



INTERNATIONAL ELECTION OBSERVATION MISSION
Republic of Belarus
Parliamentary Elections
17 October 2004

STATEMENT OF PRELIMINARY FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

Minsk, 18 October 2004 – The International Election Observation Mission (IEOM) for the 17 October 2004 Parliamentary Elections in the Republic of Belarus is a co-operative undertaking of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (OSCE/ODIHR) and the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly (OSCE PA). The IEOM was established in response to invitations from the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Belarus and the Chairman of the House of Representatives of the National Assembly of the Republic of Belarus. The IEOM observed the election to assess its compliance with the 1990 OSCE Copenhagen Document, national legislation of the Republic of Belarus and other election-related commitments. This is the first occasion that a timely invitation was extended to the OSCE/ODIHR, permitting the first standard full scale Election Observation Mission to the Republic of Belarus.

This statement of preliminary findings and conclusions is issued before the announcement and final certification of results, the completion of any election day complaints and appeals procedures, and a thorough analysis of election day findings.

The statement does not include direct findings or conclusions about the Republican Referendum on Constitutional amendments proposing the removal of the two-term limit on the office of the president, which was announced subsequent to the calling of the parliamentary elections, but also took place on 17 October. The IEOM has taken note of the Referendum to the extent that it has impacted on the parliamentary election process.

PRELIMINARY CONCLUSIONS

The 17 October elections to the House of Representatives of the National Assembly of the Republic of Belarus fell significantly short of OSCE commitments. It is a fundamental commitment of the Copenhagen Document that the will of the people serves as the basis of the authority of government: the Belarusian authorities failed to create the conditions to ensure that this fundamental commitment could be fulfilled. Universal principles and constitutionally guaranteed rights of expression, association and assembly were seriously challenged, calling into question the Belarusian authorities' willingness to respect the concept of political competition on a basis of equal treatment before the law and by the authorities.

Principles of an inclusive democratic process, whereby citizens have the right to seek political office without discrimination, candidates can freely present their views, and voters can learn about them and discuss them freely, were largely ignored. The election was administered in a manner that sought to actively exclude candidates representing a diversity of interests, and whereby non-registration and deregistration greatly diminished the selection available to voters well before election day.

The dominant influence of the State administration was apparent throughout the organisation of the election process, and at all levels of the election administration. In this regard, it is of great concern that during the election campaign period, President Aleksandr Lukashenko made a statement affirming that the Constitution and laws of the Republic of Belarus have “elements of authoritarianism”.

As election day approached, police raids on campaign offices, the detention of a candidate, detention or harassment of campaign workers and domestic observers, as well as widely reported coercion applied to certain groups, particularly students, to take part in the election, produced a climate of intimidation.

Although the elections were conducted technically in accordance with the applicable legislation of the Republic of Belarus, deficiencies in the legislative framework were further compounded by the restrictive interpretation and application of the relevant laws, the failure of the CEC to issue supplementary regulations to ensure uniform procedure, and the application of the law in an arbitrary manner. There was a fundamental interconnection between the organization of the parliamentary elections and the Referendum; issues of concern arising from one inevitably apply to the other.

The following serious shortcomings were observed:

- The legal requirement for the election administration to operate independently of the State and local administration was not respected or enforced, and consequently, the respective roles of the election commissions at all levels, and the State administration, became closely interconnected.
- The Electoral Code failed to ensure a balanced representation of both pro-governmental and opposition political interests in the composition of election commissions. Political party involvement in the work of electoral commissions, critical for transparency and confidence in the process, was therefore very limited, and decisions were often undertaken in an arbitrary manner. The voting and counting processes confirmed concerns about an absence of well-defined procedures and transparency safeguards, an absence that was conducive to procedural lapses and intentional abuse.
- The ability for political parties to play a meaningful role in the election process was marginal. Pro-government parties were barely visible and did not put forward candidates in significant numbers. Opposition parties were undermined by the clearly arbitrary non-registration of some prospective candidates, and in some cases by de-registrations without foundation.
- The Republican Referendum was a development that largely overshadowed the parliamentary election campaign. The scale of the referendum campaign, its unrestrained bias and its unregulated intrusion even into the polling stations, contributed to a highly distorted campaign environment.
- Restrictive rules on campaigning were further exacerbated by instances of discrimination in favour of selected candidates and against candidates of the opposition, including in the provision of venues for meetings with voters, refusal of the use of facilities to print leaflets and posters, and detention of campaign workers and seizure of campaign materials.
- Overall the extent and format of the election campaign in the media did not permit a genuine debate about the political alternatives. State media demonstrated a strong bias in a wide range of programs, on the one hand portraying the opposition in overwhelmingly negative terms, and on the other hand conducting an extensive campaign in favour of the incumbent political forces and the “yes” campaign in favour of the Republican Referendum.
- The five day early voting period was conducted according to overly permissive provisions, including an absence of separate accounting for the early voting results and lack of provisions for safeguarding the ballot boxes and other voting materials in a manner in which voters could have full confidence. Pressure was put on certain groups of voters to vote early, including students, the military, and labour collectives.

