

**The Belarusian Association of Journalists**

**Monitoring: The 2020 Presidential Election Coverage in the Belarusian Media**

**Final Report**

*(25 May – 20 August 2020)*

The report summarises the findings of the monitoring of the 2020 presidential election coverage in the Belarusian media.

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1. **Introduction**

The monitoring was based on qualitative and quantitative analyses[[1]](#footnote-2) of election-related contributions to state-run and independent media.[[2]](#footnote-3) Its goal was to promote high professional standards and objectivity in election coverage.

It also aimed to draw the journalist community’s attention to the fact that it is journalists’ and media’s professional duty to give voters comprehensive and unbiased information about the election process, the candidates’ agendas and present a full range of their supporters’ and opponents’ opinions.

1. **Summary**

* The 2020 presidential election was marked by exceptionally high voter engagement, which became clear in the early stages of signature collection for the nomination of some opponents of the (no longer legitimate) incumbent.
* The government responded to this engagement by arbitrarily detaining and arresting lots of campaigners, public activists and opposition figures. The highest point probably was the arrest of the most popular presidential hopeful Viktar Babaryka and his son Eduard, who was in charge of his campaign. Criminal proceedings have been initiated against another runner for presidency, Mr Valery Capkała.
* The state-run media, in their turn, tried to shift the focus from the election, at the same time smearing its main actors, such as the opponents of the incumbent and their numerous supporters.
* The Belarusian TV and radio news programmes seldom highlighted election-related items. Their priority was President Lukašenka’s visits to different places, his meetings with employees of state-owned enterprises, the military and law enforcement, and his speeches to regional authorities, etc. It was only during the early voting, i.e. at the final stage of the campaign, when the election became the dominant subject.
* The background for election coverage was Belarus’ achievements thanks to the talent of the president and the Belarusian people.
* Apart from the achievements in economy, social welfare, medicine, and culture, election coverage in the state-run media was shaped by certain propaganda clichés. For example, they presented the incumbent’s opponents as a destructive force, claimed that Belarus saw a well-orchestrated campaign that aimed to bring the government into disrepute, and argued that Belarus risked losing its state sovereignty.
* Allusions to conspiracies were quite common. For instance, the opponents of the regime were viewed as plotters and dummies guided by ‘puppeteers’ from the East and the West through popular video blogs and streams. The state-run media instilled fear of foreign interference and partition of the state into the electorate, presenting these scenarios as inevitable in case the opponents of the regime rose to power.
* The registered candidates were entitled to direct access to state-run media. The incumbent, who was at the same time seeking re-election, however, refused to address the electorate or participate in debates. Instead, he gave his State of the Nation address to the National Assembly (Belarusian parliament [translator’s note]) during the early voting. It was actually a presentation of his agenda.
* As for the other candidates’ media appearances, they went on air at off-peak slots. Furthermore, their supporters and opponents were not given the opportunity to discuss their messages in the state-run broadcast media.
* The candidates’ media appearances were not publicised in advance. The TV and radio guides did not give their names. There was no information about the exact time when each candidate was to go on air. The TV and radio guides simply said, *‘Addresses of presidential candidates’.*
* In contrast to state-run media, their independent counterparts focussed on the key election actors, election dynamics and voters’ active engagement. They also turned the spotlight on each of the candidates and their political agendas.
* Other important subjects also included public initiatives to monitor the voting procedure and vote count, as well as arbitrary detentions of peaceful protesters and independent journalists.
* The assessments of the election given by the state-run and independent media following the voting day were polar opposites. Moreover, the ways in which they covered the campaign, the voting, its results, and the mass protests, when voters took to the streets, outraged by the lack of transparency in vote count and electoral fraud, revealed an enormous divide in Belarus’ media community.

What follows are actual facts and figures that give an insight into the specific features and trends of the 2020 presidential election coverage.

**3. Key findings**

Certain decisive events and developments undoubtedly attracted plenty of public attention to the 2020 presidential election. In particular, a number of presidential hopefuls without links to the traditional opposition came to the fore and some of them rapidly rose to prominence. In addition, part of urban population that was until recently indifferent to politics has dramatically become politicised. Another important change is connected with major shifts in the channels and media that the electorate is now using to get information. Last but not least, there were a lot of drastic events such as campaigners’ arrests, criminal cases opened against two leading presidential contenders, with one of them, Mr Babaryka, being arrested, and detentions and arrests of popular video bloggers, civil society activists and political figures.

