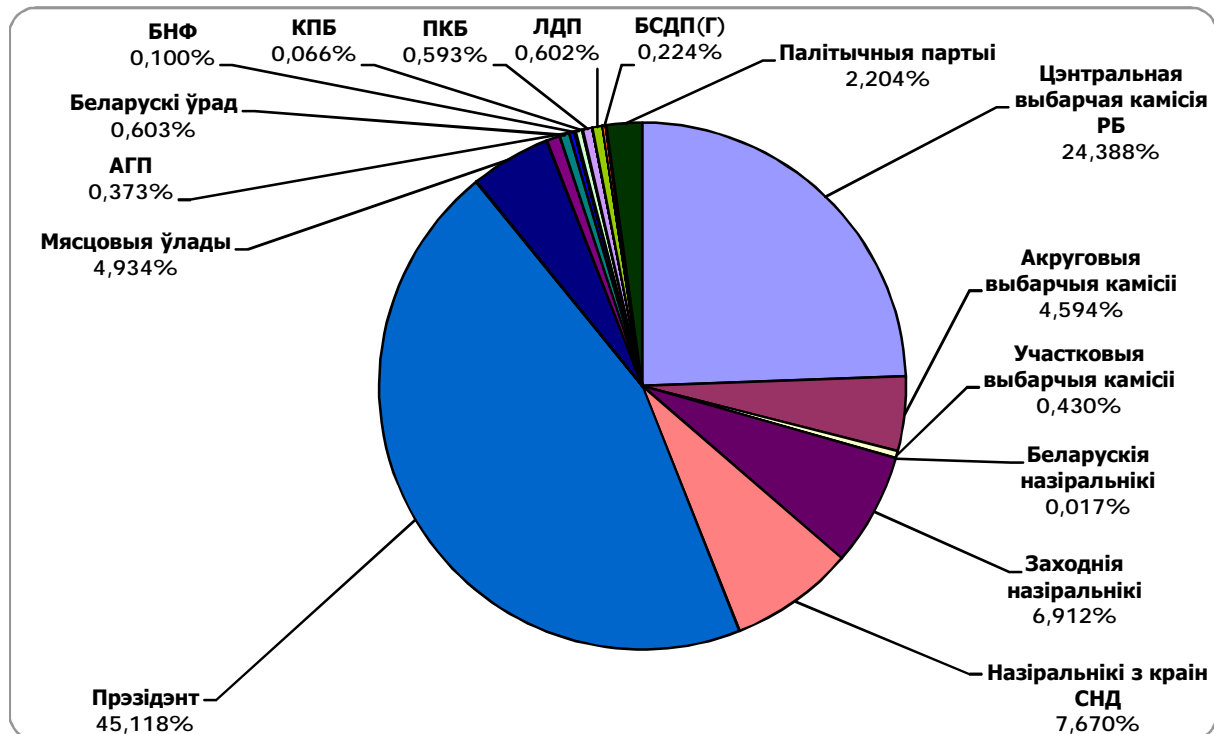
This period's findings confirm the earlier conclusion that the format of the election coverage in the state-owned media is directed towards minimising political competition between different political forces (that is, holding a 'quiet election), excluding the voters from the competition and marginalising alternative programmes (and alternative possibilities) for the Belarusian society and its development. This format leads to a situation, which is only too well familiar from the Soviet past, when the majority of voters make their choice right on the voting day, relying on only brief official resumes of the candidates submitted to the voters by election commissions.



BELARUSIAN PARLAMENT ELECTIONS 2008

23.08-05.09.2008

Measured in symbols



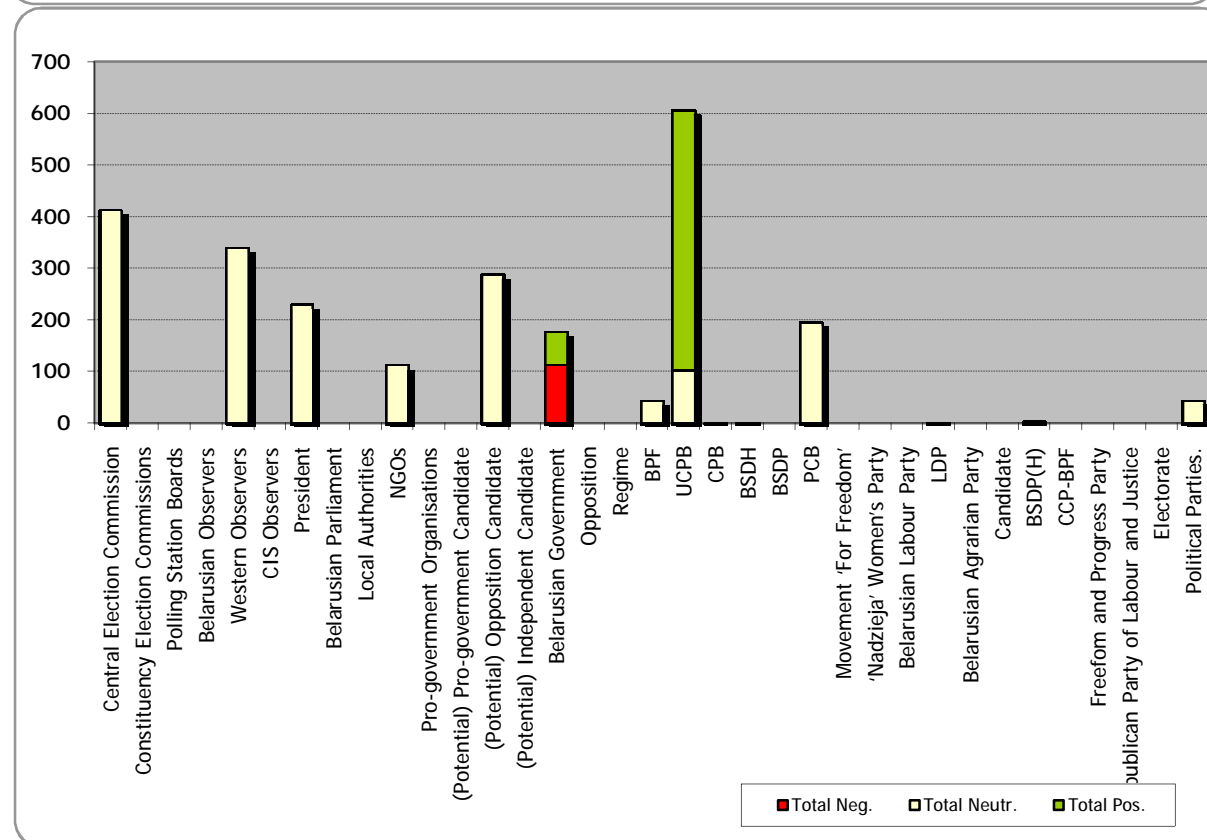
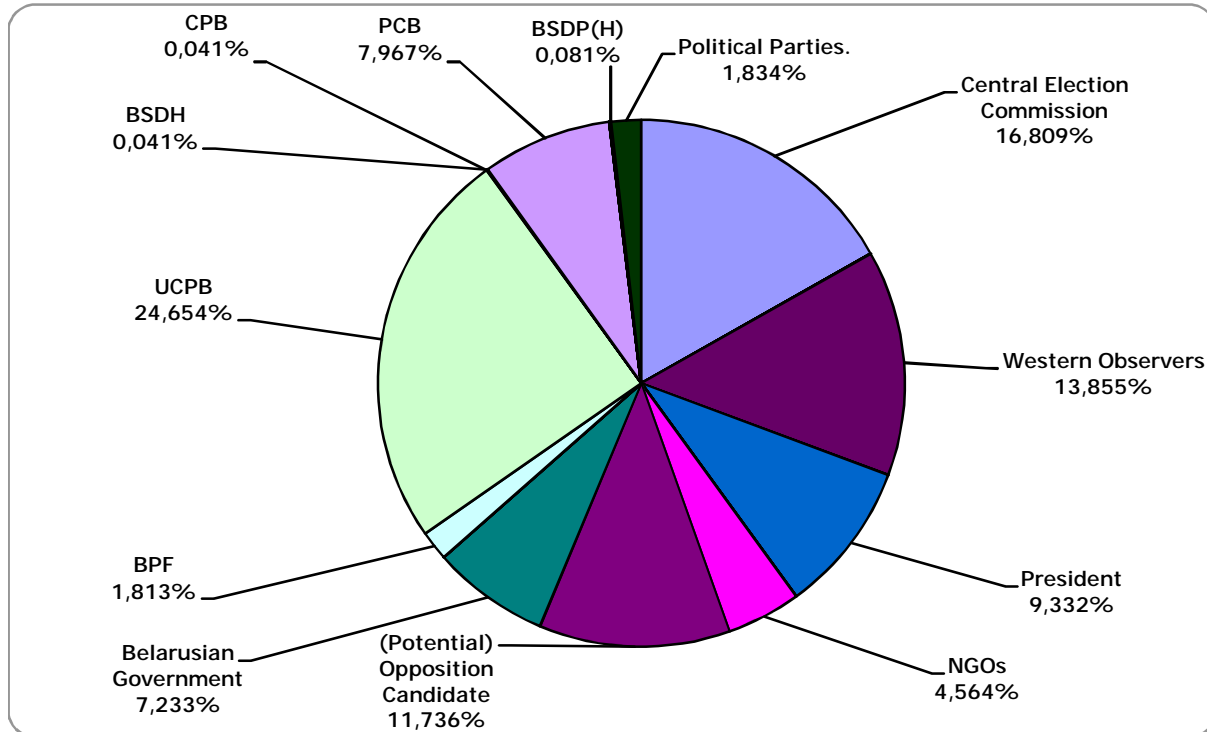