Certain aspects of the election could have served to contribute positively to the process:

- The Central Commission on Elections and National Referenda (CEC), District Election Commissions (DECs) and Precinct Election Commissions (PECs) generally met all deadlines foreseen in the law.
- The inclusion of political party representatives as non-voting members in the CEC introduced some diversity of opinion and stimulated discussion, although they had no role in decision-making.
- The vast majority of constituency contests offered some degree of competition, notwithstanding the high number of candidate registration refusals. However, in ten constituencies, there was only one candidate on the ballot; in 25 constituencies there were only two candidates.
- Candidates received a fixed amount of free television and radio airtime, and the possibility to print a statement free of charge in the state press, although this was not nearly sufficient to address the overwhelming media imbalance.

On election day, although the voting procedures themselves were generally assessed positively in around 9 out of 10 polling stations, some serious concerns arose. Basic information, including the number of registered voters in precincts, was frequently withheld from the IEOM and other observers. Counting proved very problematic. At the majority of polling stations observed, transparency was lacking, as numbers were not being announced aloud as they were established, observers were given only a limited view of the process, and procedures for compilation of protocols were not followed. There were instances where observers noted that early voting ballot boxes appeared to have been stuffed.

The OSCE and its institutions represented in the IEOM remain prepared and committed to assist the national authorities, including the National Assembly, and the civil society of Belarus, to overcome the impediments to the conduct of democratic elections. They call upon the Belarusian authorities to respond positively, and create the conditions for a meaningful democratic electoral process in the Republic of Belarus. In this spirit of cooperation, they welcome the National Assembly of Belarus to actively participate in the work of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly.

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

Background

The 17 October 2004 elections to the House of Representatives were the second to be held under the Constitution of 1996. Deputies are elected from 110 single-mandate constituencies, on the basis of a majoritarian system, for a four-year term of office. Candidates securing more than 50 per cent of the vote in a valid first round (chiefly defined as having a turnout exceeding 50 per cent) are elected. In constituencies where there is no outright winner in a valid first round, the two highest placed candidates go forward to a second round to be held in two weeks.

The elections took place in a charged political atmosphere. President Lukashenko announced on 7 September that a Republican Referendum would be held simultaneously with the parliamentary elections. Citizens voted on whether or not to allow the incumbent President to participate in future presidential elections and on eliminating the existing constitutional limit on two presidential terms in office. The referendum clearly overshadowed the parliamentary elections, both in terms of the visibility of the respective campaigning, and in terms of the relative importance that political actors across the spectrum attached to the two events.

Legislative Framework

In previous elections, the OSCE/ODIHR has identified serious flaws and deficiencies in the Electoral Code¹, and has made recommendations and extended its assistance to increase transparency and public confidence in the electoral process. The Belarusian authorities have not pursued these recommendations, which would have brought the Electoral Code more closely in line with OSCE commitments. Prior to the 2004 parliamentary elections, the OSCE/ODIHR further recommended that supplementary regulations issued by the CEC could partially address outstanding issues. However, specified regulations were not passed to institute the necessary safeguards, and the legal framework failed to provide a sufficient basis for a meaningful democratic election process.

Apart from general provisions on elections in the Constitution of the Republic of Belarus, the main law for the conduct of the elections to the House of Representatives is the Electoral Code of 11 February 2000, with amendments of 4 January 2003.² A number of supplementary CEC regulations also apply, although they were insufficient to clarify fundamental aspects of the election process, and therefore did not ensure a uniform procedure (see Election Administration).

