



MEDIA MONITORING

““Belarusian Media Coverage of the 2007 Local Elections”

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I. INTRODUCTION

Belarusian Association of Journalists (BAJ), an independent, non-partisan Belarusian NGO dedicated to freedom of expression and the media, implemented its media monitoring project in connection with the 14 January local elections.

BAJ sought to evaluate the mass media's performance in providing objective and balanced coverage of the candidates and their platforms so the citizens of Belarus could make a well-informed choice at the ballot box. The project's findings were determined through a well-defined and rigorous methodology and were not intended to support any one candidate or political party, but the integrity of the media environment as a whole during the campaign season.

Media monitoring was carried out from 4th December 2006 through 14th January 2007 using quantitative and qualitative method of analysis¹. Quantitative analysis measured the total amount of time and space devoted to elections-related coverage on 28 media outlets (state-funded television, state-funded radio, and local TV stations, national and regional newspapers)².

The monitoring took place over three periods, 4-16 December (candidate's registration), 18 December – 9 January (election campaign) and 10 - 14 January (until the Election Day). The post election period was also analyzed (the preliminary and official announcement of the results)

This is the final report, which summarizes the whole period of monitoring. Apart from the pre-election and election phase, it also includes analysis of the post-election period.

2. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

The monitored media both at the national and regional levels failed to present the local elections as an important political event.

The coverage of the Central Election Commission (CEC) was often the only elections-related coverage in most of the monitored media outlets. The work of the election administration was portrayed in an exclusive positive or neutral manner by the State-owned media.

¹ For the description of methodology, see APPENDIX 3.

² For the selection criteria, see monitoring methodology (APPENDIX 3). For the monitored media outlets, see APPENDIX 2. It should be noted that the overwhelming majority of selected media outlets were State-owned. This is the result of the systematic State policy aimed at the marginalization and closure of the independent press in Belarus. As for the electronic media, the only independent FM radio station was closed down back in 1996.

The nature of election process, whereby the media largely refrained in most respects from conventional campaign discourse, including non-coverage of the candidate's campaigns and failure to organize televised debates amongst the candidates, significantly narrowed the voters' possibilities to assess the candidates. This contributed to the overall atmosphere, whereby the essential elements of democratic elections, such a vibrant political discourse and meaningful pluralism, were completely lacking.

Of the monitored political subjects, the incumbent President and local authorities dominated the media coverage. The State-owned media portrayed the ruling powers in an overwhelmingly positive or neutral manner, whereas their coverage by the non-State media was largely neutral or negative.

While the State-owned media invariably ignored opposition politicians, their coverage by the non-State media was also limited.

The limited format of direct access programmes did not allow candidates to address large audiences, thus further preventing them from properly introducing their election and political platforms.

While the non-State regional newspapers provided a wider and more balanced picture of the election process, they could not substitute for the general lack of impartial and objective coverage of the elections-related topics by the State-owned media.

The monitored media did not offer a forum for the exchange of opinions, public debate, confrontation, investigation and commentary that would offer the public informed, analysed and assessed views of persons and groups seeking elected office in the elections.

As such, the media in general and the State-owned ones in particular, failed to fulfill its obligation to adequately inform voters to enable them to make a well-informed choice at the ballot box.

Notwithstanding their poor performance, the State-owned media did not hesitate to declare the local polls to be fair and democratic.

3. MAIN FINDINGS

3.1 *Electronic media*

3.1.1 *National Broadcasters*

The monitoring conducted by BAJ showed that the State-owned *1st National Channel (BTI)* did not treat the local elections as an important political event. In the six weeks preceding the elections, *BTI* failed to present a number of important elections-related developments and issues, including the activities of candidates and observers.

The media monitoring results (from 4th December 2006 till January 14th 2007) indicate that *BTI* dedicated only 4 percent of its prime time news coverage³ to elections-related issues. By comparison, 42 percent of such coverage was devoted to other political issues and foreign news. The remaining 54 percent of the *Panorama* news programme went to social issues, sport, weather forecasts etc.

Instead of increasing the coverage of elections-related issues, especially when candidates started their campaign related activities, *BTI*, in its prime time news programme *Panorama*, decreased its time devoted to the elections from 5 percent (in the first monitoring period) to only 3,9 percent (in the second monitoring period). The only exception to this general trend of minimizing the coverage of the elections-related topics was an increase in the coverage of the opposition during the last week before the election day (the opposition was allotted 20 per cent of the *Panorama*'s election and political coverage). This coverage, however, was exclusively negative in tone and as such, the coverage was clearly aimed at discrediting the opposition.

On the other hand, the coverage of election administration significantly decreased in the last days prior to Election Day. By contrast, the incumbent President was given as much as 76 percent of the *BTI*'s prime time political and elections news coverage, all of which was either positive or neutral in tone.

