



United States Mission to the OSCE

Statement on the Upcoming Russian Elections

As delivered by Ambassador Julie Finley
to the Permanent Council, Vienna
January 31, 2008

Mr. Chairman,

For the past several weeks, people throughout the world have been closely watching one of the most open and unpredictable political campaigns that the United States has seen in quite some time. From small diners in New Hampshire and Iowa to large rallies in California and Florida, a host of candidates have met with voters to discuss their platforms, answer questions, and outline their visions for the future. Numerous debates have been carried on major television networks, by small and large newspapers and cable outlets, while some very 21st Century forms of media, such as YouTube, have allowed people to pose questions directly to the candidates.

It's not always pretty, and there are sometimes problems, but that's how true democracy operates. The interest generated in the election has meant that thus far, record numbers of Americans have participated in primary elections and caucuses. In keeping with our obligations as an OSCE participating State, the United States intends to open its doors to allow ODIHR uninhibited access to observe our presidential election in November 2008 and as such, we expect ODIHR to determine how best to carry out its observation mission.

In Russia, by contrast, we see a very different picture. Potential candidates and parties out of favor with the Kremlin, for example, have encountered huge obstacles under onerous registration requirements for both the Duma and Presidential elections, leading to a small number of candidates and significantly tilting the playing field in favor of the ruling party and certain candidates.

It is important that the rules promote international democratic standards and that the rules apply fairly and transparently to all candidates and parties to ensure truly competitive elections where the voters have real choice. Unfortunately, these aren't the only concerns in the run-up to the March elections. Opposition groups and candidates have been significantly impeded in their efforts to exercise their rights to free assembly. We have also witnessed further harassment of independent and regional media outlets and bias of state-owned or influenced media. The OSCE, following the Duma elections, had urged Russia to address such issues.

We regret that Russia is once again imposing restrictions on ODIHR observers for the upcoming presidential election, limiting the size and duration of the observation mission.

An electoral observation mission needs to be able to work independently and without harassment or limitations. Our common obligations as OSCE participating States require that

ODIHR be able to observe adherence to commitments in the election proceedings, before, during and after elections—not simply on election day.

And it is the role of ODIHR, not the States themselves, to objectively determine what the needs are in order to conduct an effective observation mission for an election. Our Copenhagen commitments on election proceedings range from the establishment of political parties and the registration of candidates, to the political campaign process and access to the media. ODIHR plays a useful role in providing technical advice to help improve electoral performance in line with these shared commitments.

All OSCE States have made commitments to each other regarding election observation missions, including permitting an enhanced role for ODIHR to observe the elections process before, during, and after election day. We intend to fulfill these commitments during our own upcoming presidential election, as others have recently done in their own elections. We expect nothing less of Russia.

We again urge the Russian government to take immediate action to promote the full implementation of the principles and commitments of the OSCE, as we all have agreed to do on numerous occasions, and to take steps to ensure that its elections meet international standards.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.