



HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS FOR FREE ELECTIONS

Elections*2024. Preliminary analytical report on the results of monitoring the elections of deputies on a single voting day on February 25, 2024

*The expert elections*¹2024 observation mission was organized by the Belarusian Helsinki Committee and the Viasna Human Rights Center as part of the "Human Rights Defenders for Free Elections" campaign. The mission collects and analyzes information about the election campaign based on open sources and messages from voters from Belarus.*

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¹The term "elections*" in relation to the 2024 election campaign is used with an asterisk by the "Human Rights Defenders for Free Elections" campaign to emphasize the perfunctory nature of this term, since any free and fair election campaign presupposes, first of all, conditions where rights and freedoms are fully realized, including freedom of speech, freedom of peaceful assembly and association, the right to take part in the conduct of public affairs, freedom from discrimination, which is currently practically absent in Belarus.

CONCLUSIONS

A single voting day was introduced in Belarus based on the results of constitutional amendments in the 2022 referendum. The elections of deputies of the House of Representatives of the 8th convocation and local Councils of Deputies of the 29th convocation were scheduled for February 25, 2024 by Decree No. 367 of November 20, 2023.

The expert mission for independent monitoring of the elections of deputies on a single voting day on February 25, 2024, within the framework of the "Human Rights Defenders for Free Elections" campaign, uniting the Viasna Human Rights Center and the Belarusian Helsinki Committee, aims to assess the electoral process from the point of view of Belarusian legislation and international standards of free and democratic elections, inform the Belarusian public and the international community on the preparation and conduct of the elections*, as well as on the results of the observation.

The 2024 elections* in Belarus were conducted in conditions of incessant repression; in the virtual absence of freedom of expression, peaceful assembly and association; in a climate of total fear and political purge. Repressions against any manifestations of what is perceived by the authorities as political activity continue; independent media and hundreds of civil society organizations, including all human rights organizations, have been liquidated. After re-registration, 4 political parties out of 16 remained in the country, all opposition parties were liquidated, and their members cannot carry out party activities under threat of criminal prosecution under Article 193-1 of the Criminal Code of the Republic of Belarus, which was returned to criminal law in early 2022.

After the post-election crisis of 2020 and the constitutional changes of 2022, there have been significant changes in the legal regulation of elections. These changes are aimed at reducing the role of parliament, narrowing the circle of participants in electoral processes, limiting the electoral rights of citizens and increasing the control of the authorities over the electoral process.

The monitoring of all stages of the election campaign conducted by the "Human Rights Defenders for Free Elections" campaign allows us to conclude that the elections* of deputies of the House of Representatives of the 8th convocation of the National Assembly and local Councils of Deputies of the 29th convocation did not meet international standards for democratic and free elections, and were accompanied by numerous violations of the electoral legislation of the Republic of Belarus. All stages of the electoral process were not just administratively controlled by the authorities, but were organized by them to retain power and simulate popular support and consensus in society. This is evidenced by: the lack of transparency in the formation of election commissions; the vertical of power controlling the lists of persons nominated and registered as candidates; campaigning which imitated political activity, while events and their media coverage were focused on general calls to come to vote; persistent forcing of voters to participate in early voting; a climate of intimidation with bans on taking photos and taking away ballots, rhetoric about "extremist plans" and police officers at all polling stations; an opaque procedure for counting votes; the complete absence of independent observers.

Election commissions

- the formation of territorial election commissions (TEC), district election commissions (DEC), and precinct election commissions (PEC), which are an important mechanism of the democratic electoral process, confirmed the course towards absolute control by the authorities over all stages of the elections*2024;

- a total of 5,411 PEC were formed (374 fewer than in the last elections to the House of Representatives and 459 fewer than in the last local elections). They included 57,233 persons. A reduction in the number of PEC and their membership when the workload increases (a single voting day for parliamentary and local elections*) may indicate confidence in the administrative control of

all processes, as well as low political activity of voters and low actual turnout (against the background of population outflow), and the desire of the authorities to include exclusively loyal people in the commissions;

- the stage of nomination to election commissions was accompanied by pressure from law enforcement agencies in the form of searches and inspections against persons who were active during previous election campaigns, which only deteriorated the climate of fear and was a kind of signal to potential participants in the election campaign about the possible consequences of taking part in the activities of the commissions;

- the majority of representatives to the DEC (74.3%) and a significant part to the TEC (47.1%) were nominated by pro-government public associations; 4 political parties nominated 2.83% of representatives to the TEC and 16.3% to the DEC; the share of representatives of political parties in the TEC and DEC remains insignificant (2.9% and 15.6%, respectively) compared with the share of representatives of public associations (44.5% and 57.8%, respectively); in the PEC, representatives of 4 political parties received 4,763 (8.3%) seats in the PEC, and representatives of public associations received 27,880 (48.7%) seats;

- the main resource of the actors responsible for holding the elections*, as before, are the five largest public associations (Belarusian Republican Youth Union (BRSM), "Belaya Rus", the Women's Union, the Association of Veterans, the Peace Foundation) and trade unions of the Federation of Trade Unions of Belarus, which (except for the Peace Foundation) have a legislatively established special relations with the state since 2023; the success rate of their nominated representatives to the commissions is 98.7% in the TEC and 99% in the DEC;

- administrative control over the formation of commissions and the predetermination of decisions on the approval of their composition are confirmed by the ratio of nominated and elected members: 98.4%;

- gender imbalance persists: the share of women (81.7% in the TEC and DEC and 74.7% in the PEC) in the composition of commissions significantly exceeds the share of men (18.3% and 25.3%, respectively).

Nomination and registration of candidates

- the nomination and registration of candidates took place almost in the total absence of a political campaign as such: there was no information campaign from political parties, voters were not encouraged to sign up for candidates in the public space. The complete purge of public space was not considered by the authorities as a sufficient guarantee against the expression of various political opinions: the number of places for collecting signatures has decreased, so that it would not be possible for persons to gather under the pretext of collecting signatures in crowded and convenient places. Pickets for collecting signatures were rather a formality, and in some cities they were not noticeable at all; a number of evidence and circumstances of signature collection indicate a high degree of administrative control, active use of administrative resources, which is rather aimed not at increasing voter engagement, but at imitating political activity and simplifying the work of initiative groups;

- against the background of a general climate of fear, including due to repression against voters who put their signatures for the nomination of alternative candidates for the 2020 presidential elections, the activity of nominating by collecting signatures of voters decreased almost three times compared to previous elections to the House of Representatives; and one and a half times, to local councils of deputies;

- almost all initiative groups were registered: at the level of elections* to the House of Representatives, only 2 applications were refused registration (one of them, judging by the available information, belonged to the only independent candidate, the leader of the dissolved Green party); at the level of elections* to local Councils, 8 applications were withdrawn, registration was denied to 19, and with respect to 1 application, a decision was made to cancel registration;

- 18,999 contenders for deputy candidates to local Councils were nominated, which is significantly less compared to the last campaign, while compared to the 2018 elections, the number of candidates nominated by citizens by collecting signatures decreased by 15.7% and the number of candidates nominated by political parties increased by 19.5% (due to the "Belaya Rus" party established in 2023);

- 18,802 candidates for deputies of local Councils have been registered, while maintaining the trend of past cycles with a low percentage of refusals (0.65%). The average number of registered candidates at the settlement level is equal to one candidate per seat and 1.2 candidates per district at the rural level, i. e. virtually uncontested elections*; it indicates a lack of political initiative and a very high degree of administrative control (pre-agreed lists of nominated candidates), which is also a consequence of the climate of fear;

- 265 candidates for deputies of the House of Representatives have been registered with the lowest percentage of refusals (8.4%), which indicates that the nomination processes are predetermined. Apparently, the authorities set the task to have 2 candidates on the ballot in each district in order to ensure formal competition;

- the analysis of the lists of registered candidates allows us to state its downright "nomenklatura" nature: most of the candidates occupy managerial positions and there are almost no candidates with vocational occupations. Unlike previous election cycles, all candidates can be called pro-government; there is no political struggle between them;

- the share of registered women-candidates for deputies of the House of Representatives has increased to 34.7%, which is more than in 2019 (27%); the share of women-candidates for deputies of local Councils increased to 53.7%, which is also more than in 2018 (49.1%);

- there was a sharp increase in party representation due to the establishment of the Belarusian party "Belaya Rus" in 2023: 42.3% of candidates for the House of Representatives and 27.6% of candidates for local Councils are its members, while the imitative nature of such a party is obvious from the presence of a significant number of districts where members of this party oppose each other;

- the share of re-elected incumbent deputies of local Councils decreased to 39% (in 2018 it was 46.7%); 20 deputies of the House of Representatives and 31 incumbent deputies of local Councils were registered for the House of Representatives, which is significantly less than in the last cycle (in 2019, it was 32 deputies of the House of Representatives and 66 deputies of local Councils).