Several legal provisions were used to limit political participation in the election process. These provisions generally were applied in an arbitrary fashion, rather than to safeguard the political rights of candidates.

Article 67 of the Electoral Code regulates the verification of signatures collected by self-nominated candidates to support their registration. Fifty-three candidates were rejected by DEC's on the grounds of too many invalid signatures, even though in some instances evidence suggested that DEC's arbitrarily applied criteria for signature validity and procedures for sampling, scouring lists to produce the requisite number of invalid signatures, even if the candidate collected many more signatures than necessary.

Articles 100 and 101 of the Electoral Code require candidates to submit a declaration of income and property. In some cases, discrepancies between the figures submitted by a candidate and the figures the DEC collected from employers and other sources were used to disqualify a candidate, even if the candidate was not responsible for the mistake, with no further opportunity to correct the applications.

Political parties in Belarus are required to have a registered party office (“primary organization”) in the respective constituency where they wish to nominate a candidate. On the last day for registration, 16 September 2004, several local branches of the Ministry of Justice de-registered a number of “primary organizations,” denying the right to nominate a candidate in that district. There was no chance to appeal the decision in time before the last day for registration.

Article 47 regulates sanctions in the case of violations of campaign rules related to insulting the President and other state officials, or bribing of voters. On these grounds, a number of registered candidates were anonymously denounced, and were subsequently deregistered in the last days prior to the election. This included de-registrations for such minor actions as distributing newspapers or leaflets, allegedly with insulting content. The CEC rejected all appeals against these de-registrations.

¹ Particularly with regard to: insufficient provisions to ensure the integrity of the voting and transparency during the tabulation of results; restrictive provisions for observers; restrictions on campaigning; limited opportunities to challenge CEC decisions; independence and balance of electoral commissions not ensured.

² The Law on Political Parties of 5 October 1994 and the Law on Mass Media of 13 January 1995 are also of relevance, as is the Code on Civil Procedures of 11 January 1999 in respect of appeals and complaints connected with the registration procedures of political parties and candidates.

Election Administration

The election administration for the parliamentary elections consists of the CEC, 110 DEC's – one for every single-member district – and 6,659 PEC's (40 of which were established overseas in diplomatic missions of the Republic of Belarus). All commissions were established within the deadlines provided by the Electoral Code and the Law on the Central Commission for Elections and National Referenda.

The CEC is a permanent body with a five-year mandate. It was last appointed in January 2002. It has 12 members, six appointed by the President and six by the Council of the Republic, the indirectly elected upper house of the National Assembly. On 3 September President Lukashenko issued a decree permitting political parties that had nominated candidates to appoint non-voting members to the CEC. Although some such appointees made insightful contributions, there was little indication that their views were taken into account when formal decisions were taken.

The DEC's and PEC's are temporary bodies appointed for each election by, respectively, the regional and local administrations. The DEC and PEC nominations could be made by political parties, public associations, labour collectives and citizens' groups. However, the appointing bodies were not obliged to appoint these nominees. In the end, only 7 per cent of the overall composition of the DEC's were political party nominees, and the presence of a political party representative on a PEC was an extremely rare occurrence. In general, the appointing bodies of the local administration strongly favoured various representatives of the local administration.

Election commissions at all levels generally functioned efficiently, in terms of meeting deadlines foreseen in the law. However, commission work at the DEC and PEC level was hampered by the obvious reluctance of the CEC to give detailed and definite instructions that would have introduced a higher degree of standardization in the work of the lower-level commissions. Examples of the procedural deficiencies included a lack of a unified security standard for: ballot printing; poor ballot box security measures during early voting; an absence of transparency during the counting process; and the absence of the possibility for observers to receive certified true copies of PEC result protocols.

Decisions on registration of candidates were taken by the DEC's. Prospective candidates were nominated by labour collectives that included a minimum of 300 people, by one of the 17 political parties registered with the Ministry of Justice, or through self-nomination, which required collecting a minimum of 1,000 signatures from voters in a constituency.

