



Doc. 13921

18 November 2015

Observation of the presidential election in Belarus (11 October 2015)

Election observation report

Ad hoc Committee of the Bureau

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1. Introduction

1. At its meeting on 22 June 2015, the Bureau of the Parliamentary Assembly decided, subject to receipt of an invitation, to observe the presidential election in Belarus. For this purpose, it set up an ad hoc committee comprising 11 members, including the rapporteur of the Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy on “The situation in Belarus” and authorised a pre-electoral mission to take place one month before the election.

2. On 15 July 2015, the Assembly received an invitation from the Belarus authorities to observe the presidential election. On 31 August, the Bureau took note of the declarations made by the candidates for the election mission confirming that they had no conflict of interest, approved the composition of the ad hoc committee and appointed as its chair Ms Arpine Hovhannisyan (Armenia, EPP/CD). Owing to her appointment as Minister for Justice of Armenia, Ms Hovhannisyan was unable to chair the delegation and the President of the Assembly appointed Mr Reha Denemeç (Turkey, EC) as chair of the delegation (see Appendix 1).

3. The Assembly's pre-electoral delegation travelled to Minsk from 7 to 10 September 2015 to evaluate the state of preparations and the political climate in the run-up to the presidential election on 11 October 2015. The multiparty delegation was composed of Reha Denemeç (Turkey, EC), head of the delegation, Jonas Gunnarsson (Sweden, SOC), Marieluise Beck (Germany, ALDE), Andrej Hunko (Germany, UEL) and Andrea Rigoni (Italy, ALDE), rapporteur on “The situation in Belarus” of the Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy.



4. During its visit to Belarus, the pre-electoral delegation met the presidential candidates or their representatives, the Speakers of the two Houses of Parliament of Belarus, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, the Chair of the Central Election Commission (CEC), the President of the State television and radio company, representatives of the international community, the Head of the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation (OSCE/ODIHR) election observation mission, and representatives of civil society and the media.

5. The Parliamentary Assembly pre-electoral delegation, in the statement issued at the end of the visit, welcomed the openness of the Belarus authorities who had invited the delegation to observe the presidential election, 14 years following the previous invitation in 2001. It also welcomed the invitation extended to a large number of international organisations to observe the presidential election, including the OSCE/ODIHR long-term observers, without imposing constraints on their work, in accordance with the international commitments of Belarus. The statement issued by the pre-electoral delegation at the end of its visit is set out in Appendix 2.

6. The ad hoc committee was part of the international election observation mission which also comprised observers from the Parliamentary Assembly of the OSCE and the OSCE/ODIHR election observation mission.

7. The ad hoc committee visited Minsk from 9 to 12 October 2015. As part of the programme of joint meetings, it met the presidential candidates or their representatives, the Chair of the Central Election Commission, the Head of the OSCE/ODIHR election observation mission and his colleagues, and representatives of civil society, international organisations and the media. The programme of the ad hoc committee's meetings is set out in Appendix 3.

8. On polling day, the ad hoc committee split up into seven teams deployed in Minsk, Brest, Borisov and the surrounding areas.

9. The international election observation mission concluded that the presidential election of 11 October had shown that Belarus still had a considerable way to go in honouring its commitment to hold democratic elections. On polling day, voters had been able to make their choice in a transparent manner in the presence of many domestic and international observers. However, counting procedures needed to be improved considerably. An election was not limited to polling day. Consequently, Belarus needed to reform its legal framework to ensure a thoroughly competitive political environment, which was a key condition for the long-term democratic stability of the country. The press release of the international election observation mission published following the election is reproduced in Appendix 4.

2. Political context and legal framework

10. The Parliamentary Assembly observed parliamentary elections in Belarus for the first time in 1995. In 1996, the Assembly observed the Constitutional referendum and the parliamentary elections and the presidential election in September 2001.

11. The previous presidential election was held on 19 December 2010. According to the official results, of the ten candidates, incumbent President Alexander Lukashenko was elected with 79.67% of the votes (5 122 866 votes). Andrei Sannikov received the second-highest percentage – 2.56% (164 000 votes). Alexander Lukashenko has been the President of Belarus since 1994.

12. Developments in the situation of Belarus, following the previous presidential election, have been a central focus of the Parliamentary Assembly's attention. The crackdown on protesters contesting the 2010 presidential election results and the detention of the opposition candidates prompted an urgent debate during the Assembly's January 2011 part-session, which led to the adoption of [Resolution 1790 \(2011\)](#). In this resolution, the Assembly reaffirmed its decision to put on hold its activities involving high-level contacts with the Belarus authorities and called on the Bureau of the Assembly not to lift the suspension of the special guest status for the Parliament of Belarus.