BELARUSIAN PARLAMENT ELECTIONS 2008

Belorusy i Rynok

23.08-05.09.2008

Measured in cm²



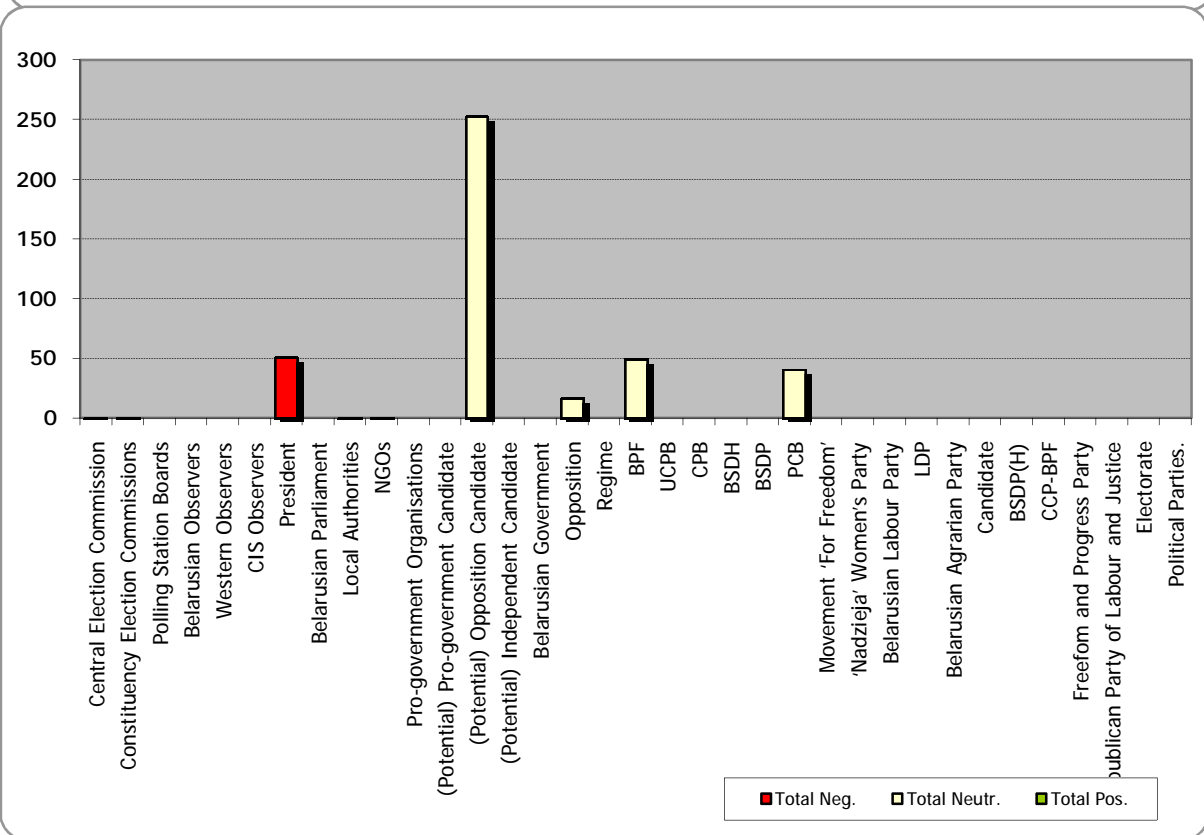
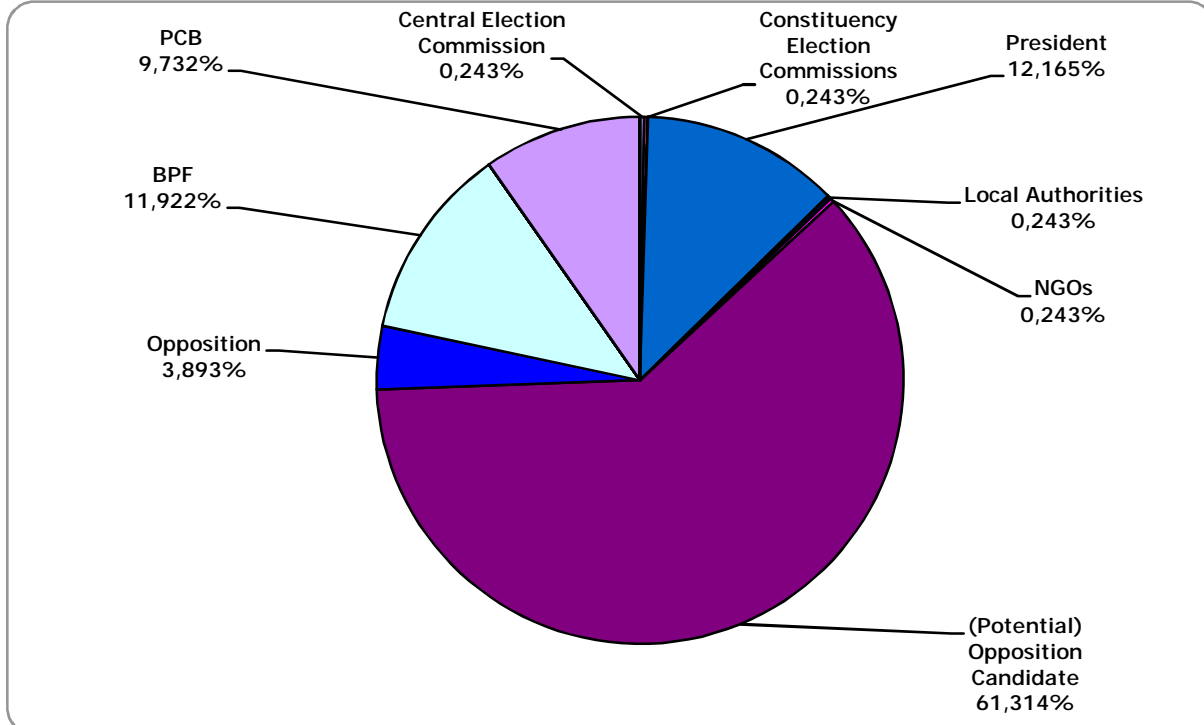


