

**Post-Election Report**  
**Belarus Watch**  
**“Election Observation: Theory and Practice” Election Observation Mission**  
**Slovakia, Parliamentary Election, 10 March, 2012**

**Background**

On 10 March 2012, a group of short-term international observers from the project “Election Observation: Theory and Practice” (EOTP) accredited under a non-governmental organization “Belarus Watch” observed the conduct of the Parliamentary elections in Slovakia. The observers focused on procedures during the election day, namely opening of the polling stations, voting, counting and closing of the polling stations. The observers visited 174 polling stations across 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 on Slovak Electoral law.

The observation mission comprised of 39 observers from Belarus and was organized within the framework of the project “Election Observation: Theory and Practice”, implemented in partnership by three organizations: Belarus Watch, European Humanities University (EHU) and Belarusian Human Rights House in exile in Vilnius (HRH). Previous project missions observed elections in Belarus, Estonia, Georgia, Ireland, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway, Poland, Sweden and Ukraine.

**Election process**

Overall, the elections were well-organized and assessed as “good” or “very good” by most of the observation teams. Commission members demonstrated coordinated work during opening and closing procedures. The procedures were implemented in compliance with the law. Voters demonstrated high voting culture self-arranging in lines while waiting for their turn in crowded polling stations. Border regions were provided with multilingual handbooks for the electoral commissions that consisted of ethnic minorities.

All visited polling stations were opened on time and voting commenced in a professional and calm atmosphere. Electoral commissions mostly played a positive impartial role and were ready to consult voters regarding the procedures. When asked, they eagerly reacted on observers’ inquiries in the majority of cases.

The mission, however, noted several shortcomings and irregularities related to various procedures concerning voting and counting of votes as well as to the access to the observation itself.

Electoral commissions were not fully aware of the status of international observers which resulted in some of the observation teams being denied **access to the polling stations** or the reluctance to share information in relation to electoral procedures. During the opening, the observation of the procedures was restricted at 28,6% of the polling station (Figure 1). Likewise, the closing procedures were not always open for the observation. For instance, one observation team was allowed to enter the station only after the ballot boxes were emptied; another team was denied access to three polling stations in a row. In general, most of the observation teams were reporting difficulties in accessing the polling stations for observation of closing and counting.

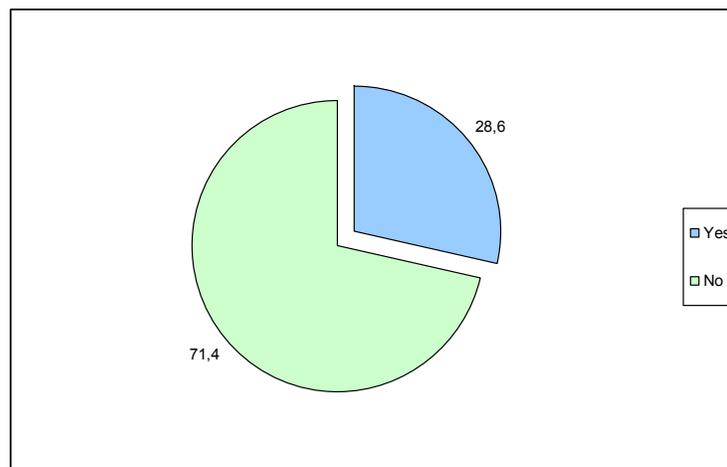


Figure 1. Restrictions in the observation of the opening procedures

In 76,3% of the observed cases commission members lacked any **identification signs**, such as name tags or badges (Figure 2). Consequently it was difficult to discern Chairmen from the rest of the members; determining the exact number of commission members also proved to be problematic due to the absence of identification badges.

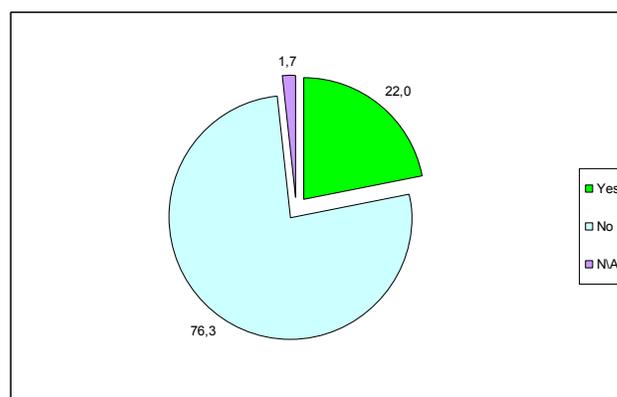


Figure 2. Presence of identification signs

At some polling stations **the functions of a Chairman** and other members could not be easily distinguished. More knowledgeable members were often taking over the initiative and carried out the functions of the Chairpersons. The criteria for selection of Chairperson varied from one place to the other, and the Chairperson was not always in charge of the polling station. Clear rules on the distribution of duties and responsibilities among other commission members were also missing.

Another issue noted by the mission was the lack of **necessary training** for Commission members. In some places only the Chairpersons alone went through the training while other commission members did not receive centralized instruction. Interestingly, some interlocutors mentioned the training was not a prerequisite for sitting in the commission. Also, the duration of the trainings varied from few hours to several days. The quality of Commissions' proficiency mostly deteriorated in rural areas.