13. On 10 March 2011, the Bureau of the Assembly set up an ad hoc committee on recent detentions, prosecutions and convictions of members of the opposition in Belarus. A report covering the period from 19 December 2010 to 1 October 2011 was made public by decision of the Bureau on 7 October 2011. The continuing deterioration of the situation of human rights and civil and political liberties throughout 2011 led to the adoption of [Resolution 1857 \(2012\)](#) and [Recommendation 1992 \(2012\)](#) on the situation in Belarus.

14. On 27 June 2013, the Assembly's Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy held an exchange of views with members of both Houses of the National Assembly of the Republic of Belarus. On 25 and 26 February 2015, Mr Andrea Rigoni (Italy, ALDE), rapporteur on the situation in Belarus, made a visit to the

country. While welcoming the openness of the authorities of Belarus, the rapporteur reiterated the Assembly's non-negotiable position on the establishment of a moratorium on executions with a view to abolishing the death penalty, as well as the release of all political prisoners.

15. Following a proposal by Mr Rigoni, a delegation from the Belarus Parliament was invited to a regional conference for eastern partnership countries organised by the Parliamentary Assembly on 4 and 5 June 2015 in Paris. The theme of the conference was "Implementation of the right to free elections: the challenge of implementing the electoral laws and respect for Council of Europe standards".

16. On 23 August 2015, during the pre-election campaign, the Belarus authorities released six political prisoners, including one former presidential candidate in the 2010 presidential election, Mr Nikolai Statkevich. On 9 September 2015, the Assembly's pre-electoral delegation, during its visit to Minsk, welcomed this positive development and urged the authorities to continue improving the human rights situation in Belarus, which was a key condition for the long-term democratic stability of the country.

17. On 23 August 2015, Anne Brasseur, President of the Assembly, also welcomed the release of six political prisoners by the Belarus authorities, adding, however, that this positive development should be "followed by further concrete steps that could lead to an improvement of the human rights situation and the normalisation of relations with the Council of Europe. The presidential elections scheduled for 11 October 2015 will be an important test for the Belarusian leadership to prove the seriousness of their intentions to align themselves with Council of Europe standards in the sphere of democracy and human rights".

18. The application of the initiative group of Nikolai Statkevich to be registered as a presidential candidate was rejected before the date of his release. On 9 September 2015, during the meeting with the Assembly's pre-electoral delegation, the chair of the Belarus Central Election Commission said that the application had been rejected on the basis of Article 60 of the Electoral Code which stipulated that citizens nominated as candidates for the position of the President of the Republic of Belarus or for deputies must be entitled, by virtue of the legislation of the Republic, to occupy positions in the State bodies and other State organisations of Belarus. Such entitlement is not granted to citizens who have been convicted of an offence. The representatives of Mr Statkevich's initiative group lodged an appeal against the CEC decision before the Supreme Court, which confirmed the CEC's decision.

19. The Republic of Belarus has a presidential system, governed by a president who has extensive powers, including the authority to dissolve the lower and upper houses of parliament, to issue presidential decrees which have the force of law when the legislature is in recess, to declare a state of emergency or to impose martial law. Elections are regulated, overall, by the Constitution and the Electoral Code. The Constitution guarantees universal, equal and direct suffrage by secret ballot. Belarus is an associate member of the Venice Commission and a member of the Group of States against Corruption (GRECO).

20. The president is elected by direct universal suffrage for a five-year term in a two-round first-past-the-post election. In order for the election to be valid, over 50% of all registered voters must take part. In the event that none of the candidates wins more than 50% of votes cast, including "invalid ballots" and votes "against all", in the first round, the second round takes place within two weeks after polling day. In the event of an invalid election, the repeat election also requires a 50% turnout.

21. The ad hoc committee was informed of recent (June 2015) amendments to the Electoral Code occasioned by changes introduced in various pieces of legislation relating to the prohibition of funding from foreign sources.

22. Other amendments to the Electoral Code introduced in November 2013 extended the period for collecting campaign funds, authorising potential presidential candidates to open a bank account once an initiative group has been registered, and raising the private donations cap and the spending limit for presidential campaigns.