In addition, the State-funded broadcaster demonstrated a consistent pattern of completely ignoring various events, including the electoral campaigns conducted by candidates. *BTI* did not organize any televised debates, programmes aimed at analysing the candidate's platforms, nor did it create any platforms for expression of any different political views or platforms existent in the Belarusian society. As for the election observers, their coverage totalled 8 seconds.

The national State-owned radio *BRI* adopted a similar approach in its *Radio-fact* news program by allocating only 3 percent of its total time to the elections-related topics. The incumbent President's share of the news coverage devoted political and elections related topics increased from 22 percent (in the first monitoring period) to 70 percent (in the second monitoring period). In total, the President received some 50 percent of the elections-related and political prime time news coverage.

The qualitative analysis revealed similar trends as on *BTI*. The President and the Central Election Commission (CEC) received mainly positive or neutral coverage, whereas the opposition was either ignored or sharply criticized.

In conclusion, the State-owned national broadcasters devoted the bulk of their coverage to the activities of the President and the election administration. By contrast, the State-funded broadcasters failed to cover an important part of the election process – election contestants.

3.1.2 Regional Broadcasters

³ In the framework of the main news programme called *Panorama*

In its regional news programmes, *BTI* also provided limited coverage of the entire electoral process. While the regional broadcasters allotted more time to the elections-related topics and issues than the national ones, it was mainly to cover the activities of the regional, district and city-level election commissions. Viciebsk *BTI*, for example, allocated 21 percent of its prime time news coverage to different level election commissions. As for the coverage of candidates and observers, similarly as the nationwide broadcasters, the regional ones also largely ignored them. There were no programmes allowing the voters to ask questions or offer their comments on the elections either.

The regional *BTI*'s news programmes devoted the bulk of their coverage to the local authorities. *TV Homiel*, for example, gave almost 82 percent of its news programmes to cover the activities of the local state administration. The other *BTI* regional channels adopted a similar approach.

Similarly, the regional State-owned radio stations showed a similar pattern of time allocation as the regional TV channels. For example, *Express-Homiel Wave FM* station dedicated 7 percent of its news programmes time to elections. Once again, the biggest portion of the station's news coverage went to local authorities (86%). The next most covered subject was President (9%), followed by the election administration (5%).

Such coverage demonstrates that the aim of the regional State-owned broadcasters was to present the election process to be mainly connected with the work of election administration and not as a competition amongst candidates.

As for the monitored non-state local TV stations, none of them demonstrated any real interest in the elections, showing even more limited coverage than the regional State-owned broadcasters. *TV Skif* (Viciebsk), for example, allocated 1 percent of its news programmes to the elections. Another local non-state TV channels, *Nireja* (Homiel) and *Intex TV* (Baranavichy), devoted to elections 2 percent and 3 percent respectively. By comparison, *2nd Channel* (Mahilou city TV) dedicated 4 percent of its news coverage to the election process. The elections-related topics covered by these stations mainly comprised of official information dedicated to the activities of different-level elections commissions. In sharp contrast, *8th Channel* (local Minsk TV station) and *Skif* (Barysau) did not bring any information about the election process at all.

Local authorities were the most covered subject on the non-state regional broadcasters' news programmes. This coverage was mainly positive and neutral.

3.2 Direct access

The CEC resolution n. 66 of 26 October 2006 provides for allocation of 5 minutes of free broadcast time on regional branches of the *National TV and Radio Company*. More specifically, according to the resolution, the allocation only concerns local wire radio, through which the national radio broadcaster *BR1* transmits most of its regional programmes. No other State-owned media outlets are under this obligation.

The wire radio, a relict preserved from the old Soviet times with no FM broadcasting, covers a very narrow audience of villagers and small towns' dwellers. In addition, the candidates' platforms were aired either from 8.00 to 8.30 a.m. or from 6.00 till 6.30 p.m. The ones broadcast in the morning did not fall into the so-called "prime time" category when most people could listen to them. As such, a significant part of audience did not have a real opportunity to get familiar with the candidates' presentations; especially voters in the cities and urban areas were fairly limited in their ability to receive the information.

Moreover, the order of the candidates' appearances was not published in the local newspapers. As such, the majority of voters was not informed about the candidates' electoral platforms and at times did not even know the contestants at all. The CEC chairman, Mrs. Yarmoshina, indirectly confirmed this situation in her interview with the *1st National TV Channel (Panorama news program, January 9, 2007)*, when she recommended to the voters to visit polling stations in order to get the information on candidates.

The limited format of direct access programmes did not allow candidates to address large audiences, thus further preventing them from properly introducing their election and political platforms. The CEC should have done more to enable the candidates' platforms at least through the direct access programmes.

3.3 Print media

The monitored State-owned national and regional press did not substitute for the lack of elections-related coverage by the State-owned electronic media.

Sovetskaja Belorussia (SB), the daily sponsored by the Presidential administration, devoted almost 84 percent of its political coverage to the incumbent President, 9 percent to the CEC and 7 percent to local authorities. No other political subjects pertaining to the elections were presented. Moreover, no space was given to any discussion regarding the elections issues and there was no special coverage devoted to different political forces, such as analysis of their election platforms or paid political ads.

