

The Coverage of the 2012 Parliamentary Elections in the Belarusian Media

Bulletin No.2

(20 – 31 August 2012)

The monitoring aims to:

- assess whether the Belarusian media are able to give an exhaustive and comprehensive coverage of the election process and whether they follow the guidelines of ethics in journalism and the internationally accepted standards in their election coverage;
- draw the attention of the journalists' community in the country to the fact that it is the duty of the media to provide voters with balanced and comprehensive information about the election process, as well as the candidates' and their supporters' political and social agendas and opinions;
- analyse how the media influence the voters' electoral choice.

The monitoring covers seventeen Belarusian media, both state-owned and independent, electronic and printed, nationwide and regional.¹ The content analysis is based on both qualitative and quantitative data, *ie* we assess the manner in which the election actors are presented and the amount of space/air time given to the election coverage in the printed and electronic media, respectively.

The given time span covers candidate registration and the beginning of the campaign, which marked the starting point for the candidates' TV and radio addresses. Meanwhile, the head of the OSCE/ODIHR observer mission arrived in Belarus. A bit earlier, on 25 July, to be more precise, the CIS observer mission began its work.

Main Findings and Some Conclusions

The manner of campaign coverage did not change essentially in the state-owned media. They continued focusing on the way the election procedure is organised and its technicalities. The CEC and constituency commissions still remained the main information source for the state-owned media. For example, the CEC received 50% of the total election coverage time in *Panorama* news programme on *Belarus 1* TV station, 35% of the election coverage time in *Radyjofakt* on the 1st Channel of the National Radio and about 48% of the space given to all the monitored subjects in *The 7 Dniy* weekly.

This, however, is not to say that the state-owned media featured the elections prominently – in fact, quite on the contrary. Thus, *Radyjofakt* allocated 1.7% of its total air time to the upcoming

¹ **The electronic media** are *Panorama* (Panorama) news programme on *Belarus 1* TV station; *Nashi Novosti* (Our News) news program on ONT TV station; *V Tsentre Vnimaniya* (In the Focus of Attention) weekly analytical program on *Belarus 1* TV station; *Radyjofakt* (Radiofact) on the 1st Channel of the National Radio; *Naviny Rehijona* (Regional News) on the Homiel Regional TV and Radio Company; *Naviny* (News) on Homiel FM; *Naviny Mahiloŭ* (Mahiloŭ News) on the Mahiloŭ Regional TV and Radio Company; *Naviny* (News) on the Mahiloŭ Regional Radio; **the Internet resources** are www.naviny.by, www.belta.by; and **the printed media** are *The Belarus Segodnia* (Belarus Today), *The Narodnaja Vola* (People's Will), *The 7 Dniy* (7 days), *The Naša Niva* (Our Field), *The Komsomolskaya Pravda v Belorussii* (YCL Truth in Belarus), *The Homielskaja Praŭda* (Homiel Truth) and *The Mogilevskaya Pravda* (Mahiloŭ Truth).

elections, as compared to 10.5% given to sport and 10.1 % given to the weather. Even though *Panorama* set a record for the CEC coverage, in general the news programme gave the elections less coverage than the weather and sport (2.1%, 2.9% and 16.1%, respectively). The same trend is typical of the regional electronic media. For example, *Naviny* on the Mahiloŭ Regional Radio gave 0.47% of its air time to the election coverage, while the weather and sport received 8.4% and 3.5%, respectively. Just the same amount of air time – a mere 0.47% – was given to the upcoming elections in *Naviny Rehijona* on the Homiel Regional TV and Radio Company. Thus, the elections are obviously far from being a top priority in the state-owned media.

As for the manner in which the election actors are presented, the state-owned media spoke positively or neutrally of the CEC and its work, gave mainly positive or neutral coverage to the CIS observer mission and presented the OSCE observers mostly neutrally.

This monitoring stage revealed a relatively new trend in the election coverage in several state-owned media – although they tended to cover the election actors minimally, the latter were presented in chiefly neutral light. This refers, in particular, to *Radyjofakt*, *The 7 Dniy* and to a certain extent to the regional media. This is especially noticeable if we contrast them with *V Tsentre Vnimaniya* weekly analytical program on *Belarus 1* TV station and its ideologically biased coverage of the election actors. At the same time, these media tend to give the election process a rather simplistic coverage by ignoring a lot of political and non-political actors engaged in the run-up to the parliamentary elections. For example, *Radyjofakt* presented only six actors, *The 7 Dniy* wrote about three of them, while TV news on the Homiel and Mahiloŭ Regional TV and Radio Companies gave coverage to ten and eight election actors, respectively.

It has been said above that the candidates are entitled to address voters via the state-owned media. They are on air at more favourable time, as compared to the 2008 parliamentary elections, *ie* from 7 pm to 8 pm. (In the run-up to the previous parliamentary elections, candidates' addresses were broadcast on TV from 6 pm to 6:30 pm, in Minsk and other big cities – from 5:30 pm to 6:30 pm.) On the radio the candidates received time from 6 pm to 7 pm. However, instead of being broadcast live, the candidates' addresses were recorded, which facilitated their censorship. According to an independent online resource, '*none of the five party members [of the United Civil Party – ed.] standing for parliament in the region [Mahiloŭ region – ed.] have so far been allowed on air.*' (http://naviny.by/rubrics/elections/2012/08/30/ic_news_623_400513/). Meanwhile, '*on 29 August, Belarus 2 did not broadcast the address of candidate Uladzimir Niapomniashchych, who is running for parliament with the United Civil Party at Homiel-Navabielica Constituency 36.*' (<http://baj.by/be/node/13814>).

Moreover, the monitored state-owned media did not announce the candidates' addresses – they did not give the exact names, the day and time of the address or mention which party the candidate represented. Thus, they deprived voters of essential information, so that they could not arrange for watching or listening to 'their' candidates. Meanwhile, the printed TV listings of the stations that broadcast the addresses – *Belarus 2* and CTV – instead of announcing *Addresses of Parliamentary Candidates*, simply say, *Elections'2012*. A telltale sign: according to BelTA, the CEC regulations on the use of the media in the run-up to the parliamentary elections do not provide for the publication of candidates' programmes in the printed media (http://www.belta.by/ru/all_news/society/Pod-tele--i-radiodebaty-kandidatov-v-deputaty-otvedeno-samoe-rejtingovoe-efirnoe-vremja---Lozovik_i_605719.html). The texts and videos of the candidates' addresses are conspicuous by their absence on the websites of the nationwide TV stations and regional TV and radio companies. In this way the state-owned media are in fact marginalising the key actors in the election process.

So far, the state-owned media have clearly centred on the way the elections are organised and their technicalities, instead of the competition of ideas and political agendas. This has left political parties and other key figures of the elections invisible to voters.

This type of election coverage goes well with the assessment of the parliamentary elections by the head of the CEC Jarmošyna: *'After all, this is not a presidential election, when candidates represent the whole country and certainly voice quite different opinions. In the upcoming elections the main issues to be debated will be of local interest to voters in each particular constituency. That is why perhaps they will be rather low-key.'* (Belarus 1, Panarama, 23 August 2012). Thus, in the monitored time span, the state-owned media went on covering the elections as a low-key local event rather than a high-profile political process of nationwide importance.

The independent online resource www.naviny.by is undoubtedly a media leader in terms of attention given to the parliamentary elections. It covered twenty six election actors, which is ten more than the state-owned www.belta.by. In addition, www.naviny.by offered the most diverse information, not only released by the government institutions and officials but also provided by other political and non-political actors. This resource gave balanced assessment of the election actors and their work.

The Naša Niva weekly gave the election process the same minimalist coverage as the state-owned *7 Dniy*. The only difference was that *The Naša Niva* did not publish the official information released by the CEC but wrote about the Movement for Freedom and mentioned other opposition actors. In presenting the subject of parliamentary elections, *The Komsomolskaya Pravda v Belorussii* limited itself to an interview with an official in its thick edition. Thus, the monitored independent media, with the exception of www.naviny.by, did not feature the parliamentary elections prominently.

If we compare the coverage of the parliamentary elections in 2008 and 2012, it can be argued that there are not any essential differences between them. Here is one of the conclusions made by the BAJ monitoring group in 2008: *'This time span's findings confirm the trends identified in the previous monitoring reports – the media coverage of the campaign in the state media is lacklustre and low-key, 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 same conclusion may just as well be applied verbatim to this year's elections.