23. These amendments also banned acts of disruption and the cancellation or postponement of elections and referendums. These changes were introduced as a result of the ratification by Belarus of the Convention on the Standards of Democratic Elections, Electoral Rights, and Freedoms in the Member States of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). Prior to ratification of this convention and the adoption of the amendments in November 2013, the law prohibited calls for a boycott only on the day of the election. With this change to the legislation, all activities to boycott or call for the boycott of an election are prohibited. In this connection, a number of people with whom the Assembly's ad hoc committee spoke expressed their concerns about possible abuse of this provision.

24. Generally speaking, the overall legal framework has been assessed in previous elections as not adequately guaranteeing the conduct of elections in line with international standards. Various people with whom the ad hoc committee spoke observed that despite the encouraging post-electoral commitments and the authorities' stated openness to consider the OSCE/ODIHR recommendations, the amendments introduced in the election legislation following the 2012 elections failed to address some key recommendations related to balanced election commissions composition and early voting procedures.

3. Election administration, registration of voters and candidates

25. Elections are administered by the Central Election Commission (CEC), 153 territorial election commissions (TECs) and 6 129 polling station commissions (PSCs), including 49 PSCs abroad. While the CEC is a permanent body and was appointed for a five-year term in 2011, TECs and PSCs are appointed on a temporary basis by regional or local authorities.

26. Under the Constitution and the Electoral Code, the President of the Republic appoints six of the twelve members of the CEC, including the chair, and has the power to dismiss all of its members. The other six members of the CEC are appointed by the upper house of the parliament. Each registered presidential candidate is entitled to appoint one member with a consultative vote to participate in CEC sessions.

27. A positive feature is that political parties and public associations have the right to nominate at least one third of TEC and PSC members, and no more than one third of the members can be State employees. The CEC states that it has adopted a decision under which local authorities will need to provide written explanations for their rejection of candidates for members of election commissions from parties or public associations.

28. Nonetheless, various opposition representatives with whom the ad hoc committee spoke said that the membership of the TECs and PSCs was unbalanced: barely 40 members out of the 69 000 election commission members were representatives of the opposition.

29. Following an open and unrestricted invitation to the observing institutions, the CEC displayed a welcoming attitude towards international observers. The Assembly's pre-electoral delegation welcomed the will of the authorities of the country to invite a large number of international observers, including ODIHR long-term observers, without imposing constraints on their work, in accordance with the country's international commitments. The ODIHR observers stated that the CEC had adopted all its decisions within the deadlines laid down, in full compliance with instructions and with the rules in force; the CEC's decisions were published on its website.

30. Belarusian citizens over 18 years of age on polling day and permanently or temporarily residing within a constituency are eligible to vote. On 24 September 2015, the CEC decided that citizens in prison for offences incurring a sentence of fewer than three months would be given the right to vote.

31. Voter registration is passive. Voter lists are compiled for each constituency by the relevant local authorities and there is no centralised voter register above the level of the PSCs. On 25 September, the CEC announced that a total of 6 995 181 voters had been registered for the presidential election, including 5 742 voters abroad.

32. PSCs are tasked with verifying and updating the electoral rolls by conducting door-to-door checks. Voters can be added to additional lists on polling day subject to presentation of a valid passport with confirmation of residence within the constituency. This is contrary to the Venice Commission's Code of Good Practice in Electoral Matters. While a large number of people with whom the ad hoc committee spoke expressed their confidence in the integrity of the voter registration system, representatives of certain non-governmental organisations expressed more critical views on this issue.

33. Any citizen born in Belarus, who is over the age of 35 and who has lived permanently in the country for the previous ten years, is entitled to run for president. Presidential candidates are nominated by initiative groups of at least 100 eligible voters. Each initiative group is required to submit, to its respective TEC, at least 100 000 signatures in support of a prospective candidate.

34. Nomination of candidates began 80 days before polling day and ended 50 days before the day of the election. Registration of candidates was carried out by the CEC and began 35 days before polling day and ended 25 days before the day of the election, namely on 15 September 2015 for this presidential election. Each voter can give his/her signature in support of several potential candidates. Within 15 days following the deadline for the submission of signatures, the TECs have to verify the authenticity and the number of signatures.

35. The CEC registered eight initiative groups out of 15 that submitted applications, including the initiative groups of the incumbent president. The CEC informed the members of the delegation that all rejected applications were due to a failure to fulfil the registration criteria such as the number of signatures to register an initiative group, citizenship requirements of signatories or potential candidates, or due to a potential candidate having a criminal record.

