

Post-Election Report
Belarus Watch
Election Observation Mission
Czech Republic, Presidential Elections, 11-12 January, 2013

Background

On 11-12 January 2013, a group of short-term international observers from the project “Election Observation: Theory and Practice” (EOTP), accredited under non-governmental organization Belarus Watch observed the conduct of the Presidential Elections in the Czech Republic. The observers focused on procedures during two days of the elections, namely opening of the polling stations, voting and counting of the votes. The observers visited 182 polling stations in different regions of the country. The mission evaluated the voting process based on international standards of secrecy of the ballot, transparency, universality, equality, fairness and freedom of elections as well as the Law on the Presidential Elections of the Czech Republic.

Summary: the mission has highly evaluated the electoral process. The observers highlighted professionalism of the members of the electoral commissions, as well as high level of voters' culture. The usage of envelopes provided the secrecy of the ballot. Transparent and quick counting procedure was also positively assessed by the observers. The sealing of the ballot box varied at different polling stations, being inappropriate at some of them. The location of voting premises on the higher floors and lack of access ramps were not appropriate for the people with special needs. The work of some precincts was hampered by overcrowding. Also the cases of people marking their ballots openly were reported, as well as cases of people voting together with their family members or friends.

Election process

In general, high level of organization of electoral process was noted by all the observation teams. Commission members acted professionally, presenting excellent knowledge and understanding of the electoral procedures. In vast majority of cases, observed by the mission, chairpersons of the commissions were ready to provide the information requested by the observers.

The level of electoral literacy of the voters, who were completing all the necessary procedures in a distinct way according to the Law, has to be mentioned. Members of the commissions in turn were acting friendly and helpful, providing clear explanations to voters. It was noted, that commission members were asking for identification documents of each voter; only voters presenting necessary documents were allowed to vote.

The practice of using envelopes, where the ballot has to be inserted, served as an additional guarantee to the compliance with the secrecy principle, as it prevented possibility for other individuals to learn voter's choice once the ballot is inserted in the envelope. The design of the ballot which allowed voters to exercise their choice without marking them simplified and quickened the electoral process.

Counting process was held transparently and effectively: the teams had a clear view of the steps

of vote counting and had access to the table where it was performed. The number allocated to the candidate on the edge of the ballot prevented the mistakes during ballot distribution into stacks. The counting of votes was quick and its results - indubitable.

Despite the overall positive impression and high evaluation of organization of elections, the mission would like to pay attention to several shortcomings and omissions that accompanied the process.

The most essential flaw of the organization of 2013 Presidential Elections in the Czech Republic was the lack of unified procedure of ballot box sealing. In some cases the ballot boxes were sealed with blue paper stickers, while at others simple tape or stickers in colours of the Czech flag were used. In some of the observed cases the seal covered all the chinks and protected the integrity of the box; in others the ballot box was sealed without all the chinks being covered on the sides. In several cases small locks were placed on the ballot box either instead of the seal or complementary to it. Observers also reported ballot boxes which already bore the remains of the stickers allegedly from previous elections. The practice of putting the signature on the seal also varied: they were either placed in a way as to cover both the sticker and the box (and, thus, made it impossible to tear off the sticker without leaving the sign on the box) or just on the sticker and thus bore no additional security guarantee. In few cases the signatures were absent at all. Overall, problems with the sealing of the ballot boxes were reported at 13% of observed polling stations.

Several polling stations were not big enough to comfortably accommodate all the voters or did not have enough polling booths. As a result, the process was hampered by overcrowding and disorganization: voters were standing in long queues to register and get their envelopes or to enter the polling booths. Such instances were reported at 9 % of the observed voting premises.

Cases of voters voting outside the polling booth were reported at 23% of the observed polling stations. According to Czech legislation people are not allowed to vote openly and should make their choice in secret. Despite this legal requirement the commission members were not preventing such cases.

Only 25% of the polling stations, observed by the mission, appeared to be equipped with facilities for people with special needs. Most of the polling stations were located on the second floor of the building which complicated the access for elderly people and made it impossible for physically disabled persons.

Several teams of the observers have expressed concern about the security of the ballot box storage during the night between the first and the second election day. In some cases the ballot box was taken to the premises of local authorities, while in others it remained at the polling station. The entrances of the precincts were sealed, however the quality of the seal was not always ensuring safety of the premises.

Cases of voting in groups (with family members or friends) were reported at 10% of the observed polling stations. Generally, commission members were not preventing such situations.

Vast majority of the teams in the mission had difficulties with getting to the polling stations due to

the undefined status of the observer in Czech legislation.

The observers also reported situations when it was difficult to identify polling station officials, as they wore no signs or name badges on them.

Based on the deviations listed above the Belarus Watch Election Observation Mission would like to set forward the following **recommendations** to improve the voting process.

1. To minimize possible mishandling of the ballot box and to ensure its security throughout the voting process it is essential to:

1.1 introduce standard of the ballot box and its sealing, and to adjust Czech legislation in accordance with it;

1.2 keep the ballot box at the polling station, providing proper guarding and sealing of the entrances (during the break between the first and the second days of the elections).

2. To make sure the electoral process runs smoothly at the polling station it is recommended to:

2.1 set up polling station in the buildings with the facilities for people with special needs;

2.2 plan the number of booths and registrars at a polling station in accordance with the number of people registered or expected to be attending the precinct.

3. To provide implementation of Czech legislation the commission members could be encouraged to:

3.1 prevent cases of open and group voting by explaining to the voters the principle of secret voting and encourage them to exercise their will alone;

3.2 make sure that only voters who cast their vote in secret are allowed to cast the ballot.

4. To ensure that the elections are open for observation by both national and international bodies it is recommended that the status of an election observer is specified in the national legislation.

5. To ensure better recognition of people present at the polling station it is important to provide commission members with badges or name tags so that they are better recognized by the voters and other authorized people present at the polling station.

The mission hopes that the recommendations proposed will be a good source in preparation for the next elections in the Czech Republic and expresses sincere gratitude for the help in preparation of the mission.

Background information on the mission: the observation mission comprised of 35 observers from Belarus. The mission was organized within the framework of the project “Election Observation: Theory and Practice”, implemented by Belarus Watch in partnership with European Humanities University (EHU) and Belarusian Human Rights House in exile in Vilnius.