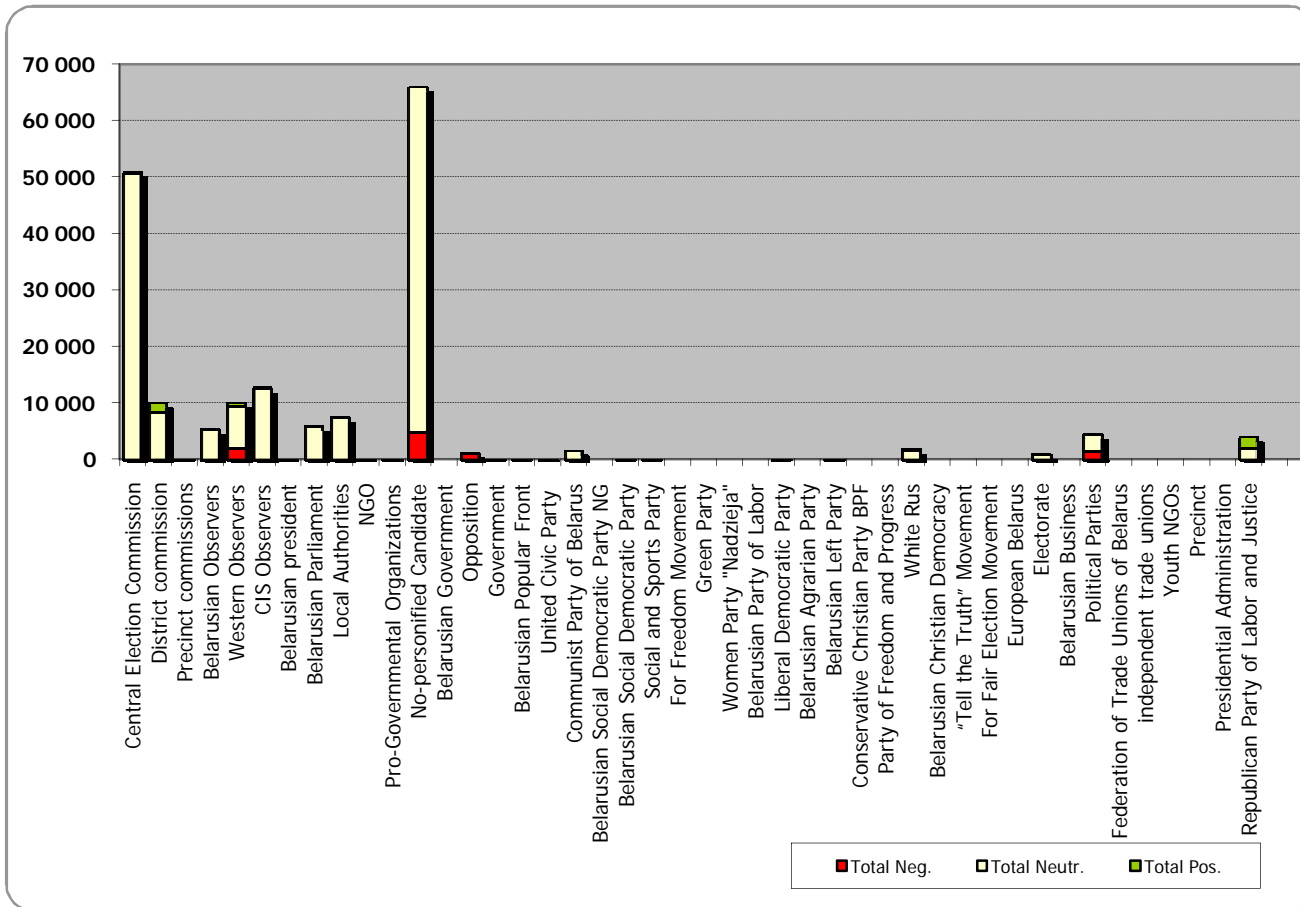
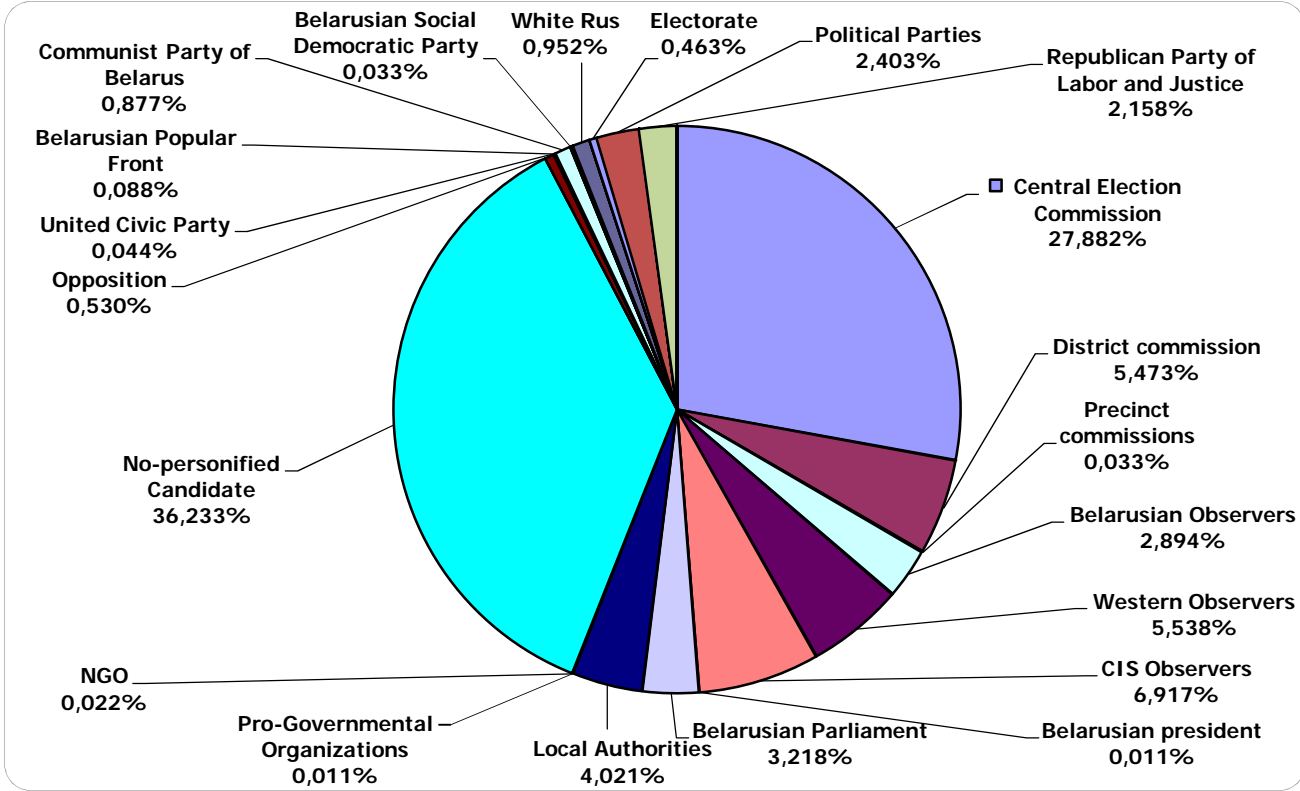
There is perhaps a broader conclusion to be drawn from the current campaign: the way the election process is conducted and covered in the media clearly reveals the symptoms of general political stagnation, which is sometimes mistaken for political stability.