There was an exceedingly high number of rejections of applicants: 312 out of 692.³ This suggests that the discretion afforded the DEC's in the current legal framework permitted exclusionary rather than inclusive interpretations of procedures for candidate registration, particularly as some of the rejections were made on manifestly trivial or formalistic grounds. A selective treatment was conferred upon certain candidates, involving the active pursuit of grounds not to grant registration. Overall, opposition party applicants were much more affected by rejections in absolute numbers than pro-government applicants.

DEC's also deregistered at least 20 candidates in the run-up to polling day, including 10 de-registrations after the start of early voting. De-registration largely resulted from alleged violations related to campaigning, although in one instance in #2 Brestkiy Tsentralniy, the DEC de-registered a candidate during the early voting period after discovering deficiencies in his income declaration, having evidently persisted in investigating this beyond the candidate registration period. The reduction in the numbers of potential candidates was further compounded by the widespread withdrawal of registered candidates, often for unclear reasons. Consequently, there were 99 constituencies in which

³ The total number and percentage of registered candidates for the 2004 elections (406 or 58.7 per cent) was appreciably less than the total number and percentage of candidates registered in 2000 (551 or 71.7 per cent).

there were four candidates or fewer, including ten constituencies in which the elections were non-competitive, with only one candidate on the ballot.

The CEC had to deal with 166 appeal cases from candidates whose registration was denied by the different DEC's. Forty-three of them, or just over a quarter, were approved. From the 123 rejected cases, over 60 were appealed to the Supreme Court, and only two of them were approved. The hearings in the CEC, as well as in the Supreme Court, were conducted in a very formalistic manner. In general, the decisions of the first instances were upheld, without taking new evidence submitted by the appellants into consideration.

Election Campaign

In contrast to the decision by seven political parties to boycott the 2000 elections, members of the majority of opposition parties sought to participate in these elections under the auspices of two informal unregistered "electoral blocs": the Coalition Five Plus⁴ and the Democratic Centrist Coalition⁵. There were also nominations from political parties affiliated with the pro-government Republican Coordinating Council of Leaders of Political Parties and Public Associations and from the Liberal Democratic Party, a separate political force that is the largest political party in Belarus. However, slightly more than half of all applicants for registration were identifiably political party representatives (either party nominees or self-nominated, but with clear party affiliation).

With only half of the candidates representing political parties, the role of party platforms in the election campaign was not very evident. In the vast majority of constituency contests, local issues received some attention. The announcement of the referendum greatly overshadowed the parliamentary election campaign. Candidates from across the political spectrum sought to define their campaigns through support for or opposition to the referendum, although this observation applies particularly to the opposition.

The Electoral Code allots each registered candidate 975,000 Belarusian Rubles (approximately USD 450) for printing leaflets and brochures. However, there were widespread complaints by opposition candidates concerning the refusal of both state-owned facilities, and the reluctance of private firms, to print campaign materials. Candidates also reported delays in the receipt of campaign materials due to police or tax inspections initiated at printing houses. In several instances, police seized campaign materials as part of these investigations. The materials were later returned, but only after a delay of several days. Given the limited amount of time foreseen in the law for candidates to campaign, these delays represented a significant obstacle.

Of particular concern were incidents in which candidates, their activists and voters were subject to pressure and intimidation. In at least two instances, police raided the headquarters of opposition party candidates. During one of these raids, the IEOM directly observed police presenting an unlawfully compiled order to confiscate campaign literature previously cleared by the DEC (#96 Svislochskiy in Minsk) for publication. IEOM observers also reported the detention of a candidate in Vityebsk, and harassment of campaign activists in Brest oblast, Minsk city, Smorgon and Dzherzhinsk. There were also widespread reports that certain groups of voters were pressured to participate in early voting. Such reports were confirmed by the IEOM observers in Brest and Mogilyov.

Candidates encountered difficulties in conducting meetings with voters, even though the Electoral Code requires the local authorities to facilitate this process. A large number of candidates received warnings related to campaigning in what appeared to be concerted efforts to hamper the ability of

⁴ The Belarusian Party of Communists, the Belarusian Popular Front, the Belarusian Social Democratic Gramada, the United Civic Party, and the liquidated Belarusian Party of Labour are linked to the Coalition Five Plus.

