

OSCE PA calls for Belarus to observe its international obligations



OSCE PA election observers meeting on 18 December in Minsk

Since observing the 19 December presidential election in Belarus, the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly has continued to follow the situation closely, expressing concern over the detention of opposition leaders and Belarus' decision to block the extension of the OSCE Office in Minsk's mandate. In response to this decision, which is forcing the field mission to close, OSCE PA President Petros Efthymiou called for the Office to be allowed to continue under its established mandate.

"The work of this OSCE Office is relevant now more than ever. The OSCE field mission in Belarus is key to maintaining a constructive dialogue with the Organization, and therefore its closure should be averted and we will strive to this end," said President Efthymiou on 7 January.

President Efthymiou pointed out that the election and its aftermath "represent a step backwards in the development of democratic governance in Belarus." The President particularly deplored the continuing detention of presidential candidates and new detentions as well as raids targeting the media. "We stand ready to assist the efforts of the Lithuanian Chairmanship to promote constructive political dialogue with the Government of Belarus, in order to facilitate the resumption of the mission of the OSCE's Office in Minsk," he said.

British parliamentarian Tony Lloyd, who served as the OSCE Chairman-in-Office's Special Co-ordinator of the OSCE short-term observer mission and led more than 50 OSCE PA observers, called on Monday for the release of political detainees in Belarus. "I was extremely disappointed to learn that many of those arrested by the authorities in connection with the elections include Belarusians who personally briefed me and my fellow parliamentary observers in December. It is a gross violation of the Helsinki Final Act, and Belarus' OSCE commitments," said Mr. Lloyd.

"These politicians, activists and journalists made individual and courageous efforts to provide the international observers,

including members of parliaments from across Europe, with an overview of the situation in the country. Their arrest and persecution is a criminalization of the democratic process in Belarus," noted Mr. Lloyd.

The Chair of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly Ad Hoc Working Group on Belarus, Uta Zapf, emphasized the need for dialogue among political forces in Belarus. In a statement issued on 11 January, Ms. Zapf regretted the repressive measures taken in the wake of the election which resulted in a high number of political prisoners. Ms. Zapf called for their immediate release and offered her strong support to the Belarusian opposition's decision to establish a national Co-ordinating Council. She appealed to the authorities to cease harassment of opposition politicians, media and civil society representatives.

"Many of the long-time, key interlocutors of our Working Group are currently detained on criminal charges related to post-election events. The OSCE has repeatedly commented on the need to reform laws on freedom of assembly, media and association in Belarus, and to bring them in line with OSCE standards," noted Ms. Zapf. "I am sorry to see that not only are these laws still in place, but they are being applied against opposition and civil society in such a manner."

Ms. Zapf also expressed regret over the decision of the Belarusian authorities to not extend the mandate of the OSCE Office in Minsk. The OSCE PA Ad Hoc Working Group on Belarus has worked closely with the OSCE field mission for many years, with joint projects planned for 2011. Mr. Zapf expressed strong support for the OSCE Office, insisting that it should be able to continue its operations under its established mandate.

Themes for 2011 Assembly meetings

The following themes have been decided for the Assembly's Winter Meeting and Annual Session:

- The Winter Meeting's Special Debate on 25 February will focus on "Immigration, Integration and Multi-Ethnic Dialogue in the OSCE"
- The general theme of the Annual Session, taking place in Belgrade on 6-10 July, will be "Strengthening the OSCE's Effectiveness and Efficiency – A new start after the Astana Summit"

Delegations are kindly reminded that the registration deadline for the Winter Meeting is **21 January**. Registration forms are available at www.oscepa.org and should be emailed to odile@oscepa.dk.