36. The CEC told the Assembly's pre-electoral delegation that it had received no complaint concerning the procedure of registration of presidential candidates and the collection of signatures in support of a prospective candidate. During the delegation's pre-electoral visit, a large number of civil society and opposition representatives with whom it spoke highlighted the importance of equal opportunities for presidential candidates to collect signatures in an unobstructed manner. In particular, they criticised the extensive use of administrative resources in support of the incumbent president by collecting signatures at State-run companies during working time, through State-controlled associations and organisations such as the Belarusian Republican Youth Union, "Belaya Rus", the Union of Women and the Belarusian Public Association of Veterans.

37. The Electoral Code does not set out a clear procedure for the selection and verification of signatures. The Assembly's ad hoc committee highlighted the importance of equal opportunities for all candidates to collect signatures in an unobstructed and free manner. Certain civil society and opposition representatives claimed that the procedure for verifying the signatures collected was not transparent and that this undermined confidence in the electoral process.

38. On 10 September, the CEC registered four candidates who had succeeded in collecting more than 100 000 signatures: the incumbent President Alexander Lukashenko – 1 753 380 signatures; Nicolay Ulakhovich – 149 819 signatures; Sergey Haydukovich – 139 877 signatures; and Tatiana Korotkevich – 105 278 signatures. This was the first time in the history of Belarus that a female candidate had been registered.

4. Electoral campaign, campaign financing and media coverage

39. The electoral campaign began on 10 September 2015 following the registration of the four candidates. The latter were able to campaign throughout the whole country and, generally speaking, without any constraints.

40. incumbent President Lukashenko ran his electoral campaign under the slogan "For the future of independent Belarus" placing the focus on economic development and regional stability, making particular reference to the conflict between Ukraine and Russia. His candidature was supported by a large number of government-linked public associations and by well-known public figures in the country.

41. The presidential candidate Haydukovich had already run in the presidential elections of 2001 and 2006 and had received 2.18% and 3.5% of the votes respectively. The slogan of his campaign was "For a strong Belarus" based on stability and public order. During the electoral campaign he did not criticise the incumbent president and argued for Euro-Asian integration.

42. The presidential candidate Ulakhovich ran his electoral campaign under the slogan "For peace, tranquillity and order", stating that Belarus was part of the "Russian world". He presented himself as a "Belarusian Cossack" with strong links to the Orthodox Church. Despite the fact that he was a presidential candidate, he supported the current leaders of the country.

43. Ms Korotkevich was the first woman candidate to run for President of Belarus. She is a member of the "Hramada" Social Democratic Party, and an activist in the "Tell the Truth" movement. The slogan of her electoral campaign was "For peaceful change". Her electoral platform focused on the socio-economic development of the country. No opposition party supported her candidature. At the meeting with the Assembly's pre-electoral delegation in Minsk on 8 September 2015, certain opposition representatives openly questioned her independence vis-à-vis the ruling authorities in the country.

44. The pre-election environment placed few restrictions on the presidential candidates who were able to campaign by meeting voters, making door-to-door visits, organising rallies and distributing campaign material. However, representatives of civil society and of Ms Korotkevich expressed reservations as to whether candidates were able to campaign freely and on a level playing field, in particular given the use of administrative resources for the incumbent president.

45. With regard to the use of administrative and public association resources, a significant number of senior officials campaigned for the incumbent president; a rally was organised by the Ministry of Defence, with the organisers calling on the families of military personnel and serving military personnel to vote for the incumbent president; State-financed public associations campaigned for the incumbent president. The Head of the Central Election Commission argued publicly for the incumbent. One positive feature was that the Minister of Labour and Social Protection, who was in charge of the incumbent president's campaign, took leave from her ministry during the electoral campaign.

46. With regard to the financing of the candidates' electoral campaign, under the legislation, candidates were to open a bank account to collect funds once their initiative group had been registered. Contributions could be made only through bank transfers. Candidates could use their own funds and contributions from private citizens and legal entities. The spending limit for a candidate was the equivalent of approximately €115 000. By way of comparison, during the previous election the spending limit was only one third of that amount.

47. In addition, State funding was provided for the printing of uniform information material, containing biographical data for all candidates, which were distributed via the PSCs. This could be seen as a positive move, as it ensured equality among candidates as regards information material for electors. Most of the people with whom the ad hoc committee spoke welcomed the increased donations and spending limits and the prolonged period for the collection of funds. However, concerns were raised regarding the actual financial contributions from citizens and legal entities to candidates due to potential pressure and intimidation of donors.