Zviazda, another national State-owned daily, offered its readers a bit more diverse coverage of the political and elections-related issues. Unlike SB, *Zviazda* gave more coverage to local authorities (38 percent) and less to the President (37 percent). A significant space was devoted to different levels of election administration (24 percent). However, *Zviazda* also failed to cover candidates and their campaigns. Unlike SB, it depicted the opposition as a non-personified subject. The tone of the coverage was exclusively negative. Similarly as SB, the non-state daily with the largest circulation, *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, also gave the bulk of its political and election coverage to President Lukashenka. However, unlike SB, *Komsomolskaya Pravda* gave him roughly equal proportions of positive and negative coverage.

Similarly as the regional TV channels, regional State-owned newspapers gave the biggest portion of space to the coverage of local authorities (at times amounting to 80 percent). Conversely, neither political platforms and candidates' campaigns nor election observers received any meaningful coverage. By marginalizing or ignoring

some important subjects and issues, the State-owned regional press did not present the electoral process in a balanced and objective way.

The coverage of state officials, including local authorities and different levels of election administration, was overwhelmingly positive in tone. When opponents of the regime were mentioned, it was exclusively in negative terms.

While even the pro-regime candidates did not receive any significant coverage, they still had an extra advantage given the bias coverage of the State officials, both in tone and space. The State-funded newspapers failed to provide adequate and objective information about election contestants, thus making it difficult for the voters to make a well-informed and intelligent choice at the ballot box.

The monitored non-State regional newspapers attempted to give a more diverse and balanced picture of the election process. In general, however, these newspapers remained restrained in the presentation of opposition candidates and their campaigns, fearing possible repercussions. Nonetheless, Intex-press (Brest), for example, provided some coverage of the opposition and opposition candidates (all together 47 percent), which was exclusively positive in tone. As such, the non-State regional press could not substitute for the general lack of impartial and objective coverage by the State owned media.

4. MEDIA EFFECTS

In the course of the monitoring exercise, the monitoring team unveiled several stories, where some of the basic journalism standards were missing – so called media effects. Such effects were mainly detected in the State-owned media. As a rule, the State-owned media have covered opposition candidates in a very negative way while giving hidden promotion to candidates supported by the local authorities. For example, some State-owned regional newspapers published large interviews with such candidates without recognizing their affiliation or status openly. Conversely, opposition candidates were mentioned sparingly and when mentioned, they were heavily criticized or slandered.

For example:

- Mahilou Bulletin (#3-4, 6 January 2007) published an interview with Mrs. Raisa Lychkovskaya, the head of the Chief Administrative Department of the National Bank in the Mahileu region. The interview could be linked with the *Professional Day of the Belarusian Bank Employees*, which was held the next day (on 7 January 2007). However, in the middle of the interview, the interviewer asked a question: “Do you have an intention to contest the upcoming local elections to become an MP? – Mrs. Lychkovskaya’s answer was: “Yes, I am a candidate...”
- BT1 (*Panorama*, 18.01.07). “Craving for power and money led the opposition to an internal war between the central and regional opposition groups. Everything was in use from labels like “idiots” to drinking parties in the hotels organized during trips to Kyiv paid by sponsors”.

5. POST ELECTIONS' COVERAGE

The State-owned media highly evaluated the local elections and their results. Traditionally, these media presented the Election Day to be conducted in a solemn atmosphere. The Brest regional newspaper *Zaria* (16.01. 07), for example, wrote that “*colorfully decorated polling stations and a rich assortment of goods*” at the buffet added to the festive mood of voters. In addition, the newspapers’ headings also demonstrated such mood: “Absolutely Unforgettable Day”, “Festive Mood was supported by music”, “Under the high activity” etc.

Both journalists and official representatives recognized the elections as democratic and extremely successful. It was specially underlined that observers did not observe any serious violations of the election law.

In contrast to the overall overwhelmingly positive evaluation of the elections by the Belarusian media, *BTI* showed a news item entitled “*Germany surprised the Belarusians*” (*Panorama*, 16 January 2007)- A presenter explained the situation: “*Today Germany... surprised the Belarusians by having criticized the local elections held on January 14th. It is not difficult to guess what the grounds for such kind of conclusions were*”. It was the opposition to provide that kind of information. In addition, presenter noted: “*Germany did not have any other informers at the elections*”.

However, the conduct of elections was criticized in several articles published in a number of independent media. These articles highlighted numerous law violations and undemocratic character of the elections.

6. CONCLUSIONS

The monitored State-owned media largely ignored the political character of the local elections and did not present them as a real political event.

By having concentrated on the activities of different level elections commissions the State-owned media failed to properly introduce the main protagonists of the elections – the election contestants. In addition, they did not offer analysed and assessed views of election platforms of persons seeking elected office in the elections. This resulted in a selective, incomplete and unbalanced coverage of the elections.