BELARUSIAN PARLAMENT ELECTIONS 2012

BELTA.BY
20.08 - 31.08.2012

Measured in symbols



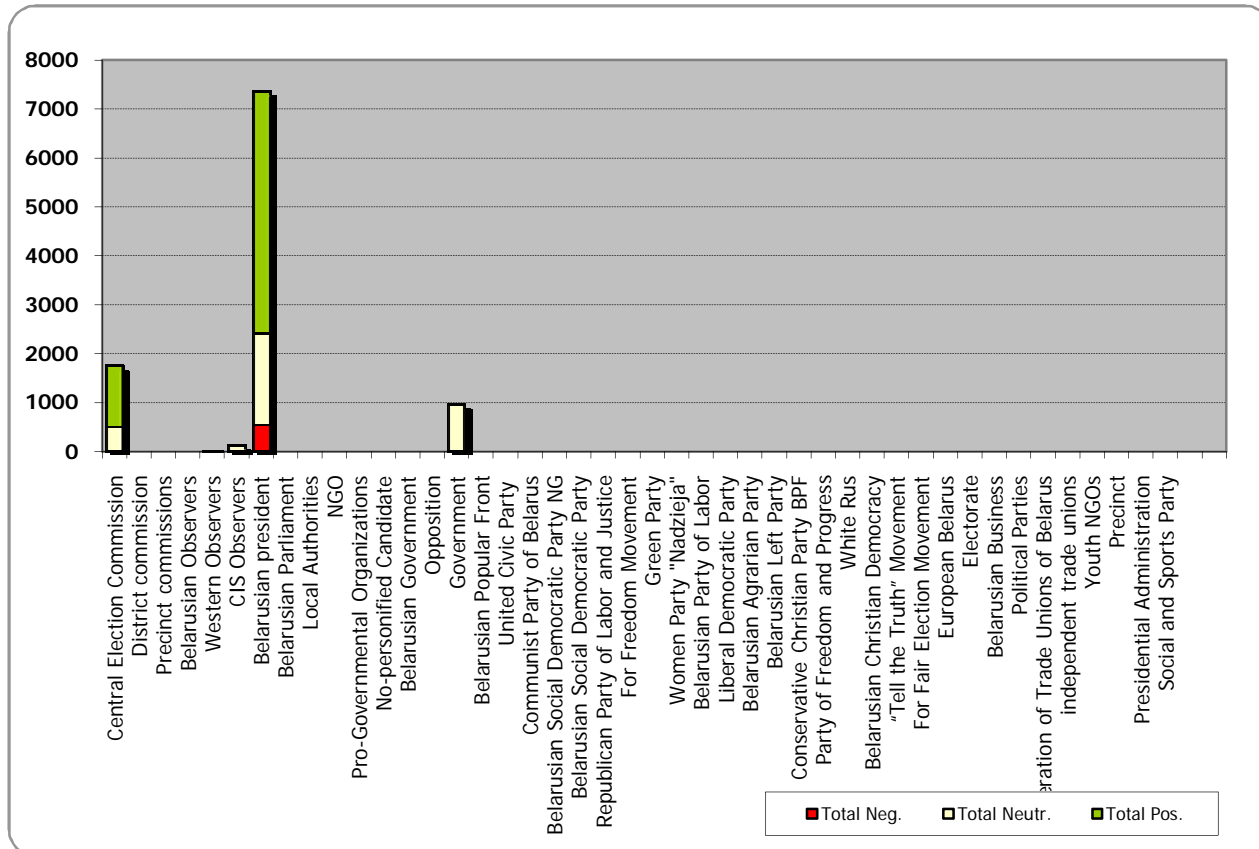
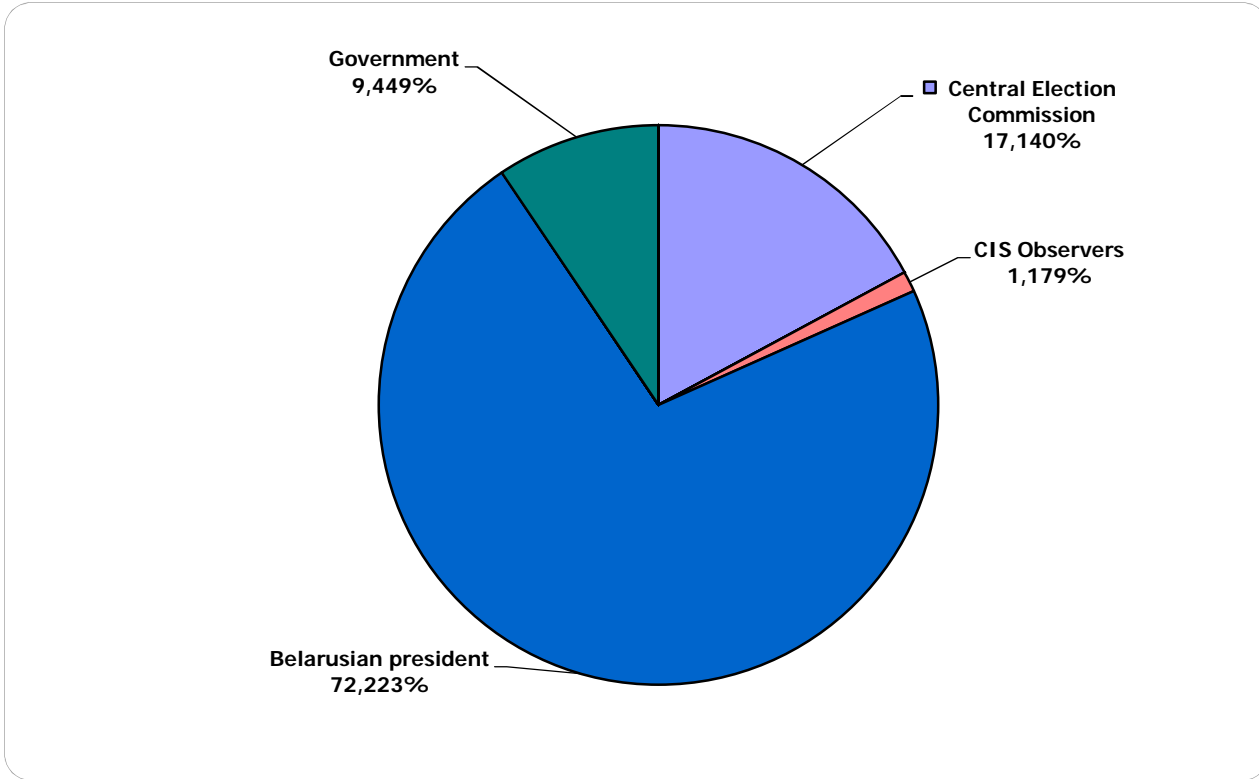


BELARUSIAN PARLAMENT ELECTIONS 2012

“Sovietskaja Bielorusija”

