

**Interview with Ambassador Benedikt Haller,
the Head of OSCE Office in Minsk
21 January 2010**

Questions by Mr Vladimir Vasilkov, editor of the analytical information section of BelTA

1. Dear Ambassador, allow me to wish many successes to your mission in Belarus. What do you personally expect from the forthcoming period of your leadership in the OSCE Office in Minsk? Have you set any concrete list of “tasks № 1” you would like to fulfill in the near future?

Answer: First allow me say that I look very much forward to working in Belarus; I am grateful for the trust invested in me by the OSCE countries, and I thank you for your kind wishes. My overarching goal is to ensure that the Office implements its mandate effectively, in the best interest of Belarus and of its society. I plan to use the initial phase of my tenure to get fully acquainted with the work of the Office and the context in which it operates. As you are aware, the Office provides assistance and expertise across a number of sectors – for instance, on energy security and efficiency, provision of assistance to Chernobyl affected regions, assistance to the well functioning of state institutions including law enforcement agencies as well as to the reform of the juvenile justice and the penitentiary system. Both during the elaboration and the implementation of specific activities which stem from the Office’s mandate, I will do my best to ensure that close collaboration is achieved with the state agencies as well as with representatives of civil society and other relevant interlocutors.

2. One of your predecessors, Hans-George Wieck, was blamed for being biased in favour of the Belarusian authorities and offering too much support to oppositional forces, while the other, Hans-Jochen Schmidt, made oppositional activists displeased with his excessive, in their view, loyalty to the policy of the Belarusian government. What is the prognosis, in this connection, with regard to your image?

Answer: I think all of my predecessors have been distinguished for their dedication and commitment. As I already mentioned, my overarching goal is to ensure that the Office implements its tasks effectively. In doing so I will be guided by the mandate while taking into account the views and expectations of the host authorities and of other segments of Belarusian society when drafting and implementing concrete activities.

3. Ten years have passed since the OSCE established its mission in Belarus. To sum up the results, which main achievements and failures can be noted in the work of the Office?

Answer: Evaluating the work of any OSCE Field Operation is up to the OSCE participating States. Therefore, I feel it would be erroneous for me to jump to conclusions at the very outset of my tenure in Minsk. To my mind, there have been notable contributions of the OSCE Office in the past in all areas of its mandate and we can build upon them in the future. My priority is now to plan ahead in order to fill our mandate with life. I will nonetheless draw upon any lesson learned which could possibly increase the efficiency and the effectiveness of the Office’s activities.

4. Do you intend to somehow correct the “modality” of strategy and tactics in mission’s work? Maybe, you believe that some questions should be paid more attention to and some, vice versa, will become less urgent... Will new emphases be made?

Answer: Our strategy is defined by the mandate that has been approved by all the OSCE participating countries and we will be guided by it. All parts of the mandate are essential; to my mind it is not possible to put more emphasis on a particular part of the mandate than on another one.

5. Everyone knows that the main event for the Office in the forthcoming year will be the Presidential electoral campaign. Traditionally, OSCE observers assessed the Belarusian elections in a two-fold manner. On the one hand, they pointed at certain progress while, on the other hand, made notes about “falling short of standards”. Yet, the Belarusian authorities put forward a counter-claim: where is this list of “OSCE standards” referred to as being violated? Isn’t it being construed post factum, after each electoral campaign?

Answer: The assessment of the elections in the OSCE area is within the domain of the ODIHR and Parliamentary Assembly of OSCE. Both have observed over a 150 elections in the last decade and have accumulated important know-how and competence in this field. The OSCE Office, however, does not have a mandate to observe elections in Belarus nor does it have the expertise to do so. At the same time the Office has been lending assistance to the Republic of Belarus in improving the electoral system in the country and is ready to do so in the future in every possible way. As far as the assessment of elections is concerned, the main document on OSCE election standards, the ODIHR is guided by is the Copenhagen Document, adopted in 1990.

6. Recently, amendments, aiming at certain liberalization, were introduced into the electoral legislation of our country. How do you assess them? Do they raise the chances of recognition of the forthcoming elections by the West?

Answer: My understanding is that the Belarusian authorities have shared the said amendments with ODIHR; we have been told of about 130 changes introduced into the relevant legislation. As I said, within the OSCE it is ODIHR that has the competence to assess them. Please always remember that our Office is a field operation that works on the basis of its mandate and does not claim to speak for the whole of the OSCE.

7. How do you assess the role of Belarus in the OSCE and the contribution of Belarus to the European security architecture?

Answer: The Republic of Belarus has been a full-fledged member of the OSCE since 1992 and proved to be a very active participating State as recently evidenced by your country’s readiness to host, in March this year, the Second Preparatory Conference for the 18th Economic and Environmental Forum. Moreover, during the past year relevant Belarusian agencies, in cooperation with our Office, have organised and hosted a number of events dedicated to the use of alternative energy sources and protection of critical energy infrastructure. It is also my understanding that your permanent representative to the OSCE, Ambassador Alyaksandr Sychov, was recently appointed by the Chairman-in-Office as Chairman of the OSCE’s Economic and Environmental Committee. These are only a few amongst many elements that suggest how active the Republic of Belarus is within the framework of the OSCE. In this context I would also like to refer to the statement of Minister Martynov at the OSCE Ministerial Council in Athens which touches upon a broad range of OSCE related issues.

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