While even the pro-regime candidates did not receive any significant coverage, they still had an extra advantage given the bias coverage of the State officials, both in tone and space. In addition, the State-owned media at times demonstrated a pattern of hidden promotion of pro-regime candidates when publishing interviews that failed to clearly acknowledge their status and affiliation. The State-funded newspapers failed to provide adequate and objective information about election contestants, thus not enabling the voters to make a well-informed and intelligent choice at the ballot box.

The State-owned media showed a bias coverage in favor of the State administration, both in tone and time/space allocation. When opponents of the regime were mentioned, it was exclusively in negative terms.

The limited format of direct access programmes did not allow candidates to address large audiences, thus further preventing them from properly introducing their election and political platforms. As such, the ability of voters to receive information on different election platforms and views was severely reduced.

In conclusion, the media's biased coverage and ignorance of the elections demonstrated that Belarus lacks a strong and independent media able to provide objective and balanced information to enable the electorate to make a well-informed decision. The monitored media did not offer a forum for the exchange of opinions, public debate and commentary that would offer the public informed, analysed and assessed views of persons and groups seeking elected office in the elections.

APPENDIX 1:

Charts

Charts are available at www.

APPENDIX 2:

List of monitored media outlets

National broadcasters

1. Belarusian Television, 1st National Programme — “Panorama” (“Panarama”) news programme
2. Belarusian Radio, 1st National Programme — “Radiofact” (“Radyjofakt”) news programme

State owned regional broadcasters

1. STV (Capital TV Channel) – “Minsk region” (“Minshchyna”) news programme
2. Belarusian TV – Viciebsk “Regional news” (“Novosti regiona”) programme
3. Belarusian TV – Homiel “Regional news” (“Naviny regijona”) programme
4. TRK-Mahilou – Mahilou “News-region” (“Novosti-region”) programme
5. Belarusian TV – Hrodna “Regional news” (“Rehijanalnyja naviny”) programme
6. “Express – Homel wave” (“Ekspres – Homelskaja hvalia”) radio, 101.3 FM, – “News” (“Naviny”) radio programme

Local TV stations

1. 8th Channel (TV channel, Minsk)
2. Skif TV channel (Barysau)
3. Skif TV channel (Viciebsk)
4. TeleVid (Rechyca) – “Event” (“Sobytiye”) programme
5. Nireja TV channel (Homiel)
6. Buh-TV channel (Brest)
7. Intex-TV (Baranavichy) -- “News” (“Naviny”) programme
8. 2nd channel – “City news” (“Haradskija naviny”) programme
9. Smarhon TV channel (Hrodna region)

Print media

National newspapers

1. Soviet Belarus (Sovetskaya Belorussia) – Belarus Today (Belarus Segodnia)
2. Star (Zvyazda)
3. Komsomolskaja Pravda v Belarusi

Regional newspapers

1. Minsk Truth (Minskaja Prauda)
2. Viciebsk currier M (Viciebski courier)
3. Viciebsk people (Vicbichy)
4. Dawn (Zarya) – (Brest)
5. Night Mogilev (Vecherniy Mogilev)
6. Mahilou Bulletin (Mahilouskija Vedamasci)
7. Homiel truth (Homielskaya prauda)
8. Intex-press (Baranavichy)

APPENDIX 3

Monitoring methodology

1. Introduction

This methodology developed by MEMO98, Slovak NGO based in Bratislava, aims to produce the most objective evaluation possible of how the election is being covered in the media. For this purpose, quantitative and qualitative analysis is used

Monitored parameters are as follows:

- time (in broadcast media) and space (in print media) given to different subjects, their representatives and actors in the election;
- the manner in which different subjects, their representatives and actors are presented in different media outlets;
- instances of unprofessional or unbalanced election coverage, including distorted information, libel and defamation concerning candidates, their programmes, conduct, etc.

2. Monitoring Broadcast Media

TV programmes are monitored with a focus on picture and sound information. Radio programmes monitoring is focused on sound information solely. Monitoring centres primarily on the election as its subject-matter, the subjects participating in the election and the parameters monitored. All other news items that do not refer to either the election or its subjects are not to be covered by the monitors.

The first step in monitoring is to select TV or radio news items that cover or refer to the election.

2.1. Measuring Time

The second step is to measure the time given to each of the subjects monitored. The time is measured in seconds. All the selected news items are monitored separately.

The time given to each actor is measured, when:

- the subject (actor) is only in the shot;
- the subject is in the shot, speaking directly into the camera or microphone;
- the subject is spoken about by a media representative, which on the radio means that the subject is quoted by a journalist and on TV that the subject appeared in the shot, with a commentary provided by a journalist;
- a third actor, e.g. another political figure, a journalist or a voter speaks about the subject.

An instance when a subject is not given any measurable time but is mentioned is called a reference. Each reference is recorded in the form and one reference is allocated 1 second.