**Nominees, candidates, and specific features of election coverage**

*3.1* *State-run media*

Unlike the previous presidential elections, where the focus of media attention had been on Lidzija Jarmošyna, the Chairperson of the Central Election Commission, this time it was Mr Lukašenka who made the most startling statements.

To give just one example, the following quote offers an insight into the atmosphere of the government’s harsh confrontation with some of its opponents: *‘Some nomination seekers’ campaigners are abusing the right to campaign in order to knock the society off-balance and destabilise the social and political situation; then they will form guerrilla groups and we cannot rule out the possibility that they are willing to stage a brawl in the square.’* (*Panarama, Belarus 1, 09/06/2020*)

In one of the *Panarama* news broadcasts, the president actually said that force would be used to crack down on active mass protests: *‘We will bring back everyone to their senses in the right place at the right time. There will be no power change in this country, to say nothing of a Maidan* [a reference to the wave of protests in Kyiv, Ukraine in 2013-14, when Viktor Yanukovich was ousted – translator’s note]*!’* (*Panarama, Belarus 1, 10/06/202010)*

The state-run media regularly repeated the accusation that certain contenders allegedly acted on orders of some HQs abroad. As the stage of collecting signatures for presidential nomination was nearly over, with one of the contenders already behind the bars, BelTA quoted the president as saying: *‘Masks have been torn off not only some dummies we had here, but also some puppeteers sitting outside Belarus.’* (<https://www.belta.by/president/view/net-bolshej-tsennosti-chem-suverennaja-i-nezavisimaja-belarus-lukashenko-niko>)

Another specific feature was the overall emotional charge, which sometimes bordered on apocalyptic visions. *‘This summer the government is going to take a hard examination,’* said the *Kontury* host in the opening remarks to one of his shows. *‘Peace, state sovereignty and the future are at stake.’* (*Kontury, ONT, 07/06/2020)*

It may sound like a paradox, but even though tensions ran high in the run-up to the election, the state-run media did not deliberately bring into focus election-related issues. As a rule, there were no special highlights in the news on the radio and TV, the print media do not have relevant sections, publishing just some sporadic contributions. When election-related events were mentioned, they were often placed in the context of the incumbent’s declarations or referred to indirectly.

The charts drawn as part of the monitoring illustrate certain specific features of the 2020 election coverage.

*Focus on the ‘main’ candidate.* The charts of the coverage given to the election actors show that Mr Lukašenka, who was at the time president seeking re-election, was in the limelight in all the state-run media. For example, from 25 May to 8 August 2020 *Nashi Novosti* and *Panarama* news allocated to him in total *75%* of the airtime given to all the election actors, while the corresponding figure for *Radyjofakt* between 25 May and 8 August 2020 was *73%.*

The remaining state-run media, both electronic and print, showed a similar picture. The smaller share of Mr Lukašenka’s media presence was found only in the monitored regional media.

*Ignoring or smearing the opponents*. The abovementioned trend was in stark contrast with how the state-run media presented the other presidential hopefuls. They were sometimes just mentioned in passing, i.e. when these media published or broadcast information about the registration of presidential candidates. For example, the same percentage (0.019%) of the contenders’ media presence in the *Mahiloŭskaja Praŭda* chart means that their names were just mentioned in the information provided by the CEC.

At the same time, those state-run media that did give some coverage to the contenders presented them in a negative or highly negative light. (This is visualized by the red bars in the charts for the state-run media.)

This type of assessment contrasted with the presentation of the ‘main’ presidential runner, who received highly positive, positive or neutral coverage (visualised by the green and white bars, respectively).

*Low priority of the election-related issues.* Paradoxically enough, the state-run media gave the presidential election low-key coverage, at least for most of the campaign. However, that was the fact, and the state-run media did so with good reason. The presidential election became a top priority only during the early voting, i.e. five days before the voting day on 9 August. It was the time when the state-run media did not only try to mobilise the electorate to vote early, but also overtly and covertly campaigned for the incumbent, who gave his State of the Nation address when early voting was already under way.