20.08 - 31.08.2012

Measured in cm2

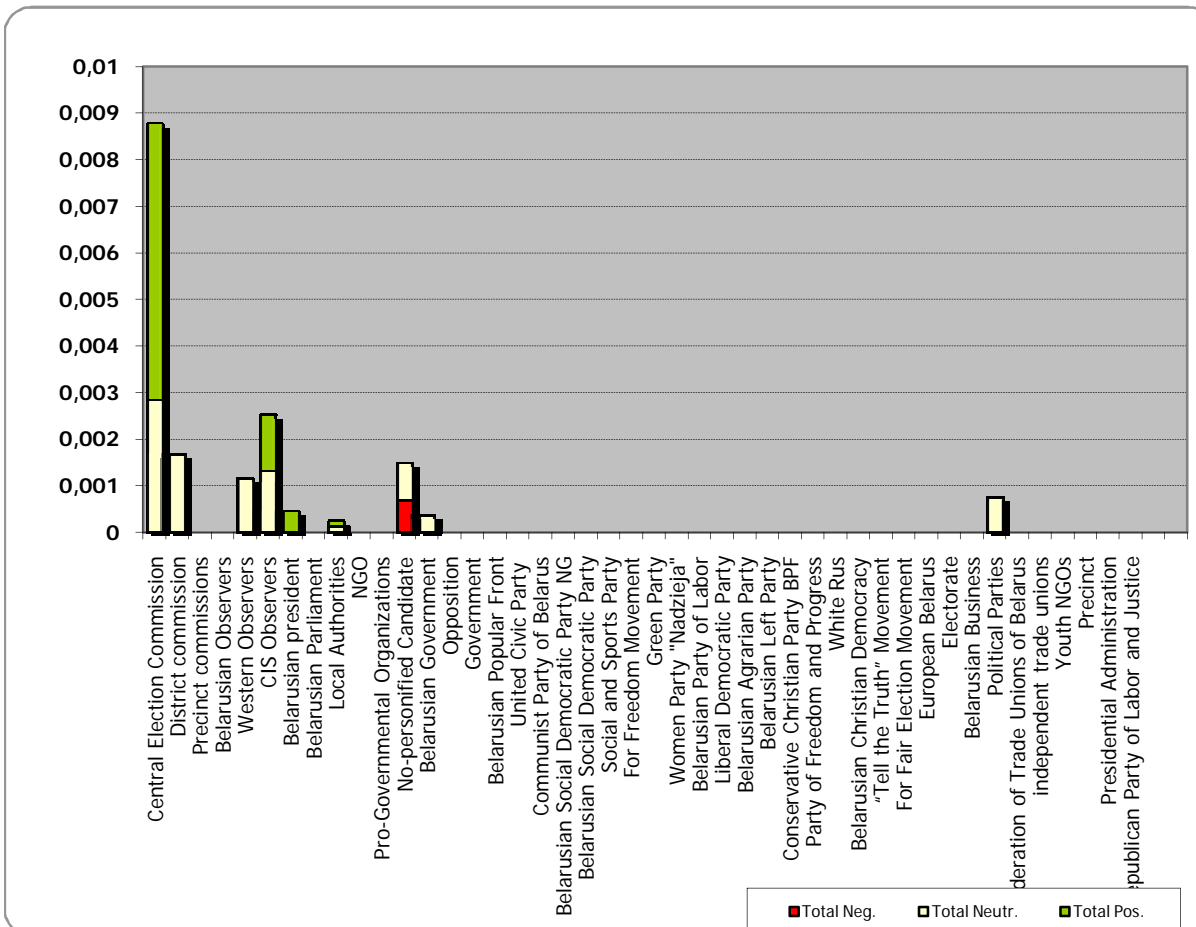
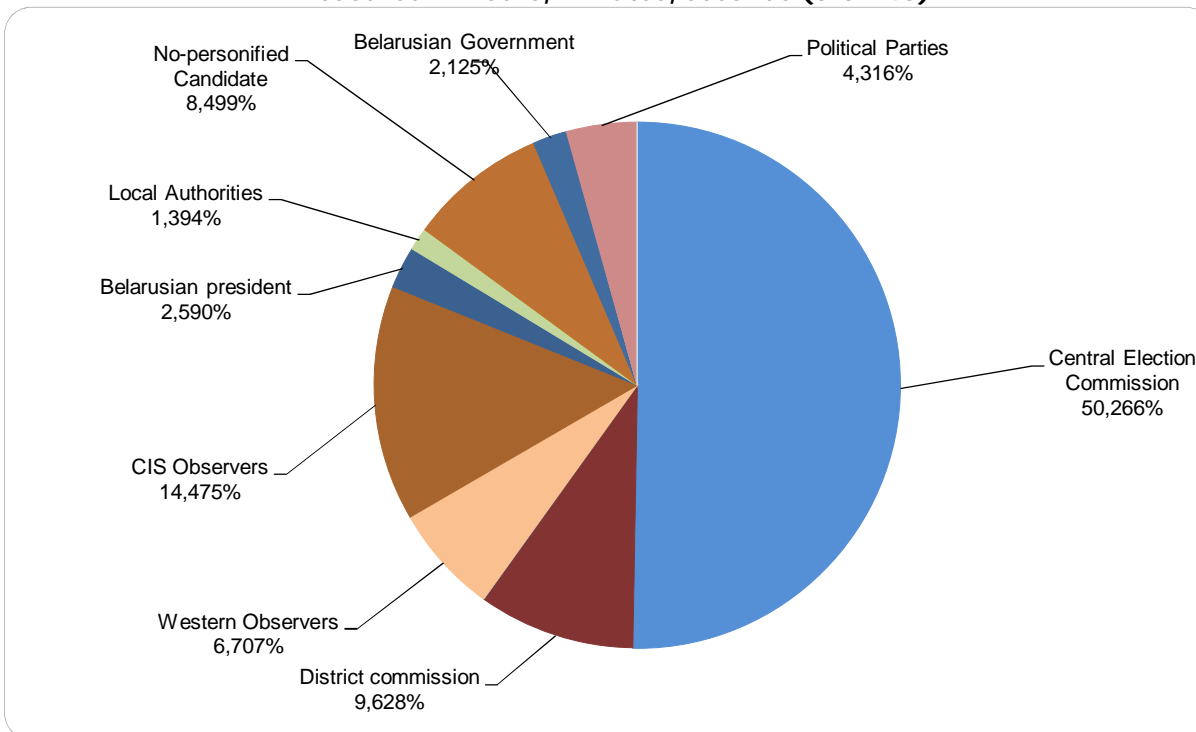