3. Monitoring Print Media

Print media monitoring is focused on textual information and pictures (i.e. photos, cartoons, logos, images of party banners, etc.) in each issue of the paper taken separately.

Just like in monitoring TV and radio programmes, print media monitoring centers on the election as its subject-matter, the subjects participating in the election and the parameters monitored. All other contributions that do not refer to either the election or its subjects are not to be covered by the monitors.

The first step in monitoring media outlets is to select articles that cover or refer to the election.

3.1. Measuring Space

The second step is to measure the space allotted to each subject in the selected contributions. The space is measured in square centimeters. All the selected contributions are to be monitored each of them taken separately. One checklist is used to assess one paper only.

The articles are scanned page by page in the paper, with special attention on the front page, as it is the one that the largest number of people read. Sometimes headlines are given a lot of space on the front page. In such cases the headline space is measured separately. An article on the front page is often continued on some other pages. Then the article is analyzed as a whole and the continuation pages are recorded. Its whole space and that of each extract on each page are to be measured.

In measuring the space it is important to determine which subject in the story is the main one or if the story presents one main and some auxiliary subjects. If the article brings information on one main subject, this subject is allotted the whole of the article space. If there are any other subjects mentioned, these references are treated as remarks and allotted 1 square centimetre of space. Each of them is assessed in terms of the manner of presentation parameter.

If the article has two subjects (i.e. it gives a more or less professional comparison of two candidates' programmes) and the comparison can eventually favour one of them, the article space is equally divided between the two actors. Each of them gets their evaluation mark in terms of the manner of presentation.

If a neutral factual article has several actors, none of them being a dominant subject, all the actors get a reference with a neutral grade of 3.

4. Assessing the Manner of Subjects' Presentation

The manner of presentation is assessed in the same way both for the broadcast and the print media.

The manner in which the subjects are presented is evaluated on the scale of **1 to 5**.

| | | | | |
|----------------------------------|---------------------------|--------------------------|---------------------------|----------------------------------|
| 1=(+) highly positive | 2=(+) positive | 3=(0) neutral | 4=(-) negative | 5=(-) highly negative |
|----------------------------------|---------------------------|--------------------------|---------------------------|----------------------------------|

On TV the manner of presentation is determined by the use of picture and sound effects, the anchorman's intonation and the style of the text itself.

In the press the manner of presentation is determined by explicit or implicit judgements about the actor, references to positive or negative contexts, historic figures, the style, etc.

5. Monitoring Checklists (Forms)

The monitors fill in the forms either electronically or by hand in black pen. Paper forms are compulsory.

There are three different forms for monitoring the broadcast media.

Form 1 is meant to capture the number of news items on the programme in general, the overall time of the programme, the numeric order of relevant news items, a brief description of the relevant news items (i.e. subject-matter, message, time span).

Form 2 captures the time given and the manner in which the subjects monitored are presented in news items selected by the monitor as relevant or on a programme, for example, featuring the opposition.

Form 3 is designed to record instances of distorted information, blocking election-relevant subjects and issues, cases of defamation, libel, etc.

There is only one form for monitoring the print media, in which the page, the headline, etc. are recorded.

While filling in the forms, the monitors use abbreviations referring to the objects to be monitored and subjects participating in the election. The names of people representing the given subjects are recorded in full. Every monitor enters either their name and personal number or the personal number only in the form for monitoring the print media.

6. The list of the subjects monitored in the election:

- Central Election Commission;
- Different level constituency election commissions;
- Candidates supported by local authorities or representing pro-governmental political parties;
- Neutral candidates;
- Candidates representing opposition political parties;
- Belarusian observers;
- President;
- Local authorities;
- Opposition as a non-personified subject.

APPENDIX 4

International standards on media coverage of elections

This document was elaborated by the well –known International organization Article 19 having a worldwide experience in freedom of expression issues and media field.

Legal standards

The role of media during elections is governed mainly by two international human rights:

1. The right to free expression
2. The right to political participation

1. **The right to freedom of expression** is protected in:

- Article 19 of the *Universal Declaration for Human Rights* (UDHR)⁴;
- Article 19 of the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights* (ICCPR),⁵ (ratified by Belarus on 1973 and legally binding on its government);
- Article 10 of the *European Convention on Human Rights* (ECHR) (not ratified by Belarus).⁶

Freedom of expression is seen as one of the most important rights guaranteed under the ECHR. It is fundamental to democracy. In the context of political processes (such as elections), freedom of expression must be particularly protected.

During elections, the right to free expression is essential so as to promote:

- the media's right to report on elections freely;
- all candidates/parties' right to communicate their message to the voters;
- the voters' right to receive information about the candidates/parties and about the electoral process.

Restrictions to the right to free expression:

In very specific, narrowly-defined circumstances international law allows certain restrictions to the right to free expression. Such restrictions have to:

- (1) be prescribed by law;
- (2) pursue one of the legitimate aims, as listed, and;
- (3) be necessary in a democratic society.