Here are a few examples of such campaigning. *‘Voters can support their candidate during early voting up to 8 August. You only need to show your ID,’* said the *Panarama* presenter on 5 August 2020. *‘Polling stations are busy today, among other things because of the State of the Nation address the President gave yesterday, which has strongly resonated with* *voters.’* (*Panorama, Belarus 1, 05/08/2020*)

Here is another statement modelled on the same propaganda pattern: *‘Belarusians have been actively expressing their position as citizens for three days already by going to the polls to cast a ballot for their candidate. It is concern for this country’s future that brings together all and everyone. The president’s State of the Nation address is still fresh in their mind, as his sincere words have got to the hearts of Belarusians.’* (*Panarama, Belarus 1, 06/08/2020*)

This type of coverage considerably increased the airtime and space given to election-related issues in the state-run electronic and print media.

Compared to the previous stage between 5 July and 2 August, when the upcoming election received just *3.38%* of airtime in *Radyjofakt* on the First National Channel of the Belarusian Radio, the share of election-related issues soared to *30%* during the early voting, to give just one example.

*3.2 Direct access*

Candidates’ media appearances and debates are the most crucial part of campaigning. The Central Election Commission (CEC) obliged the state media to provide the candidates with direct access to their audiences.

Compared to the 2015 presidential race, these broadcasts went on air at worse time slots. While the candidates’ media appearances began to be broadcast at 19.30 in 2015 and at 19.00 in 2010, this time they went on air starting from 17.00. A large proportion of working population was undoubtedly deprived of the opportunity to watch them at this time.

Meanwhile, the state-run print and electronic media did not advertise in advance the candidates’ TV and radio addresses. The TV and radio guides did not give their names. There was no information about the order and exact time when each of the candidates was to go on air.

*Belarus 1* also broadcast the candidates’ debates at off-peak slots, starting at 17.00.

The state-run media technically granted direct access to all the presidential runners. However, by broadcasting their media addresses and debates at worse time slots these media brought down the voter’s attention to them.

The candidates’ media appearances were not uploaded to the website of the Belarusian TV and Radio Company. Searches for ‘presidential candidates’ media appearances’ led to the 2015 spoiler candidates’ video addresses. (https://www.tvr.by/videogallery/informatsionno-analiticheskie/vystupleniya-kandidatov-v-prezidenty/).

As for the contents of the contenders’ media addresses, it was Head of the Belarusian TV and Radio Company Ejsmant who aired the state-employed journalists and the state media’s opinion, *‘Some candidates’ campaigning speeches are just lie-sodden, which we have demonstrated more than once in our shows.’* (*Ponyatnaya politika* [Politics Made Clear], *Belarus 1, 29/07/*2020) It goes without saying that the candidates were not invited to the shows that Mr Ejsmant meant, so they were deprived of the right to rebut.

Apart from direct access, the contenders’ presence in the state-run media was not just low but meagre, which is evident from the quantitative data cited above, e.g. 0.019% of the contenders’ media presence in the *Mahiloŭskaja Praŭda*.

As we have already said, the incumbent refused to appear on the radio and TV at the time set by the CEC. However, when early voting was already under way, he gave his annual State of the Nation address to the National Assembly and the Belarusian people. That was undoubtedly his election agenda, as it repeated a number of his earlier statements. Its final sentences brought to mind his earlier declarations about staying in power by force: *‘And remember, we have the police, the army and the security forces. They are the children of those who you want to harness in a wagon and whip. People wearing the uniforms, they won’t let you do this! […] You are a quarter of a century late. We now firmly hold the future in our hands. The future of our independent Belarus. We won’t give you the country.’* (https://www.sb.by/articles/prezident-nezavisimost-stoit-dorogo-no-ona-stoit-togo-chtoby-ee-sokhranit-i-peredat-budushchim-pokol.html)

The Sate of the Nation address went on air live and was repeated in the evening at prime time by all the state-run TV and radio stations. The sum total of the airtime given to the address of the president who was seeking re-election made up about 24 hours.