BELARUSIAN PARLAMENT ELECTIONS 2008

Brestskiy Kuryer

23.08-05.09.2008

Measured in cm²



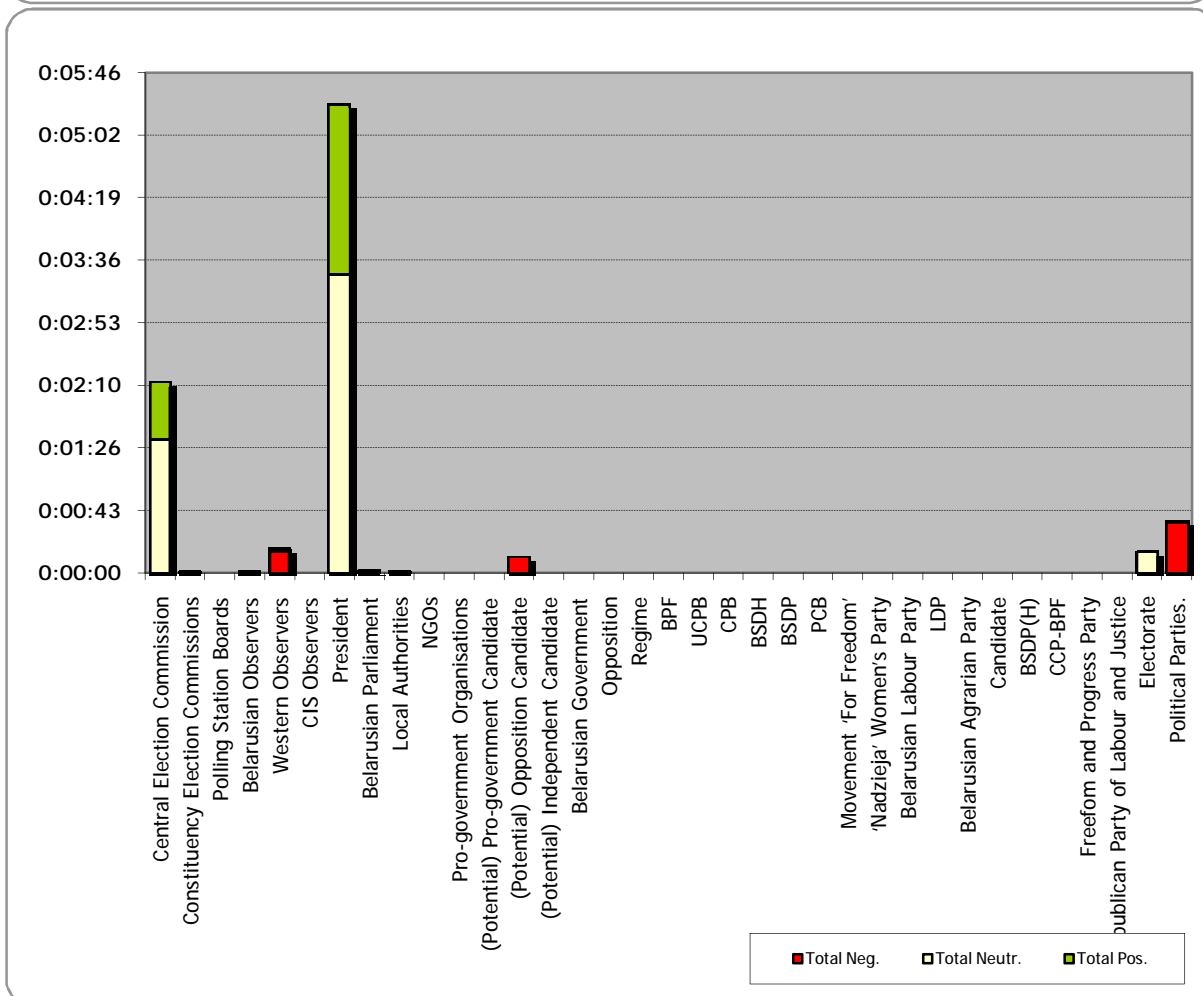
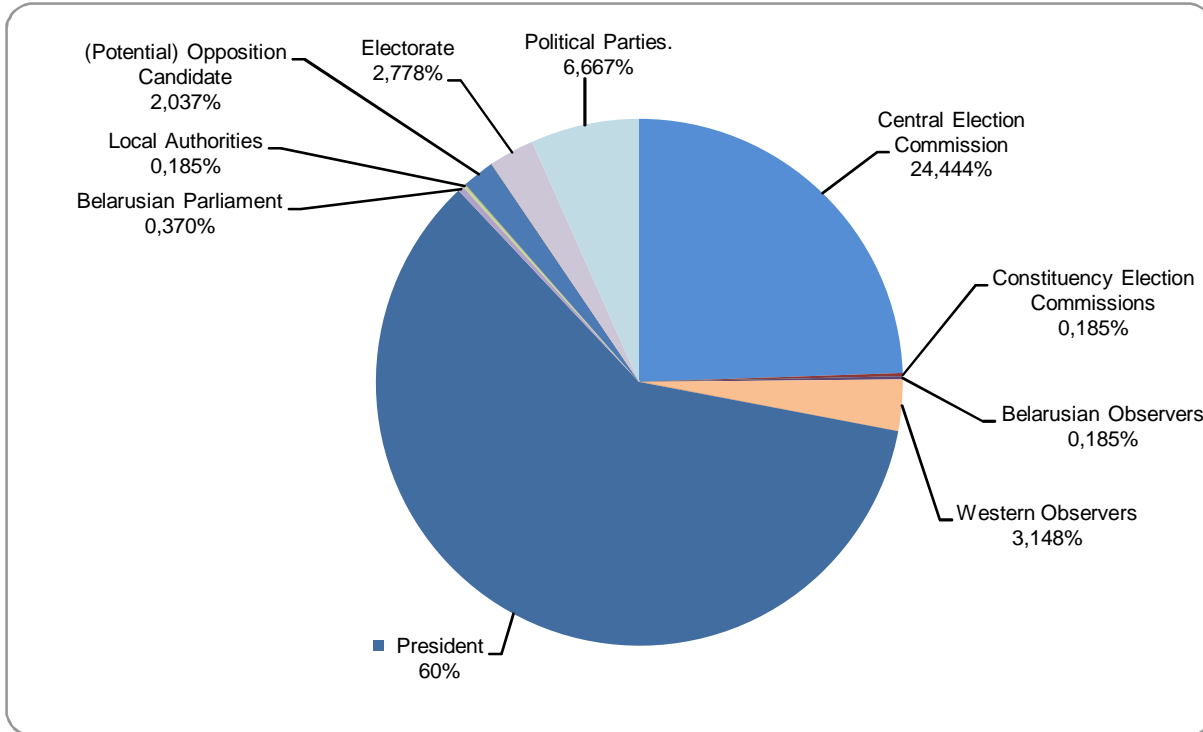


BELARUSIAN PARLAMENT ELECTIONS 2008

Panorama Nedeli (the 1st National Channel)

23.09-05.09.2008

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



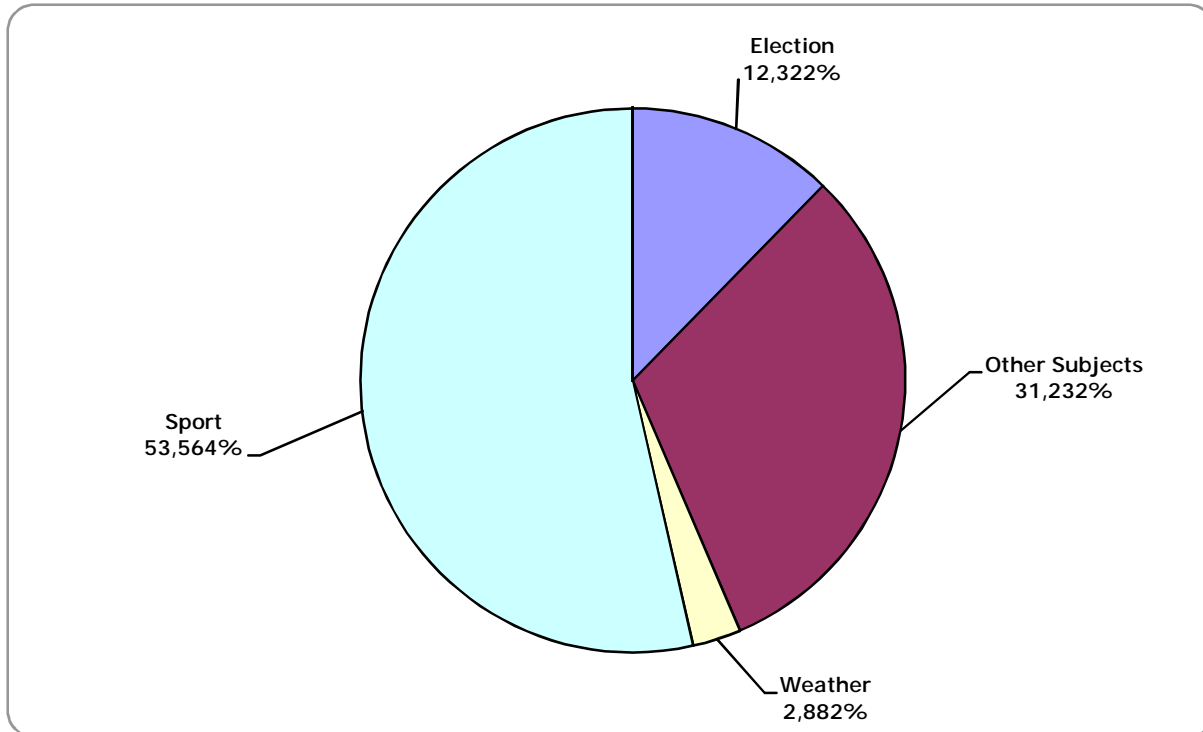


BELARUSIAN PARLAMENT ELECTIONS 2008

Panorama Nedeli (the 1st National Channel)

