



HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS FOR FREE ELECTIONS

CIVIL CAMPAIGN HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS FOR FREE ELECTIONS

Elections to the House of Representatives of the National Assembly of Belarus of the sixth convocation

Observation is carried out by activists of the Belarusian Helsinki Committee and the Human Rights Center "Viasna" in the framework of the campaign [Human Rights Defenders For Free Elections](#)

Weekly Analytical Report. August 29 – September 4

CONCLUSIONS

- the election campaign is still largely low key, failing to attract much public attention; after the broadcast of televised and radio speeches, many candidates stopped meetings with voters;
- a significant level of campaigning activity is demonstrated by the pro-government candidates, who still use the administrative resource, including state-controlled electronic and print media;
- there were a number of cases when candidates withdrew their nominations: 31 candidates have already left the campaign, representing 6% of the total number of registered candidates; 355 candidates have formed their electoral funds and opened special accounts, which amounts for 68% of the total number of registered candidates, or 72% of the number of candidates who are still running for the parliament;
- local authorities and representatives of pro-government associations across Belarus have carried out numerous mobilization activities for the organization of elections; heads of the PECs have been involved in meetings, seminars and trainings;
- election commissions have been instructed to prepare for a collective and simultaneous votes counting procedure, which does not allow observers to directly observe the counting of ballots;
- observers of the campaign "Human Rights Defenders for Free Elections" have met with representatives of the OSCE ODIHR EOM accredited in the regions.

PREPARATIONS FOR VOTING

Local authorities and representatives of pro-government associations across Belarus have carried out numerous mobilization activities for the organization of elections. Heads of the PECs have been involved in meetings, seminars and trainings.

The Babrujsk district executive committee hosted a regional meeting of deputies, which brought together members of the district and village councils of deputies, as well as representatives of local self-government bodies. The meeting dealt with the conduct of elections. Head of the committee's department for organizational and personnel work reported on the preparatory procedures.

A training was held in Mahilioŭ to address possible 'risks' for the PEC members on Election Day. The event was moderated by Dzmitry Tsimafeyenka, head of the organizational and personnel department of the Kastryčnicki district administration.

The official said that the election commissioners would have to reject the observers' requests for separate vote counting. Heads of the PECs, according to the trainer, should refer to the electoral legislation, which allows the election commissions to independently decide on the procedure of vote counting.

Another possible situation: during the vote counting, an observer asks permission from the head of the PEC to approach the table to see the marks on the ballots. The election official, according to the trainer, should also reject the request, since the electoral law only allows the observer to remain seated in the place selected by the PEC head. It was also stressed that the electoral legislation and the CEC regulations do not define the minimum distance from the counting table for the observer. Thus, the question is addressed by the PEC chair. The observer's only right is being located directly across the table and seeing the members of the commission sort and count the ballots. Members of the commission should be on the other side of the table opposite the observer (in contrast to earlier elections, the election commissioners are not allowed to obstruct with their bodies the table for ballot counting).

The third situation: the observer asks for permission to photograph and videotape the counting process. The election officials should reject the request, referring to Art. 13 of the Electoral Code, which comprehensively describes the observer's rights and is not subject to broad interpretation.

Experts of the campaign "Human Rights Defenders for Free Elections" stress that such instructions encourage a joint and simultaneous votes counting procedure, which does not allow the observers to directly observe the counting of ballots. This once again underlines the correctness of the proposals of the campaign "Human Rights Defenders for Free Elections" on the settlement of the issue through a CEC ruling. The ban on using photo and video recording devices during observation also restricts the observers' rights under Art. 13 of the Electoral Code. Interpretation of the observer's rights as not subject to broad interpretation suggests that the list is closed and exhaustive. Such an approach is contrary to the theory of law, which says that only prohibitions may be exhaustive.

A number of candidates in Brest have withdrawn from the elections. All of them are employees of state-owned enterprises and were nominated by the labor collectives.

CAMPAIGNING

Pro-government candidates are actively involved in socially significant events. According to local media reports, Uladzimir Andreichanka, Chairman of the House of Representatives and a candidate for Dokšytsy electoral district No. 22, spoke at the opening of a kindergarten in the town Ušačy, Viciebsk region and at a teachers' conference in Hlybokaje. During the Day of Knowledge festivities held in school No. 1 in Dokšytsy, Andreichanka donated equipment for a computer laboratory. Incumbent MP Vadzim Dzeviatouski, who is running in the Navapolack-based electoral district No. 24, has been actively advertised by local media as the initiator of a mass event (a rock concert under the motto "Navapolack — A Drugs-Free City!").

The website of the Hrodna regional executive committee advertises an event under the auspices of the Belarusian Republican Youth Union (BRSM), which is expected to be attended by a number of current MPs. The website does not report on which of the candidates will take part in the event. Several government-run enterprises in Rečyca will reportedly host meetings with deputy chairman of the Homieĺ regional executive committee, a candidate for electoral district No. 44, Baliaslau Pirshtuk, as well as his election agents and other persons.

Administrative resources are still abused by Halina Filipovich, member of the House of Representatives and a candidate for the Svietlahorsk-based electoral district No. 46. Her meeting with voters on September 1 was attended by heads of local enterprises and BRSM activists. There was a positive response to a publication, which said that Halina Filipovich's meetings with voters were not announced beforehand. Adjustments have been made to the candidate's schedule. However, this practice is still not commonplace: local authorities continue to conceal the time and place of meetings of pro-government candidates. Similar situations were observed, for example, in electoral districts Nos. 1 and 2 in Brest.

