
ELECTION COVERAGE IN BELARUS: BIAS AND PREJUDICE

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The Belarus media coverage of the 2000 parliamentary elections was neither free nor balanced nor honest. This was the conclusion of Great Britain's Institute for War and Peace Reporting monitoring group which spent a month working in Minsk.

The absence of an election campaign, by its traditional meaning, is the first thing that attracted the attention of observers. No programmes, platforms or proposals were published in the press, and no viewpoints concerning the country's political and economic development were discussed. Moreover, many parties were as though debarred from the election fight because many candidates concealed their party affiliation. The former merits of candidates, rather than programmes, were believed to be the key criteria. The struggle waged between the government, i.e. President Lukashenko, and the opposition. The President received support from the sole national TV channel and radio channel. The print-run of the presidential *Sovietskaya Belorussia* newspaper alone was threefold higher than the total of all the opposition editions, but there are more than ten state-run newspapers in Belarus. The opposition only had several newspapers. Such correlation of forces was evidently in the Lukashenko government's favour.

NO AUDIENCE FOR THE CANDIDATES

Each candidate had five minutes to speak over the radio or TV and their presentations were arranged in the following manner: The candidates were shown, one after the other, sitting at the same table against a glittering blue background that tired the viewers' eyes. Everyone was dissatisfied with such an organization of the candidates presentations - and no-one watched them. There were no preliminary announcements concerning the days when each candidate would speak. It meant that the voters could only watch their constituency candidates if they either watched all the presentations or just occasionally. Therefore, although the candidates had been formally guaranteed the right to read a short programme, the voters' rights to obtain information on their candidates had not.

LITTLE IMPACT ON THE VOTERS

Thus, the candidates' presentations turned out to be almost inefficient and were of little impact on the voters' decision. The radio and TV editorial coverage of the election campaign, as well as that of the newspapers, should have been first and foremost (i.e. the most important leverage of influence). Editorial coverage means the publishing or the airing of materials by editorial staff decision and not because the election law requires it. The entire editorial time was dedicated to advocating Lukashenko and his candidates against the opposition. The opposition leaders were called puppets and the march and demonstration participants were called fagots and compared to barking mongrels. However, the confrontation between Lukashenko and the opposition existed before the elections, as it will continue; hence it follows that it had no direct relation to them. The parliamentary elections in Belarus were thus taken as a rehearsal before the 2001 presidential elections.

INSULTING REPORTING

The media of the two political camps informed their audiences about different events. The state-run media informed society mainly about official events such as the Conference of Deputies, the National Assembly session or the next speech by Lukashenko. The opposition-organized events were either neglected or commented upon in an extremely critical, often insulting, way. Films shown by the Belarusian TV during the election campaign presented a vivid sample of such commentaries. They compared the opposition to "Hitlerjungend" and suggested that the opposition leaders resembled Hitler and Stalin. In Belarus, almost fully destroyed during WW2, fascists provoke very strong emotions. This was the way official propaganda incited people against the opposition.

PRINT-UP CONFISCATED

The situation was quite mirrored in the opposition newspapers. They covered in detail the "unofficial" events such as the opposition's "Marches for Freedom". These were not reported by the official media. The opposition press reported about the "election farce" and demanded freedom; however, without disclosing the meaning of what they understood by "freedom". Belarus was compared to Milosevic's Yugoslavia. If a newspaper called people to boycott the elections, its print-run was immediately confiscated and the distributors were fined. This resulted in a situation whereby the consumer of governmental or opposition media alone was being deprived of full information on what was happening around him. With this background, many people preferred to obtain information from the Russian TV channels, but the latter were very restrained in their coverage of the Belarus elections.

TWO PARALLEL WORLDS

Thus a situation emerged in Belarus during the election campaign whereby the governmental and opposition media did not report on the same events. The press campaign was very languid and the confrontation between the powers and the opposition had minor relation to the actual elections. As a matter of fact, the government and the opposition lived in different worlds and spoke about different things. So, there was no public dialogue between the different political streams. One cannot, thus, speak about a fair and balanced coverage of the election campaign. The voters had insufficient information available to make an intelligent choice between programmes and candidates. The latter had not been provided with equal conditions for campaigning.

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