⁵ The Democratic Centrist Coalition was an agreement by the "Respublika" parliamentary grouping, the "Young Belarus" Coalition, and the European Coalition "Free Belarus", including the Belarusian Social Democratic Party (Narodnaya Gramada) and the Belarusian Women's Party "Nadzeya," to work together during the elections.

candidates to reach voters. In at least 16 cases candidates were de-registered as a result of questionable violations of Electoral Code provisions on campaigning. Limitations on candidates' ability to campaign were particularly egregious in light of the massive, nationwide, and apparently state-funded campaign in support of a "yes" vote on the referendum. The Republican Referendum campaign created an atmosphere in which it was suggested that the opposition was against the interests of the nation.

Some candidates stated that the venues approved by local authorities for campaigning did not enable them to reach a significant portion of the electorate in a given constituency, due to their limited number or location. Requests for additional meeting spaces reportedly were denied in many instances. However, the DEC's in many constituencies did provide considerable support in organizing "candidate forums" during which voters familiarized themselves with candidates' platforms.

President Lukashenko made a series of public statements about the elections. The President repeatedly referred publicly to the desirability of having only one round of elections in order to save the public funds that would be required to conduct a second round. On 6 October he reiterated that government-backed candidates should win all 110 seats in the House of Representatives in the first round, stating that "we have enough powers and techniques to win these elections by a landslide."⁶ There were allegations that candidates supported by the local authorities received preferential treatment and benefited from the use of administrative resources.

Media

All the nationwide electronic media originating in the country are state controlled. These outlets dominate the provision of information about political developments in Belarus. The only other widely-accessible electronic media, TV channels from the Russian Federation or local radio, do not provide any significant political coverage. Alternative information of a political nature is available, however, through some non-state print media and the Internet.

In addition to the basic legal framework for campaigning in the media as defined by several articles of the Electoral Code, the CEC on 8 September specified rules providing candidates with an equal right to a maximum five minutes of free TV and five minutes of free radio airtime, as well as two typewritten pages in the state print media to be published free of charge. Most candidates were able to address their message to voters through State broadcast and print media outlets, however, there were some reported instances of censorship of these candidates' presentations, and refusals to air presentations, principally in respect to references to the Republican Referendum. Self-censorship by candidates, in order to avoid any violation of the Electoral Code, was also reported.

The free presentations in state TV and radio were the only opportunity for candidates to address their message to voters through the broadcast mass media: there were no candidates' paid advertisements in electronic or print media outlets and no debates between the contestants were transmitted in the media. Overall, there was a lack of genuine debate about political developments and a lack of balance in the presentation of political options.

According to the results of the OSCE/ODIHR EOM media monitoring for the period 6 September to 16 October, the President and Government got more than 90 percent of the time dedicated to political and election-related actors in news coverage, and 75 percent overall in current affairs programs, of monitored electronic media originating in Belarus. The president was portrayed in overwhelmingly positive terms. The electronic media in their news and current affairs programs provided only limited

⁶ Previously President Lukashenko told a 20 July 2004 press conference that he had issued a "directive" that 30 per cent of current parliamentarians should be re-elected and that the representation of women should be increased to 30 to 40 per cent of the Parliament.

information about election developments, and the biggest share of that limited coverage was given to the CEC.

There was very limited state electronic media coverage of political party activities, but opposition parties were indirectly portrayed in a very negative tone. This was especially the case in analytical and special programs. Some opposition figures were also presented as enemies of the State, and accused of incompetence, radical nationalism, criminal activities or sympathy for terrorists.

Print media outlets provided more variety of information about various political options. All the monitored print media outlets also devoted most space to the President, and his portrayal in all three monitored state newspapers was overwhelmingly positive, but non-state newspapers portrayed the President mostly in negative terms.

There was a significantly disproportionate amount of time given in the media to coverage of the Republican Referendum, vis a vis the parliamentary elections. For instance, voter education clips dealing with the parliamentary elections were aired only in one monitored TV channel; the total time dedicated to these clips in the monitored period was less than 16 minutes. In contrast, spots that instructed viewers on how to fill out the ballot for the referendum, providing instruction on how to tick the box “for”, but failing to mention the possibility of voting “against”, were aired in all monitored TV channels; the total airtime given to coverage of these spots in the monitored period was approximately five times greater (75 minutes).