23.09-05.09.2008

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



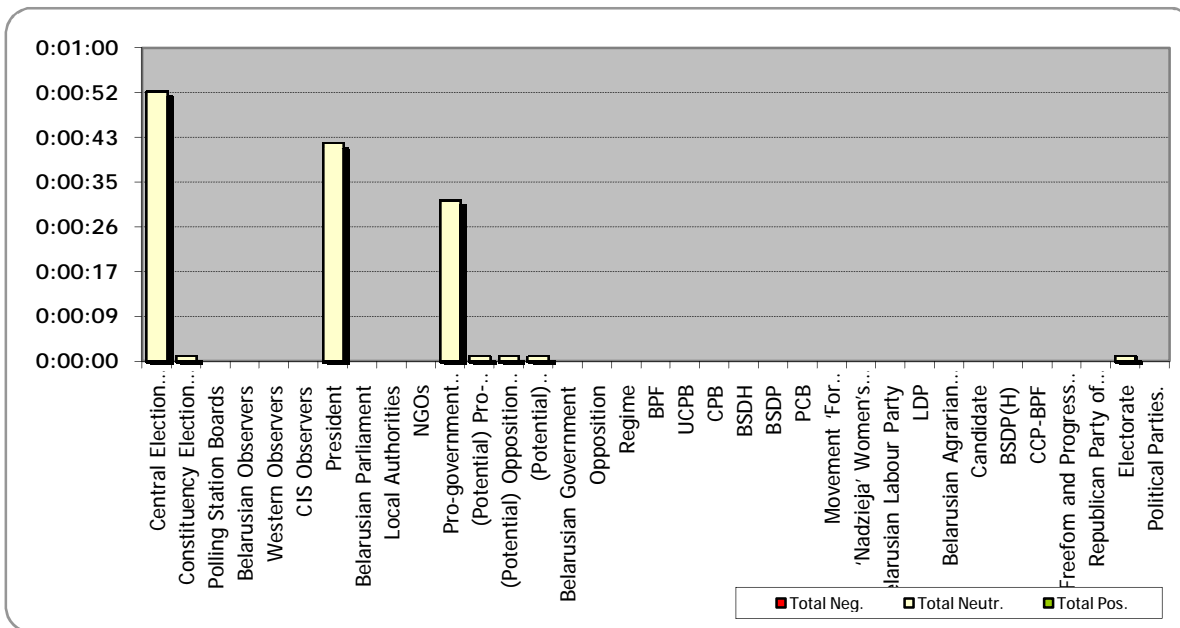
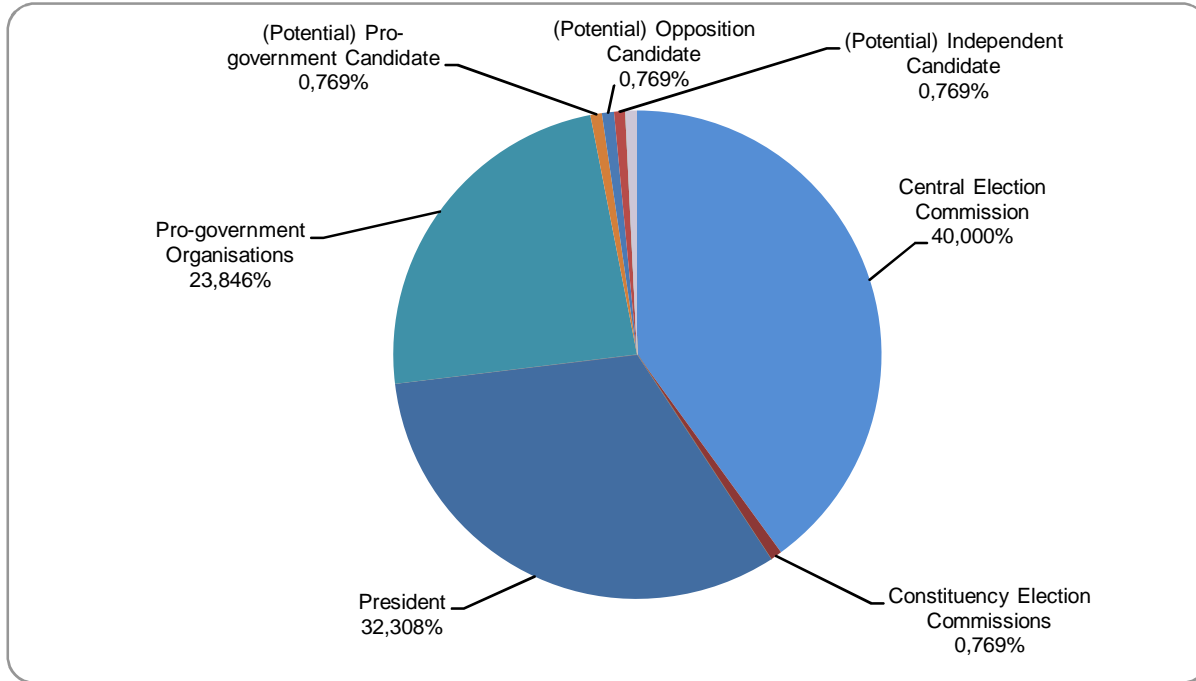


BELARUSIAN PARLAMENT ELECTIONS 2008

Naviny (Homiel Regional Radio 101.3 FM)

23.08-05.09.2008

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



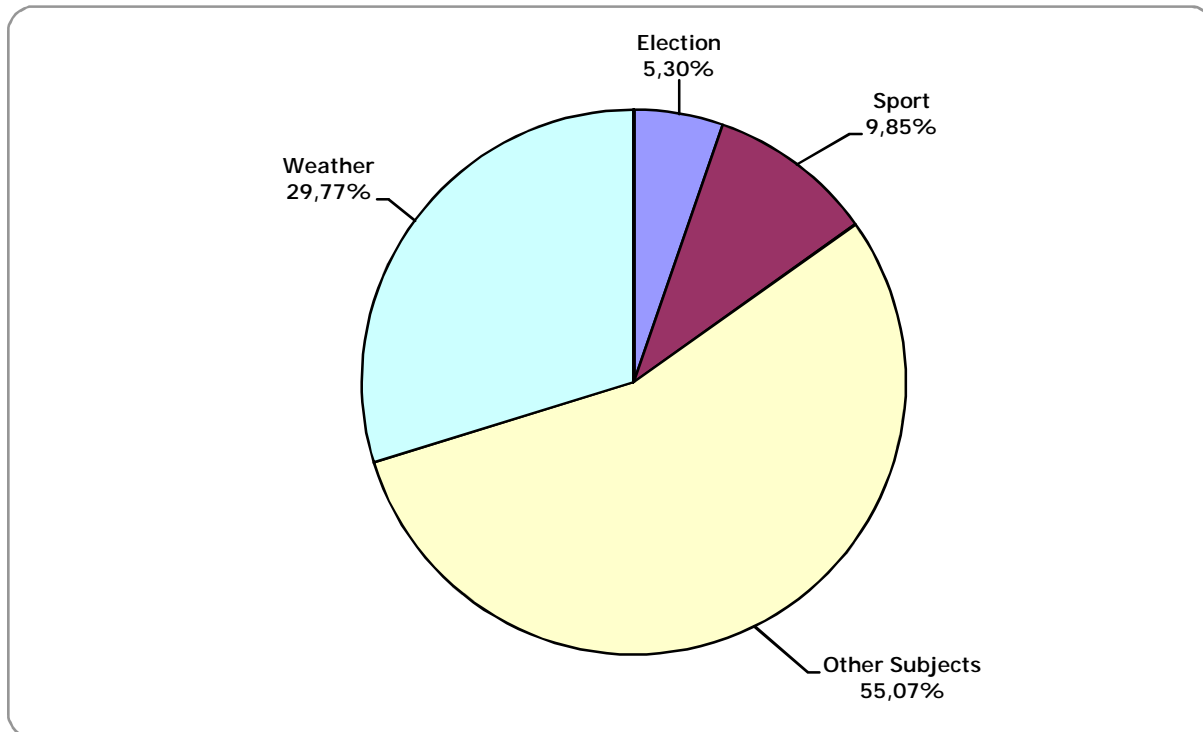


BELARUSIAN PARLAMENT ELECTIONS 2008

Naviny (Homiel Regional Radio 101.3 FM)