48. The CEC informed the ad hoc committee that in accordance with the legislation in force, presidential candidates were obliged to submit income and expenditure reports to the CEC, which had an overall responsibility for campaign finance oversight during the campaign period and for drafting a final report within five days following polling day. Investigative measures could be initiated and sanctions imposed should a candidate exceed the authorised campaign financing limits by 20%.

49. The Electoral Code provides for free airtime for candidates on State television and radio, and free space in State-funded print media. The CEC adopted instructions for the implementation of this provision. The public television channel Belarus 1 and radio station Radio National 1 allowed each candidate 30 minutes free airtime; the incumbent president declined this offer. A live television debate was held on 3 October between the candidates, but the incumbent president did not take part in this event, nor did one of the candidates, who sent his representative. In this connection, the ad hoc committee found it a matter of regret that not all of the candidates took part in the debate and pointed out that in its pre-electoral statement it had encouraged all presidential candidates to take part in order to improve the culture of political debate in Belarus and enable the electorate to make an informed choice.

50. According to the ODIHR's preliminary media monitoring report, there was broad coverage of the institutional activities of the incumbent president in the State-financed media and this coverage was favourable to the president. During the period from 7 September to 7 October, roughly 47% of political news concerned the incumbent president, 9% Ms Korotkevich, and 7% Mr Haydukovich and Mr Ulakhovich respectively.

5. Polling day

51. Polling day was calm and the voting well organised. The ad hoc committee took note of the presence of representatives of the candidates and national observers in a large number of the polling stations visited. The CEC announced that 36.6% of voters had cast their vote during the five days preceding polling day. This advance voting procedure is provided for in the electoral legislation without any justification.

52. The ad hoc committee noted a number of shortcomings in the polling stations visited:

- while voting was taking place, in general, observers were not allowed to approach members of the polling station to verify the electoral rolls and signatures; this prohibition is provided for in the Electoral Code;
- the members of the ad hoc committee were not systematically allowed to get near the tables to observe the counting of votes; this prohibition is also provided for in the Electoral Code;
- the procedures are not set out in detail, which is detrimental to the transparency of the count and the publication of results; the poor quality of ballot boxes and seals was also mentioned;

- there were cases of failure to comply with procedures regarding the count and the preparation of results protocols.

53. On 16 October, the CEC announced the official results of the presidential election: Mr Lukashenko obtained 83.5% of the votes (5 102 478 votes), Ms Korotkevich 4.4% (271 426 votes), Mr Haydukovich 3.3% (201 945 votes) and Mr Ulakhovich 1.7% (102 131 votes). The turnout rate was 87.2%. Mr Lukashenko was elected President of the Republic of Belarus.

6. Conclusions and recommendations

54. The ad hoc committee concluded that the presidential election of 11 October 2015 showed that Belarus still had a considerable way to go in honouring its commitment to hold democratic elections. On polling day, voters had been able to make their choice in a transparent manner in the presence of many domestic and international observers. However, an election is not limited to polling day. The vote counting procedures and the rules governing the work of observers on polling day need to be considerably improved in order to enhance confidence in the electoral process.

55. Belarus needs to reform its electoral legislation to ensure a thoroughly competitive political environment which is a key condition for the long-term democratic stability of the country.

56. The pre-election environment was calm and with few restrictions on the presidential candidates who were able to campaign throughout the country without constraint. The ad hoc committee welcomed the release of political prisoners at the start of the pre-electoral campaign and urged the authorities to continue improving the human rights situation in the country.

57. The ad hoc committee was informed of the use of administrative resources and resources of the State-funded public associations in campaigning for the incumbent president; a significant number of senior officials were also alleged to be actively involved in the election campaign for the incumbent president. In future, the Belarus authorities should take steps to avoid such practices.

58. The ad hoc committee welcomes the openness of the Belarus authorities in inviting the Parliamentary Assembly to observe the presidential election, 14 years after the previous invitation in 2001. It also welcomes the large number of international organisations invited by Belarus to observe the presidential election, including the ODIHR long-term observers, without imposing constraints on their work, in accordance with the country's international commitments. Nonetheless, the ad hoc committee is convinced that the electoral legislation should be improved to enable the international observers to carry out their work effectively, particularly on polling day, without interfering in the operation of the electoral commissions. This could help enhance confidence in the whole electoral process.

59. With regard to the funding of the electoral campaign, candidates could use their own funds and contributions from private citizens and legal entities. In addition, public funding was provided to print uniform information material on the candidates for voters, in order to ensure equality between them. However, some of the people with whom the ad hoc committee spoke expressed concerns regarding the actual financial contributions from citizens and legal entities to candidates due to potential pressure and intimidation of donors.

