

Press Release

Competition limited in Belarus elections as many democratic rights not respected, international observers say

MINSK, 24 September 2012 – Many OSCE commitments on citizen's democratic rights to associate, to stand as candidates and to express themselves freely were not respected in yesterday's parliamentary elections in Belarus, **concluded** the international observers from the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) and the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly (OSCE PA).

The elections were not administered in an impartial manner and the complaints and appeals process did not guarantee effective remedy, the observers found.

"This election was not competitive from the start," said Matteo Mecacci, Special Co-ordinator, who led the short-term OSCE observer mission. "A free election depends on people being free to speak, organize and run for office, and we didn't see that in this campaign. We stand ready to work with Belarus to take the steps forward that are in our common interest."

"The lack of neutrality and impartiality on the part of election commissions severely undermines public confidence in the process," said Antonio Milošoski, Head of the OSCE/ODIHR long-term election observation mission. "Citizens should feel confident that their votes are counted as cast, but the lack of proper counting procedures or ways for observers to verify the results raises serious concerns."

While there was an increase in the number of candidates put forward by parties, prominent political figures who might have played a role remained in prison or were not eligible to register because of their criminal record. Arbitrary administrative decisions also constrained the field of contestants, limiting voters' choices.

Despite improvements made to the electoral law in amendments in 2010 and 2011, the legal framework does not adequately guarantee the conduct of elections in line with OSCE commitments and international standards.

On a positive note, political parties could, for the first time, nominate candidates in constituencies where they maintained no regional office, increasing the number of political party nominations. Nonetheless, overly technical application of the law resulted in the exclusion of one in four nominees.

The election campaign was barely visible throughout the four-week campaign. Although the Constitution guarantees freedom of expression and there is a high number of media outlets, coverage of the campaign did not provide a wide range of views. Candidates who called for an election boycott had their free access to media coverage denied or censored. Media coverage focused on the President and government, with minimal attention given to candidates.

While early voting and election day procedures were assessed positively, the process deteriorated considerably during the count. A significant number of observers were not given a meaningful opportunity to observe the count and evaluated the process negatively in a significant number of the polling stations observed. The continued lack of properly delineated counting procedures meant that an honest count could not be guaranteed.

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