

Belarus elections efficiently organized, long-standing systemic shortcomings remain, international observers say

MINSK, 12 September 2016 – The 11 September parliamentary elections were efficiently organized and there were visible efforts to address some long-standing issues, but a number of systemic shortcomings remain, the international observers concluded in a preliminary statement released today. The legal framework restricts political rights and fundamental freedoms, and was interpreted in an overly restrictive manner. Media coverage did not enable voters to make an informed choice and, despite an overall increase in the number of candidates, including a significant number from the opposition, the campaign lacked visibility, the statement says.

The election administration exhibited a welcoming approach towards international observers. The composition of the electoral commissions, however, was not pluralistic, which undermined confidence in their independence. Despite some positive efforts by the authorities, early voting, and counting and tabulation procedures were still marred by a significant number of procedural irregularities and a lack of transparency.

“It remains clear that Belarus still has some way to go to fulfil its democratic commitments. In the run-up to the elections, the authorities made a number of promises regarding the transparency of the process, on which they delivered partially, but insufficiently,” said Kent Harstedt, Special Co-ordinator and leader of the short-term OSCE observer mission. “We hope the Belarusian government, together with the newly elected parliament, will carry on with the democratization process and undertake a comprehensive effort to address our long-standing recommendations.”

Despite some first steps taken by the authorities, the constitutional and legal framework does not adequately guarantee the conduct of elections in line with OSCE commitments and other international obligations and standards. A working group was established to consider prior OSCE/ODIHR recommendations, signaling a willingness to engage in electoral reform. Nonetheless, a number of key long-standing OSCE/ODIHR and Council of Europe Venice Commission recommendations have yet to be addressed, and the need for comprehensive electoral reform, as part of the broader democratization process, remains.

“Yesterday, voting was calm and well-organized, although there were concerns regarding the counting. However, elections are not limited to voting day only, and these elections showed that Belarus, as a European country, needs a truly competitive political system in order to realize its democratic potential,” said Gisela Wurm, Head of the PACE delegation. “It is therefore vital to begin immediately the necessary reform of the legal framework, so as to enable the creation of such a system, which is a key element for democratic stability. PACE and the Venice Commission stand ready to co-operate with Belarus in this regard.”

Restrictions on fundamental freedoms of association, expression and assembly narrow public space, and negatively affected the environment in which the elections were held. While candidates were generally able to campaign freely within the confines of the law, a large number chose not to, which contributed to voter apathy. On a positive note, the CEC instruction for a more permissive allocation of public venues was followed by many local authorities. Unequal access to state and public

institutions and resources, however, skewed the playing field for candidates. Collectively, this limited the choice available to voters.

“We note that, for the first time in 12 years, some members of the opposition will be represented in the parliament. However, the legal and constitutional framework limits public space for debate, and did not provide voters with the opportunity to make an informed choice,” said Ivana Dobesova, Head of the OSCE PA delegation. “We encourage all members of parliament to use this opportunity to engage in genuine discussions about the future of the country.”

Media regulations are strict. Criminal offences of defamation, libel and insult, and a ban on calls to boycott the election are contrary to international standards and challenge freedom of expression. During the campaign, news programmes on state-owned media focused largely on the activities of the president and other state officials, as well as political statements by the CEC Chairperson. Coverage of candidates’ campaign activities, meanwhile, was virtually absent and largely limited to short, pre-recorded speeches. This narrowed voters’ access to candidate information.

The election administration, led by the CEC, made technical preparations and passed decisions within legal deadlines. However, only a negligible number of election commission members were appointed from opposition nominees, and local executive authorities had a dominant presence in the leadership of the election administration.

Voter lists are updated by precinct election commissions based on data provided by local authorities. The absence of a centralized voter register that could be used for cross-checking against multiple registrations, along with an overly permissive system for registering voters on election day, resulted in a lack of safeguards against multiple-voting.

“The persistent shortcomings we have identified in the course of observing these elections point to the fact that long-standing recommendations remain to be addressed,” said Tana de Zulueta, Head of the OSCE/ODIHR long-term election observation mission. “The election of the new parliament constitutes an excellent opportunity to take action and implement these recommendations in a comprehensive and inclusive way.”

Of 630 candidates nominated, 484 eventually stood for election, including a significant number from the opposition. Despite this overall increase in the number of candidates, the legal provisions for registration allowed for selective implementation. Ninety-three prospective candidates were not registered, mostly due to inaccuracies in asset and income declarations, an insufficient number of valid support signatures or failure to submit supporting documentation. This approach raised disproportionate and unreasonable barriers to candidacy, the observers said.

Women are well-represented in the election administration, but less so in political life. There are no special measures to enhance women’s representation, and women constituted 25 per cent of candidates in these elections.

The CEC exhibited a welcoming attitude towards international observers. In an inclusive process, more than 827 international and 32,105 citizen observers were accredited. Despite some improvement in access provided for both citizen and international observers, a number of undue legal limitations and a restrictive interpretation of observers’ rights remain.

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