Campaigning

- the canvassing stage was an administratively controlled imitation of a political race between entirely pro-government candidates: the authorities were trying to handle the difficult problem of creating an appearance of public interest in the elections* while prohibiting the manifestation of any public initiative. Considering any street activity as a threat, the authorities have taken all measures to make such events invisible (compared to previous election campaigns, the number of places where such events can be held has decreased; those rare pre-election pickets that were held across the country were small and had state symbols in their decoration, so it was difficult to determine which candidate they were held in support of);

- the campaign of most candidates was conducted mainly in the form of meetings with voters in the assembly halls of institutions and enterprises, often during working or lunch hours. The participation of voters in such meetings was ensured by the administration. The information coverage of such meetings created the appearance of great interest in the candidates, their programs and answers to questions of interest to voters. How the campaigning processes are managed by the administration can be noticed in the peculiar practice of "saving" organizational efforts: joint speeches of several candidates registered in the same electoral district were common, which is absurd in a competitive election campaign;

- the election programs of the candidates and the coverage of the canvassing stage in the state media were vivid indicators of an authoritarian political system where there is little room for real political diversity or critical discussion. The candidates' programs, which echoed the same positions and values supported by the authorities, indicate a significant limitation of political dialogue and the absence of a true competition of ideas. At the same time, it was extremely difficult to find election programs on the Internet, and some of the election programs were not published in the print media at all;

- the candidates were given airtime on state television, and there were formal TV debates. However, the existing legislative restrictions, minus the introductory and final words, leave each candidate about 3 minutes to communicate with their opponent, which limits the possibility of an in-depth exchange of opinions. Some speeches contained signs of incitement to hatred, prohibited by Article 47 of the EC, and manipulation of information;

- the artificial nature of the canvassing period is most clearly visible from the coverage of this stage in the state media. Despite the general density of information, it does not reflect a political competition of alternative visions of the country's future, but general words about the importance of elections and the obligation of voters to take part in them (with a continued focus on early voting);

- the CEC, executive committees, and social institutions were actively involved in educational and awareness-raising events about the elections, substituting such activity for the lively political process of the election campaigning. Special attention was paid to the "patriotic education of young people" during various "open dialogues" and at "dialogue platforms" in institutions of secondary special and higher education and when covering them on social networks and in the media. At the same time, the participants of such information events were often in a position dependent on the speakers and attendance at such events could effectively be mandatory for them;

- many registered candidates did not use their right to open special election accounts: at the level of elections* to the House of Representatives, only 160 candidates out of 265 took advantage of this opportunity. That is, across the country, 105 candidates for the House of Representatives are "running" a campaign without having the funds for it. This proves that competition in elections* is an imitation.

Voting and its results

- in the tradition of an authoritarian state, the authorities consider turnout as proof of general legitimization; every election turns into a plebiscite procedure, where the very fact of a voter's arrival at a polling station is evidence of trust in the state. Therefore, the authorities made special efforts to organize a real turnout (using administrative pressure) and to create an appearance of mass voter activity (information events dedicated to the elections* and their media coverage actively created a "festive mood" that should fill the space of the absent political competition);

- as in previous election campaigns, early voting was of an administrative, mobilizing, and compulsory, and accountable nature. Despite the fact that the EC defines early voting as an extraordinary measure that should be used when a voter is unable to vote on the main day, the authorities called and forced early voting; the official voter turnout for early voting was a record 41.7% (35.8% in 2019, 31.3% in 2016, 25.9% in 2012);

- the elections*2024 were held in conditions of an increased and obviously excessive presence of law enforcement agencies: police officers were present at all polling stations, video surveillance and "panic buttons" for commission members were installed, the stations were equipped with open booths allowing to monitor what is happening in them;

- despite the fact that the early voting turnout in 2024 was the highest of all the elections to the House of Representatives, the final official turnout is the lowest of the previous campaigns of the last 5 years, even inferior to the 2018 local election campaign (73.09% vs. 77.23%);

- 6 hours after the closure of the polling stations, the preliminary results of voting on the formation of all local councils with their competent membership were announced throughout the

country by the CEC; the list with the surnames of the deputies of the House of Representatives was known within 6 hours and 30 minutes after the closure of the polling stations;

- the counting of votes remains non-transparent, data on polling stations are not published; no data is provided by the CEC in machine-readable form;

- according to the CEC data on special election accounts, 29% of candidates elected as deputies of the House of Representatives did not open such accounts and, therefore, successfully "conducted" the election campaign without having funds specially allocated for it in accordance with the established procedure.

THE SITUATION ON THE EVE OF THE ELECTIONS

The elections*2024 began against the background of a deep social and political crisis lasting almost 4 years, which began in 2020 due to increased repression against civil society during the election campaign² and falsification of the results of the 2020 presidential elections³. The announcement of the official results of the 2020 elections, which did not reflect the real will of the citizens⁴, was followed by massive spontaneous peaceful protests, responding to which the authorities ordered violent dispersals of protests, mass detentions, and torture of protesters⁵. The investigative authorities began to initiate criminal cases against participants in peaceful protests on charges of group actions grossly violating public order or mass riots⁶.

The criminal prosecution for political reasons, which was practiced every now and then throughout the authoritarian period, intensified during the 2020 presidential elections, remains at a repressive level to this day, and will continue in the foreseeable future. The initiation of criminal cases for political reasons is the main method of suppression of any activity disapproved by the authorities: compared to the end of 2020, the number of known criminal cases for political reasons has increased five-fold. At the end of 2020, the Viasna Human Rights Center knew of 650 people against whom a criminal case was initiated in connection with their social and political activity, 1,380 — at the end of 2021, 33,800 — at the end of 2022, and 5,200 on 11/20/2023⁷. According to the authorities, at the end of 2020, more than 900 criminal cases were initiated for participating in protests⁸; and more than 5,000 at the end of 2021. Cases related to "extremist and protest activity" then accounted for 5.5% of all criminal cases, while "less than 3% of crimes in this category were committed with the actual use of violence⁹." There were 11,000 cases in July 2022¹⁰ and 16,000 cases in November 2023¹¹. At the time of the announcement of 2024 election*, 1,444 people

2A more detailed analysis is provided in the Preliminary analytical report on the results of the observation:

<https://elections2020.spring96.org/en/news/98942>

3The explanation of the discrepancy between the announced results of the presidential elections and the real expression of the will of citizens can be found in the Final analytical report on the results of observation of the presidential elections of the Republic of Belarus in 2020: <https://elections2020.spring96.org/ru/news/100922>

4The final analytical report on the results of the observation of the presidential elections of the Republic of Belarus in 2020, p. 3: <https://elections2020.spring96.org/ru/news/100922>

5During the first three days of the post-election protests, more than 6,000 people were detained, during August 2020 – more than 7,500, and during 2020 – more than 31,000 people. In August 2021, the Investigative Committee of the Republic of Belarus reported that in the second half of 2020, it received about 5,000 complaints of alleged ill-treatment, and all of them were rejected. See The human rights situation in Belarus in 2020: <https://spring96.org/en/news/101223>

6Amnesty Eurasia, The Belarusian authorities have opened massive criminal cases against hundreds of peaceful demonstrators: <https://eurasia.amnesty.org/2020/11/03/massovye-ugolovnye-dela-protiv-soten-mirnyh-demonstrantov-v-belarusi/>

7Viasna, the list of defendants in criminal cases [updated]: <https://spring96.org/ru/news/99641>

8Viasna, the human rights situation in Belarus. November 2020: <https://spring96.org/en/news/100777>

9Viasna, the human rights situation in Belarus. Analytical review: <https://spring96.org/en/news/106329>

10Telegram channel of the Investigative Committee of Belarus: <https://t.me/skgovby/7971>

11The official website of the Prosecutor General's Office of the Republic of Belarus:

<https://www.prokuratura.gov.by/ru/media/novosti/mezhdunarodnoe-sotrudnichestvo/generalnyy-prokuror-shos/>

deprived of their liberty in connection with the initiation of a criminal case were recognized as political prisoners¹².

Administrative and criminal proceedings do not meet the standard of fair judicial procedure, and the execution of punishment in politically motivated cases is carried out with the use of torture and cruel, inhuman, and degrading treatment. The authorities not only do not protect against torture, but systematically use it themselves. Essentially, any interaction between a representative of the government and a person who is an opponent of the government or is considered as such does not take place within the framework of the law, respect for human rights, and humane treatment, but in conditions of violence, humiliation, and suffering. At least 8 deaths are known to have allegedly occurred as a result of unjustified or disproportionate use of force, torture, and inhumane conditions of serving sentences in the form of imprisonment : Aliaksandr Taraikouski, Aliaksandr Vikhor, Henadz Shutau, Raman Bandarenka and Vitold Ashurak¹³, Ales Pushkin¹⁴, Viktor Klimovich¹⁵, and Ihar Lednik¹⁶.

Freedom of speech in Belarus is absent not only at the level of an individual, but also in the media of Belarus. Since 2020, media and journalists have faced several widespread methods of pressure: criminal prosecution (15 criminal cases are known in 2020¹⁷, 60 criminal cases in 2021¹⁸, 17 criminal cases in 2022¹⁹), obstruction of media activities by law enforcement agencies, the application of legislation on countering extremism to limit the influence of independent media and administrative measures of restricting access to information. A wide range of independent information is prohibited: from the social and political issues to culture and Belarusian-language content. Violation of prohibitions entails persecution in various forms: ill-treatment and torture, fines, confiscation of property, administrative arrest and criminal prosecution, compulsory psychiatric treatment, threats of deprivation of citizenship²⁰.

One of the most important forms of participation in the life of the state and society is realized by people through civil society organizations, while the state has the obligation to create conditions for their proper functioning. However, after the crisis of 2020, the authorities took a number of actions to purge civil society. As of the end of October 2023, according to monitoring conducted by Lawtrend, 1,457 non-profit organizations have been dissolved or are in the process of dissolution (931 are in the process of forced dissolution and 526 are in the process of self-dissolution)²¹.

The combination of restrictive legislation, politics of intimidation, and repressive practices is used as a powerful tool to force people to leave the country²². According to various estimates,

12Viasna, the list of political prisoners [updated]: <https://prisoners.spring96.org/en>

13Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, A/HRC/52/68, paragraph 12:

<https://undocs.org/Home/Mobile?FinalSymbol=A%2FHRC%2F52%2F68&Language=E&DeviceType=Desktop&LangRequested=False>

14Viasna, Political prisoner and artist Ales Pushkin died: <https://spring96.org/en/news/112176>

15Viasna, Political prisoner Mikalai Klimovich died in the colony: <https://spring96.org/en/news/111635>

16Viasna, Political prisoner Ihar Lednik died: <https://spring96.org/en/news/114453>

17Belarusian Association of Journalists, The mass media situation in 2020:

<https://baj.media/sites/default/files/analytics/files/2021/media-monitoring-2020-ru.pdf>

18Belarusian Association of Journalists, Mass media in Belarus in 2021: <https://baj.media/ru/analytics/smi-v-belarusi-v-2021-godu-0>

19Belarusian Association of Journalists, Mass media in Belarus in 2022: <https://baj.media/ru/analytics/smi-v-belarusi-v-2022-godu-0>

20Viasna, Restriction of Freedom of Expression under the Pretext of Combating Extremism and Terrorism:

https://spring96.org/files/book/en/freedom_of_expression.pdf

21Lawtrend, Мониторинг НКО в Беларуси, находящихся в процессе принудительной ликвидации и принявших решение о самоликвидации: <https://www.lawtrend.org/freedom-of-association/situatsiya-so-svobodoj-assotsiatsij-i-organizatsiyami-grazhdanskogo-obshhestva-respubliki-belarus-obzor-za-oktyabr-2023-g>

22Доклад Специального докладчика по вопросу о положении в области прав человека в Беларуси Анаис Марэн, A/77/195: <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N22/432/95/PDF/N2243295.pdf?OpenElement>

from 200 to 500 thousand people were forced to leave Belarus after August 9, 2020²³ and now, as a result of new legislative changes, they are deprived of the opportunity to exercise their voting rights.