60. Concerning media coverage, the Electoral Code provides for free airtime for candidates on State television and radio, and free space in State-funded print media. The public television channel Belarus 1 and radio station Radio National 1 allowed each candidate the allocated free airtime. The ad hoc committee observed that there was broad coverage of the institutional activities of the incumbent president in the State-financed media and that this coverage was favourable to the president. In this connection, the ad hoc committee reiterates that public broadcasters have an obligation to ensure equal access for all candidates without giving preferential treatment to the incumbent president.

61. The ad hoc committee underlines the importance of the work of all the civil society stakeholders actively involved in the observation of elections. It believes that the Belarus authorities should pursue their co-operation with the Parliamentary Assembly and with the Venice Commission in order to improve the legal framework and electoral practices in Belarus.

62. The ad hoc committee believes that the Council of Europe and its Parliamentary Assembly, through their various co-operation programmes, including those of the Eastern Partnership, should continue to strive to improve the electoral legislation and its implementation in Belarus.

Appendix 1 – Composition of the ad hoc committee

Based on proposals by the political groups of the Assembly, the ad hoc committee was composed as follows:

Reha DENEMEÇ (Turkey, EC), Chairperson

- **Socialist Group (SOC)**
 - Jonas GUNNARSSON, Sweden*
 - Birute VESAITE, Lithuania
 - Luc RECORDON, Switzerland
- **Group of the European People's Party (EPP/CD)**
 - Thierry MARIANI, France
 - Emanuelis ZINGERIS, Lithuania
- **Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE)**
 - Marieluise BECK, Germany*
 - Luis Alberto ORELLANA, Italy
- **European Conservatives Group (EC)**
 - Reha DENEMEÇ, Turkey*
- **Group of the Unified European Left (UEL)**
 - Andrej HUNKO, Germany*
- **Rapporteur of the Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy**
 - Andrea RIGONI, Italy*
- **Secretariat of the Parliamentary Assembly**
 - Chemavon CHAHBAZIAN, Head of the Election Observation and Interparliamentary Co-operation Division
 - Sonia SIRTORI, Head of the Office of the Secretary General of the Parliamentary Assembly
 - Franck DAESCHLER, Principal administrative assistant, Election observation and Interparliamentary co-operation Division

* members of the pre-election delegation

Appendix 2 – Statement by the pre-electoral delegation

A pre-electoral delegation from the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) visited Minsk to assess the pre-election process and the preparations for the presidential election to be held on 11 October 2015.

09/09/2015 – The pre-electoral delegation welcomed the openness of the Belarusian authorities who had invited the PACE after 14 years since the last invitation in 2001. It also welcomed the invitation extended to a large number of international organisations to observe the upcoming presidential election, including the ODIHR long-term observers, without imposing constraints on their work, according to the international commitments of Belarus.

The delegation was informed by the Central Election Commission (CEC) about the different stages of the preparation of the presidential election, including the procedure of collecting signatures for registration of presidential candidates. Six candidates submitted a sufficient number of signatures, more than 100 000, to the CEC to be registered as a presidential candidate. According to the CEC, no complaint was submitted to the CEC. On 10 September, after the verification of the signatures, the CEC will announce the names of the registered candidates.

A large number of interlocutors representing civil society and extra-parliamentary opposition highlighted the importance of equality of opportunity for presidential candidates to collect signatures in a free manner and of preventing the misuse of administrative resources in favour of the incumbent president.

Concerning the composition of election commissions, the delegation was informed, by interlocutors representing the opposition, about unbalanced membership of territorial and precinct election commissions. Political parties and public associations have the right to nominate at least one third of members of these commissions, however opposition representatives have complained that only 40 members, among 69 000 members of election commissions, are representatives of the opposition.

On 23 August, during the pre-election campaign, the Belarusian authorities released six political prisoners, including one former presidential candidate. The PACE pre-electoral delegation welcomes this positive development; and urges the authorities to continue improving the human rights situation in Belarus which is a key condition for the long-term democratic stability of the country.

The Election Code envisages free airtime for presidential candidates on State television and radio, and free space in State-funded print media. Some interlocutors of the delegation pointed out that the media environment has deteriorated in recent years due to defamation lawsuits and administrative sanctions imposed on journalists. The PACE pre-electoral delegation underlined the fact that public broadcasters have an obligation to ensure equal access for all candidates without privileging the incumbent president. The delegation was informed about a TV debate between presidential candidates to be held on 3 October 2015. The delegation encourages all presidential candidates to participate in this debate which could develop the culture of political debate in Belarus and enable the electorate to make an informed choice.

