

Press statement by the European Parliament Observer Mission on the Presidential Elections in Belarus

Minsk, 10 September 2001. A delegation from the European Parliament visited Belarus from 7 till 10 September 2001 to observe the Presidential elections. The delegation was headed by Jan Marinus WIERSMA (Netherlands, PES). Other Members of the delegation were Lennart SACREDEUS (Sweden, PPE-ED), Elisabeth SCHROEDTER (Germany/Greens), Pedro MARSET CAMPOS (Spain/GUE) and Robert GOODWILL (United Kingdom/PPE-ED).

The observation mission was carried out in close cooperation with the Parliamentary Assemblies of the Council of Europe and the OSCE and OSCE/ODIHR observation mission.

The 2001 presidential election process in the Republic of Belarus represented an important opportunity to assess the development of democracy and civil society in the country. As such, this election will influence the future relations between Belarus and the international community, including the European institutions.

The delegation undertook its monitoring mission on the basis of international standards for conduct of free and democratic elections as formulated by the OSCE and the Council of Europe. The Delegation confirmed the importance of the four criteria established in 2000 by the Parliamentary Troika as the benchmarks for free and fair elections and the main principles of the ongoing democratisation process in Belarus:

- Transparency of the election process,
- Access of opponents to the state-run mass media,
- Non-discrimination of political opponents, and
- Meaningful functions and powers for the parliamentary body.

The delegation observed a number of fundamental shortcomings to the electoral process, some of which are specific to the political situation in Belarus:

- A political regime that is not accustomed to and does everything in its power to block the opposition;
- Executive structures with extensive powers, including rule by presidential decree, that are not balanced with commensurate legislative controls, and that allow the arbitrary changing of the electoral environment;
- A legislative framework that still fails to ensure the independence of election administration bodies, the integrity of the voting and voting results tabulation process, free and fair campaign conditions, and imposes excessive restrictions for campaigning and observers;
- An election administration system that is overly dependent on the executive branch of government from the national to the local community levels, and is partial;
- A campaign environment seriously to the disadvantage of the opposition candidates;
- A campaign of intimidation directed against opposition activists, domestic observation organisations, opposition and independent media, and a smear campaign against international observers; and
- Highly biased State-controlled media and censorship against the independent print media.

During the last year and on the occasion of the 2001 presidential elections some positive features have noted in Belarus, in particular as regards the democratic awareness of the people. These changes may constitute hope for further improvements. These positive elements are the following:

- An emerging civil society mobilised and deployed more than 10,000 domestic observers; it was however profoundly regrettable that a few thousand of these observers had their accreditation revoked.
- The democratic forces of the opposition were able to overcome their differences and jointly contest the election, being an expression of greater and maturing political and democratic awareness;
- With three candidates competing in the presidential election, voters in Belarus were offered a genuine political choice, although the restrictive campaign regulations and practices made it extremely difficult for the voters to be fully informed about the alternatives.
- With the help of international experts improvements have been made in some areas of the legislative framework for elections;
- The administrative preparations were conducted well from an organisational point of view; the legal terms for the formation of electoral commission and the registration of candidates were respected within the existing legal framework;

Particular concern was expressed about explicit threats made recently by highest government representatives against the opposition and independent media and activists. Developments in this area must remain under special international scrutiny.

On the basis of these observations and without taken into account the outcome of the election the delegation concludes:

- The 2001 presidential election process failed to meet the OSCE commitments for democratic elections formulated in the 1990 Copenhagen Document and the Council of Europe standards.
- The Delegation welcomes and acknowledges the emergence of a pluralist civil society, being the foundation for the development of democratic political structures, representing all segments of the population.
- Isolation is not the best interest of the Belarus people and is not conducive to strengthening democratic development.

The Delegation emphasised the great contribution to this process of democratic awareness made by the OSCE Advisory and Monitoring Group and its Head of Mission. This work should continue as such.

The delegation sincerely regrets that the absence of basic democratic structures in Belarus and the lack of respect for basic human rights and values has greatly contributed to the present isolation of the country and its people. However in the light of the existing democratic deficit (proved once more by the presidential elections) as well as of the positive trends indicating a more pluralistic political environment in Belarus, the international community should reassess its policy towards this country.

This does not mean that the European Parliament recommends at this moment to modify the European Union's attitude towards the Belarus regime. EU Policy with regard to Belarus will, of course, continue to evolve but no changes should be made until a full assessment has been made of any post election developments. A report to be drawn up by Mr. Pedro MARSET CAMPOS will carry out this assessment and advise the European Union on its strategies for the development of a fully functioning civil society and democratic political forces in Belarus. The institutions represented in

the observer mission must be prepared to continue to give further assistance to the promotion of a constructive dialogue across the political spectrum of the civil society, and between the government and the international community. This assistance should further facilitate the process of promoting the democratic and economic transition of Belarus and its integration in European structures.

It should finally be noted that the European Parliament's clear stand on the respect for basic human rights and democratic standards in Belarus must also be considered as an indication for its attitude towards other states in economic and democratic transition.

For further information contact:

*Henrik OLSEN, Interparliamentary Relations – Europe, Tel. +32-2-284 27 79,
e-mail: holsen@europarl.eu.int*