After the 2020 presidential elections, the authorities already have experience in conducting a nationwide election campaign — a referendum on changing the Constitution, held on February 27, 2022, amid systemic and massive violations of human rights, a legal crisis, growing authoritarianism and the tension in the region due to the war unleashed by the Russian Federation against Ukraine. The preparation and holding of the referendum did not meet the basic international standards for conducting free and fair electoral campaigns and were accompanied by numerous violations. The voting was not transparent, there were no independent observers, and the result cannot be recognized as a real expression of the will of citizens²⁴.

By the time the 2024 elections* were announced, the authorities had created a climate of total fear, supported by administrative arbitrariness. All three years after the 2020 presidential elections, the regime systematically purged the social and political space, leaving no opportunities for healthy political discussion and real political struggle in the election campaign. Due to ongoing political repression, any initiative to participate in the 2024 election campaign that is not sanctioned by the vertical of power will entail a high risk of politically motivated criminal prosecution. Existing remedies are still ineffective; there are no guarantees of judicial independence and predictability in law enforcement practice. The human rights situation in Belarus is critical, in such conditions it is impossible to talk about the 2024 elections* as free, fair, and democratic.

OBSERVATION CONDITIONS

The authorities' creation of an atmosphere of fear²⁵ and the suppression of civil society resulted in the 2024 elections* lacking the opportunity for comprehensive independent observation of all aspects of the electoral process. In December 2023, authorities began intimidating citizens who acted as observers during the 2020 presidential election. They conducted searches and arrests,²⁶ accompanied by threats, and forced them to record apology videos.²⁷ The state-run media published videos accusing human rights defenders of misusing personal data of observers and falsifying data of election* monitoring results, specifically mentioning the “Human Rights Defenders for Free Elections” campaign and Viasna Human Rights Center.²⁸ These actions aimed to discredit independent observation in the eyes of the Belarusian and international public.

OSCE/ODIHR international observers were not invited to observe the elections*.²⁹ No observers were sent by the “Human Rights Defenders for Free Elections” campaign or

23Belarusians in exile: an overlooked issue addressed by the Parliamentary Assembly:

<https://pace.coe.int/en/news/8955/belarusians-in-exile-an-overlooked-issue-addressed-by-the-parliamentary-assembly>

24Final analytical report of the expert mission on evaluation of the republican referendum, p. 4

<https://referendum2022.spring96.org/ru/news/107870>

25See the campaign's pre-election* report 2024: <https://elections2024.spring96.org/en/news/113507>

26It is important to note that, based on the information available to us, all of them were released after “preventive” interviews.

27See <https://elections2024.spring96.org/en/news/113571>

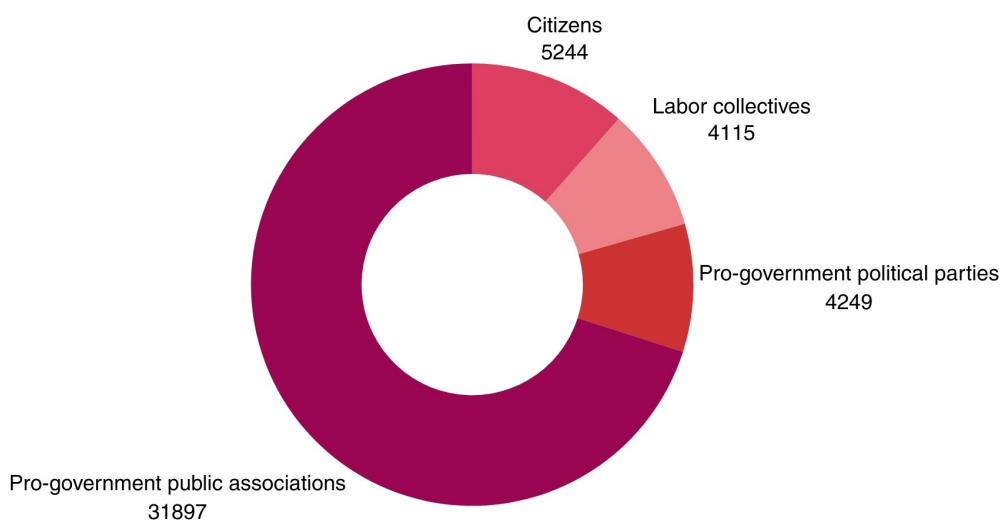
28*All-National TV*, “How extremists wanted to use Belarusians in elections? It’s something else,” February 15, 2024. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oXuIn4vY6WQ>

29OSCE, “Deteriorating human rights situation in Belarus of utmost concern as crackdown continues, human rights office ODIHR says,” 21 Feb. 2024, <https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/563046>

representatives of democratic forces due to security concerns.³⁰ Only politically biased³¹ local and international observers were permitted to observe.

Almost half of all local observers were nominated by pro-government parties and public associations. The main entities that sent local observers were public associations, “citizens who submitted an application”, and political parties. “Belaya Rus” is the leading political party in this respect. Other public associations include pro-government trade unions and the Belarusian Republican Youth Union (BRSM).³²

WHO NOMINATED THE OBSERVERS



According to the publication *Flagshtok*, among the observers from the Belarusian Republican Youth Union, who can be expected to be youth representatives, were citizens over 50 years old, which indicates the formal nature of such nominations.

Flagshtok media reported that some BRSM observers, who were expected to be youth representatives, included citizens over 50 years old.³³ This suggests that the nominations were merely formal. According to the publication, the typical observer was a pre-retirement-age woman who works as a teacher and was nominated by a pro-government public organization.

The CEC created a Public Election Observation Center as a platform to inform citizens about the 2024 election* observation and to interact with observers.³⁴ This center brought together

³⁰See campaign statement: <https://elections2024.spring96.org/en/news/113394>

³¹Politically biased election observation – a threat to the integrity of international institution, EPDE. https://www.epde.org/en/documents/details/politically-biased-election-observation-a-threat-to-the-integrity-of-international-institutions.html?file=files/EPDE/RESSOURCES/2019/2019%20Publications/EPDE_Biased%20observation%20threat%20integrity_EN.pdf

³²CEC, Information on Observers Accredited by Election Commissions, <https://www.rec.gov.by/uploads/files/Pdf/2024/stat14-15.pdf>

³³*Flagshtok*, “Observers at the February 25 election. Who are these people?” February 23, 2024. <https://d1j52mw0aso44.cloudfront.net/by/vybary-2020/nabljudateli-na-vyborah-25-fevralja-kto-eti-ljudi.html>

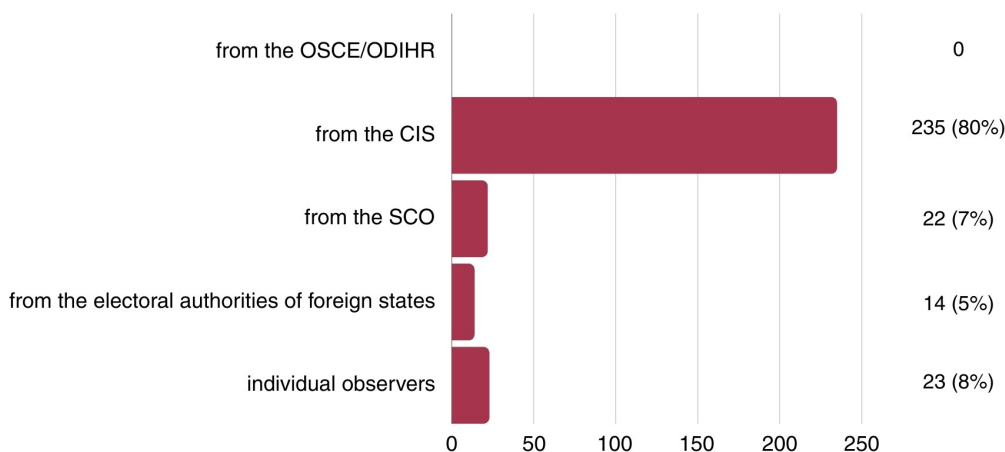
³⁴BT, “Public Election Observation Center hotline is set up,” February 20, 2024. https://www.tvr.by/news/obshchestvo/rabotaet_goryachaya liniya tsentra_obshchestvennogo_nablyudeniya_za_vybora

all local observers. The Center’s *Observation in Operation* Telegram channel³⁵ does not reflect the results of observation. Instead, it focuses on the authorities’ general agenda regarding patriotic education and treating elections as a festivity.³⁶

The CEC sessions were attended by only four individuals, which is a record low. One observer was sent from each of the following: the Communist Party of Belarus, “Belaya Rus”, BRSM, and the Belarusian Professional Union of Workers of Education and Science.³⁷

Regarding the international observers, CEC Chair Ihar Karpenka stated that although international organizations were going to be present at the elections, the elections were held for the country’s citizens, not for the approval of international observers. “Specifically, I am talking about the CIS observation mission. Traditionally, we invite the heads of election bodies from CIS countries, as well as representatives from CSTO and SCO.”³⁸ A total of 294 people were registered as international observers, 80% were CIS observers.³⁹

INTERNATIONAL OBSERVERS



We found one of these observers from Germany, Gunnar Lindemann, in the Database of Politically Biased International Observers of the European Platform for Democratic Elections.