The PACE delegation was assured by the representatives of the Belarusian authorities that all necessary measures will be undertaken to guarantee the transparency of the electoral process, including during the voting and counting procedures.

The delegation had meetings with the speakers of the two Houses of Parliament of Belarus, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, the Chairperson of the CEC, the President of the State television and radio company, the presidential candidates or their representatives, representatives of the international community, the Head of the OSCE/ODIHR election observation mission, representatives of civil society and media.

The Parliamentary Assembly will send an 11-member delegation to observe the presidential election on 11 October 2015.

Members of the delegation: Reha Denemeç (Turkey, EC), Head of the Delegation; Jonas Gunnarsson (Sweden, SOC); Marieluise Beck (Germany, ALDE); Andrej Hunko (Germany, UEL); Andrea Rigoni (Italy, ALDE), Rapporteur of the Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy on “The situation in Belarus”

Appendix 3 – Programme of the election observation mission (9-12 October 2015)

Friday 9 October 2015

- 11:00-12:00 PACE ad hoc committee internal meeting:
- Opening by Mr Reha Denemeç, Head of the delegation
 - Debriefing by the members of the pre-electoral mission
 - Information by the secretariat of PACE on the deployment, logistic questions; distribution of files
- Joint parliamentary briefings
- 13:00-13:15 Welcome and opening:
- Mr Kent Harstedt, Special Co-ordinator of the short-term OSCE observers
 - Mr Reha Denemeç, Head of Delegation of the PACE
 - Mr Jim Walsh, Head of Delegation of the OSCE PA
- 13:15-14:45 Briefing by members of the OSCE/ODIHR team
- 15:00-15:45 Meeting with Ms Lidya Yermoshina, Chairperson of the Central Elections Commission
- 15:45-18:45 Meetings with candidates or their representatives:
- Mr Sergey Haidukevich
 - Mr Andrey Dmitriev, representing Ms Tatiana Korotkevich
 - Ms Mariana Shchotkina, Head of the election campaign of Mr Alexander Lukashenko
 - Mr Nikolai Ulakhovich

Saturday 10 October 2015

- 09:30-10:30 Representatives of the opposition:
- Mr Anatol Liabedzka
 - Mr Siarhei Kaliakin
 - Mr Mikola Statkevich
 - Mr Viktor Tsiareshchanka
- 10:30-11:30 Round table with representatives of civil society:
- Mr Aleh Hulak, Belarusian Helsinki Committee
 - Mr Uladzimir Labkovich, Human Rights Centre "Viasna"
 - Mr Dzianis, Observation of the election campaign "Right to choice in 2015"
 - Ms Raisa Mikhailovskaia, Belarusian information centre
- 11:30-12:30 Round table with media representatives:
- Mr Ales Antsipenka, Belarusian Association of Journalists
 - Mr Ales Lipay, Director of the private news agency "Belapan"
 - Mr Marat Markov, Vice-President of the State television and radio company
 - Mr Artsiom Schraibman, political analyst of the news agency TUT.by
- 13:00-13:30 OSCE/ODIHR briefing (security, co-ordination, forms)
- 13:30-14:00 Deployment information and meeting with drivers and linguistic assistants

Sunday 11 October 2015

- All day Opening of polling stations
- Observation of elections
- Closing of polling stations – Counting

Monday 12 October 2015

08:00-08:45	PACE delegation debriefing meeting
09:30-11:00	Meeting of the Heads of delegations
14:30	Press conference

Appendix 4 – Press release of the International Election Observation Mission (IEOM)

Reforms needed to address substantial shortcomings in Belarus election, international observers say, after peaceful presidential campaign

12/10/2015 – The 11 October election once again indicated that Belarus still has a considerable way to go in meeting its OSCE commitments for democratic elections. This underscores the need for the political will to engage in a comprehensive reform process, the international observers concluded in a preliminary statement released today. Some specific improvements and a welcoming attitude were noted. Some significant problems, particularly during the counting and tabulation of votes, undermined the integrity of the election. The campaign and election day were peaceful, the statement says.

“It is clear that Belarus still has a long way to go towards fulfilling its democratic commitments. The recent release of political prisoners and a welcoming approach to observers were positive developments. However, the hope that this gave us for the broader electoral process was largely unfulfilled,” said Kent Harstedt, Special Co-ordinator and Leader of the Short-Term OSCE Observer Mission. “Given previous promises, I was especially disappointed by shortcomings during counting and tabulation. We hope that the Belarusian government will have the political will to engage in a thorough reform process, which we are ready to support.”

