

THE BELARUSIAN ASSOCIATION OF JOURNALISTS

Mass Media in Belarus

Info-posting – November 23 – December 05, 2010

The Presidential candidates delivered their election speeches on the state TV and radio within the reporting period. It was only the head of state Aliaksandr Lukashenka, who refused to make use of TV and radio broadcasting to promote his pledges.

Also, the live TV and radio debates were held on December 4 and December 5 respectively. Lukashenka didn't take part in the debates either.

The Belarusian State TV and Radio Company appointed the TV debate presenters on its own. Thus, the highly provocative in relation to the opposition activists TV reporters Andrei Kryvasheyeu and Yury Prakopau appeared on the air. However, despite the fact, quite a few analysts noted that the Presidential candidates enjoyed moral prevalence during the debates.

At the same time, the Belarusian State TV had broadcast a number of reports, discrediting the opposition activists before the debates. Also, the state-owned printed media published a range of articles, discrediting some alternative Presidential candidates and their structures or initiative groups.

The facts were mentioned by the OSCE/ODIHR election observation mission representatives in their progressive report on the election in Belarus. "On the one hand, the candidates express openly their opinion... On the other hand, the official media cover very broadly and positively the President's activities, speaking rather negatively about the alternative candidates," said the OSCE/ODIHR Mission Head Gert Arens.

Moreover, several state-owned national and regional newspapers refused to publish election programs of some democratic candidates and asked them to introduce changes in the texts of the programs. Generally, the democratic candidates' teams complain about difficulties of canvassing in the regions. Among other, they note that local media, apart from the few survived non-state regional periodical editions, do not publish any information about the time alternative candidates' meetings as well as TV and radio speeches.

On **November 23, 2010**, the Belarusian Association of Journalists presented the second interim report, evaluating the coverage of the Presidential election 2010 in the Belarusian media.

"Unfortunately, there can't be seen any progress in the election coverage by the state-owned media. Just as before, they keep on presenting the President and the Central Election Committee as the main characters of the election," noted Ales Antsiapienka, the

Head of Media Monitoring Group. Despite the evidently positive changes like the candidates' live TV speeches in the peak-viewing-time as well as the TV and radio debates, the coverage of the Presidential election 2010 in the media doesn't differ significantly from the coverage of the Presidential election 2006, he believes.

The Belarusian Association of Journalists is going to present the following monitoring report, analyzing the media coverage of the election within the period of active canvassing on December 14, 2010.

At the same time, the First Channel of Belarusian State TV broadcast a report in the "Panorama of the Week" informational and analytical program (presenter - Yury Prakopau), that intended to defame the opposition on **November 22, 2010**. The report dwelt upon "The Young Belarus" NGO activities. Among other, the organization activists were accused of misapplication of grant funds and blamed for leading the immoral way of life. Nika Lazouskaya and Volha Brunevich, mentioned in the TV report, appealed to the Public Prosecutor's Office in Frunzenski City District of Minsk with a demand to check the legality of broadcasting the video materials, used in the program. The girls claimed the video files had been taken from private archives and made public illegally.

As reported on November 24, 2010, Yauhien Shapchyts, a staff video editor from the Belarusian State TV and Radio Company had been forced to leave his position for creating a scandalous canvassing video material «Granny-2010» about a grandson, who hid his granny's passport in order to prevent his ancestor from casting her vote for a candidate that resembled A. Lukashenka. Y. Shapchyts stated that he was forced to resign in connection with the produced video material. The Press Service of Belarusian State TV and Radio Company confirmed the fact of Y. Shapchyts' dismissal. However, the officials stated that the journalist had left his position in accordance with his own wish. It is worth mentioning that the video material was watched by more than 23,000 people in the YouTube during the first day of its presence on the Web on November 08, 2010.

On **November 29, 2010**, the Editors-in-Chief of "*Respublika*" and "*Narodnaya Gazeta*" nation-wide state-owned newspapers sent letters to a Presidential candidate **Vital Rymasheuski** with a request to make changes in his election program that had to be published in the corresponding periodical editions. In particular, they asked the candidate either to take away his call to come to October Square in Minsk after the Presidential election at 8 p.m. on December 19, 2010 or to present a permit for holding the meeting in the written form. Moreover, the Editor-in-Chief of "Zarya" newspaper (Brest) requested Rymasheuski's proxy to introduce amendments to the election program. Apart from the appeal to come to October Square in Minsk, the Editor disliked a paragraph about the consequences of Chernobyl disaster as well as a sentence about the "mafia at the district and regional levels". According to BelaPAN News Agency some more alternative candidates encountered grudges against their election programs on the part of state-owned media. In particular, **Ryhor Kastusou** was forced to change the words "Lukashism" and "Lukashenka regime" to "the single-handed leadership" and "the authoritarian regime." **Dzmitry Us** was requested to delete his comparison between the present-day election system in Belarus and the ballot system in Germany in the 1930-ies. The BAJ lawyers are convinced that the media are obliged to publish the candidates' election programs without amendments and that the media do not take

responsibility for publishing the candidates' election pledges. However, Mikalay Lazavik, the Head of Central Election Committee stated that editorials could be brought to legal responsibility for publishing appeals for participation in the unauthorized public actions.

The Head of OSCE/ODIHR election observation mission Gert Arens informed the "Euroradio" reporters about some findings, mentioned in the interim report on the election campaign in Belarus on **December 2, 2010**. *"On the one hand, the candidates express openly their opinion... On the other hand, the official media cover very broadly and positively the President's activities, speaking rather negatively about the alternative candidates,"* said the OSCE/ODIHR Mission Head Gert Arens.

According to Mr. Arens, 14 long-term observers from 13 OSCE member-states are working in Minsk nowadays. 20 more mini teams, each consisting of two observers, are working in the regions. The OSCE/ODIHR election observation mission is constantly monitoring the Belarusian State TV Channel, ONT, STB, Lad, the Belarusian versions of NTV and RTR as well as the state-owned nation-wide newspapers "SB. Belarus Today", "Zviazda", "Respublika", "Narodnaya Vola" and independent periodical editions "Komsomolskaya Pravda", "Zviazda", "Nasha Niva", and "Belorusy i Rynok."

On **December 3, 2010**, the Public Prosecutor's Office for Miensk region finished its inspection on the fact of A. Biabienin's death and refused to file a criminal case. According to the official investigation results, the journalist and a co-founder of "Charter'97" Web-site committed a suicide. It should be reminded that A. Biabienin's corpse was found in a loop in his summer house on September 3, 2010. It is worth mentioning that the OSCE experts were invited by the state authorities to look into the circumstances of this death. Basing on the findings and documents, presented by the Belarusian Public Prosecutor's Office, the experts stated that the media worker had hanged himself. However, the journalist's colleagues, friends, and fellow-fighters, including a Presidential candidate Andrei Sannikau, disagree with the official suicide version. According to Sannikau, it is senseless to expect the unbiased investigation on the case from the incumbent state authorities.

Prepared by the BAJ Monitoring Service