[mi 8 017 215 21 83 /](https://t.me/vedetsyanablyudenie)

³⁵Telegram channel <https://t.me/vedetsyanablyudenie>

³⁶*Observation in Operation*, “Elections are always a holiday!”, <https://t.me/vedetsyanablyudenie/38>

³⁷CEC, Information on observers sent to the meetings of the Central Election Commission of the Republic of Belarus during the 2024 elections of deputies on the Single Voting Day, <https://www.rec.gov.by/uploads/files/Pdf/2024/cec-nabl.pdf>

³⁸*Sputnik Belarus*, “EU observers will work at elections in Belarus, CEC head promises,” February 17, 2024. <https://sputnik.by/20240217/glava-tsik-belarus-provodit-vybory-ne-dlya-mezhdunarodnykh-organizatsiy-1083724709.html>

³⁹CEC, Information on foreign (international) observers accredited by the Central Election Commission of the Republic of Belarus during the elections of deputies on the Single Voting Day, February 25, 2024, <https://www.rec.gov.by/uploads/files/Pdf/2024/i-nab.pdf>.

On February 24th, the Ministry of Culture and the CEC hosted a concert for international observers.⁴⁰

After accrediting international observers, the CEC published comments allegedly made by European observers. They noted the “high level of election organization”⁴¹, ensuring “freedom of choice”⁴² and “compliance with international standards.”⁴³ Meanwhile, the pro-government media quoted⁴⁴ Gunnar Lindemann, an international observer from Germany. However, it’s worth noting that Lindemann is listed⁴⁵ in the Database of Politically Biased International Observers by the European Platform for Democratic Elections.⁴⁶

Thus, the observation conditions for the 2024 election* were highly restricted and regulated. There was no opportunity for independent and opposition observers to participate in a safe environment. Only politically biased domestic and international observers were permitted to observe. Their observation results did not reflect the true course of the electoral process.

LEGAL FRAMEWORK

The amended Electoral Code regulated the preparation and conduct of elections*. This was preceded by a legislative deterioration of conditions for the activities of independent public associations, including political parties, and the media. Excessive restrictions on freedom of expression and freedom of assembly continued.⁴⁷ A year before the Single Voting Day, a new requirement was introduced that political parties had to re-register. This resulted in only four out of the original sixteen parties remaining registered and authorized to nominate candidates for deputy. All opposition parties were liquidated. These measures, together with changes in the Electoral Code, have narrowed the range of subjects who can participate in the electoral campaign in different roles.⁴⁸

After the 2022 constitutional referendum, the central authorities’ configuration changed. This election campaign is a preparation for the formation of a new supreme representative body, the All-Belarusian People’s Assembly.⁴⁹ The 2024 election* combined two campaigns: one for the deputies of the House of Representatives of the 8th convocation and another for the deputies of local

40*BelTA*, “Important, intimate, familial. A director discusses the concept of a concert featuring masters of arts and talented youth at the Bolshoi,” February 24, 2024, <https://www.belta.by/culture/view/vazhnoe-sokrovennoe-semejnoe-rezhisser-o-kontseptsii-kontserta-masterov-iskusstv-i-talantlivoj-617463-2024/>

41*CEC* (@cikbelarus), “Polish and French observers praised the organization of the elections in Belarus,” February 25, 2024, <https://t.me/cikbelarus/2253>

42*CEC* (@cikbelarus), “We have not witnessed the restrictions on voting reported by Western media, independent observer from Italy notes,” February 25, 2024, <https://t.me/cikbelarus/2250>

43*CEC* (@cikbelarus), “German observer: Voting in Belarus meets democratic standards,” February 25, 2024, <https://t.me/cikbelarus/2223>

44*BelTA*, “German observer: Voting in Belarus meets democratic standards,” February 25, 2024, <https://www.belta.by/society/view/nabljudatel-iz-germanii-golosovanie-v-belarusi-sootvetstvet-demokraticheskim-standartam-617608-2024/>.

45*EPDE*, Database of politically biased election observers, Result: Gunnar Norbert Lindemann,

<https://www.fakeobservers.org/biased-observation-database/details/lindemann-gunnar-norbert.html>

46*EPDE*, Database of politically biased election observers, <https://www.fakeobservers.org/politically-biased-election-observers.html>

47The first report of the “Human Rights Defenders for Free Elections” campaign “Situation on the eve of the elections*2024” describes relevant developments, pp. 2-3: <https://elections2024.spring96.org/en/news/113507>

48*Ibid.*

49The All-Belarusian People’s Assembly includes both House of Representatives deputies and representatives of local councils at various levels. This is under the Law of the Republic of Belarus No. 248-Z “On the All-Belarusian People’s Assembly”, Articles 6, 7, 10: <https://pravo.by/document/?guid=12551&p0=H12300248&p1=1>.

Councils of Deputies of the 29th convocation. Both campaigns took place on a Single Voting Day, the last Sunday of February, as per changes in the electoral legislation.

The key changes to the election laws include:

- extending voting rights to citizens in pre-trial detention;
- formalization of the restriction on exercising suffrage outside the Republic of Belarus. This change automatically deprives a significant number of citizens who left the country after 2020 due to the risk of politically motivated persecution of the opportunity to participate in elections*.

- significant narrowing of the group of people who have the right to be elected. Citizens who hold citizenship in another country, possess a foreign residence permit or have any foreign document that “grants them benefits or advantages” are now prohibited from running for office. Individuals who have an effective court conviction cannot run for the position of House of Representatives deputy. Candidates for local council deputies must be citizens without a criminal record, whether unexpunged or outstanding;⁵⁰

- further restriction of financing expenses for the preparation and carrying out of election campaigns. Financial aid cannot be received from foreign states, organizations, or citizens, as well as from organizations receiving foreign gratuitous aid, including transfers from Belarusian citizens who stay outside the country for over 183 days a year;

- the revised EC does not give citizens a practical way to know the membership of election commissions, which undermines confidence in the electoral process;

- the right to be a domestic observer is limited to those who have the right to vote;

- the ban on photographing ballots has been reintroduced.

Positive changes, such as implementing early voting without breaks, including citizens in voter lists before election day, and formalizing the obligation of election commissions to ensure favorable conditions for citizens with disabilities, are unable to significantly improve the overall situation. The changes made to electoral legislation do not take into account recommendations from the OSCE/ODIHR,⁵¹ domestic and international observers⁵². This effective undermining of the universality of elections* as early as at the regulatory stage worsens the situation.⁵³ The systemic problems repeatedly noted by observers remained unaddressed:

- The election commissions should be formed in a way that ensures their independence and impartiality. All candidates should be able to nominate members. Additionally, the problem caused by the lack of clear criteria for the election of commission members should be addressed. The current setting enables the reproduction of hierarchical relationships in the commissions imported from institutions that send representatives to commissions;

- Excessively broad restrictions on exercising the right to be elected;

⁵⁰Ibid, p. 4.

⁵¹OSCE/ODIHR recommendations are available in the Electoral Recommendations Database <https://paragraph25.odhr.pl/search?dayOfElection=2019-11-17T00%3A00%3A00.000Z&numberOfTheRecommendationInTheFinalReport=1&numberOfTheRecommendationInTheFinalReport=55&projectBeneficiary=Belarus&typeOfElection=Parliamentary&yearOfElection=2019&yearOfElection=2019>

⁵²<https://referendum2022.spring96.org/ru/news/107870>

⁵³Situation on the eve of the elections*2024. First report of the campaign “Human Rights Defenders for Free Elections,” pp. 5-6: <https://elections2024.spring96.org/en/news/113507>

- Lack of legal and administrative measures to prevent abuse of office, pressure on public officials, and support from state-owned enterprises or state-subsidized associations during the electoral campaign;
- Lack of transparency in the candidate registration process; minor inaccuracies in documentation may result in automatic denial of registration. De-registration is not an exceptional measure that is only applied in cases of serious violations of the law by a court decision;
- Lack of independent, impartial, and professional verification of campaign finance reports based on fair and objective criteria;
- Lack of adequate safeguards against abuse during early voting and mobile voting (see below);
- Lack of measures to ensure a controlled and transparent vote-counting process, including unimpeded access of observers to the process, announcement, and demonstration of the mark on each ballot paper during the vote count, open drafting of final protocols, and provision of a copy of the latter to observers.

The current regulation does not comply with international standards established by the Convention on Standards for Democratic Elections, Electoral Rights and Freedoms of the Member States of the Commonwealth of Independent States,⁵⁴ despite statements made by representatives of the electoral administration and the CIS Interparliamentary Assembly.⁵⁵

ELECTION COMMISSIONS

The authorities consolidated their absolute control over all stages of the 2024 elections* through the formation of Territorial Election Commissions, District Election Commissions, and Precinct Election Commissions.

The authorities' complete disinterest in citizens' real participation in electoral processes is evident in the almost complete lack of information available to a wide range of voters about the formation stages of election commissions and the associated rights and opportunities.

The authorities restricted the range of entities eligible to nominate representatives to the commissions. This was due to ongoing repressions that drastically reduced the number of public associations. Only 4 out of 16 political parties were able to finalize the re-registration procedure, all of which are loyal to the regime. As a result, all established election commissions lacked representatives from opposition parties and independent public associations.

The percentage of political party representatives in TECs, DECs, and PECs is still insignificant. They account for only 2.9%, 15.6%, and 8.3%, respectively, compared to the much higher percentage of representatives from public associations, which account for 44.5%, 57.8%, and 48.7%, respectively.

⁵⁴The defects of the national regulation that contradict the Convention mentioned, as described in the Analytical Report on the results of the observation of the 2019 elections to the House of Representatives of the National Assembly, are still relevant, https://spring96.org/files/misc/2019_elections_analytical_report_en.pdf.

⁵⁵<https://www.belta.by/society/view/karpenko-k-vyboram-budut-obrazovany-1394-okrzhnye-i-territorialnye-izbiratelnye-komissii-601553-2023/>, <https://www.belta.by/society/view/mezhdunarodnye-nabljudateli-ot-mpa-sng-vysoko-otsenili-organizatsiju-vyborov-v-belarusi-617414-2024/>, <https://www.belta.by/society/view/kosachev-vse-usloviya-dlja-raboty-mezhdunarodnyh-nabljudatelej-na-vyborah-v-belarusi-obespecheny-617380-2024/>.