BELARUSIAN PARLAMENT ELECTIONS 2012

Panorama
20.08 - 31.08.2012

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

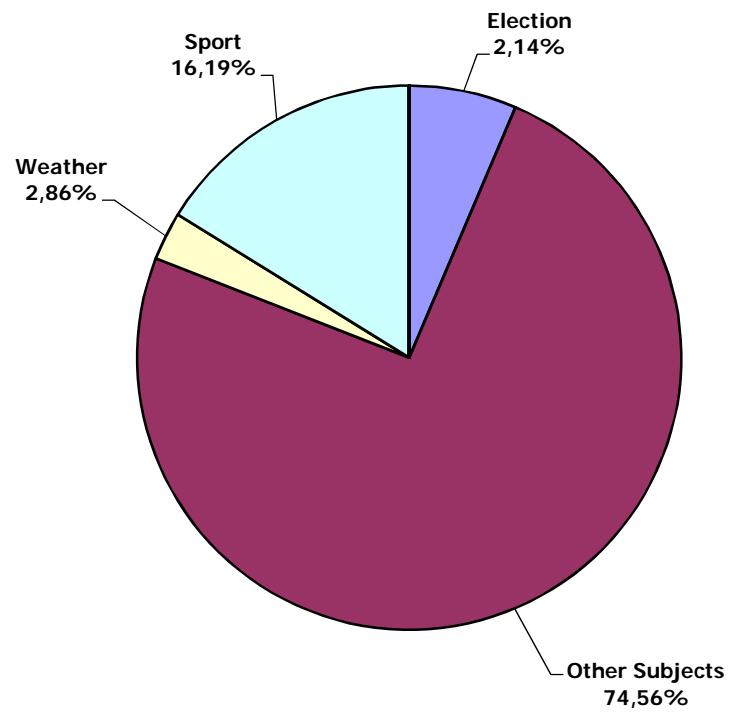




BELARUSIAN PARLAMENT ELECTIONS 2012

Panorama
20.08 - 31.08.2012

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

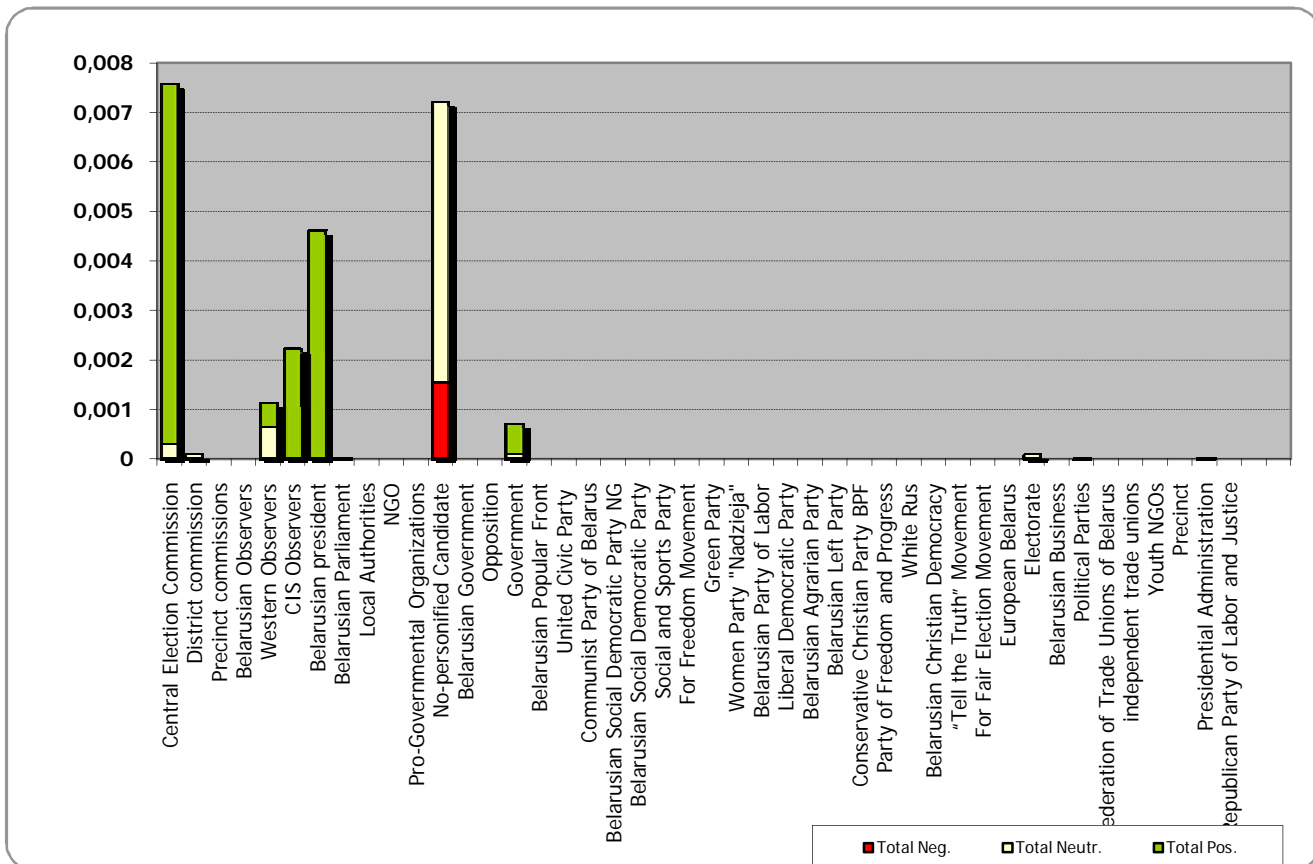
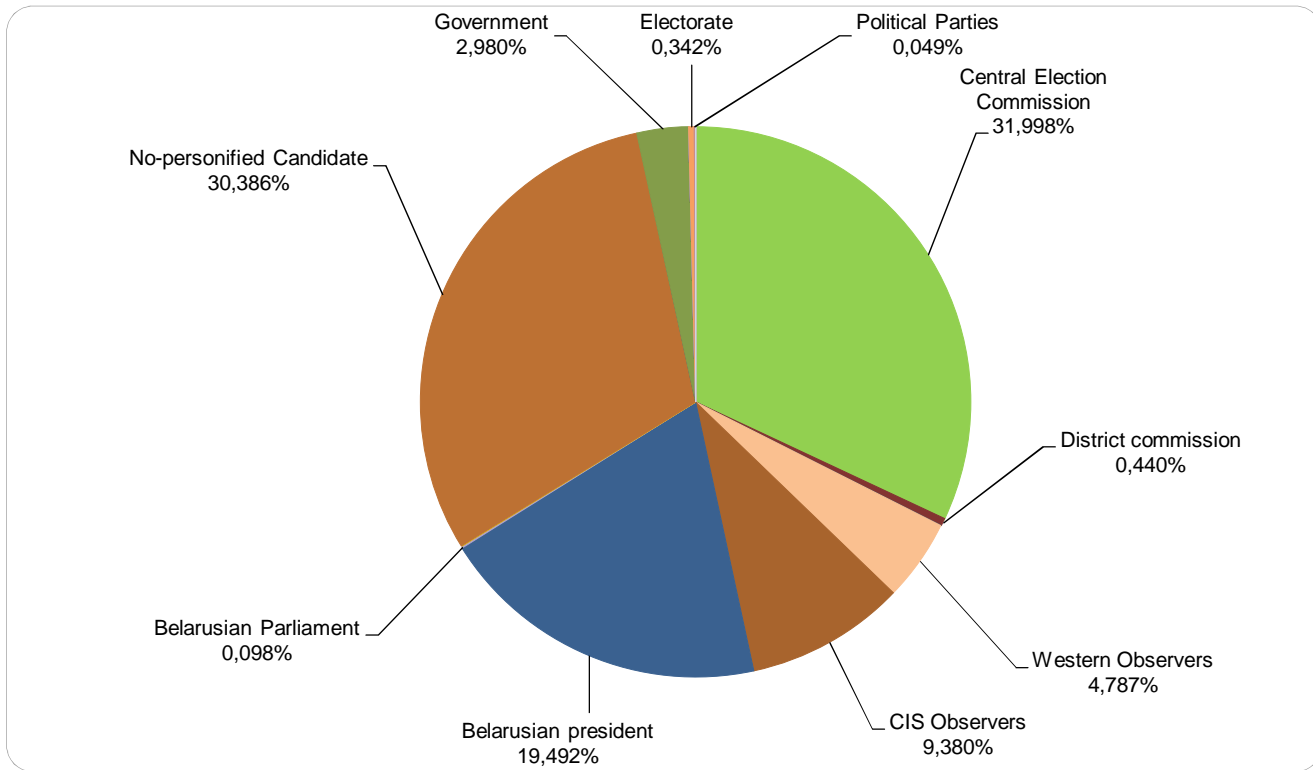