The OSCE/ODIHR itself came under unprecedented verbal attack and public accusation from senior state officials and the state media, with unfounded accusations of bias and pre-prepared conclusions about the election. The state television channel BT1 repeatedly aired in its broadcasts false information about the OSCE/ODIHR and its activities in Belarus. Insinuations, and a lack of any effort to receive direct information from EOM representatives, suggested a deliberate attempt to discredit the OSCE/ODIHR EOM.

Women’s Participation

Women were well represented in the election administration, including in positions of leadership. The Chair of the CEC is a woman.

The outgoing House of Representatives had 14 women deputies (12.7 per cent). One hundred and eighteen women applied for registration, of whom 83 were registered, including four on appeal to the CEC. As a result of withdrawals and four de-registrations of women candidates, there were 70 women on the ballot on 17 October (21.2 per cent of the total – out of 330). It is of note that the Belarusian Women’s Party “Nadzeya” chose not to nominate any candidates for the elections.

National Minorities

There are more than 130 nationalities that currently reside in Belarus according to the results of the census. 81.2 per cent of the population is Belarusian, and the three largest minority groups are Russians (11.4 per cent), Poles (3.9 per cent), and Ukrainians (2.4 per cent). There also are Roma communities in Minsk, Gomel, and Vityebsk Oblasts, and Minsk City. Although two candidates of Polish descent were not registered, including on appeals to the CEC and Supreme Court, it does not appear that these cases were linked to their national origins.

In general, issues related to gender and national minorities were not evident in the electoral process.

Domestic Observers

The unregistered civic initiative “Partnership” engaged in non-partisan domestic observation beginning on 1 July 2004. It registered long-term observers in 98 constituencies through provisions in the Electoral Code that allow citizens to become observers by collecting 10 signatures from voters in a constituency. The group managed to accredit over 3,000 STOs to observe both the five days of early voting and election day. Due to its lack of legal status, Partnership accredited STOs, deployed in teams of two, either through signature collection or through local civic organizations. The STO teams sought to cover 25 per cent of the polling stations in every constituency. The IEOM received several reports of harassment of domestic observers, for instance in Gomel, Grodno, Mogilyov and Novopolotsk.

Election Day – Voting, Counting and Tabulation

1. Early Voting

During the five-day period of early voting the IEOM undertook over 900 observations in polling stations. Although there are some fundamental concerns about the transparent regulation of early voting, observers positively assessed the voting procedures in 90 per cent of observation visits. The main observed problem involved breaches of the secrecy of the vote (9 per cent of all observations), mainly caused by the absence of voting booths and instances of group voting. Although some of the other observed problems, such as instances of voters being allowed to vote without presenting identity documents, appeared to be procedural lapses, there were also occasions when persons were seen in possession of multiple ballot papers. Parliamentary election campaign materials were observed inside the voting room in 12 per cent of all observations, while materials promoting a “yes” vote in the referendum were present in many polling station voting rooms.

There was no instruction from the CEC that ballot boxes should be entirely sealed in the period between the twice-daily voting sessions and overnight (when the box would be under guard by a police officer), and consequently only in very few instances did IEOM observers note that PECs had put in place measures to seal the slot in the top of the box when it was not in use. A daily record by official protocol of participation in early voting continued to be absent from the procedures. There was, however, specific provision for the sealing of the slot in the box at the close of the final session of early voting, so it is of concern that at the start of Election Day proceedings on 17 October early voting ballot boxes were observed to be without such a seal in 20 per cent of cases where the box was in view.

2. Election Day

Although the overall conduct of voting was positively assessed by IEOM observers in 90 per cent of polling stations, certain serious problems were prevalent: unauthorized persons were present in 13 per cent of polling stations (and seen to be directing the work of the PEC in 3 per cent of polling stations); there were instances of voters being allowed to vote without identity documents at 4 per cent of polling stations; and ballot boxes were observed to be not properly sealed or intact in 8 per cent of polling stations. The prevalence of campaign materials inside the voting rooms was much diminished compared to the early voting period.