The five largest public associations in Belarus, including BRSM, “Belaya Rus” [remains as a public association and also formed an eponymous party in March 2023], Belarusian Women’s Union, Association of Veterans, and the Peace Foundation, along with the trade unions that are part of the Belarus Trade Union Federation, are the main administrative leverage for conducting elections. Except for the Peace Foundation, these associations have a legislatively established special relationship with the state since 2023; the admission rate of their nominated representatives to commissions is 98.7% at TECs, 99% at DECes, and 98.4% at PECs. The high admission rates of pro-government candidates to election commissions attest to administrative control over commission formation and predetermined decisions to approve their membership.

The reduction in the number and membership of PECs, while maintaining the high workload associated with the introduction of a single voting day for elections to the House of Representatives and local councils, may indicate confidence in the administrative controllability of all processes and low political engagement and turnout of the population, as well as the authorities’ desire to include only loyal individuals in the commissions.

The revised legislation permits the non-disclosure of PEC members’ names, making it challenging to evaluate the PEC’s membership, specifically the extent to which the ‘occupational principle’ of forming election commissions is maintained when commission members represent the same labor collective, and their immediate supervisors head these election commissions.

NOMINATION AND REGISTRATION OF CANDIDATES

The nomination and registration of candidates occurred without any political campaign. Political parties did not organize any information campaigns, and voters were not encouraged to sign up for candidates in public spaces.

After re-registration, only four pro-government parties remain in the legal field, while civil society organizations and independent media have been liquidated *en masse*. The authorities do not believe that completely cleansing the public realm of dissidents is enough to prevent the expression of diverse political opinions. The number of authorized signature collection sites has been reduced during the current election campaign. Collecting signatures in busy and convenient places was difficult. However, some privileged candidates have successfully ignored the prohibition.

Nomination of candidates through signature collection does not require formal links to state or political structures. However, this method is perceived as insecure because holding any alternative position would almost certainly lead to political persecution. The authorities continue to actively use this tactic against dissenters. Due to the atmosphere of fear created by the authorities, independent candidates refrained from running, even by collecting signatures. There was only one known unsuccessful attempt to register as a candidate for the House of Representatives by the leader of the liquidated Green Party. Nomination activity by collecting voters’ signatures decreased almost threefold compared to the previous elections for the House of Representatives and one and a half times for local Councils of Deputies.

Almost all initiative groups were registered: only two applications for registration were refused at the House of Representatives election* level. One of them was for the only independent candidate, the leader of the liquidated Green Party, according to available information; at the local council election* level, 8 applications were withdrawn, 19 were denied registration, and 1 registration was revoked.

The picketing for the signature collection was not active and was merely window-dressing. In some cities, it was not visible at all. Reports and circumstances linked to signature collection indicate a high degree of administrative control and active use of administrative leverage. This was not aimed at attracting a mass of voters, but at simulating political activity and simplifying the work of initiative groups.

Due to the absence of independent observers overseeing the work of election commissions, it was challenging to evaluate the signature collection process. The media coverage was minimal. In general, most election commissions' verification of voters' signatures and data about candidates, including questionnaires, income and property declarations, was non-transparent and publicly undisclosed.

A total of 298 candidates were nominated for the House of Representatives, which is significantly lower than the previous election campaign's figure of 703.

The percentage of women increased by 6.9%, from 25.7% (181) in 2019 to 32.6% (97) in 2024.

On January 16, 2024, Ihar Karpenka, the CEC chairman, announced that 92 women had submitted their applications to register as candidates. All of them were granted registration.⁵⁶ 18,996 candidates were nominated for local Councils of Deputies elections.⁵⁷ However, the figures were later adjusted.⁵⁸

The number of candidates nominated to run for local councils (18,999 people) decreased significantly compared to the last campaign. The number of candidates nominated by citizens through signature collection decreased by 15.7%, while the number of candidates nominated by political parties increased by 19.5% compared to the 2018 elections.

Nomination activity has significantly decreased. In 2019, 424 candidates were nominated, including by opposition parties. However, in the current campaign, the absence of independent candidates was noticeable.

There were 265 candidates registered for the House of Representatives elections*. The nomination processes were predetermined, as indicated by the lowest recorded rejection rate of 8.4%. It seemed like the authorities aimed to have two candidates on the ballot in each district to ensure formal competitiveness. Eight applications to run for office were withdrawn, and 25 candidates were denied registration as candidates for deputies.

A total of 18,802 candidates were registered for local council elections*, and the rejection rate remained low at 0.65%, continuing the trend of past election cycles. The average number of registered candidates at the settlement level was one candidate per seat and 1.2 candidates per district at the rural level, making the election virtually clear-choice. This suggests a lack of political initiative, which may be due to a climate of fear and a high degree of administrative control,

⁵⁶*BelTA*, "298 candidates for the House of Representatives have been nominated in the country, Karpenka says," January 16, 2024. <https://www.belta.by/society/view/karpenko-v-strane-vydvynuto-298-kandidatov-v-deputyat-palaty-predstavitelej-610081-2024/>.

⁵⁷*BelTA*, "18,996 people have been nominated as candidates for local Councils of Deputies, Karpenka says," January 16, 2024, <https://www.belta.by/society/view/karpenko-v-kandidaty-v-mestnye-sovety-deputatov-vydvynuty-18-996-chelovek-610110-2024/>.

⁵⁸*CEC*, "Ihar Karpenka informs international observers about the registration of candidates for deputy," February 24, 2024, <https://rec.gov.by/ru/from-telegram-ru/view/igor-karpenko-rasskazal-mezhdunarodnym-nabljudateljam-o-registratsii-kandidatov-v-deputyat-1547-2024>

including pre-agreed lists of nominated candidates. 78 declarations of consent to run for office were withdrawn, and 119 candidates were denied registration.

The analysis of the registered candidate lists reveals a completely ‘nomenklatura’ character. The majority of candidates hold managerial positions, and there are almost no working-class candidates. Unlike previous election cycles, all candidates can be considered pro-government, and there was no political conflict among them.

The percentage of women running for the House of Representatives increased from 27% in 2019 to 34.7%. Similarly, the corresponding share of women running in local council elections increased from 49.1% in 2018 to 53.7%.

The creation of the “Belaya Rus” party in 2023 has led to a sharp increase in party representation. 42.3% of candidates for the House of Representatives and 27.6% of candidates for local councils are members of this party. However, this partisanship is imitative, as evidenced by the significant number of districts where party members compete with each other.

The rate of incumbent local councilors running for office again decreased to 39%. In the current cycle, 20 House of Representatives deputies and 31 incumbent local councilors were registered as candidates, which is significantly lower than the previous cycle’s numbers (32 House of Representatives deputies and 66 local councilors in 2019).

ELECTION CAMPAIGNING

The campaigning period was characterized by an imitation of political competition between pro-government candidates, clearly controlled by the authorities. Candidates had only 24 days to campaign, which is a critically short time. During this period, they are supposed to present their programs to voters and canvass them. However, the short period allocated for campaigning aligns with the fresh election-related authorities’ policy of emphasizing the importance of voting rather than discussing the elections*, candidates, and their programs.

Candidates in these elections* hardly used campaign pickets, despite the simplified procedure for their conduct. The authorities considered street events a potential threat and banned them in the busiest parts of cities. If held, these events were practically unnoticeable. The pre-election pickets held around the country were few in number and decorated with state paraphernalia. It was difficult to determine which candidate they supported.

Most candidates mainly campaigned through programmatic talks in the assembly halls of public institutions and companies, often during working hours or lunch breaks. Administrators ensured voter participation in these meetings, which resembled ‘ideological lectures.’ The purpose was solely to create the appearance of public interest in candidates, their programs, and their responses to voters’ questions.

The election programs of candidates and the coverage of the campaign period in state media attested to an authoritarian political system with limited space for political diversity or critical debate. Candidates’ programs echoed the themes and values espoused by authorities, indicating a significant limitation of political dialogue and the absence of true competition of ideas. Publishing programs in print media⁵⁹ only limits voters’ exposure to them, hindering their ability to

⁵⁹Candidates could publish the program for free in print media only, as stated in Part 2 of Article 46 of the Electoral Code.

get an insight into the candidates' platforms. It was challenging to locate election programs online. Additionally, some election programs were not even published in print media.

State media covered the campaign stage, but failed to present the differences between candidates, limiting voters' ability to make informed decisions. The coverage focused on the importance of voting, without providing enough information about the candidates. Offering airtime to candidates on state television and formal televised debates created an illusion of a democratic electoral process. However, in practice, the 3 minutes of airtime provided at debates is insufficient for candidates to adequately present their programs, discuss differences in approaches, and convincingly argue their positions.

EARLY VOTING

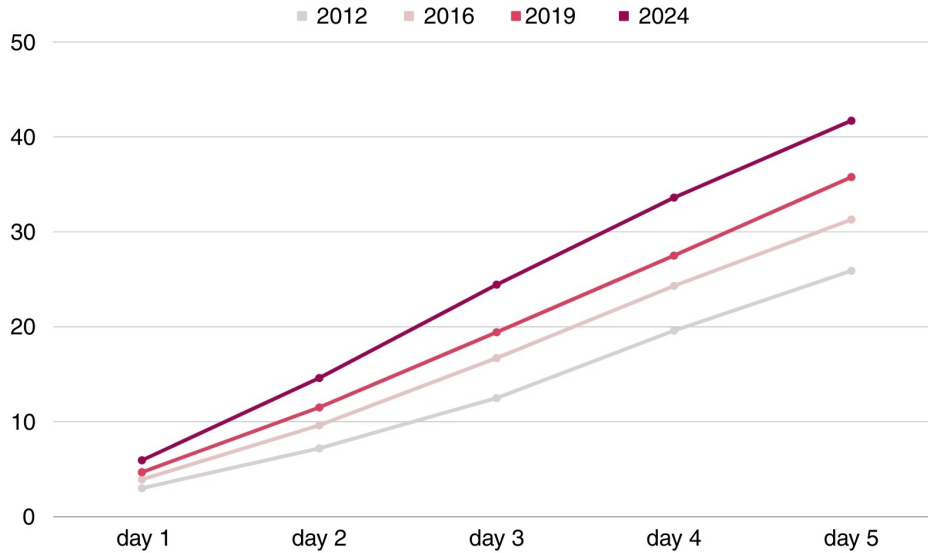
Under the law, early voting lasted for five days from February 20th to February 24th, 2024. Official turnout for early voting was a record 41.71%.⁶⁰ Previous House of Representatives elections demonstrate the trend of increasing reported turnout in early voting with every election cycle:

Election to the House of Representatives	2024	2019	2016	2012
Day 1 of early voting	5.94%	4.69%	3.92%	3.00%
Day 2 of early voting	14.61%	11.51%	9.63%	7.20%
Day 3 of early voting	24.44%	19.43%	16.71%	12.50%
Day 4 of early voting	33.61%	27.50%	24.31%	19.60%
Day 5 of early voting	41.71%	35.77%	31.29%	25.90%

Early voting was coercive, reportable, and driven by administrative mobilization, as in previous election campaigns. The EC defines early voting as an extraordinary measure to be used when voters are unable to vote on the main day. However, the authorities have traditionally taken a radically different approach.

