

Post-Election Report

Election Observation: Theory and Practice

Election Observation Mission

Latvia, Parliamentary Election, 2 October 2010

Background

On 2 October 2010, the Parliamentary election took place in Latvia. A group of short-term international observers accredited under the Swedish International Liberal Centre visited 203 polling stations within the whole country (21% out of all the polling stations in the country).

The observation mission comprised 35 observers from Belarus, Sweden and Lithuania. The Mission was organised within the framework of the project “Election Observation: Theory and Practice”, implemented in partnership by 4 organizations: the United Centre of Initiatives for Belarus (JuBIC), Swedish International Liberal Centre (Silc), European Humanities University (EHU) and Belarusian Human Rights House in Vilnius (HRH). Previous project missions observed elections in Norway, Georgia, Lithuania, Ukraine, Poland, Sweden and Belarus.

Election process

The mission observed the opening and closing of the polling stations, the process of voting, and the vote count during the election day. The mission evaluated the voting process based on international standards and OSCE criteria as well as national legislation of the Republic of Latvia.

In general, the elections were well-organised and held in accordance with the Latvian electoral law. The election commissions were mostly friendly and willing to help the observers. The registration process of voters was estimated as very good by all the teams. The system of double-checking of passport at the entrance and at the registration desk proved its reliability. The mission believes that this mechanism prevented cases of voting without an identification and multiple voting by one person. The counting was estimated as transparent by most of the observers, although the required procedures were not always followed.

However, there are several omissions and shortcomings that can be considered as an overall tendency.

First of all, the secrecy of ballot, one of the basic international standards, which is also protected by the national legislation of Latvia, was not always respected. In most of the polling stations visited by the mission, the voter's choice was made in public either consciously or unconsciously. This happened for the following reasons:

- some polling booths, voting compartments and rooms were not constructed in a way to guarantee secrecy;

- the commissions failed to explain to the voters the principle of secret voting or to prevent the voters from voting in public;
- the understanding of voting procedures was missing among voters.

Another deviation, caused by the lack of understanding of procedures by both the voters and the commission members, related to the secrecy principle took place when a certain number of people voted in groups and members of one family voted together.

The **lack of unified rules for organising polling stations** has to be mentioned. It led to certain inconveniences, which resulted in some minor disruptions of the whole voting process:

- some polling stations had the voting booths in rooms separate from the ones used for registration. As a result, polling station officials were usually absent in the voting rooms and were not able to control the voting process;
- at some polling booths curtains did not ensure the secrecy of vote as they were not properly covering the booth from all sides. One of the examples that the mission encountered very often was an X-crossed polling booth made of cupboard standing on the table and having no curtains. At some polling places voters were marking ballots out of polling booths – at tables standing separately in the room used for registration;
- rooms where the voting process was held were very large, which in some cases made it difficult for polling commission members to ensure control over the procedure.

In many cases, even though the ballot boxes were sealed at polling stations observed, there were **problems with seals**, for instance:

- some observers reported one of the two stickers necessary to be present at the box to be missing;
- the number of stickers themselves varied from one polling station to the other;

Registration of observers at polling stations was a lengthy procedure. Since observers already had official certificates issued by the Central Election Commission of Latvia the duration of the registration procedure at polling stations can be considered long.

Recommendations

Taking into consideration all the mentioned deviations and remarks, short-time observation mission of the “Election Observation: Theory and Practice” project would like to present the following recommendations:

1. To decrease the number of open voting and family/group voting cases and ensure the secrecy of ballots it is important:
 - to make voters understand the importance and conduct of voting procedures. Explanations and instructions on how to vote and what the main principles of voting are can be provided both by advertisements (e.g. TV advertisements on how to vote, mark the ballot, seal the envelope; posters inside the polling stations) and by polling station officials on the voting day;

- to prevent any attempts at open voting or family/ group voting unless the voter is physically incapable of filling the ballot or voting himself/herself.
2. To ensure a better organisation of polling stations it is important:
 - to arrange polling stations in a way that will make all the equipment and voters visible to the commission members in order to avoid ballot-marking in public;
 - to avoid overcrowding at polling stations. This can be achieved via making exits and entrances recognizable for voters. Introducing more booths to a single polling station can also be an option.
 3. To ensure a better organisation of construction of polling booths it is important:
 - to guarantee that a polling booth conforms to the principle of secrecy of vote (e.g. the curtains must cover the whole width of the entrance to a polling booth; voting compartments should be covered from all the sides to make it impossible to see the voter's choice);
 - to guarantee the constant control over polling booths by commission members: either organise polling booths in rooms where the commission is located or ensure the presence of a polling station official at all times in a separate room with voting booths.
 4. To introduce a unified outlook of the seals on ballot boxes and rules concerning the sealing. To ensure standardized requirements for seals it is important to make the number of seals on polling boxes standard.
 5. To establish an easy standardized procedure of observers' accreditation at a polling station it is important to issue official accreditation as a badge, as the document will make the authorization of observers visible for everyone present. Providing officials with additional instructions about the rights of observers will ensure better communication and understanding between observers and commissions.
 6. To increase the overall efficiency of election process it is important:
 - to provide extensive training for all commission members, focusing on procedural issues and principles of voting. Particular attention should be paid to the appearance of polling stations; issues concerning the ballot security and commission's actions to prevent deviations; sealing of ballot boxes;
 - to improve voters' education. The information on voting procedures should be widely spread and the number of education means should be increased.

In spite of the mentioned deviations and remarks, the Parliamentary elections in Latvia on 2 October 2010 were held in accordance with international and national standards. Although the deviations mentioned require attention, they did not affect the outcome of elections. The mission hopes that the recommendations above will help with a better overall organisation of the next elections in Latvia.