The ECHR lists the following legitimate aims:

- national security or public safety,
- the prevention of disorder or crime,

⁴ UN General Assembly Resolution 217A(III), 10 December 1948. The UDHR, as a UN General Assembly resolution, is not directly binding on States. However, parts of it, including Article 19, are widely regarded as having acquired legal force as customary international law since its adoption in 1948.

⁵ UN General Assembly Resolution 2200A(XXI), 16 December 1966, in force 23 March 1976.

⁶ E.T.S. No. 5, adopted 4 November 1950, in force 3 September 1953.

- the protection of health or morals,
- the protection of the rights and freedoms of others.

2. **The right to political participation and right to vote** are guaranteed in a number of international documents, for example Article 25 of the ICCPR, which states that:

“[e]very citizen shall have the right and opportunity, without ... distinction [of any kind] ... to vote ... at genuine ... elections.”

People can make an informed choice during elections only if they receive accurate and balanced information, together with a variety of viewpoints, so as to be able to form their own opinions on candidates and parties.

What do human rights mean in practice?

International bodies, such as the European Court of Human Rights or the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) have provided detailed guidance on what these principles mean in the practice of an electoral process. They have implications for the State, the campaigning parties, and the media itself.

Key guidelines are:

- All **media must be free** to report and comment on elections-related news and there must be no government censorship on election-related programmes or articles.⁷
- The **State-owned (public) media** have to provide the public with fair and balanced reporting, to enable them to make an informed and unfettered choice in electing representatives. All State-owned and State-controlled media (including the print media) should report campaigns in a fair, balanced and impartial manner.⁸
- The State-owned media must provide **voter education**. This means, citizens should be well informed about the registration and voting process.⁹
- The **private broadcast media** can also be required by law to follow some basic principles of fairness, balance and impartiality. However, according to

⁷ Political broadcasts or reports may however be subject to post-publication sanctions, for example, if they are found to have been defamatory or likely to incite violence. Any such measures should, however, be enforced through the regular judicial processes, in accordance with international human rights standards.

⁸ Recommendation R(99)15 of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe on Measures Concerning Media Coverage of Election Campaigns, Note 2, Appendix, Principle I.2 (Recommendation R(99)15). Also Recommendations on media and election are contained in the 1999 Report of the UN Special Rapporteur on the Protection and Promotion of the Right to Freedom of Opinion and Expression, Mr. Abid Hussein, UN Doc. E/CN.4/1999/64, 29 January 1999, Point 17 (UN 1999 Report).

⁹ See 1999 UN Report, Point 17.

the Council of Europe, such regulations should be implemented “with due respect for the editorial independence of broadcasters”.¹⁰

- **Private print and Internet-based media** should be free to express a political preference for one or other candidates.

While the State should not make prescriptions on content to the private media, it is strongly recommended that all private media develop and follow **voluntary guidelines** conducive to fair reporting. This serves to fulfil the principles of journalistic ethics and to promote freedom of expression.

- It is common to give a certain amount of free air-time to candidates/parties (often but not always on the public broadcaster) so they can communicate their messages to the public. This **free air-time** has to be provided in a **fair, transparent**, and non-discriminatory way.¹¹
- If **paid political advertising** is allowed, this “should be made available to all contending parties **indiscriminately**”.¹² This rule applies to both the public and private media.
- An **election administration** (central, regional, local) should be established which is independent of government, as well as of any political, financial or other force that can undermine its independence. The Central Election Commission has to be tasked and enabled to monitor and safeguard all principles of freedom of expression during the election period.

Ethical standards for media and journalists

Why ethics and self-regulation?

There are some important reasons why the media should establish and follow principles of professional ethics. Here are two of them:

- The media possess (in other places we put media as singular. We should make it consistent – normally I use the singular form, although it’s true that medium is actually the singular form...I think that the singular is used increasingly) great power in society because of their capacity to shape public opinion. The media should exercise this power with accountability.

¹⁰ Recommendation R(99)15, Note 2, Appendix, Principle II.1.

¹¹ *Ibid*, Principle II.4 and UN 1999 Report, Point 17.

¹² *Ibid*, Principle II.5.

- Establishing your own ethical guidelines and the procedures for upholding them, means exercising your freedom of expression – the freedom to make your own decisions in this sphere. It is aimed to protect you from restrictions that are imposed from above, and can protect against illegitimate accusations and attacks.

What is ethics?

Ethics is the personal capability of and commitment to responsible judgement in each circumstance, even the most challenging and unusual. Guidelines and codes of conduct help in upholding it, but it requires active commitment to ethical standards from each member of the profession and each media outlet.