All candidates were able to campaign throughout the country and to convey their messages without hindrance. The campaign was low-key but became more active over the final two weeks, the observers said. Only one candidate, whose platform focused predominantly on socio-economic issues, was openly critical of the incumbent. This gave voters limited choice.

The voting process on election day was assessed positively in 95% of polling stations observed, however a large number of observers were not allowed to check voter lists, and seemingly identical signatures were observed in 47 polling stations. The counting process was assessed negatively in 30% of stations observed, indicating significant problems. The tabulation process was assessed negatively and as lacking transparency in 25 per cent of instances observed.

“On 11 October voters were able to make their choice in a transparent manner in the presence of many domestic and international observers. However, counting procedures have to be improved considerably. An election is not limited to voting day. Therefore, Belarus needs to reform its legal framework to ensure a thoroughly competitive political environment. This is a key condition for the long-term democratic stability of the country,” said Reha Denemeç, Head of the PACE Delegation. “PACE, together with the Council of Europe’s Venice Commission, stands ready to co-operate with Belarus on this.”

In a positive step, after the release of several internationally acknowledged political prisoners in 2014, the president ordered the release of the remaining such prisoners in August. The institutions represented in the international election observation mission expect that, with these releases, further such prosecutions will cease and this will mark a closed chapter.

“Given worldwide conflicts today, I welcome Belarus’ recent constructive role facilitating dialogue over Ukraine. In this regard, greater international focus on this election is inevitable, and this opportunity has not been fully embraced,” said Jim Walsh, Head of the OSCE PA Delegation. “There is considerable work that remains to be done, most notably in the areas of more representative election commissions and the integrity and transparency of counting procedures. We hope that the constructive attitude demonstrated by authorities to our missions will continue in pursuit of our common objective.”

The CEC registered 8 of 15 groups that applied to collect supporting signatures and, subsequently, registered 4 candidates, the statement says. All of the groups were able to collect signatures across the country. The right to stand as a candidate is limited by previous criminal convictions; activities such as participation in unauthorised events can lead to the reinstatement of sentences. Signature verification was insufficiently transparent, undermining confidence in the process.

Candidates were provided with a platform to convey their messages, despite the restrictive media environment. Media monitoring showed that extensive coverage of the incumbent’s activities in his official capacity made him by far the most visible. In addition, some State-owned media shaped their coverage to convey political messages favourable to him. Free access to time on State-owned media was provided on an equal basis and in an uncensored format, which contestants welcomed, and the media provided the public with voter information. A live debate was televised on 3 October, in which all of the candidates except for the incumbent were represented.

While, in a welcome move, one government minister stepped down to lead the incumbent's campaign, other high-ranking public servants and officials campaigned during working hours on behalf of the incumbent, the statement says. A number of his campaign events were held in State-run enterprises, and some State-supported public associations and institutions campaigned on his behalf, creating an uneven playing field and blurring the line between partisan interest and the State.

Despite welcome engagement by the authorities since the last presidential election, the legal framework remains essentially unchanged. The framework was previously assessed as inadequate to guarantee the conduct of elections in line with OSCE commitments and other international standards, the observers said. Existing provisions and laws, including from 2011 and 2012, limit fundamental freedoms of association, assembly and expression, the observers said.

"Work needs to be done to improve the electoral framework, as past recommendations, particularly on balanced electoral administration and election day procedures, remain unaddressed. There is a clear need to improve the transparency and independence of the election administration," said Ambassador Jacques Faure, Head of the OSCE/ODIHR long-term election observation mission. "The election laws and framework as they stand now establish limitations on fundamental freedoms."

Following an open and unrestricted invitation to the observing institutions, the Central Election Commission (CEC) exhibited a welcoming attitude towards international observers. However, the absence of clear and transparent legal criteria for the selection of members of lower-level election commissions allowed local authorities full discretion over the appointment process, which was not inclusive. The voter registration system is overly permissive, allowing registration in polling stations on election day without sufficient legal safeguards.

Three independent citizen observer groups carried out long-term observation and regularly published their findings. Some 43 500 citizen and more than 900 international observers were accredited, including PACE for the first time since 2001. Some two thirds of citizen observers representing public associations were subsidised by the State. The rights of citizen and international observers are prescribed by law in an exhaustive manner and were interpreted and applied restrictively. Observers are not entitled to follow all stages of the process.