



Reforms needed to address substantial shortcomings in Belarus election, international observers say, after peaceful presidential campaign

MINSK, 12 October 2015 – The 11 October election once again indicated that Belarus still has a considerable way to go in meeting its OSCE commitments for democratic elections. This underscores the need for the political will to engage in a comprehensive reform process, the international observers concluded in a preliminary statement released today. Some specific improvements and a welcoming attitude were noted. Some significant problems, particularly during the counting and tabulation of votes, undermined the integrity of the election. The campaign and election day were peaceful, the statement says.

“It is clear that Belarus still has a long way to go towards fulfilling its democratic commitments. The recent release of political prisoners and a welcoming approach to observers were positive developments. However, the hope that this gave us for the broader electoral process was largely unfulfilled,” said Kent Harstedt, Special Co-ordinator and Leader of the Short-Term OSCE Observer Mission. “Given previous promises, I was especially disappointed by shortcomings during counting and tabulation. We hope that the Belarusian government will have the political will to engage in a thorough reform process, which we are ready to support.”

All candidates were able to campaign throughout the country and to convey their messages without hindrance. The campaign was low-key but became more active over the final two weeks, the observers said. Only one candidate, whose platform focused predominantly on socio-economic issues, was openly critical of the incumbent. This gave voters limited choice.

The voting process on election day was assessed positively in 95 per cent of polling stations observed, however a large number of observers were not allowed to check voter lists, and seemingly identical signatures were observed in 47 polling stations. The counting process was assessed negatively in 30 per cent of stations observed, indicating significant problems. The tabulation process was assessed negatively and as lacking transparency in 25 per cent of instances observed.

“On 11 October voters were able to make their choice in a transparent manner in the presence of many domestic and international observers. However, counting procedures have to be improved considerably. An election is not limited to voting day. Therefore, Belarus needs to reform its legal framework to ensure a thoroughly competitive political environment. This is a key condition for the long-term democratic stability of the country,” said Reha Denemeç, Head of the PACE Delegation. “PACE, together with the Council of Europe’s Venice Commission, stands ready to co-operate with Belarus on this.”

In a positive step, after the release of several internationally acknowledged political prisoners in 2014, the president ordered the release of the remaining such prisoners in August. The institutions represented in the international election observation mission expect that, with these releases, further such prosecutions will cease and this will mark a closed chapter.

“Given worldwide conflicts today, I welcome Belarus’ recent constructive role facilitating dialogue over Ukraine. In this regard, greater international focus on this election is inevitable, and this opportunity has not been fully embraced,” said Jim Walsh, Head of the OSCE PA Delegation. “There is considerable work that remains to be done, most notably in the areas of more representative election commissions and the integrity and transparency of counting procedures. We hope that the constructive attitude demonstrated by authorities to our missions will continue in pursuit of our common objective.”

The CEC registered 8 of 15 groups that applied to collect supporting signatures and, subsequently, registered 4 candidates, the statement says. All of the groups were able to collect signatures across the country. The right to stand as a candidate is limited by previous criminal convictions; activities such as participation in unauthorized

events can lead to the reinstatement of sentences. Signature verification was insufficiently transparent, undermining confidence in the process.

Candidates were provided with a platform to convey their messages, despite the restrictive media environment. Media monitoring showed that extensive coverage of the incumbent's activities in his official capacity made him by far the most visible. In addition, some state-owned media shaped their coverage to convey political messages favorable to him. Free access to time on state-owned media was provided on an equal basis and in an uncensored format, which contestants welcomed, and the media provided the public with voter information. A live debate was televised on 3 October, in which all of the candidates except for the incumbent were represented.

While, in a welcome move, one government minister stepped down to lead the incumbent's campaign, other high-ranking public servants and officials campaigned during working hours on behalf of the incumbent, the statement says. A number of his campaign events were held in state-run enterprises, and some state-supported public associations and institutions campaigned on his behalf, creating an uneven playing field and blurring the line between partisan interest and the state.

Despite welcome engagement by the authorities since the last presidential election, the legal framework remains essentially unchanged. The framework was previously assessed as inadequate to guarantee the conduct of elections in line with OSCE commitments and other international standards, the observers said. Existing provisions and laws, including from 2011 and 2012, limit fundamental freedoms of association, assembly and expression, the observers said.

“Work needs to be done to improve the electoral framework, as past recommendations, particularly on balanced electoral administration and election day procedures, remain unaddressed. There is a clear need to improve the transparency and independence of the election administration,” said Ambassador Jacques Faure, Head of the OSCE/ODIHR long-term election observation mission. “The election laws and framework as they stand now establish limitations on fundamental freedoms.”

Following an open and unrestricted invitation to the observing institutions, the Central Election Commission (CEC) exhibited a welcoming attitude towards international observers. However, the absence of clear and transparent legal criteria for the selection of members of lower-level election commissions allowed local authorities full discretion over the appointment process, which was not inclusive. The voter registration system is overly permissive, allowing registration in polling stations on election day without sufficient legal safeguards.

Three independent citizen observer groups carried out long-term observation and regularly published their findings. Some 43,500 citizen and more than 900 international observers were accredited, including PACE for the first time since 2001. Some two-thirds of citizen observers representing public associations subsidized by the state. The rights of citizen and international observers are prescribed by law in an exhaustive manner and were interpreted and applied restrictively. Observers are not entitled to follow all stages of the process.

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