

Working Group on Belarus in Minsk with President Soares



President Soares speaks to local journalists in Minsk

The OSCE Parliamentary Assembly's Working Group on Belarus is in Minsk from 9 to 12 March, on a visit led by PA President Joao Soares.

Members of the Working Group, chaired by Uta Zapf, Germany, are holding high-level meetings including with Foreign Minister Sergei Martynov, the Speakers of the two houses of Parliament, Vladimir Andreichenko and Boris Baturoi, the OSCE PA Delegation Headed by Valery Ivanov, and senior officials from the Presidential Administration, the Ministry of Information, Ministry of Justice, as well as representatives of civil society and the international community.

The OSCE PA Delegation includes Claudio D'Amico, Italy; Morten Hoeglund, Norway; Pawel Poncylyusz, Poland; and Cecilia Wigstrom, Sweden.

In their meetings, Members of the Group stressed the importance of an open parliamentary dialogue, upholding Belarus' commitments as a participating State of the OSCE and the need to find peaceful, inclusive solutions to the country's political problems. The Delegation discussed issues related to the Chernobyl nuclear disaster and possible work by the OSCE PA on this issue. Members also discussed some of the progress being made with regard to freedom of the media but urged continued work in an open and transparent fashion in this area.

Other developments noted positively by the Delegation include the release of political prisoners, registration of some political associations and media outlets and increased cross-border contacts with European neighbors. The Delegation was disappointed to hear that some media outlets continue to face difficulties.

The OSCE PA Delegation welcomed the ongoing co-operation with the Belarusian Delegation to the OSCE PA. While in Minsk, the Working Group is also hosting a Seminar on 'Improving the Climate for Foreign Investment' which is being organized jointly with the Belarusian Delegation to the OSCE PA in co-operation with Germany's Friedrich-Ebert Foundation and with the support of the OSCE Office in Minsk.

The Delegation was supported during the visit by Programme Officer Anna Chernova and Presidential Advisor Andreas Baker from the International Secretariat, and by Nuno Paixao from the Portuguese parliament.

OSCE election observation discussed in Athens

Representatives of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly and the OSCE ODIHR met in Athens on 11 March under the auspices of the Greek Chairmanship to discuss election observation co-operation between the PA and ODIHR. The OSCE Chair-in-Office, the Foreign Minister of Greece Dora Bakoyannis, briefly addressed the participants, highlighting the importance of the co-operation.

The OSCE Chairmanship was represented by Head of the Greek Delegation to the OSCE PA, Panayotis Skandalakis, and Chairperson of the Permanent Council, Ambassador Mara Marinaki. The Assembly was represented by President Emeritus Goran Lennmarker and Deputy Secretary General Tina Schøn. The Director of the ODIHR, Ambassador Janez Lenarcic, and OSCE PA Secretary General, Spencer Oliver, also participated in the meeting.

The participants went through the 1997 Co-operation Agreement, discussing how to improve co-operation in all phases of election observation. The PA representatives stressed the need to adhere to the 1997 Agreement in letter and spirit and expressed their regret that the ODIHR has failed to comply with key provisions of the Agreement, including particularly the sharing of timely and complete information from long term observers.

Although there was some disagreement about the authority of the Special Co-ordinator, appointed by the Chair-in-Office, all interlocutors agreed that it is the mandate of the Special Co-ordinator to deliver the statement assessing the elections on behalf of the OSCE Chairmanship. The ODIHR agreed that they will fully share all information from the long term observers in a timely manner, including regular field reports, with the OSCE PA. They also agreed that a staff member of the PA would be hosted in the ODIHR core team office with access to all information and activities. In addition, it was agreed that drafting on the Special Co-ordinator's statement would be started jointly between representatives of the OSCE PA and the ODIHR several days prior to the elections, the results of which will be shared with other appropriate observer groups as soon as possible.

The PA representatives considered the discussions to be a valuable step forward in resolving differences between the two OSCE Institutions, although some problems remain unresolved. The Greek Chairmanship promised to follow the implementation of these agreements closely in the coming months.

Ambassador Christos Zacharakis, Special Envoy of the Chairmanship, chaired the meeting.