IEOM observers gave a negative assessment of counting in 60 per cent of the 72 polling station vote counts observed. Overwhelmingly, there was an absence of transparency in the establishment of results and the compilation of the protocol: in only five observed instances did the PEC, before opening the ballot boxes, follow the established procedure for entering the number of eligible voters and the number of voters who had received ballot papers. Counting of ballots was done generally in silence, even furtively: in only one observed vote count was the voters’ choice as indicated on the ballot announced aloud, and in barely 20 per cent of cases was the total number of votes cast for each candidate stated aloud before the protocol was compiled. There were at least four instances where

protocols were observed being filled out initially using pencils and erasers, which is a violation of an explicit provision in the rules of procedure established by the PEC. In PEC 21 of DEC 9 (Drogichinskiy, Brest oblast), the protocol was compiled by a PEC member outside the counting room, apparently on the basis of a telephone conversation with an unknown person. In PEC 2 of DEC 50 (Volkovysskiy, Grodno oblast) the protocol was compiled by the PEC chairman in a separate office, receiving numbers on slips of paper from other commission members in the counting room. In barely half of observed polling stations did the PEC post a copy of the results protocols on the wall for observers to note the results.

In two separate DEC's in Baranovichy, observers who were able to view ballot boxes closely enough reported multiple ballots emerging from early voting ballot boxes folded together in wads, suggesting ballot stuffing.

3. Obstruction of IEOM observers

Of serious concern was the prevention of IEOM observers from carrying out their observation duties with sufficient freedom of movement and access to information. The refusal of PEC members to provide basic data in response to questions that are a standard part of OSCE observation methodology and not in conflict with the rights of international observers as defined in CEC regulations, such as the number of voters on the voter list, was consistent and widespread. IEOM observers were regularly ordered not to approach voting materials, and confined to one part of the voting room. The problem became particularly acute during counting.

In at least seven cases, obstruction of observers involved outright refusal to allow entry to polling stations on military bases or in border zones, despite assurances having been given by the central authorities to the IEOM that its standard operating principle of full access to all polling stations would be respected. Some observers encountered hostility from PEC members and police at polling stations; in four instances PECs at regular polling stations threatened that they would have IEOM observer teams (two of them teams of parliamentarians of the OSCE PA), removed by police for seeking basic information relating to the voter list or vote count. In PEC 63 of DEC 32 (Shumilinskiy, Vityebsk oblast) the IEOM observer team was ejected from the vote count. In several cases IEOM observers were not permitted to enter DEC's to observe results tabulation.

*This statement is also available in Russian.
However, the English text remains the only official version*

MISSION INFORMATION & ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Ambassador Audrey Glover (UK) is Head of the long-term OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Mission. Ms. Tone Tingsgard (Sweden), Vice-President of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, was appointed by the OSCE Chairman in Office as a Special Coordinator for the OSCE short-term observation.

The IEOM issues this statement before the final certification of the election results and before a complete analysis of the IEOM observation findings. The OSCE/ODIHR will issue a final comprehensive report approximately six weeks after the completion of the electoral process.

This statement is based on the election preparation and campaign observations of 12 election experts of the OSCE/ODIHR EOM stationed in Minsk and 22 long-term observers deployed in the capital and eight other cities for five weeks prior to the election day. The statement also incorporates findings on the early voting days and election day of around 270 short-term observers from 38 OSCE participating States, including some 50 from the OSCE PA, reporting from approximately 1,400 polling stations out of a total of 6,619 countrywide.

The IEOM wishes to express its appreciation to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Central Election Commission, and other authorities of the Republic of Belarus for the co-operation and assistance they provided.

For further information, please contact:

- Ambassador Audrey Glover, Head of the OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Mission, in Belarus (Tel.: +375 17 287 2965) until 30 October;
- Ms. Urdur Gunnarsdottir, OSCE/ODIHR Spokesperson, or Ms. Holly Ruthrauff, OSCE/ODIHR Election Adviser, in Warsaw (Tel.: +48 22 520 0600);
- Mr. Jan Jooren, Press Councillor of the OSCE PA (Tel.: +45 - 40 41 16 41).

Address: 11, 2-ya Shestaya Liniya St.
220013 Minsk
Belarus

Tel.: +375 17 287 2965
Fax: +375 17 287 2973
e-mail: office@odihr.iptel.by