For purposes of comparison: in accordance with the procedure outlined by the CEC, each candidate was entitled to two thirty-minute addresses to the electorate on TV and two thirty-minute appearances on the radio at off-peak slots.

*3.3 The electorate, independent media and their positioning*

Throughout the presidential race, the state-run media tended to portray the opponents of the regime, e.g. supporters of some contenders, as criminals. For instance, when interviewed by *Glavny Efir* on *Belarus 1* on 31 May 2020, First Deputy Minister of the Internal Hienadź Kazakievič claimed, *‘Heads of the polling station boards and election commissions who were in charge of the parliamentary elections have been recently receiving threats. In other words, polling station boards and election commissions for this election have not yet been formed, but these people and their families are already being jeopardised.’*

Two weeks later, on 13 June 2020, *Nashi Novosti on Saturday* claimed that the wife of a policeman involved in detaining a coordinator of Mrs Cichanoŭskaja’s campaign had been menaced. *‘Another thing is that the spouse has been receiving threats, she is this policeman’s spouse,’* said the Minister of Internal Affairs Jury Karajeŭ. *‘Well, naturally, we will find them.’* (*Nashi Novosti, ONT,* *13/06/2020)*

*‘There are some other examples as well. Criminals, no doubt about it,’* a journalist commented on the Minister’s accusation.

Pictured in a highly negative light, voters who supported the contenders were conspicuous by their absence in person from the state-run media. In general, these media gave no voice to any of the incumbent’s opponents, airing only ‘pro-Lukašenka’ views.

Such claims were particularly numerous during early voting. The charts show the voices of this segment of voters (see *Electorate*). The predominantly green colour means that the state-run media portrayed such voters in a positive light. The positive statements were occasionally ‘substantiated’ by the findings of opinion polls conducted by unheard of or little known pro-governmental centres.

It was probably the first time since Belarus began holding elections that the state-run media had spoken of their independent counterparts as a threat to stability in society, claiming that the latter allegedly used new technologies to co-ordinate protests. In particular, they pinned the blame on some Telegram channels and the RFE/RL.

*‘If you watch carefully these bizarre streams of campaigning for nomination turned public gatherings, which is proven by headlines in independent media, you will of course see technologies behind them,’* claimed Mr Ivan Ejsmant, the Chairperson of the Belarusian TV and Radio in the *Klub Redaktorov* (Editors’ Club) weekly show on Belarus 1. *‘”Why are you here?” “I’m dissatisfied.” “Who are you going to vote for?” “I am going to vote against.” “Who is going to win?” “We probably won’t win.” “So what are you going to do on 9 August?”...’* <https://www.svaboda.org/a/30692928.html>

Soon afterwards the Belarusian independent media were accused of stirring a conflict, too. *‘Some media that are quite popular have openly taken an anti-governmental stance,’* said Mr Ivan Ejsmant, the Chairperson of the Belarusian TV and Radio in the *Klub Redaktorov* (Editors’ Club) weekly show on Belarus 1. *‘They are preparing a coup,’* clarified Mr Žuk, the Editor-in-Chief of *SB. Belarus Segodnya.*

*‘The non-state media are waging a war against different opinions,’* the show summed up what Mr Žukhad said. Finally, an interesting detail: during the discussion of independent media and journalists, service cartridges or a grenade and a pen featured in the background of the newsroom interior. (*Klub Redaktorov*, *Belarus 1*, 24/07/2020)

*3.4 Independent media*

The monitored independent media included [*www.naviny.by*](http://www.naviny.by)as well as the *Narodnaja Vola* and the *Komsomolskaya Pravda v Belorussii* print media.

They focussed their attention on the key election actors, such as the candidates, their campaigns, the CEC and the opposition. In addition, they offered quite extensive coverage of campaign rallies attended by voters, first and foremost led by Mrs Cichanoŭskaja, the most popular candidate who was either ignored or portrayed in a negative light by the state-run media.

At the initial stage of the election a lot of coverage was given to the detained presidential hopeful Mr Babaryka, Mrs Cichanoŭskaja’s husband and head of her campaign Siarhiej Cichanoŭski, the arbitrarily arrested bloggers and activists, and detained journalists.