BELARUSIAN PARLAMENT ELECTIONS 2012

ONT/NASHI NOVOSTI
20.08 - 31.08.2012

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



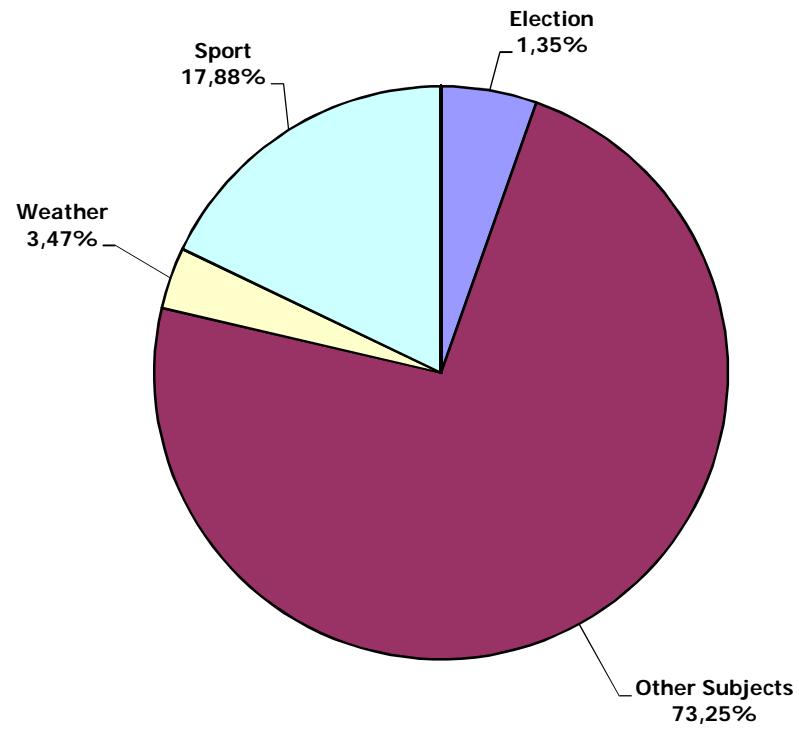


BELARUSIAN PARLAMENT ELECTIONS 2012

ONT/NASHI NOVOSTI

20.08 - 31.08.2012

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



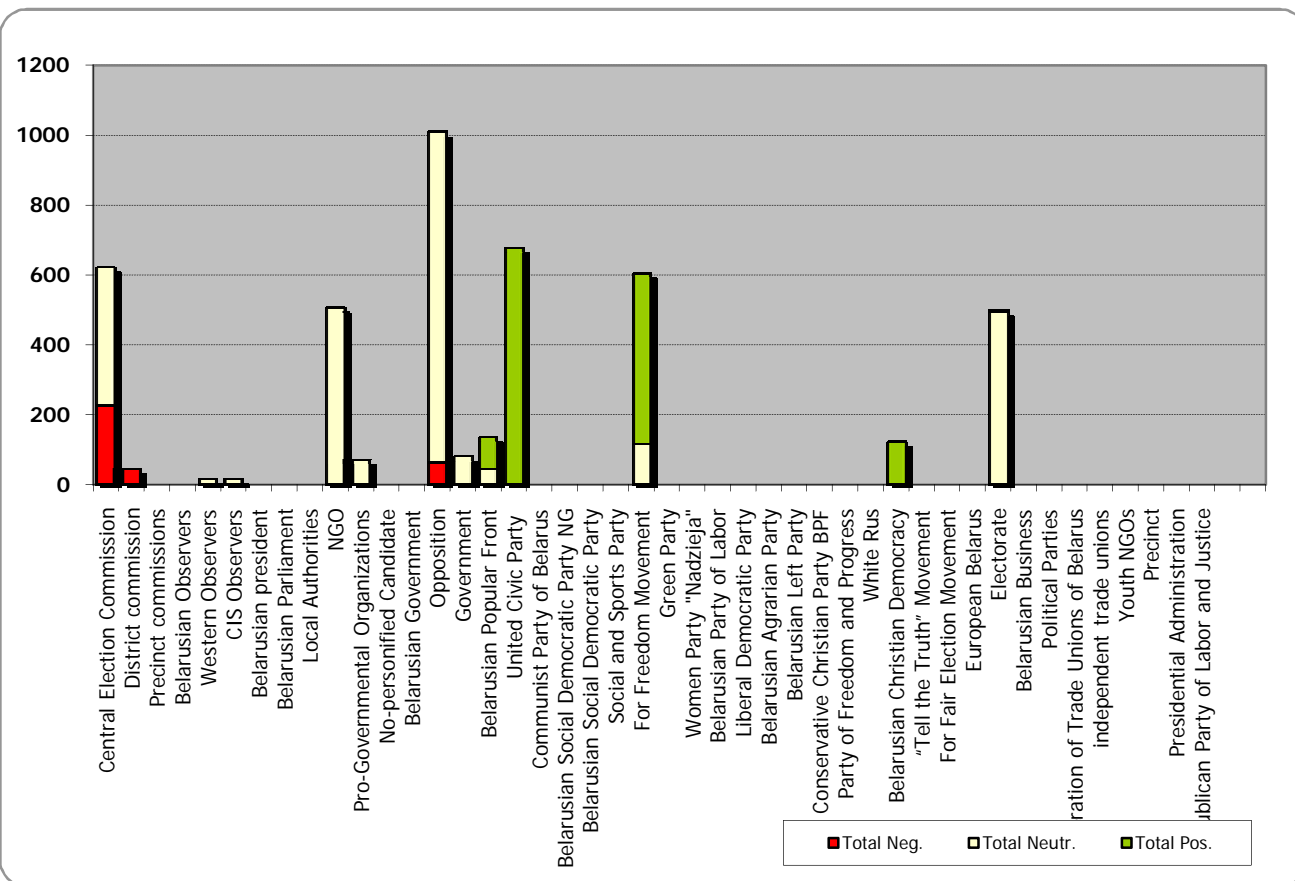
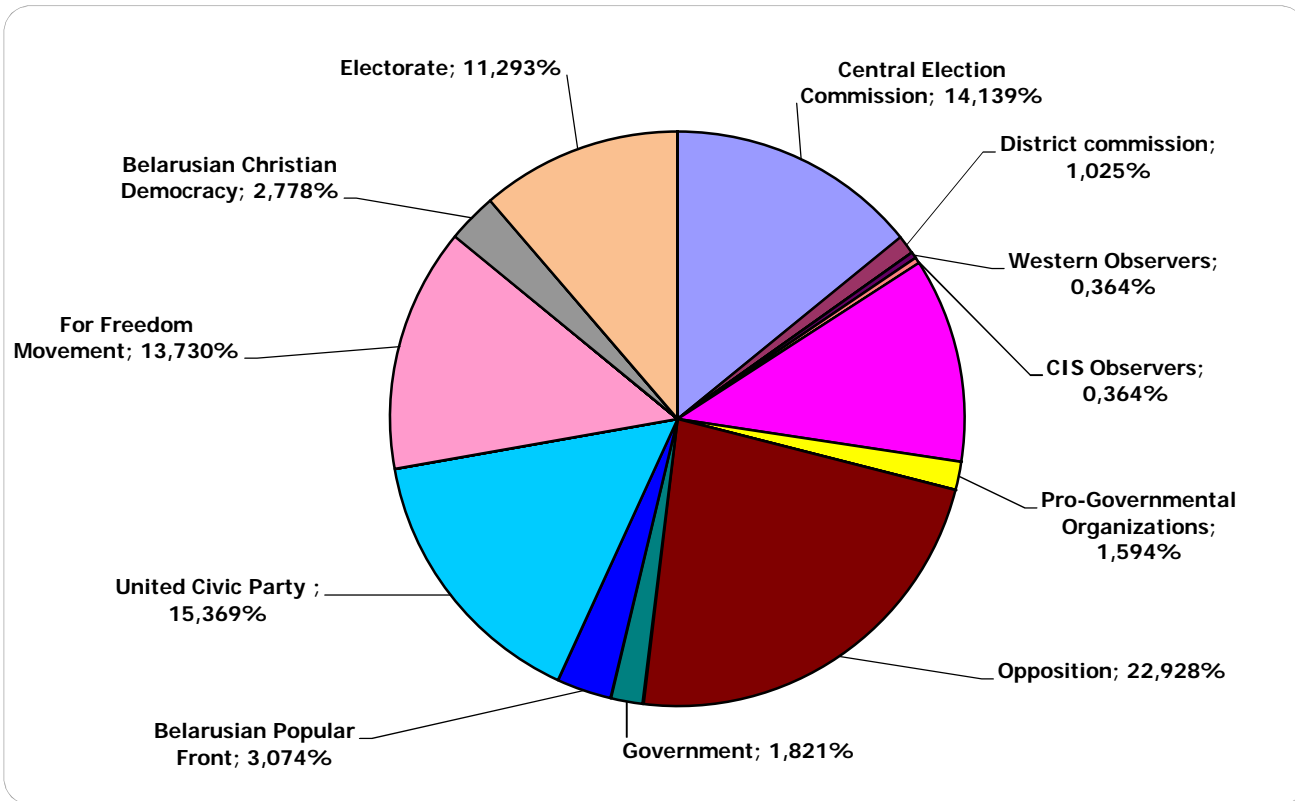


BELARUSIAN PARLAMENT ELECTIONS 2012

"Narodnaja Vola"

20.08 - 31.08.2012

Measured in cm2

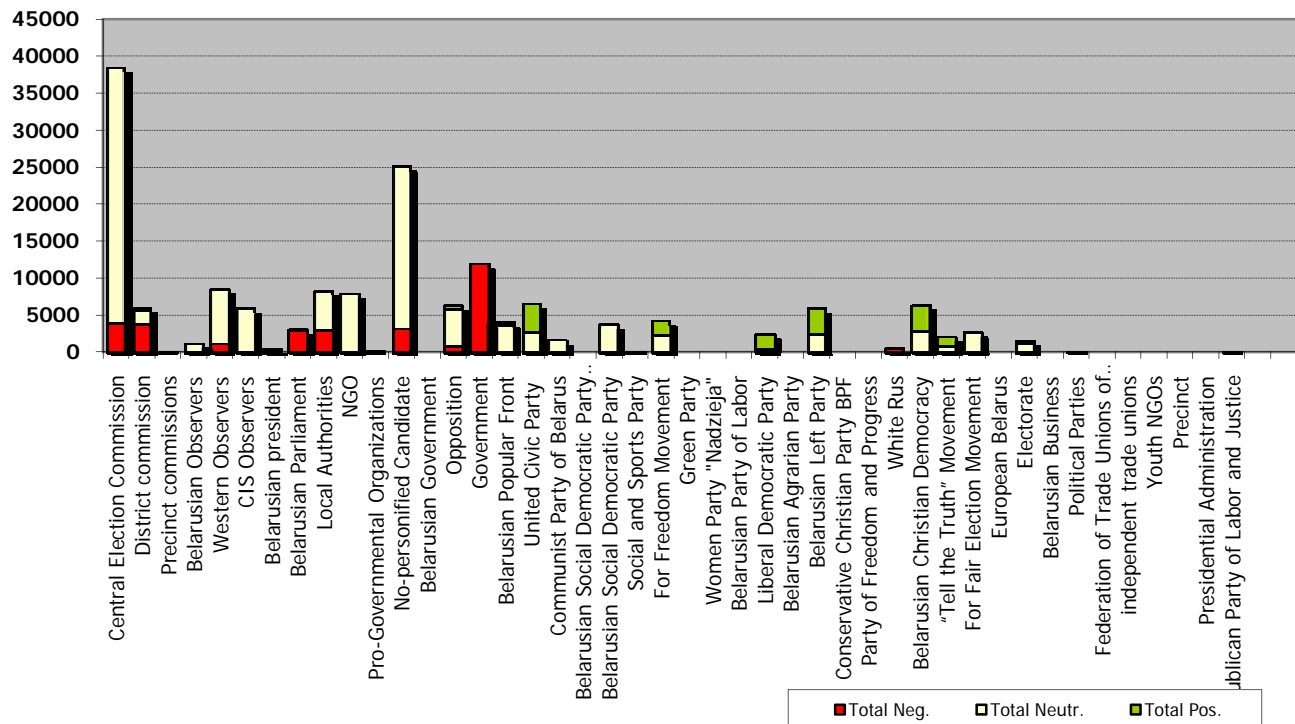
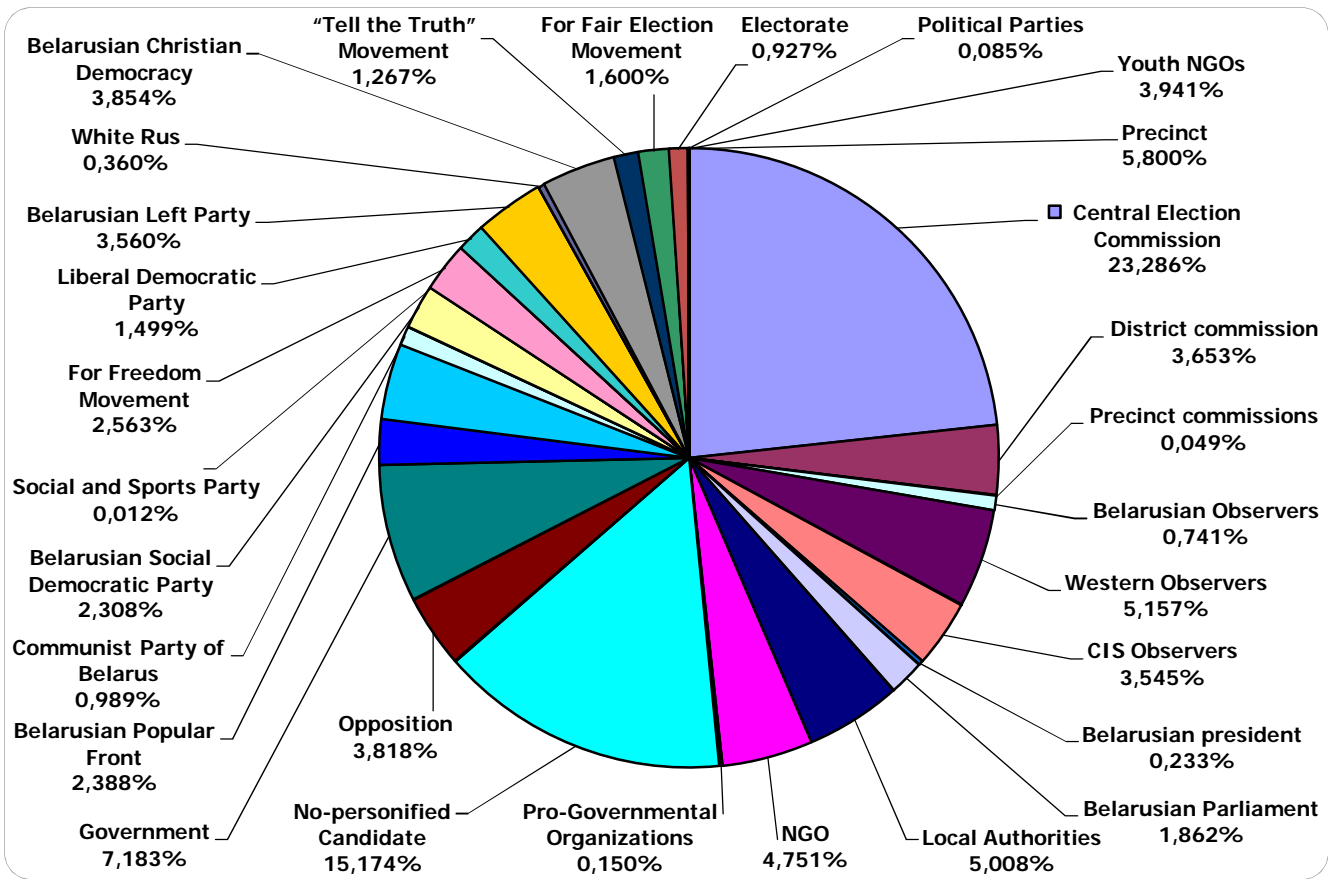