23.08-05.09.2008

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



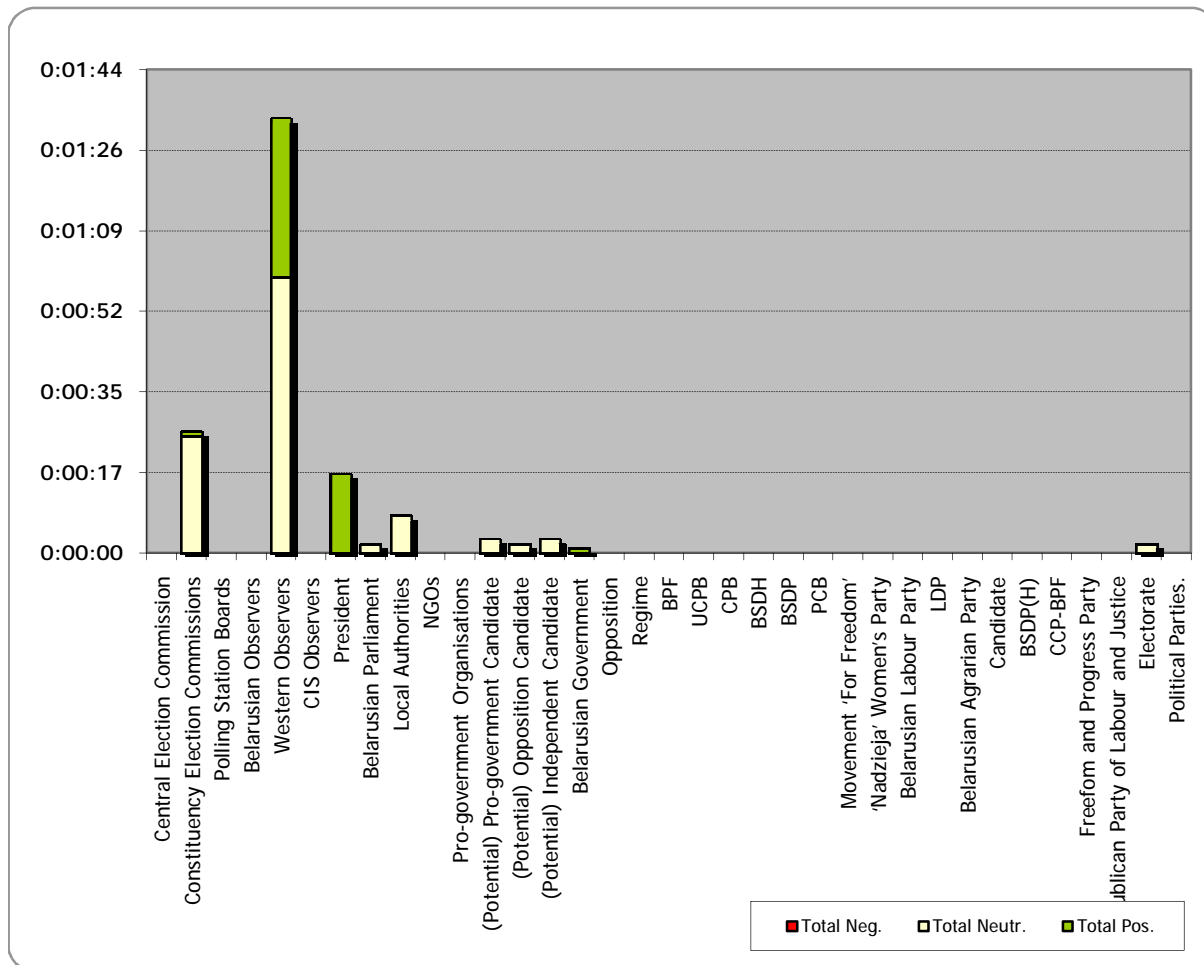
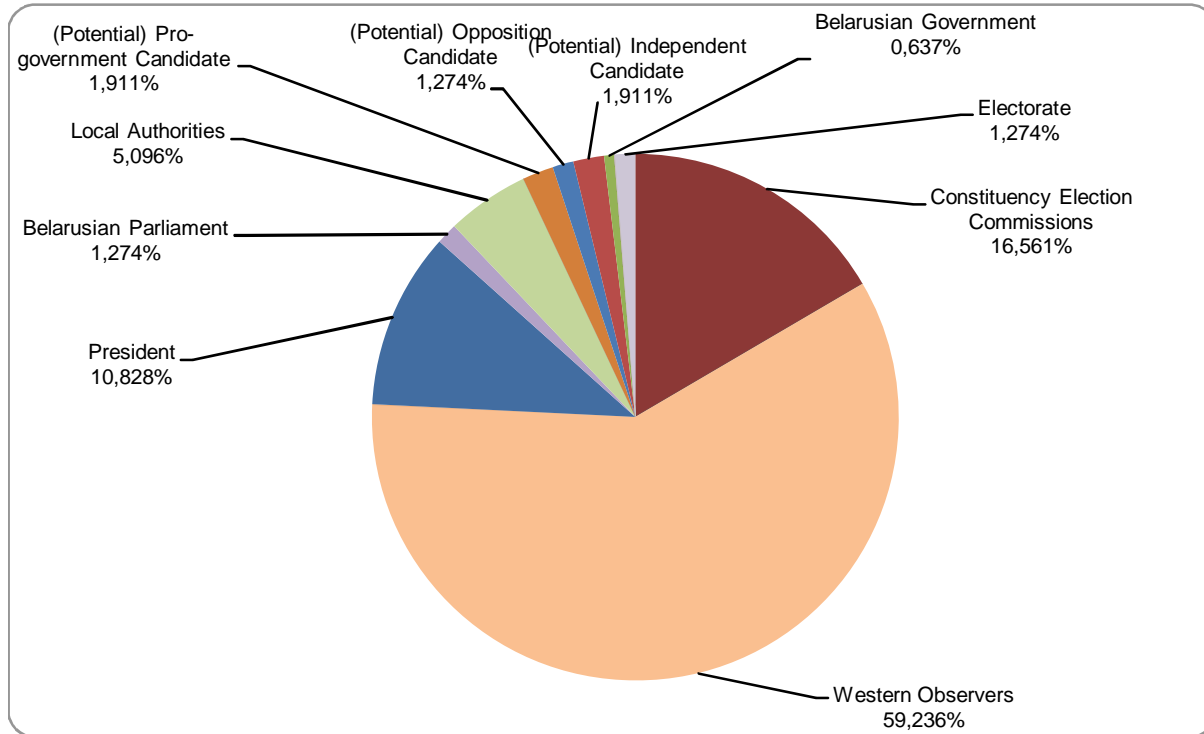


BELARUSIAN PARLAMENT ELECTIONS 2008

Navyi Rehijona (Homiel)

23.08-05.09.2008

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



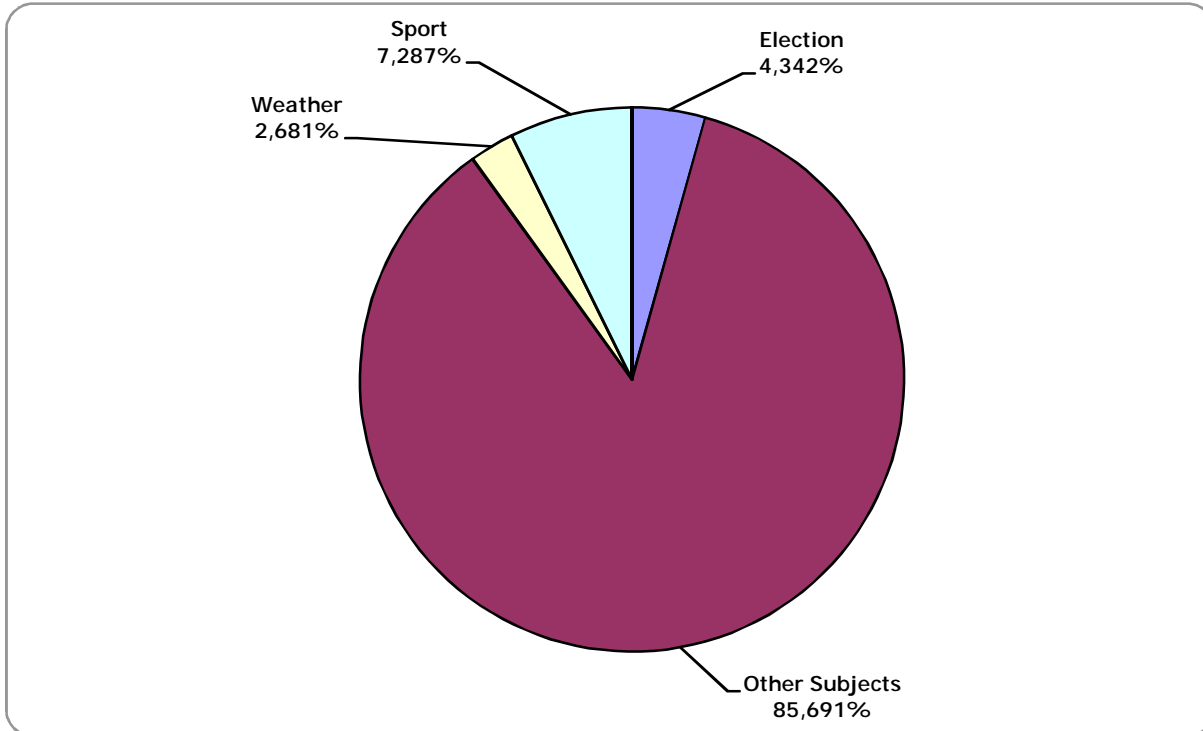


BELARUSIAN PARLAMENT ELECTIONS 2008

Naviny Rehijona (Homiel)