Inaccurate or incomplete information about candidates' meetings with voters was published on the websites of the district administrations of Minsk. The publications normally advertise the campaign events of pro-government candidates. For example, the website of the Maskoŭski district administration only published the schedule of meetings of three candidates in three constituencies: Ihar Kamarouski in electoral district No. 98, Liudmila Makaryna-Kibak in electoral district No. 99 and Aksana Haiduk in electoral district No. 100. There is no information on the meetings of the remaining 12 candidates running in these districts. Similar irregularities have been registered on the websites of the Saviecki and Zavodski administrations of Minsk.

There were cases of discrediting opposition candidates. Videos with falsified sound were posted on the vk.com social network. Offensive content of these videos related to a joint picket staged by candidates Tatsiana Seviarynets (Viciebsk electoral district No. 18), Alena Shabunia and Heorhi Stankevich (both running in electoral district No. 19). After a July 27 rally, the candidates were harassed by the police, who charged them with violation of Art. 23.34 of the Administrative Code (participating in an unauthorized street protest).

There were government-related obstacles to the activities of separate candidates. According to observers, opposition candidates were not allowed to meet with labor collectives on the territory of the Homieĺ-based electoral district No. 36. Volha Damaskina, a BPF candidate running in the Polack-based electoral district No. 27, was not allowed to place campaigning posters in a local shop, while a pro-government candidate had been authorized to do so in the same outlet. The incident was resolved only after conversations with the administration. Yury Liashenka, a candidate from the Belarusian Party of the Greens in the Svietlahorsk-based electoral district No. 46, also had to overcome administrative barriers to post his campaigning materials.

Mikalai Charnavus, a UCP candidate in the Baranavičy-based electoral district No. 5, has been unable to hold a picket in one of the most popular places in the city. The ban referred to an opinion of 'one of the candidates'. Volha Palityka, current member of the House of Representatives running in the same district, said that she did not want opposition candidates to picket next to her election events. The issue remains unresolved.

On September 1, the Belarus-3 Channel aired TV debates of candidates running in the Bjarozha-based electoral district No. 9, a member of the United Civil Party Aliaksandr Kabanau and member of the *Fair World* Party Aliaksandr Melnik. Some of the statements by Aliaksandr Kabanau were later removed from the debates.

On September 2, it became known that Pavel Zinin, former potential candidate in the Kryčau-based electoral district No. 83, was dismissed from his job at the Investigation Committee. According to him, his running in the election campaign was not sanctioned by the authorities, resulting in increased harassment at the workplace. Representatives of the Investigative Committee, however, stressed that the dismissal was not linked to Zinin's initiative to run for a parliament seat.

MEDIA COVERAGE OF THE ELECTIONS

On August 29, the Central Election Commission refused to invite a representative of the Belarusian Helsinki Committee to a meeting of the Mass Media Supervisory Board, a body formed to monitor the compliance with the rules of election campaigning in the media. As noted in the CEC response, the electoral law provides for the rights of national observers accredited by the election commissions to attend the meetings of these commissions. According to current practice, meetings of the Supervisory Board can only be attended by special media analysts of long-term international observation missions. In a telephone conversation with a representative of the Belarusian Helsinki Committee, Alena Dzmukhaila, head of the CEC's organizational and personnel department, said that international observers enjoy greater rights than national ones. Experts of the campaign "Human Rights Defenders for Free Elections" point out that the work of the Mass Media Supervisory Board is still closed from the public, as the CEC does not inform about the nature of disputes and the results of their consideration.

The activities of opposition candidates are in most cases ignored by state-controlled media, while the campaigning events of the pro-government candidates are widely covered by these media outlets.

The *Hrodzienskaja Praŭda* newspaper published the candidates' electoral platforms in the Saturday issue with a circulation of only 6,700 copies, despite the fact that the four constituencies of Hrodna are inhabited by about 230,000 voters. The circulation of the newspaper's Wednesday issue with a TV program is about 22,000 copies.

A similar problem was faced by Ihar Maslouski, a candidate from the Belarusian Social Democratic Party (Hramada) for the Brest-based electoral district No. 4. In his complaint sent to the DEC and the *Viačerni Brest* newspaper, he pointed out that his election platform was published in issue No. 67 of the newspaper, which had a circulation of 4,300 copies. However, the election platform of Uladzimir Bazanau, a current member of the House of Representatives running in the same district, was published in the same newspaper, but in an issue with a circulation of 10,000 copies.

APPEALS AND COMPLAINTS

On August 31, Raman Yurhel, an observer of the campaign "Human Rights Defenders for Free Elections", received an answer from the CEC to his appeal regarding a publication in the *Hrodzienskaja Praŭda* and the newspaper's online version, which, according to him, could be

viewed as hidden campaigning in support of the pro-government candidates. The response said that the question was considered at a meeting of the Mass Media Supervisory Board. The newspaper was recommended to refrain from such publications in the future. At the same time, the Supervisory Board requested that the Hrodna regional election commission strengthened the monitoring of compliance with the rules of campaigning in the media.

On August 31, Viktor Danilchuk, a UCP candidate running in the Hrodna-based electoral district No. 50, filed an appeal with the Hrodna regional election commission against a refusal by the district election commission to place some of his biographical data in the premises of the polling stations. In its decision, the commission refers to the fact that the information submitted by the candidate was not supported by documented proof, but could be used in other campaign materials of the candidate. A decision of the Hrodna regional election commission of September 2 dismissed the candidate's appeal.