[*www.naviny.by*](http://www.naviny.by) published election-related items in a special section, ranking them as a top priority. The coverage contained both information and analysis. The online resource also held debates between some of the contenders.

The items were balanced, which is supported by the assessments of the actors and the percentage of coverage they received. [*www.naviny.by*](http://www.naviny.by)featured a wider range of actors than the state-run media. The spotlight was on the presidential hopefuls, with quite different shares of coverage as compared to the state-run media.

The *Narodnaja Vola* primarily focused its attention on the contenders, speaking of them mainly in a neutral or neutral and positive tone. At the same time it was critical of the incumbent, the CEC, the government, and local authorities or gave them neutral coverage.

Just like the *Narodnaja Vola,* the *Komsomolskaya Pravda v Belorussii* typically offered neutral coverage, being occasionally critical of the incumbent, the CEC, and the government.

Unlike the state-run media, the monitored independent ones avoided referring to the actors in an anonymous and depersonalised manner. They also gave formal names of NGOs, movements, and political parties.

1. **Assessments of the election in the media**

The state-run media stuck to their traditional rhetoric in their assessments of the presidential election. In other words, they spoke of the voting day as a celebration.

BelTA quoted Mr Lukašenka, *‘You see it’s a celebration.’* (<https://www.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-vybory-proshli-kak-prazdnik-no-te-kto-zahotel-ego-isportit-zasvetilis-esche-jarche-402288-2020/> ) *‘It is actually a celebration,’* said the head of a municipal executive committee in Mahiloŭ region. *‘For our town and our country as a whole.’*  (*Naviny-rehijon,* Mahiloŭ TV and Radio Company, Belarus 4, *09/08/2020)*

As early as the evening of the voting day state TV claimed that the incumbent had won the election. For example, *Nashi Novosti* on ONT announced on 9 August 2020, *‘Lukašenka is leading.’* The same report said that 93.71% of voters at the polling stations with restricted access (in military units, etc.) had voted for him.

The next day the state-run media broadcast a statement of the CIS Observer Mission, which claimed that the election had been valid, meaningful and and transparent. BelTA quoted Mr Lebedev, the Head of the CIS Observer mission: *‘The CIS Mission did not witness any facts that could question the legitimacy of the presidential election in Belarus. […] The CIS Mission has arrived at the conclusion that the election on 9 August was held in compliance with the Constitution and the Election Code of Belarus. It was open and meaningful and granted the citizens of Belarus free and unfettered expression.’* (<https://www.belta.by/politics/view/missija-sng-ne-obnaruzhila-faktov-stavivshih-pod-somnenie-ligitimnost-vyborov-prezidenta-belarusi-402256-2020/>).

In addition, all the state-run media published congratulatory messages that Mr Lukašenka had received from high-ranking officials who praised his electoral ‘victory’.

By contrast, on the eve of the voting day independent *www.naviny.by* uploaded a video that exposed fraud techniques (<https://naviny.by/node/416163>). On the voting day and afterwards they informed the audience how independent observers had been expelled from the polling stations and detained, and also reported on instances of rigged vote count, fraudulent polling station boards’ minutes and other breaches of the law.

Those instances when votes were counted correctly and honestly and voters were able to read the polling station boards’ minutes clearly demonstrated that a vast majority had voted against the incumbent.

On 14 August 2020 the *Komsomolskaya Pravda v Belorussii* wrote: *‘”About 10.50 p.m. a police officer came out [of the polling station] and said he would lead a representative [of the voters] inside to take a photograph of the minutes,” said Hieorhi. “There were 1,869 ballots for Cichanoŭskaja and only 705 ones for Lukašenka at polling station 8 .*”’

Here is another quote from the same report under the headline *At some polling stations in Minsk Cichanoŭskaja gets several times more votes than Lukašenka*: *‘Cichanoŭskaja won in a landslide at polling station 11 in Liasny near Minsk. She got more than five times more votes. Lukašenka received only 178 ballots here, while 947 ones were cast for Cichanoŭskaja.*

*Polling station 27 in the village of Kopišča near Novaja Baravaja borough probably set a record: Cichanoŭskaja got here fifteen times more votes than Lukašenka! According to the polling station board’s minutes, 83 voters cast their ballots for the incumbent and 1,248 voted for Cichanoŭskaja.’* (https://www.kp.by/daily/217167/4267621/).