Key principles of journalistic ethics during elections

Principles for covering elections should be based on general ethical principles for good journalism, as they are outlined in numerous codes of conduct around the world. One of the most authoritative codes is the Declaration of Principles on the Conduct of Journalists of the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ Code of Conduct).¹³

Most codes hold journalists responsible for:

- Respecting the truth and disseminating accurate information;¹⁴
- Refraining from fabricating information or falsifying documents;
- Using fair methods to obtain information;
- Respecting the confidentiality of sources;
- Avoiding discrimination;
- Avoiding ‘malicious representation’, defamation and bribery.¹⁵

Specific guidelines for election periods include:

- Cover elections **fairly!** This means that on a contentious issue a journalist should seek comments from all sides involved, and give a candidate the opportunity to respond to another candidate’s accusation.

¹³ Available on <http://www.ifj.org/default.asp?Issue=ETHICS&Language=EN>.

¹⁴ Principle 1 of the IFJ Code of Conduct states: “Respect for truth and for the right of the public to truth is the first duty of the journalist”.

¹⁵ The IFJ Code of Conduct counts as ‘grave professional offenses’ malicious misrepresentation; calumny, slander, libel or unfounded accusations; and the acceptance of a bribe (Principle 8).

- Report news as **accurately** as possible, refraining from deliberately favouring any candidate!
- Always strive to **correct any inaccurate information** you may have disseminated by mistake. This has to be done particularly speedily during an election campaign, where time is vitally important for the campaigning parties and candidates.
- Speedily give the **right of reply** to those who have been harmed by the dissemination of inaccurate or false information through you.¹⁶ The reply, correction or retraction should be approximately the same length, and should be broadcast in approximately the same time period, as the allegedly defamatory statement.
- Do not attempt to ‘interpret’ a candidate’s words, but instead **faithfully report** what was said.
- Avoid **emotive, inflammatory or discriminatory language** on any grounds, including race, gender and religion.
- In your reporting, make a clear distinction between the reporting of **facts** and the expression of an **opinion or commentary**.
- Provide **voters voices** in your reporting
- Give access to your medium to **all candidates**.
- **Opinion polls** should be reported with due care. You should ensure that, along with the poll, you report essential information such as the date when the poll was carried out, who commissioned and carried it out, and the margin of likely error.¹⁷

What is a **bias**?

A bias can be plain favouritism, but also omission of certain information, portraying of a story from a particular angle or giving it a certain twist.

Deliberate biases may also include more subtle techniques, such as the use of camera angles to make a candidate more or less photogenic, and the location of a candidate’s interview (a luxurious office as opposed to decrepit surroundings).

How to cope with **biases**?

Avoiding biases is not an easy task even for the best journalists, and all journalists make mistakes occasionally – not only because of political pressure or to pursue personal gain, but also simply because of work pressure and the need to meet

¹⁶ There should be an expedited procedure: during the short and intense election period, there is not time to address unfair and incorrect accusations through courts, and these can have a significant effect on the overall outcome.

¹⁷ For example, see the BBC rules on this issue, reported in ACE, *op. cit.*, “Voluntary Guidelines on Reporting Opinion Polls – United Kingdom”. <http://www.aceproject.org/main/english/me/mey16.htm>

deadlines. Partisanship may be the result of other underlying, internal and invisible processes. As a journalist noted:

The gathering, editing and publishing of news involves decisions by people who inevitably bring their own background, values and prejudices to bear on deciding what to select, emphasise and colour as new.¹⁸

In addition, an increase in news items relating to the incumbent is not necessarily a clear indication of bias, but may simply result from the emergence of circumstances which require the incumbent's particularly frequent public exposure. What the media and the Central Election Commission should ensure is the **elimination of deliberate biases** - and the provision of journalistic training so as to avoid unintentional biases as much as possible.

As the IFJ reminds us, a journalist is “a link between the event and the reader, listener or viewer ... news coverage should not become a barrier between the candidates and the voters. It should be a bridge connecting them.”¹⁹

What practical steps can be taken?

Journalists' organisations such as the IFJ recommend a range of measures to improve media performance during election periods. These include the following.

Recommendations for Individual Journalists

- Carefully study the media-related **election rules** before the campaign starts!
- Thoroughly prepare yourself by studying the major candidates and the socio-political context of the elections!
- Respect **issue complexity**! Issues are often more complicated than they might appear at first sight. Journalists should be acute observers and good analysts. One should remember that being impartial does not mean that one should not question or criticise.
- Do your utmost to remain **impartial** vis-à-vis the political process! As the IFJ Election Manual recommends, a journalist should not even take a ride in a politician's car.²⁰ This could impact adversely on his/her credibility.
- In general, follow the guidelines of the **IFJ Code of Conduct** when reporting at all times!

¹⁸ International Federation of Journalists, *Election Reporting Handbook. A Media for Democracy Handbook*, p.8 <http://www.ifj.org/pdfs/electionreporting.pdf>.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, p.9.

²⁰ John Lawrence, Briefing Paper by Training Editor of “The Nation”, Kenya, in International Federation of Journalists, *op. cit.*, p.24.