BELARUSIAN PARLAMENT ELECTIONS 2012

NAVINY.BY
20.08 - 31.08.2012

Measured in symbols



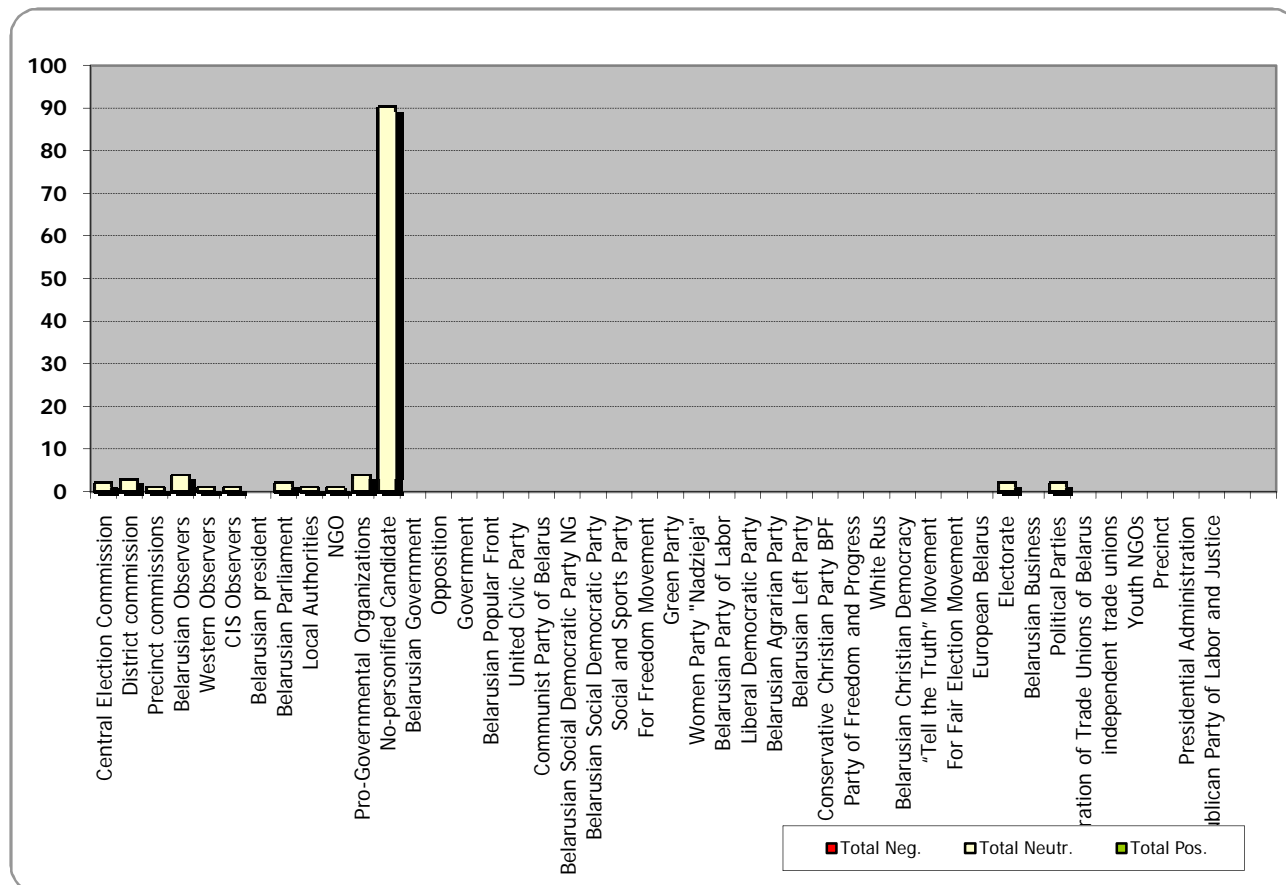
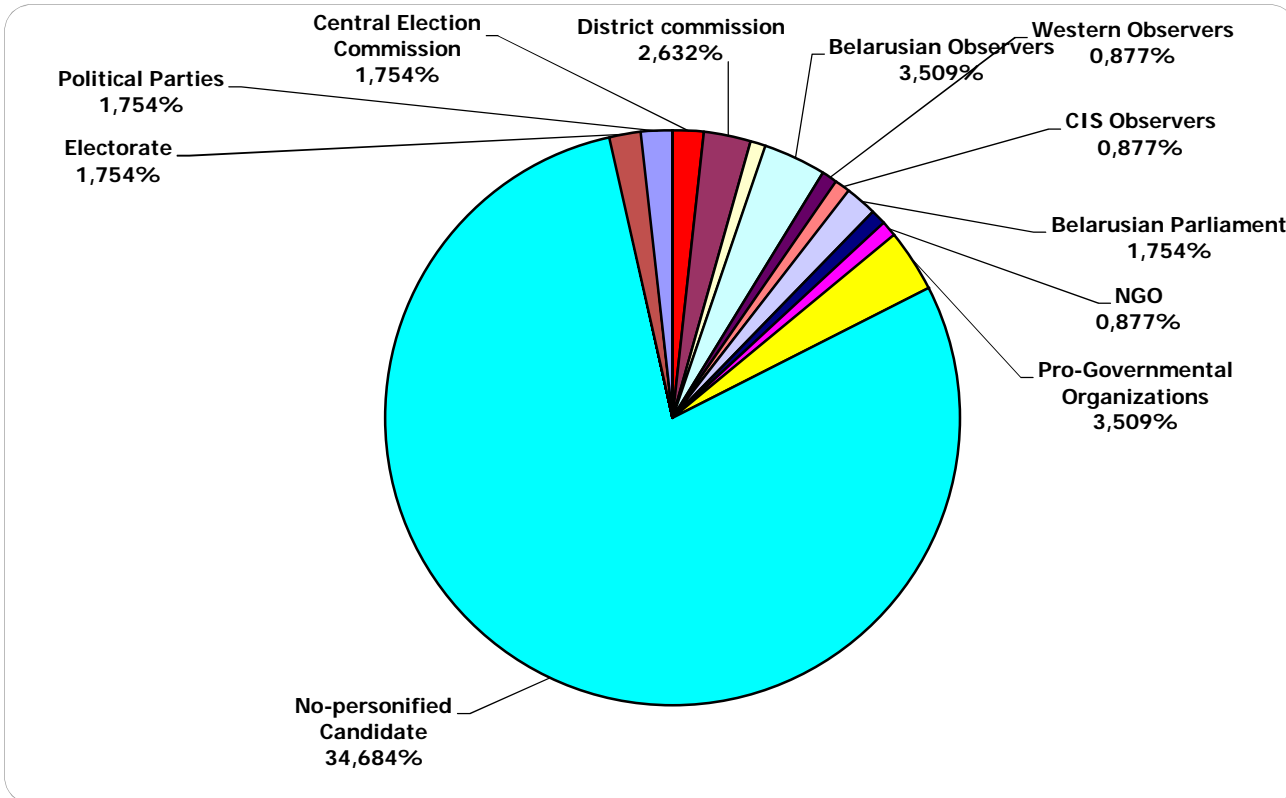