23.08-05.09.2008

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



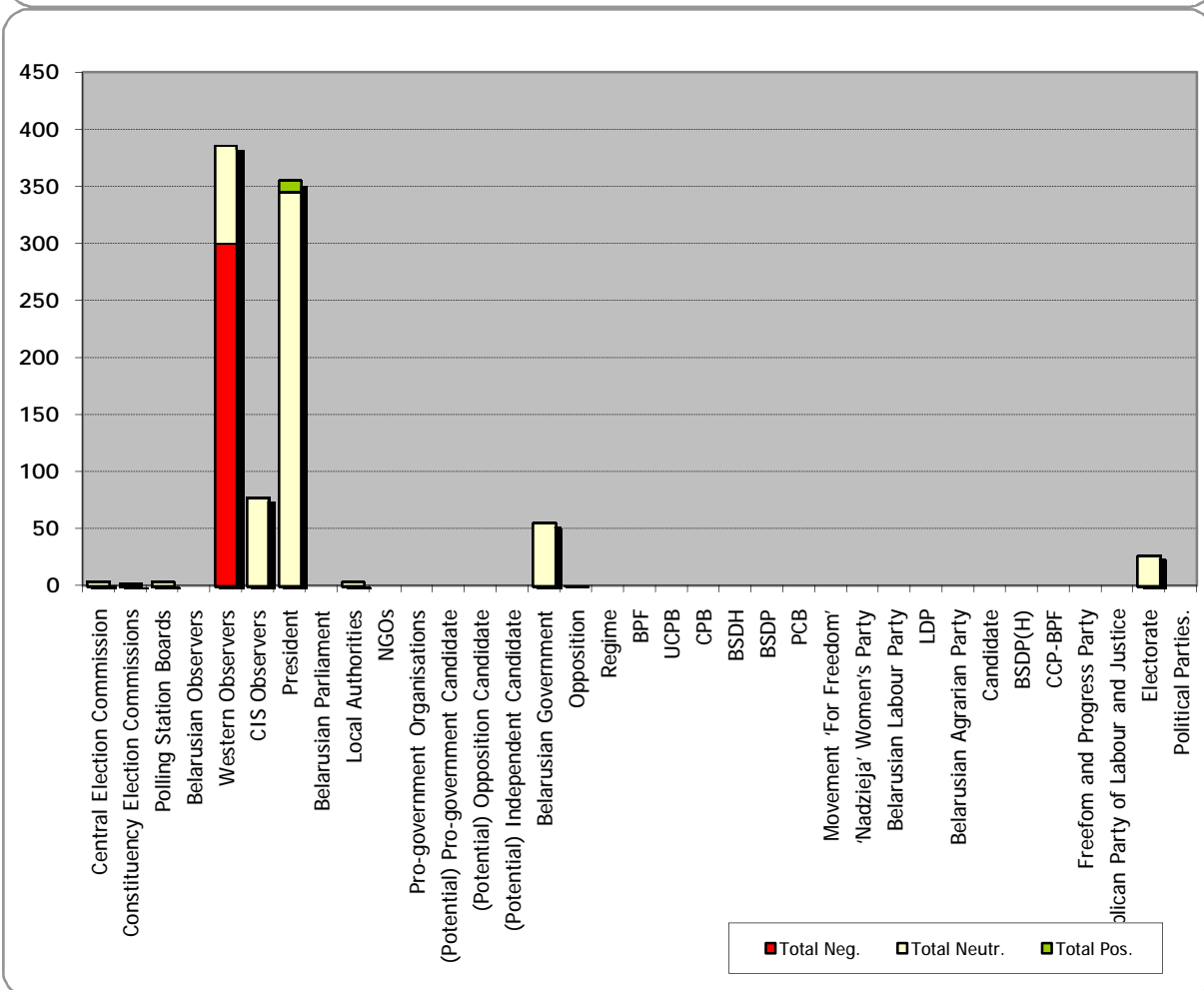
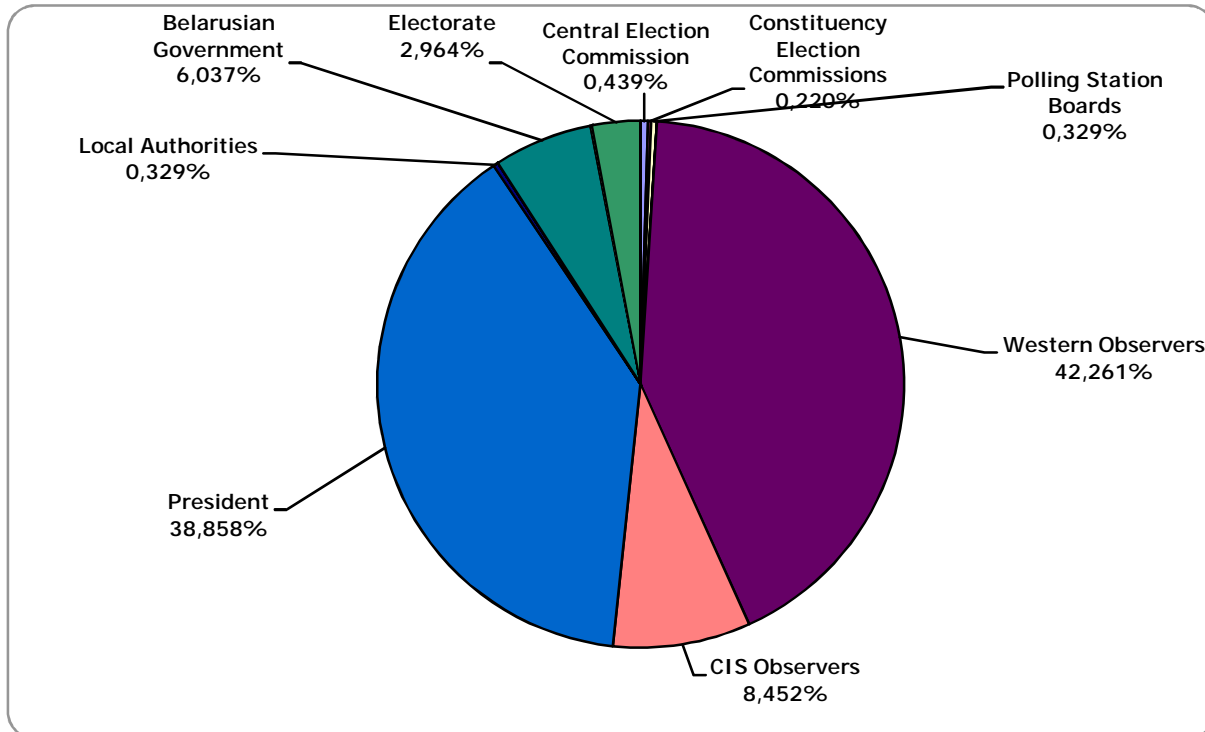


BELARUSIAN PARLAMENT ELECTIONS 2008

Homielskaja Prauda

23.08-05.09.2008

Measured in cm²



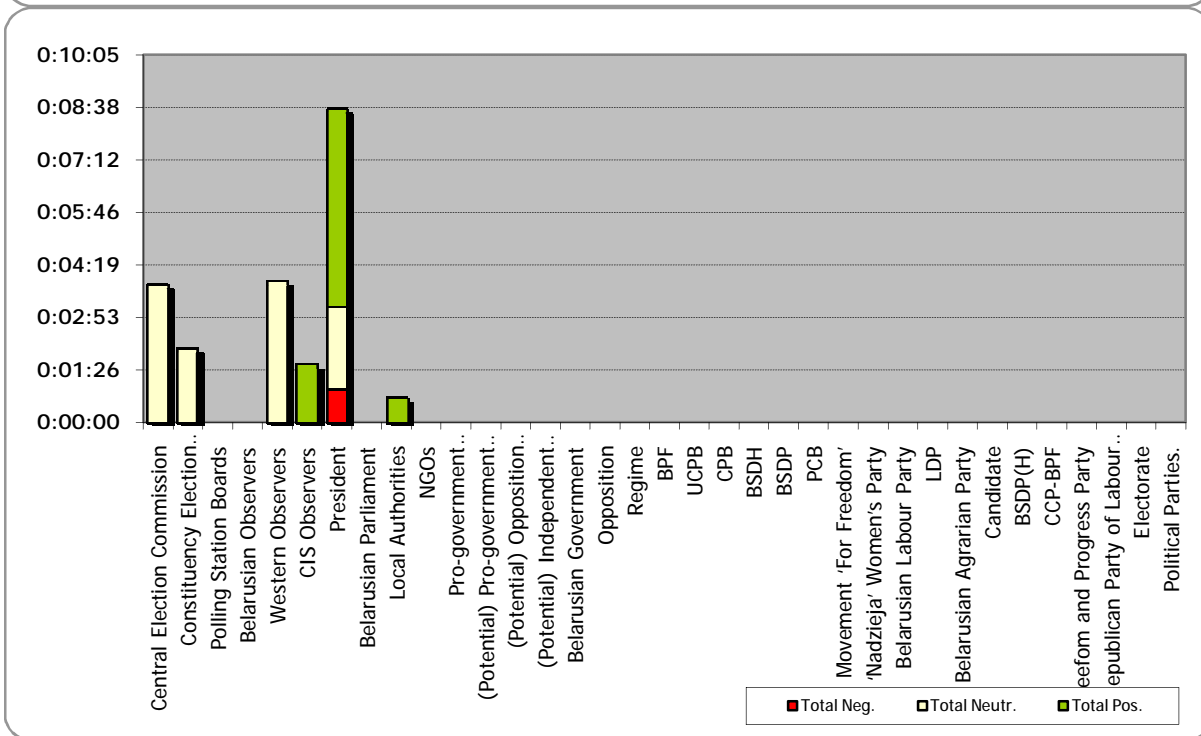
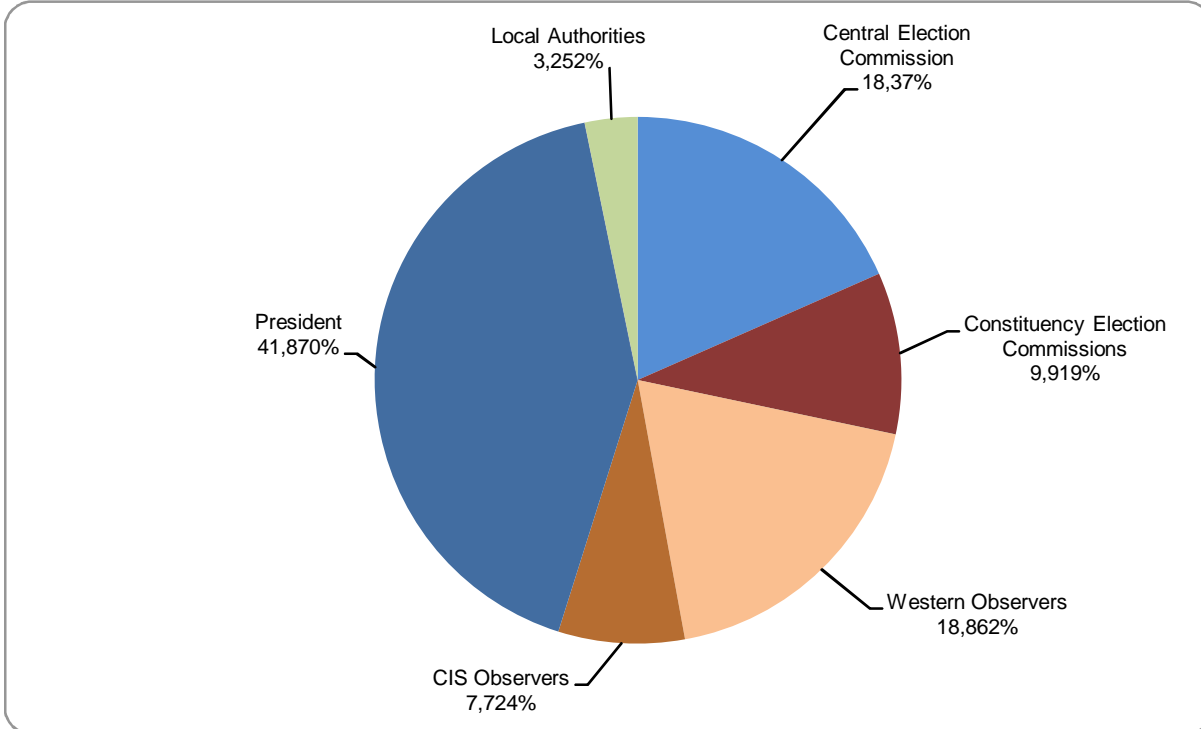