⁶⁰CEC, Information on Early Voting, 20-24 February 2024: <https://www.rec.gov.by/ru/news-ru/view/dosrochnoe-golosovanie-1494/>

INCREASE OF THE % OF OFFICIAL TURNOUT AT EARLY VOTING



Art. 53 of the EC regulates early voting. This procedure allows voters who are unable to vote on election day to cast their ballot up to five days before the main voting day. The ballot is filled out in the presence of the precinct commission and placed in a separate sealed ballot box. This ensures that the voter's will is not compromised. Note that the legislation does not require official confirmation of a voter's inability to come to the polling station on election day. Early voting is conducted from 12 to 7 pm without interruption, with at least two members of the precinct commission present. Ballot boxes should be sealed or unsealed in the same manner on the first day of early voting as on the main voting day.

Every day after the end of voting time during the early voting period, the chair or deputy chair of the precinct commission must cover the slot for dropping ballots in the ballot box with a piece of paper. The chair or deputy chair and a member of the precinct commission shall sign it. The ballot box unsealing should be done daily before the start of early voting by the same individuals. Observers and members of the media have the right to be present during the sealing and unsealing of the slot for depositing ballots in the ballot box. The precinct commission chair must ensure that the ballot box is stored properly. During early voting, the chair or deputy chair of a precinct commission draws up a daily report. The report includes the number of ballots received by the PEC, the number of citizens who received ballots (on the last day of early voting – the total number of citizens who received ballots), the number of spoiled ballots, and the number of unused ballots. The chair or deputy chair and a member of the commission shall sign the report. A copy of the report shall be posted for public inspection on the premises of the precinct commission. Early voting polling stations cannot be set up in temporary voter housing locations, such as hospitals, sanatoriums, and rest homes.

Given the abusive practices in previous election campaigns, it is important to note that the above-mentioned measures alone may not be sufficient to ensure the transparency and integrity of the early voting process. Among other issues, the seals, voting forms and other documentation used may not be guaranteed to be secure, and there may be no protection against artificially inflated turnout and ballot stuffing. Additionally, observers may not have unimpeded access to voter lists and protocols, including the right to photograph the latter. The lack of a quorum of PEC members reduces the level of scrutiny and transparency of the process.

The authorities' systemic actions indicate that early voting aimed to achieve and demonstrate high voter turnout, as it has in the past. The early voting stage is one of the most problematic stages of the electoral process in Belarus. It creates ample opportunities for the use of administrative leverage, artificial increase of turnout, and falsifications committed by members of commissions. This is because the stage is susceptible to abuse.

The desire to boost turnout, rig the vote, and ensure full control over the voting process was clearly expressed. This was done through the active promotion of early voting. The authorities actively campaigned for early voting before and during the early voting days (February 20 to 24). They organized pickets,⁶¹ entertaining mass events,⁶² and ideological meetings with students.⁶³ They also held 'single awareness-raising days' for labor collectives⁶⁴ and posted extensively on social media⁶⁵ and in local pro-government media.⁶⁶

Practical steps were taken from 20 to 24 February to organize mass participation in voting. This included mobilizing pensioners,⁶⁷ athletes,⁶⁸ public servants, and employees of state-funded organizations and enterprises. Students and parents of schoolchildren were particularly instrumentalized in the educational institutions. High school students were stationed at the entrance of the building where the polling stations were located. They were offering to guide voters to the polling station. State-funded organization heads reported to higher officials on high turnout during early voting.⁶⁹ School directors had an early voting 'schedule' for their subordinates and reported to the education department.

To encourage early voting participation, authorities have traditionally used both incentives and threats against voters. For instance, students were promised a day off from school if they voted early instead of attending classes. They were also warned of academic consequences if they refused to vote early.⁷⁰ Election commissioners gave stationery and constitution books as gifts to first-time and early-voting youth. Some other voters also received gifts.⁷¹ Some factories, educational

61 "Pickets in 'support of the elections' took place in various provinces of Minsk Oblast":

<https://elections2024.spring96.org/ru/news/114448>

62 "Every effort has been thrown at promoting early voting": <https://spring96.org/ru/news/114518>

63 "Across the Mahilioŭ Oblast, students are 'strongly advised' to vote early":

<https://elections2024.spring96.org/ru/news/114513>

64 "The week leading up to the vote in Viciebsk Oblast": <https://elections2024.spring96.org/ru/news/114512>

65 "The first day of early voting in Hrodna Oblast": <https://spring96.org/ru/news/114465>

66 "Almost all local nomenklatura representatives in Rahaŭ voted early":

<https://elections2024.spring96.org/ru/news/114540>

67 "A 'walking tour' of polling stations": <https://elections2024.spring96.org/ru/news/114535>

68 "Team up to vote, and no pictures of ballots": <https://elections2024.spring96.org/ru/news/114494>

69 "Homie Oblast leads two days into early voting": <https://elections2024.spring96.org/ru/news/114493>

70 "Across the Mahilioŭ Oblast, students are 'strongly advised' to vote early":

<https://elections2024.spring96.org/ru/news/114513>

71 "Calendars, constitution books, and... tea are used to attract people to polling stations in Brest Oblast":

<https://elections2024.spring96.org/ru/news/114539>

institutions, and healthcare facilities have reportedly threatened workers with employment contract non-renewal if they did not vote early. Those residing in dormitories, both students and workers, were warned that they may not be allocated a bed or room in the upcoming year. Dormitory duty officers visited the rooms with a list of residents who did not participate in early voting. Mass voting by prisoners sentenced to restriction of freedom in open-type correction facilities is also a known occurrence.

ELECTION DAY VOTING (INCLUDING MOBILE VOTING) AND VOTE TABULATION

The precinct commissions shall notify voters about the election day, time, and place of voting, as well as provide them with information about the candidates for deputy. This notification must be sent no later than 10 days before the election. The commission's telephone number should also be included.⁷² Voting takes place from 8 am to 8 pm. Polling places in military units and places where voters are temporarily housed, such as hospitals, sanatoriums, rest homes, and other temporary locations, may close voting before 8 pm if all voters on the list have cast their vote. Article 51 of the Electoral Code states that voting must take place in designated premises. These premises should have enough booths or rooms for secret voting, ballot issuing stations, and ballot boxes installed. The ballot boxes should be placed in a manner that requires voters to pass through the booths or rooms for secret voting. The boxes should be visible to members of the precinct commission, observers, and deputies of the House of Representatives, members of the Council of the Republic, and deputies of local councils who are observing the voting.

Before voting begins on election day, the PEC chair checks and seals or unseals the ballot boxes in the presence of at least two-thirds of the commission members. Voters must vote in person; voting for others is not permitted.⁷³ The election officials issue a ballot paper to a voter based on the list of eligible citizens. The voter must present a passport, citizen's identification card, or another document specified by the CEC.⁷⁴ Upon receiving the ballot paper, the voter should sign next to their name on the list. When voting in an election, the voter marks the blank square to the right of the candidate's name they choose to vote for. If a voter wishes to vote against all candidates, they should mark the empty box to the right of the 'Against all candidates' line. On the single voting day, a voter receives two separate ballot papers. One is for the election of a member of the House of Representatives, and the other is for the election of a member of the local Council of Deputies. The voter fills in each ballot paper and puts them into the ballot box. Taking the issued ballot outside the polling place and taking photos or videos of the completed ballot were prohibited in 2023.⁷⁵

The electoral legislation still allows voting at the voter's residence, which is susceptible to abuse under the current regulations. PECs must enable voters who cannot come to the polling station on election day due to health or other valid reasons to vote, as stated in Art. 54 of the EC. For this purpose, PECs should have a maximum of three portable ballot boxes. The number of boxes can only be increased by a maximum of two.⁷⁶ If voters request it, verbally or in writing, the PEC will send at least two commission members to organize voting at their location on election

⁷²EC, art. 50.

⁷³EC, art. 52.

⁷⁴<https://rec.gov.by/ru/election-schedule-ru/view/elections-2024-edg>

⁷⁵EC, art. 52.

⁷⁶See the procedure spelled out in Art. 54 of the EC.

day. Official confirmation of the reasons for their inability to come to the polling station is not required. Voters can request to vote at their location, including on election day. The request must be made no later than two hours before the end of voting time. This provision does not protect against the abuse of the mobile voting tool that has occurred in past campaigns.⁷⁷

Turnout

The authorities view voter turnout as evidence of general legitimacy, in the tradition of authoritarian states. Elections often become plebiscitary procedures. Going to the polling station is seen as evidence of trust in the state. The authorities therefore make special efforts to organize a high voter turnout and create an image of mass voter activity. This is achieved through administrative coercion, as described above. Turnout figures are only consistently announced by CEC on election day. However, without independent observers, it is impossible to assess the accuracy of the reported figures.