BELARUSIAN PARLAMENT ELECTIONS 2012

"Mogilevskaja pravda"

20.08-31.08.2012

Measured in cm2

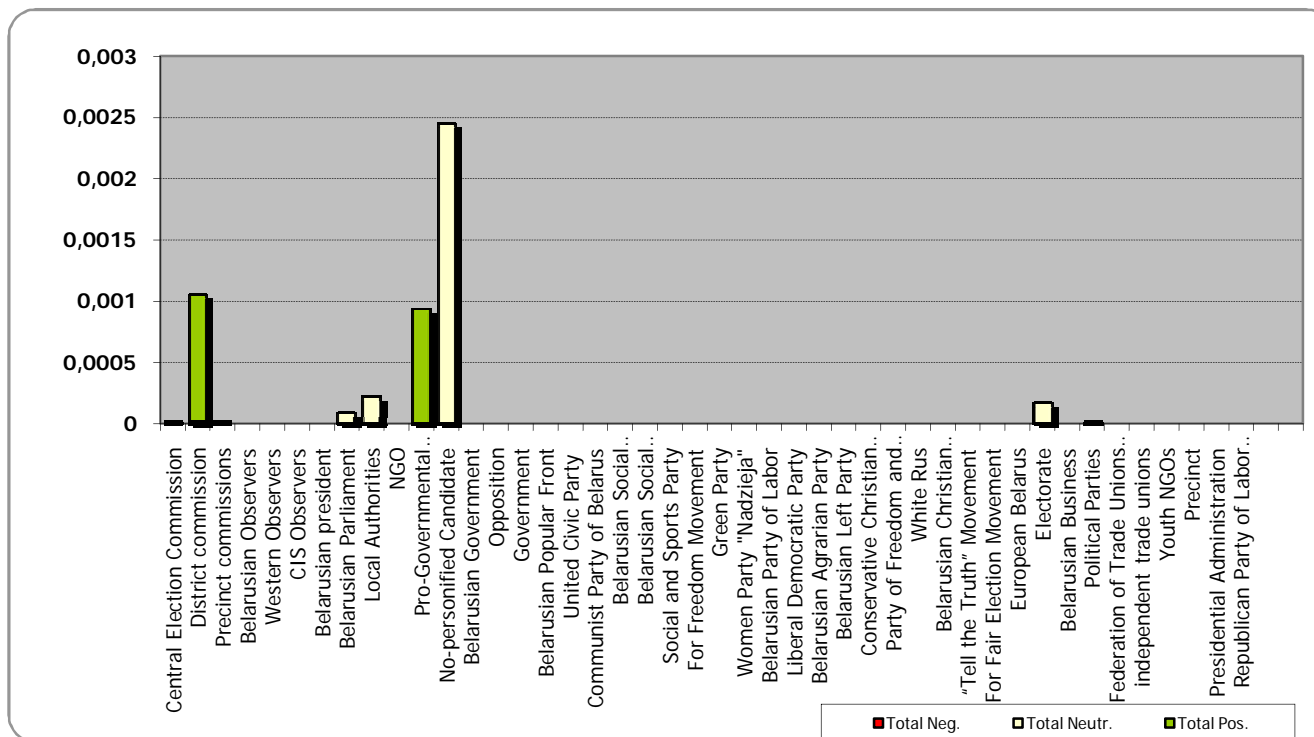
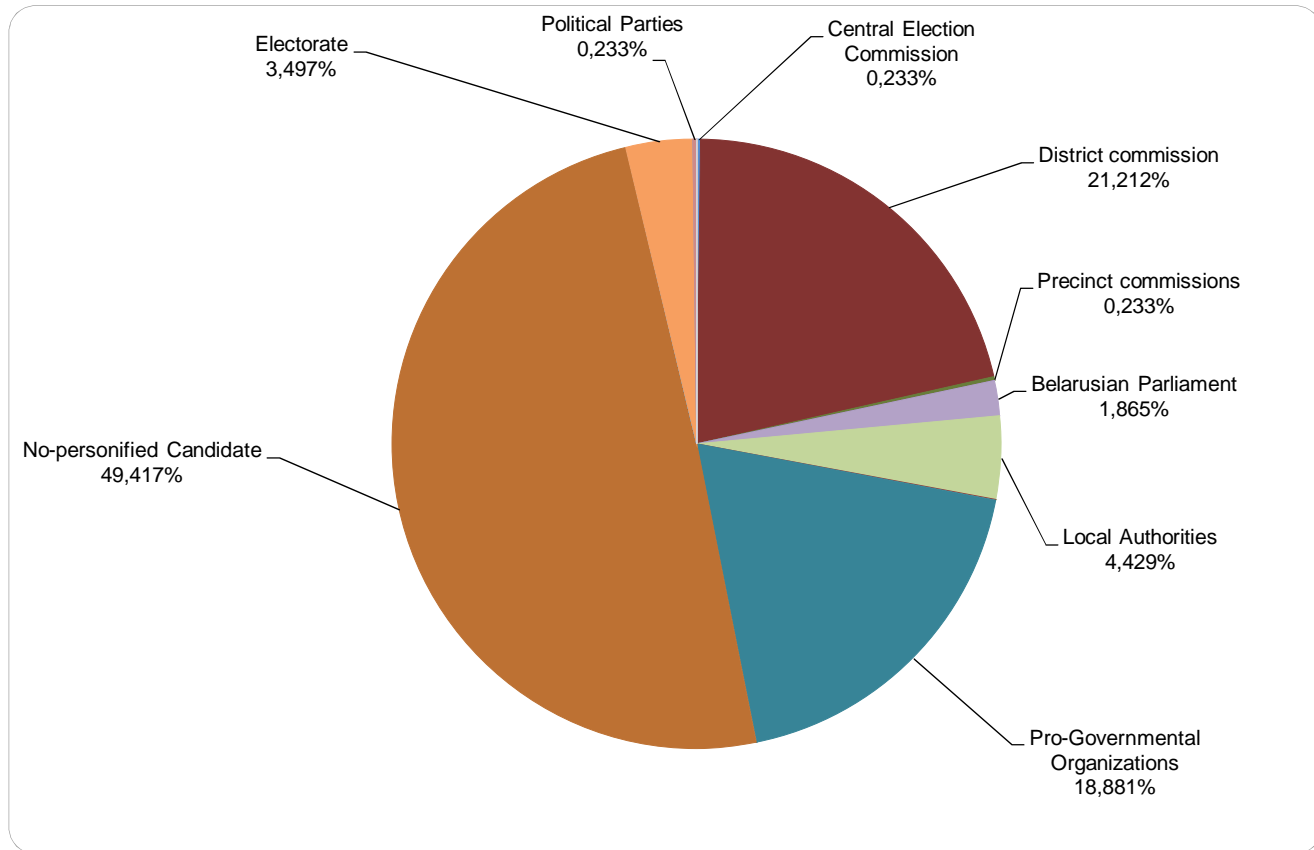




BELARUSIAN PARLAMENT ELECTIONS 2012

TRC "Mahilou"/Radio "News"
20.08 - 31.08.2012

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





BELARUSIAN PARLAMENT ELECTIONS 2012

TRC "Mahilou"/Radio "News"
20.08 - 31.08.2012

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