Recommendations for Media Outlets

- Different media outlets should join forces to prepare **general professional guidelines** and codes of conduct for journalists, as well as a mechanism for its implementation.
 - Each media outlet should develop **internal guidelines** for the coverage of elections.
 - It may be advisable for a media outlet to establish an **internal system** - such a committee responsible for reviewing news items/articles so as to monitor impartiality, and to provide support to journalists.
 - An internal **ombudsperson** may be appointed to review complaints from the public.
 - So as to protect journalists' editorial freedom, internal **statutes** can be adopted. Some newspapers have agreements guaranteeing that journalist should not be forced to perform or report in a way that is contrary to their convictions. Committees of nominated representatives can act to safeguard the interest of journalists in case of conflict between them and management.
 - The media should invest in building a relationship of **trust with the public**. A media outlet can, for example, set out and communicate to the electorate its rules for the reporting of the campaign, and solicit feedback from the public.
 - **Resource persons** should be at hand to provide answers to specific questions. These may include media lawyers, respected political analysts, sociologists and specialists in journalistic codes of conduct and journalistic ethics.
 - **Minor parties** should also be given attention in the media.
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- **Media and political parties/electoral candidates** could **jointly** develop an agreement to promote ethical behaviour in their interaction and guarantee **mutual respect** during the election campaign. This type of informal agreement can improve the, often problematic, relationship between journalists and politicians, and reduce the common lack of mutual trust.

When violence against journalists was on the increase in **South Africa** in 1992, the South African Union of Journalists convened a meeting with the representatives of major political parties. A **“Declaration of Respect for the Rights of Working Journalists”**, was signed by the parties, stated that they undertook to “respect and promote the physical safety of journalists, including news photographers and radio and television crews”.²¹

²¹ International Federation of Journalists, *op. cit.*, pp. 19 and 28.

- After the elections, a media outlet should **assess its performance** and identify possible drawbacks, so as to correct them in future electoral campaigns.

Resources:

- **UDHR**

<http://www.un.org/Overview/rights.html>

- **ECHR**

<http://conventions.coe.int/treaty/en/Treaties/Html/005.htm>

- **ICCPR**

http://www.unhcr.ch/html/menu3/b/a_ccpr.htm

- **ARTICLE 19 *Guidelines for Election Broadcasting in Transitional Democracies*, London 1994**

In 1994, building on experience gained during the first wave of democratic elections in post-Soviet Central and Eastern Europe, ARTICLE 19 published its *Guidelines for Election Broadcasting in Transitional Democracies*. These guidelines focus on the role of the broadcast media in elections, with a special focus on the obligations of State-owned broadcasters.

<http://www.article19.org/docimages/516.htm>

- **Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe**

In 1999, the Committee of Ministers adopted **Recommendation R(99)15** on Measures Concerning Media Coverage of Election Campaigns,²² which goes beyond the broadcast sector and recommends measures that apply to all media.

[http://www.coe.int/t/e/human_rights/media/5_Documentary_Resources/1_Basic_Texts/2_Committee_of_Ministers'_texts/Rec\(1999\)015%20E%20&_Exp_Mem.asp#TopOfPage](http://www.coe.int/t/e/human_rights/media/5_Documentary_Resources/1_Basic_Texts/2_Committee_of_Ministers'_texts/Rec(1999)015%20E%20&_Exp_Mem.asp#TopOfPage)

- **UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression**

Recommendations on media and election are contained in the **1999 Report** of the UN Special Rapporteur on the Protection and Promotion of the Right to Freedom of Opinion and Expression, Mr. Abid Hussein, UN Doc. E/CN.4/1999/64, 29 January 1999,

²² Adopted 9 September 1999.

[http://www.unhcr.ch/huridocda/huridoca.nsf/\(Symbol\)/E.CN.4.1999.64.En?Opendocument](http://www.unhcr.ch/huridocda/huridoca.nsf/(Symbol)/E.CN.4.1999.64.En?Opendocument)

- **OSCE**

Further recommendations regarding the role of the media in election times can be found in the **'human dimension' agreements** adopted by the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE)

See 'Document of the Copenhagen Meeting of the Conference on the Human Dimension of the CSCE', June 1990, mainly Principle 7.8.

<http://www.osce.org/docs/english/1990-1999/hd/cope90e.htm>

- **Venice Commission**

Further recommendations are also included in the **Code of Good Practice in Electoral Matters** adopted by the European Commission for Democracy through Law,²³ better known as the Venice Commission, an international organisation established through the Council of Europe.²⁴

[http://www.venice.coe.int/docs/2002/CDL-AD\(2002\)023rev-e.asp](http://www.venice.coe.int/docs/2002/CDL-AD(2002)023rev-e.asp)

²³ European Commission for Democracy through Law (Venice Commission), Code of Good Practice in Electoral Matters, Strasbourg, 30 October 2002, CDL-AD (2002) 23.

²⁴ Russia is a member of the OSCE, Council of Europe and the Venice Commission.