Other independent print media reported on electoral fraud, too. For example, on 14 August the *Narodnaja Vola* published Valer Karbalevič’s contribution: *‘Reports of electoral fraud at the sixth presidential election have been coming in from a vast variety of regions. There are even audio recordings uploaded on the internet where office holders of local administrations can be clearly heard giving instructions to rig the minutes in Lukašenka’s favour.’* (Valer Karbalevič. The people will prevail. *Narodnaja Vola, 14/08/2020*)

One of the factors that made this election stand out was long queues of voters who waited to be admitted to the polling stations right until they closed. Many of the voters then stayed to wait for the polling station boards’ minutes. As early as midday there were already problems with the internet connection, as the websites of independent media that had been giving extensive coverage of the election became inaccessible every now and then. This made the tension even more tangible.

After the polling stations had closed, voters spontaneously took to the streets in large numbers.

1. **Conclusions**

The state-run media in fact campaigned for one candidate, namely Mr Lukašenka. Direct access through TV and radio addresses did not change the fact that these media kept the contenders out of the limelight.

Nor did they function as a platform for airing critical views or discussing the country’s present condition and prospects for future development.

The state-run media’s assessments of President Lukašenka’s many years in office prompted the conclusion that there was no alternative to him and if he was not re-elected it would be the worst-case scenario, with chaos, partition of Belarus and a loss of independence.

It was clear from the very start of the election that the incumbent was preparing to use brutal force in order to stay in power.

As for the independent media, they focussed on providing information in their election coverage, clearly defined each candidate’s positions and treated them either neutrally, positively or critically. They also presented opinions of different participants in the election process. Expert analyses and opinions also made up an essential part of their election coverage.

During all the preceding elections, both parliamentary and presidential, the state-run media had a decisive impact on the election process. However, this presidential race has made it obvious that they have lost some of their influence. This is substantiated by the numbers of views and comments on YouTube media products owned by the state-run TV stations. We can speak of a new balance between trust and distrust that the 2020 presidential election has revealed.

Another reason why the electorate has been turning away from the state-run media is that nowadays the Belarusian media field offers a wide range of alternative sources of information with a much more up-to-date and dynamic content. They were easily accessible via mobile internet throughout the presidential race.

Furthermore, the assessments the state-run media gave the election, as well as their coverage of the campaign, the election results and the mass protests, when they turned their back on numerous detentions, brutal beatings and tortures of peaceful protesters and other regime’s atrocities, give grounds to speak of a profound crisis of governmental journalism.

Last but not least, the 2020 election has revealed a real demand for uncensored horizontal channels of information in society. The unremitting detentions of independent journalists attempt to crush these channels of communication.

1. The documents that form the basis for the qualitative analysis are The Code of Ethics in Journalism (adopted at the BAJ Congress in 2006); The Declaration of Principles of Professional Ethics in Journalism; Election Coverage in Media (Belarus), 2016 edition; and International standards of election coverage in media (Legal and ethical standards, recommendations to media and individual reporters).

   The quantitative analysis is based on measuring the time or space given to election coverage and its key actors. The report has a number of appendices in the form of summarising charts that show the quantitative data and the way each of the actors has been presented. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. *The electronic media include the* Panarama *news programme on Belarus 1 TV station, the* Nashi Novosti *news on ONT, the* Glavny Efir *weekly programme on Belarus 1, the* Kontury *weekly programme on ONT; the* Radyjofakt *radio programme on the First National Channel of the Belarusian Radio, and* Naviny-rehijon*, broadcast by Mahiloŭ TV and Radio Company. The online resources include* [www.tut.by](http://www.tut.by) and [www.belta.by](http://www.belta.by). *The print media are the* SB. Belarus Segodnia*, the* Narodnaja Vola, *the* Komsomolskaya Pravda v Belorussii*, the* Zviazda*, the* Minskaja Praŭda*, and the* Mahiloŭskaja Praŭda. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)