Time on Election Day, February 25, 2024	Official turnout
9:00	43.64%
12:00	50.97%
14:00	59.17%
16:00	65.40%
18:00	70.29%
20:00	73.09%

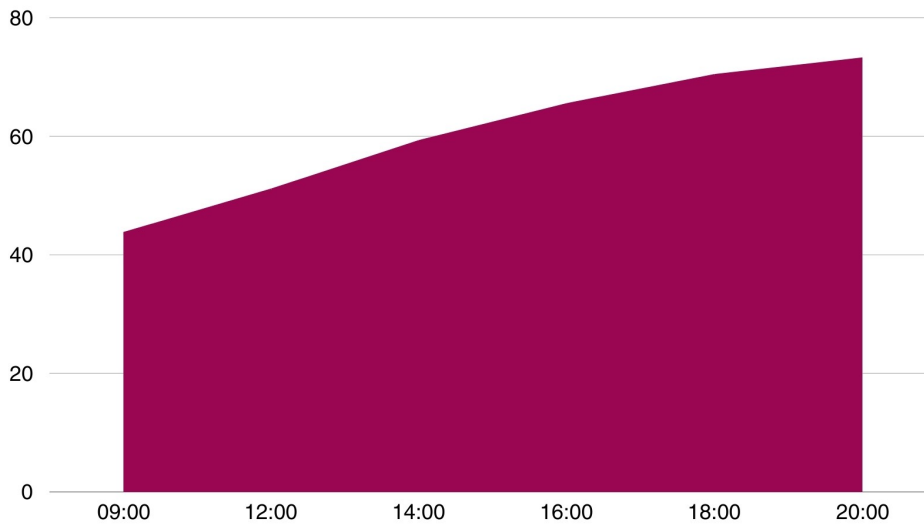
Many voters who came to the polling station at the end of the voting day reported that there were very few signatures on the registration sheets. This is suspicious, as the declared turnout was 73%. On average, at least 10 of the 15 lines on the sheet should be filled in.

Although early voting turnout in 2024 was the highest of any House of Representatives cadence, the final official turnout is the lowest of the previous five-year campaigns, even lower than the 2018 local councils election campaign.

	2024	2022 (referendum)	2020 (presidential election)	2019 (House of Representatives Elections)	2018 (local elections)
turnout	73.09%	78.63%	84.30%	77.40%	77.23%

⁷⁷See, inter alia, ODIHR Mission's Final Election Observation Report for the 2019 Campaign, pp. 33-34: https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/f/6/450163_0.pdf

% OF THE OFFICIAL TURNOUT ON THE SINGLE VOTING DAY

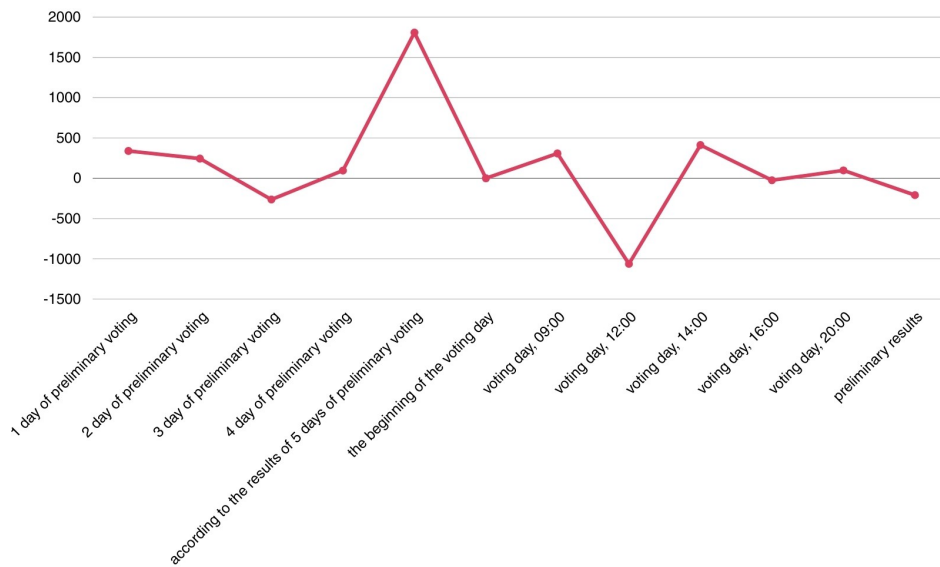


The CEC also reported on the change in the total number of voters. Article 21 of the EC requires that voter lists be prepared 15 days before election day (two days in case of temporary housing locations such as hospitals), but also allows for changes to the total number of voters, including on election day (for voters not included in the voter list but registered within the polling station’s precinct). At the same time, the disorderly nature of significant changes in this list suggests either carelessness in compiling lists based on the database of citizens’ place of registration or manipulation.

	Total number of voters	Difference with previous value
Initial figure announced by CEC	6,913,965	
Day 1 of early voting	6,913,626	339
Day 2 of early voting	6,913,382	244
Day 3 of early voting	6,913,646	-264
Day 4 of early voting	6,913,550	96
Total in five days of early voting	6,911,742	1,808
Start of voting day	6,911,742	0
9:00	6,911,434	308

12:00	6,912,497	-1,063
14:00	6,912,085	412
16:00	6,912,110	-25
20:00	6,912,115	-5
Preliminary results	6,912,221	-106

THE DYNAMICS OF THE NUMBER OF VOTERS COMPARED TO THE ONE ORIGINALLY ANNOUNCED BY CEC



Voting conditions

The repressive environment,⁷⁸ along with the ongoing harassment⁷⁹ and coerced public apologies⁸⁰ of protesters who objected to the official results of the 2020 elections, as well as the public initiation of criminal proceedings for allegedly ‘attempting to disrupt’ the 2022 referendum,⁸¹ are intended to demonstrate to society that expressing any criticism or dissent during the 2024 elections* is unacceptable.

The 2024 elections* were held with an increased presence of law enforcement agencies, in the continuation of that logic. Aliaksandr Kupchenia, the head of the Public Security Police Directorate for Law Enforcement and Crime Prevention, held a press conference⁸² dedicated to

⁷⁸See the campaign’s 2024 pre-election report: <https://elections2024.spring96.org/en/news/113507>

⁷⁹Since the start of the 2020 election campaign, *Viasna* HRC has registered over 4,500 convictions and at least 5,736 individuals (including those suspected, charged, or convicted) in politically motivated criminal cases. See <https://spring96.org/en/news/114277>

⁸⁰*Mediazona Belarus*, “A channel linked to law enforcement officials releases a video of a female protester kissing a red and green flag,” February 7, 2024, <https://strangling-rods-355181.appspot.com/news/2024/02/07/kiss>.

⁸¹<https://spring96.org/ru/news/114498>

⁸²Video of the press conference: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oFkePQy2gq0>

ensuring security during the elections. He discussed special police officer training for responding to electoral process violations and the formation of ‘voluntary vigilantes’ for the elections* from BRSM members and police veterans. STV, a state-financed TV channel, released a video demonstrating how police officers were going to detain protesters or voters who attempted to take pictures of their ballots at polling stations.⁸³

Police officers were present at all polling stations,⁸⁴ and video surveillance was installed. Panic buttons were also provided for commission members.⁸⁵ However, the polling stations were equipped with open booths, which allowed for monitoring of activities inside. In 2020, the practice of prohibiting photography in voting booths was introduced as an anti-epidemic measure. However, it has now become an accepted measure to increase scrutiny of voter behavior, particularly attempts to photograph the ballot.

However, the 2024 elections* were preceded by extensive activity from the CEC, executive committees, and public institutions, such as educational and awareness-raising events on ‘Patriotic Education of Youth’. The workers at educational institutions that housed polling stations organized concerts and other entertainment⁸⁶ to create a festive atmosphere⁸⁷ around the elections, despite the absence of political competition.⁸⁸

Concerning the accessibility of buildings and premises where polling stations were located for people with reduced mobility, it has been reported that not all polling stations met the required standards for special equipment such as ramps, lowered thresholds, and doorways with a width of at least 0.9 m. Additionally, not all precinct commissions were provided with personnel who could assist individuals in accessing the polling station.

In general, the voting conditions for the 2024 elections* were designed to maximize control over the voting process, suppress dissent, and ensure the appearance of legitimacy and public support. However, these conditions severely limited the fundamental democratic principles and rights of citizens.

At the time of writing, preliminary voting results⁸⁹ indicate that House of Representatives members have been elected in all 110 districts, and all 1,284 local councils have been formed, namely:

- 6 oblast councils and the Minsk City Council,
- 118 regional councils,
- 10 municipal councils (cities of oblast subordination),
- 14 municipal councils (cities of regional subordination),

⁸³STV, “The Interior Ministry is preparing for potential disruptions during the elections. Will 2020 happen again?”, February 18, 2024, <https://ctv.by/kak-obespechat-bezopasnost-na-vyborah>

⁸⁴CEC (@cikbelarus), “Friendly and helpful. Internal Affairs of ficers are on duty at all polling stations to protect public order,” Telegram, February 25, 2024, <https://t.me/cikbelarus/2233>

⁸⁵CEC (@cikbelarus), “Since February 19, police have been protecting all polling stations, Karpenka says”, Telegram, February 24, 2024, <https://t.me/cikbelarus/2182>

⁸⁶See, for example, <https://elections2024.spring96.org/ru/news/114518>

⁸⁷CEC (@cikbelarus), “Elections are not only an important political event. For Belarusians, it’s a holiday,” Telegram, February 25, 2024, <https://t.me/cikbelarus/2211>

⁸⁸See the findings of the analytical report on the results of monitoring the election campaigning: <https://elections2024.spring96.org/en/news/114587>

⁸⁹<https://t.me/cikbelarus/2262>, <https://www.belta.by/society/view/tsik-obnarodoval-familii-deputatov-palaty-predstavitelej-vosmogo-sozyva-617780-2024/>

- 8 settlement councils,
- 1,127 rural councils (for comparison, the 27th and 28th local council elections resulted in the formation of 1,160 and 1,152 rural councils, respectively⁹⁰).

The names of candidates provisionally elected to the House of Representatives are known. However, information on the number of votes cast for each candidate in individual districts and the number of invalidated ballots is not yet available. The data available reflect the aforementioned nomenclature character of the deputy corps: the vast majority of elected candidates hold managerial positions. All 20 deputies of the House of Representatives from the 7th convocation who registered as candidates will enter the new convocation.