BELARUSIAN PARLAMENT ELECTIONS 2008

Radiofact (the 1st National Radio Channel)

23.08-05.09.2008

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



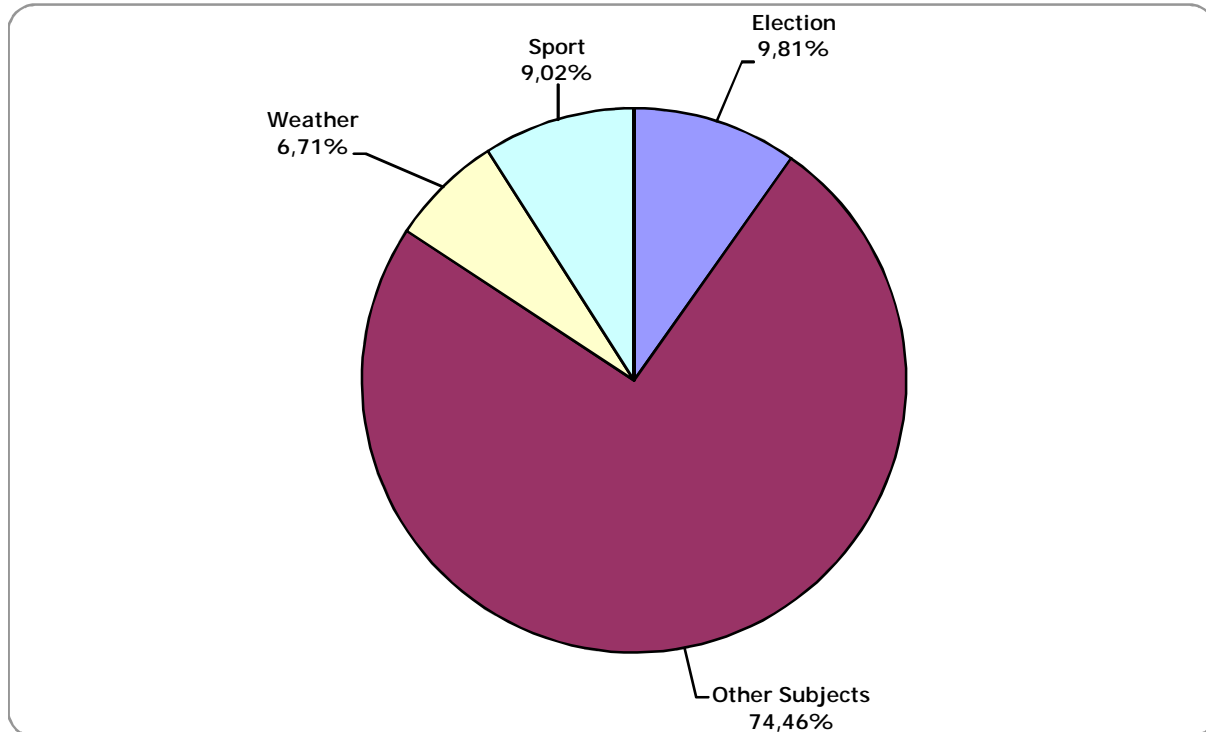


BELARUSIAN PARLAMENT ELECTIONS 2008

Radiofact (the 1st National Radio Channel)

23.08-05.09.2008

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

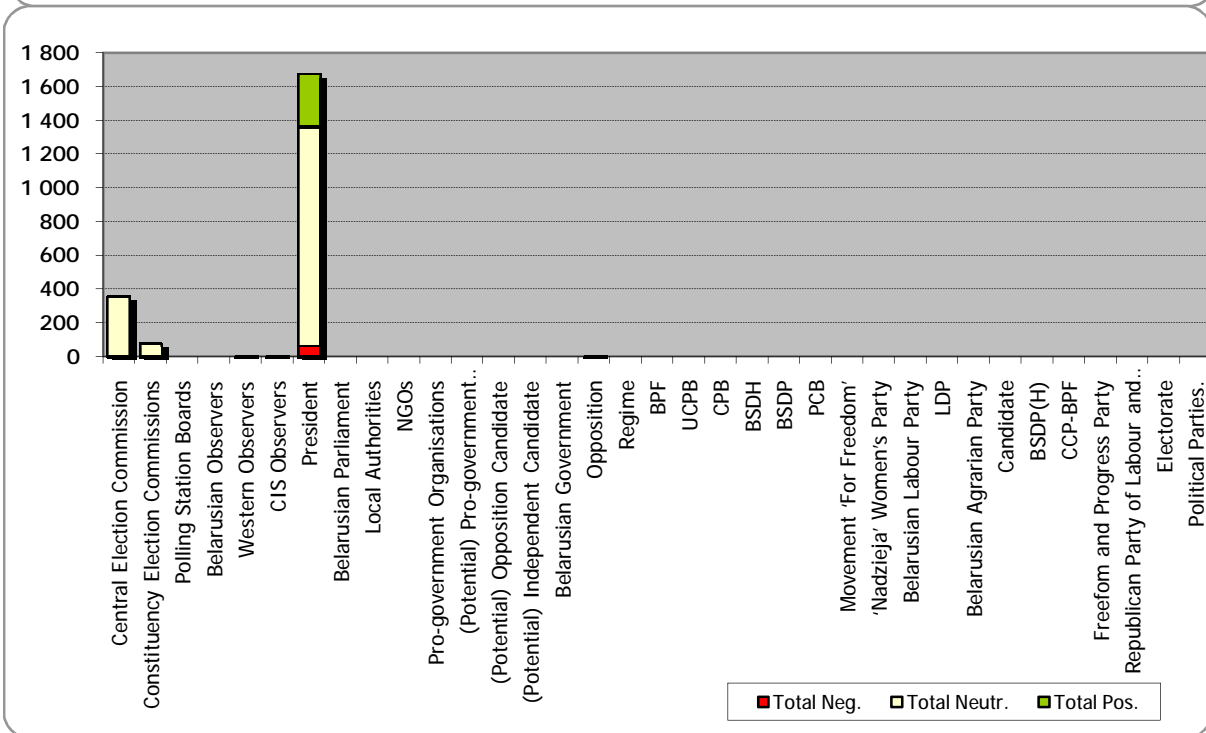
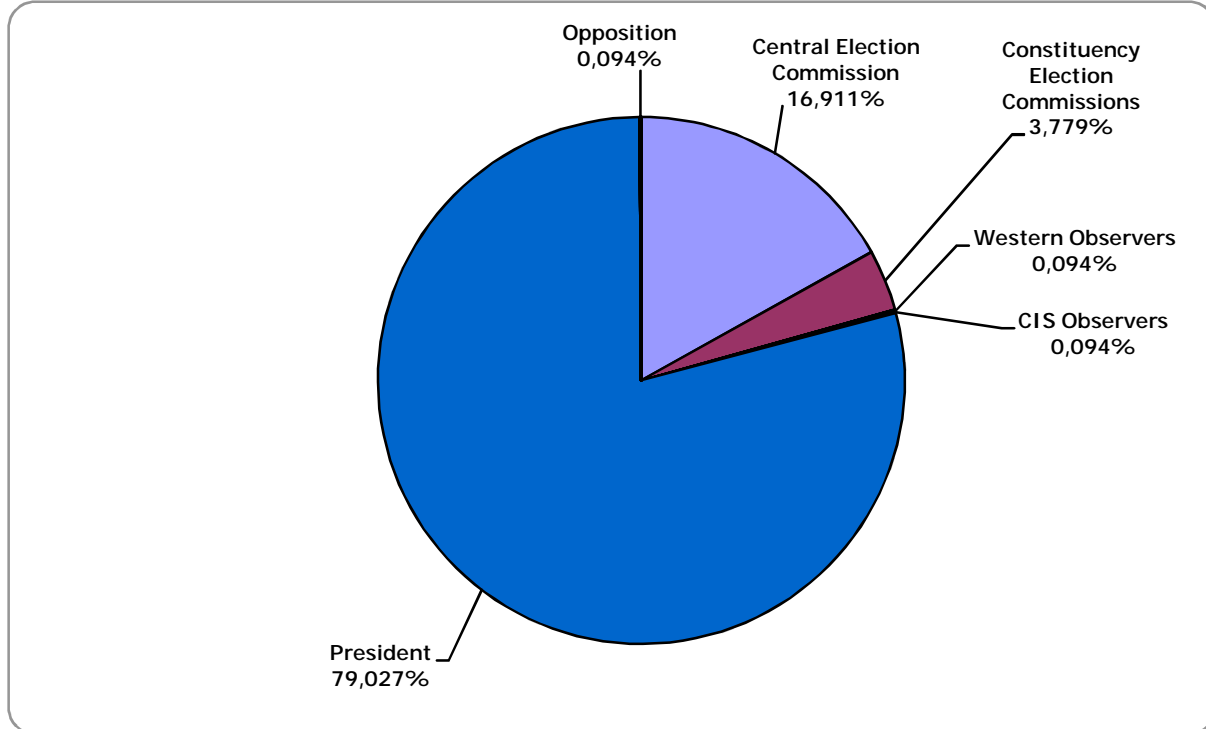