Based on CEC data on special campaign accounts for the formation of the election campaign funds for persons nominated as candidates for deputies,⁹¹ 29% of candidates who supposedly won seats in the House of Representatives did not open such accounts. It appears that they ‘successfully’ conducted their election campaigns without funds allocated for this purpose under the established procedure.⁹²

COMPLAINTS AND APPEALS

The situation regarding appeals of electoral rights violations in the 2024 elections* contrasts with previous campaigns. It appears that there were very few complaints and appeals during this election cycle. As a result, the CEC chose not to publish the section on its website, which is a departure from previous elections. During this election campaign, any disagreement with violations was perceived as unsafe due to the prevailing atmosphere of fear. Additionally, there were no independent candidates or opposition political parties to appeal against violations of the rights of their representatives, particularly in the process of forming election commissions.

The CEC reported⁹³ that during the House of Representatives candidate registration stage, 25 individuals were denied registration. Of those, 5 filed complaints, with 4 being considered by election commissions and 1 by the court. All complaints were eventually dismissed.

INFORMATION on the Consideration of Complaints against the Refusal to Register Candidates for the House of Representatives

Councils of Deputies	Number of refusals to register	Number of appeals considered	
		by election commissions	by courts

⁹⁰<https://rec.gov.by/uploads/folderForLinks/elections-ms27-sved21.pdf>,
<https://rec.gov.by/uploads/folderForLinks/elections-ms28-elect-59-60.pdf>

⁹¹<https://belarusbank.by/ru/33139/41509/41530>

⁹²See Analytical Report on the Results of Monitoring the Election Campaigning:
<https://elections2024.spring96.org/en/news/114587>

⁹³CEC, Consideration of Complaints Against Refusal to Register House of Representatives Candidates:
<https://www.rec.gov.by/uploads/files/Pdf/2024/stat42.pdf>

		total	dismissed	total
Brest Oblast	5	2	2	1
Viciebsk Oblast	2	1	1	
Homiel Oblast	3			
Hrodna Oblast	3			
Minsk Oblast	3			
Mahilioŭ Oblast	1			
Minsk	8	1	1	
TOTAL	25	4	4	1

The Brest⁹⁴ and Viciebsk Oblast Executive Committees have published decisions regarding complaints against refusals to register candidates for the House of Representatives on their websites.

“The Viciebsk Oblast Election Commission denied S.A. Nishchymenka’s registration as a candidate for the House of Representatives in Akciabrski electoral district No. 20, according to their decision No. 14 of 01.02.2024⁹⁵. S.A. Nishchymenka’s registration was refused due to a failure to provide the information required in the income and property declaration. The return reflects the income earned from December 1, 2022, through December 1, 2023.

Section 1 of the declaration should indicate income received from January 1, 2022, to December 31, 2022, under paragraph 3 of the Resolution of the Central Election Commission of the Republic of Belarus No. 34 of November 21, 2023, which clarifies the procedure for declaring income and property during the elections of deputies on the single voting day on February 25, 2024. No declaration showing income earned between January 1, 2022 and December 31, 2022 has been provided.”

The Brest Oblast Election Commission reviewed two complaints regarding the decisions to deny the registration of candidates for the House of Representatives.

1) Kobryn election district No. 12 denied A.V. Khilko’s registration as a candidate for deputy to the House of Representatives. The registration was refused because the signature lists for

⁹⁴Decisions No. 9 and 10 of the Brest Oblast Election Commission of 02.02.2024: <https://www.brest-region.gov.by/ru/edg-2024-ru/page/1>

⁹⁵Decision No. 14 of the Viciebsk Oblast Election Commission of 01.02.2024: <https://vitebsk-region.gov.by/ru/vybory-2024/>

the candidate's nomination contained over 15% unreliable signatures out of the total number of verified signatures.⁹⁶

2) T.V. Perapialiak was denied registration as a candidate for deputy of the House of Representatives in Pružany election district No. 9. Mr. Perapialiak has not provided documents on the withdrawal of Ukrainian citizenship, which was the reason for the refusal to register.⁹⁷

The CEC reported⁹⁸ that during the local councils of deputies candidate registration stage, 119 individuals were denied registration. Of those, 9 filed complaints, with 8 being considered by election commissions and 1 by the court. 6 complaints were dismissed, and 3 were not considered on the merits.

INFORMATION on the Consideration of Complaints against the Refusal to Register Candidates for the Local Councils of Deputies

Councils of Deputies	Number of refusals to register	Number of appeals considered			
		by election commissions			by courts
		total	dismissed	dismissed without hearing on the merits	total
oblast councils and Minsk City Council	20				
regional councils	47	3	2	1	
municipal councils (cities of oblast subordination)	20	2	1	1	

⁹⁶Decision No. 10 of the Brest Oblast Election Commission of 02.02.2024: <https://www.brest-region.gov.by/uploads/files/EDG/Reshenie-oblastnoj-izbiratelnoj-komissii-10.pdf>

⁹⁷Decision No. 9 of the Brest Oblast Election Commission of 02.02.2024: <https://www.brest-region.gov.by/uploads/files/EDG/Reshenie-oblastnoj-izbiratelnoj-komissii-9.pdf>

⁹⁸CEC, Consideration of Complaints Against Refusal to Register Local Council of Deputies Candidates: <https://www.rec.gov.by/uploads/files/Pdf/2024/stat43-44.pdf>

municipal councils (cities of regional subordination)					
settlement councils					
rural councils	32	3	2	1	1
TOTAL	119	8	5	3	1

The Homiel Oblast Election Commission received⁹⁹ an appeal regarding two refusals of registration to local Councils. The regional election commission's decision to reject the registration of a candidate for deputy to the regional council due to a violation of the income declaration submission procedure was deemed valid. There is no information on whether the decision of the Oblast Election Commission was appealed to a court of law. The complaint against the rural election commission's refusal to register a candidate for the rural council was not considered because the candidate's nomination lists contained more than 15% unreliable signatures. The Regional Election Commission, which has authority over the Rural Election Commission, was deemed responsible for addressing the complaint by the Oblast Election Commission.¹⁰⁰

The Viciebsk Oblast Election Commission, in its Decision No. 15 of February 1, 2024¹⁰¹, *“denied registration to V.V. Hrun tou as a candidate for the Viciebsk Municipal Council of Deputies. The registration was refused due to unreliable information provided by V.V. Hrun tou in his income and property declaration. Paragraph 2 of Section II, ‘Information on Property’ of the declaration does not contain any information about a car registered with the traffic police on 24.12.2015. Report No. 52/10/2236 of the traffic police department of the Directorate of Internal Affairs of Viciebsk Oblast Executive Committee dated January 17, 2024, confirms this fact. Based on the provided certificate of car retirement dated 31.01.2024, the car was removed from registration due to disposition between 01.01.2024 and 31.01.2024. On 12.01.2024, when filling out the declaration, Mr Hrun tou was still the owner of the vehicle.”*

Ihar Karpenka, Chairman of the Central Election Commission, stated¹⁰² that *“there were 12 complaints filed regarding refusals to register candidates, including 2 appeals to the courts. The complaints were dismissed because the nominated individuals did not comply with the requirements of the legislation regarding the number of valid signatures when nominated by citizens, the list of*

⁹⁹Gomel Pravda, “The Oblast Election Commission considered two complaints from applicants for local council candidates at a meeting,” February 1, 2024, <https://gp.by/novosti/obshchestvo/news281561.html>

¹⁰⁰Election*2024. Analytical report on the results of monitoring the nomination and registration of candidates, p. 19 (Appeals), <https://elections2024.spring96.org/en/news/114313>

¹⁰¹Decision No. 15 of the Viciebsk Oblast Election Commission of 01.02.2024: <https://vitebsk-region.gov.by/ru/vybory-2024/>

¹⁰²CEC, “Ihar Karpenka informs international observers about the registration of candidates for deputy,” February 24, 2024, <https://rec.gov.by/ru/from-telegram-ru/view/igor-karpenko-rasskazal-mezhdunarodnym-nabljudateljam-o-registratsii-kandidatov-v-deputaty-1547-2024>

required documents, submission of false data on income and property, and non-compliance with the requirements of the law.”

As of February 7, 2024, six¹⁰³ campaign-related complaints have been filed with the courts and dismissed.¹⁰⁴ Leanid Anfimau, Head of Staff of the CIS Election Observer Mission, reported this.¹⁰⁵

The Viciebsk Oblast Election Commission, by Decision No. 9¹⁰⁶ dated December 27, 2023, dismissed the complaint¹⁰⁷ against Decision No. 3 dated December 22, 2023, of the Viciebsk Municipal Election Commission, which refused to register the electoral association that nominated I.G. Yaskevich as a candidate for the Viciebsk Municipal Council of Deputies. The complaint was dismissed without a hearing on the merits because the applicant missed the deadline for filing it. *“The decision of the Viciebsk Municipal Election Commission was made on December 22, 2023. The complaint was sent on November 26, 2023 [left unedited for spelling or grammar], as evidenced by the date on the application of I.G. Yaskievich and the date of registration in the documents control register.”*

¹⁰³Supreme Court, “2024 Election Campaign: Meeting between Valery Kalinkavich, First Deputy Chairman of the Supreme Court of the Republic of Belarus, and Leanid Anfimau, Head of Staff of the CIS Observer Mission”, February 7, 2024, https://court.gov.by/ru/justice/press_of_fice/4f8509553b67469c.html.

¹⁰⁴See <https://elections2024.spring96.org/ru/news/114356>

¹⁰⁵STV, “No OSCE, so what? How Belarus is preparing for elections and what August 2020 taught us: Interview with Leanid Anfimau,” February 11, 2024, <https://ctv.by/ne-budet-obse-nu-tak-hto-kak-v-belarusi-gotovyatsya-k-vyboram-i-chemu-nauchil-avgust-2020-go>

¹⁰⁶Decision No. 9 of the Viciebsk Oblast Election Commission of 27.12.2023: <https://vitebsk-region.gov.by/uploads/files/28-12-23-10.docx>

¹⁰⁷See <https://elections2024.spring96.org/ru/news/113814>