BELARUSIAN PARLAMENT ELECTIONS 2008

Respublika
23.08-05.09.2008

Measured in cm²



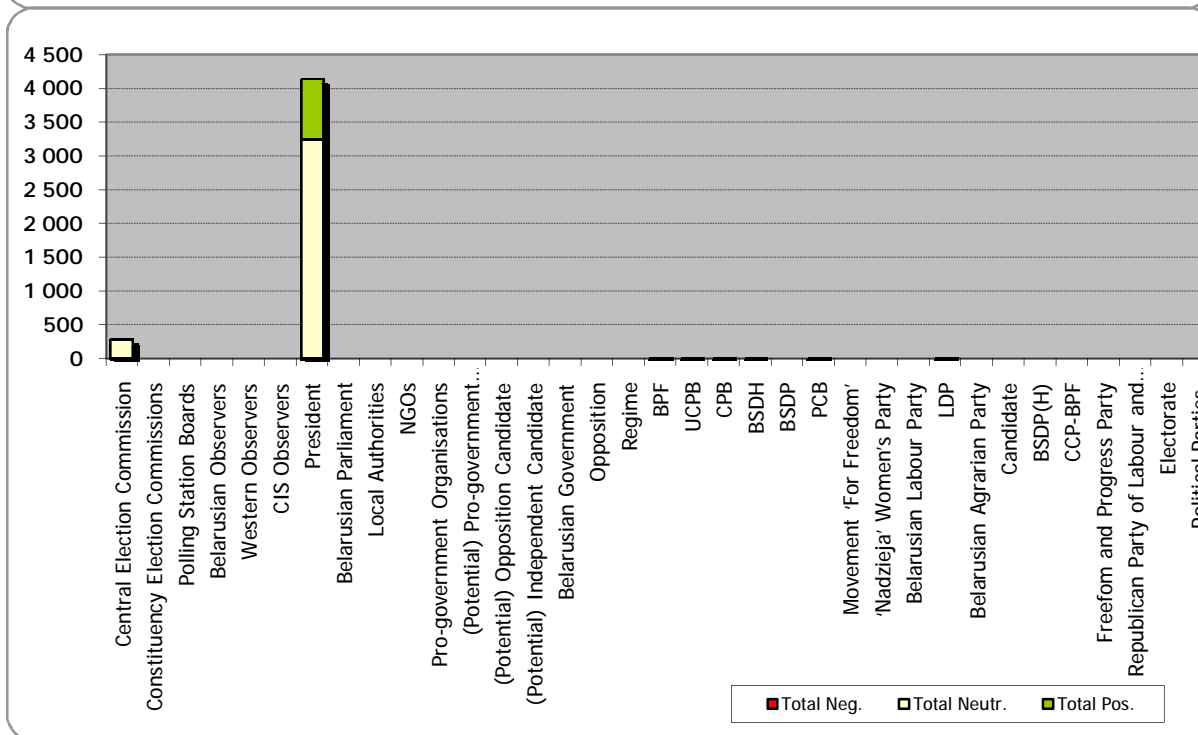
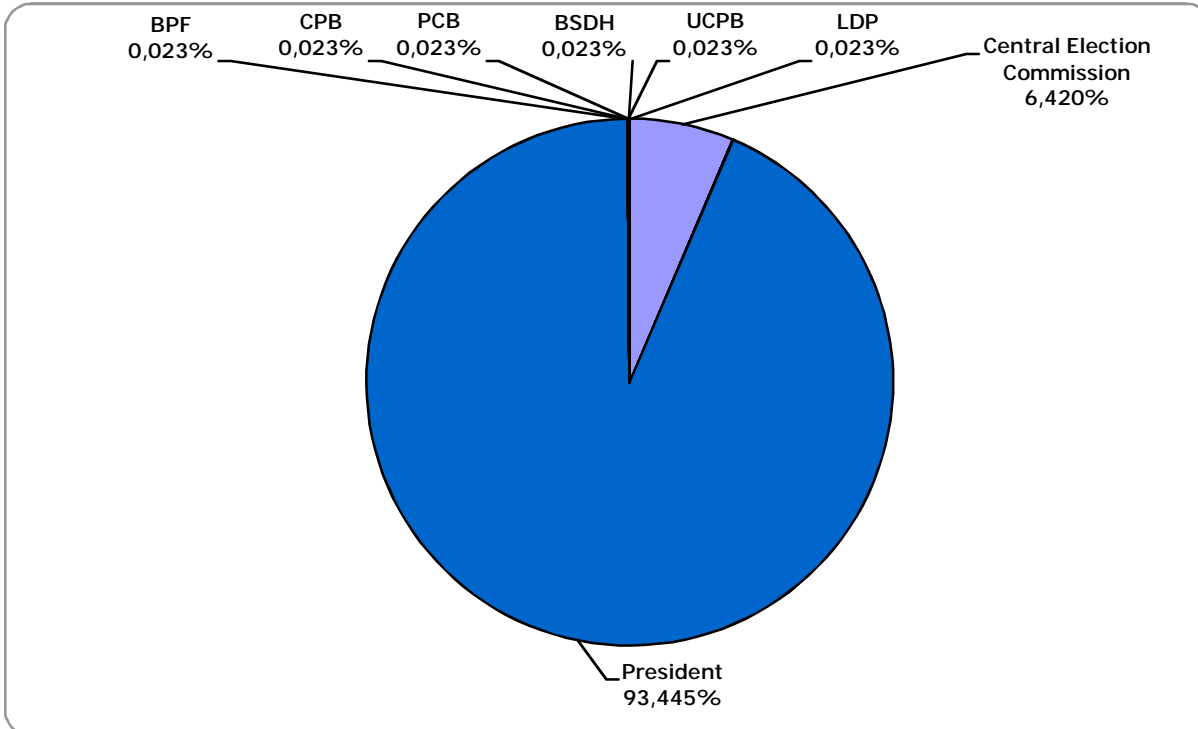


BELARUSIAN PARLAMENT ELECTIONS 2008

Sovetskaya Belorussiya: Belarus Segodnya

23.08-05.09.2008

Measured in cm²





BELARUSIAN PARLAMENT ELECTIONS 2008

NAVINY.BY
23.08-05.09.2008

Measured in symbols