The general voter's culture at some polling stations laid ground for the breach of vote secrecy (Figure 3), the practice when people marked their ballots outside the booths. Also, there were instances of people voting in groups or together with family members when several electors occupied one booth at a time. In total, 30,4% and 13,7% (Figure 4) of all the observed stations in rural and urban areas respectively were characterized by **family or group voting**. The frequency of these cases was considerably higher in rural Roma settlements. Electoral commissions chiefly disregarded these practices.

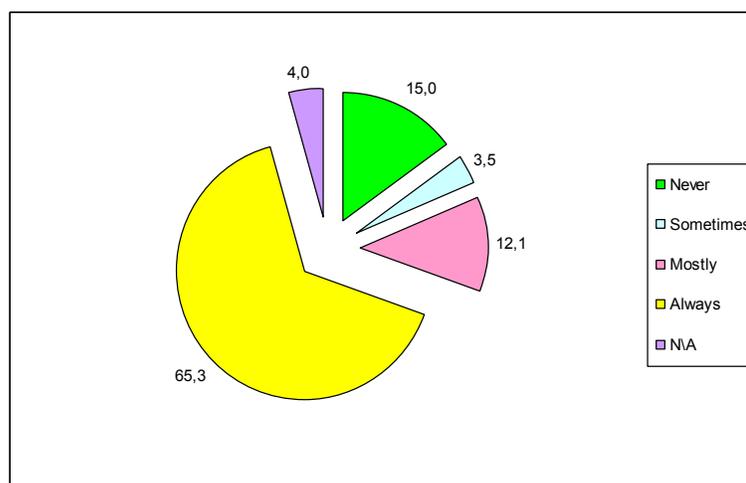


Figure 3. Vote secrecy ensured at a particular polling station

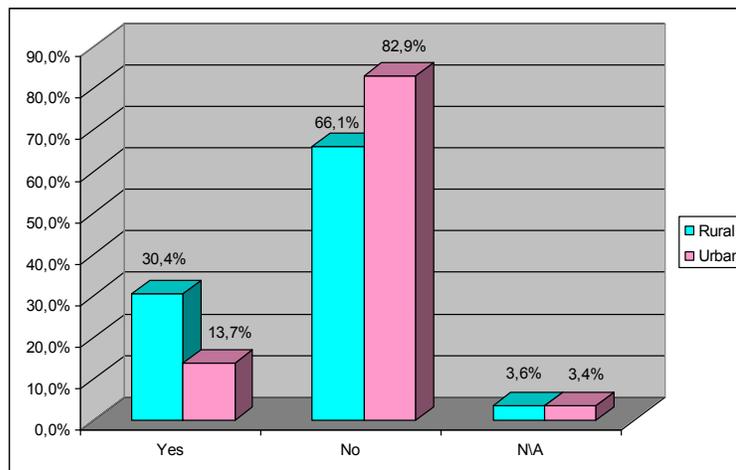


Figure 4. Family and group voting

Some shortcomings were noticed in terms of **the layout of polling stations**. Not all of the booths ensured vote secrecy. Some of them were located against mirror walls or turned towards the entrance, thus the preference of the voter could be witnessed.

The construction of the booths was not unified. They differed from light cardboard shields to heavy wooden frames with curtains. The curtains did not always ensure the proper level of privacy and made the voter's choice visible. In total, 30,5% and 12,5% (Figure 5) of encountered polling booths in urban and rural areas respectively did not ensure vote secrecy.

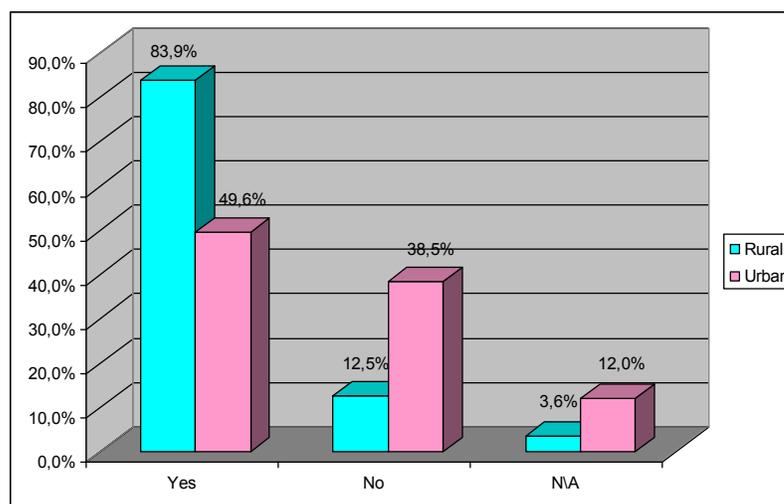


Figure 5. The construction of polling booths ensures vote secrecy

There was no standardized procedure of **sealing ballot boxes**. Some of them were sealed at the bottom and the top and bore signatures of all commission members together with a stamp, whereas others lacked either stamps or signatures. Interestingly enough, there was a case when a ballot box did not have the bottom at all and some ballots were sticking out underneath the box. Despite fact that the commission’s attention was brought to the issue, still the problem was not addressed. Another observation team reported of a bottomless ballot box attached directly to the floor.

Although special containers for **unmarked ballots** were set at the polling stations, not all electors were willing to use them. The law does not prohibit taking unused ballots away. The absence of unified practice in this regard, however, confused the voters and Commission members and made the treatment of unused ballots dependent on a specific polling station.

Another observed deviation concerns **identification documents** provided by electors. The law stipulates that the only legal document that can prove voters’ identity is an ID card. However, there were manifold cases when voters were providing old passports instead of IDs. Moreover, there were some incidents detected when commission members failed to check IDs at all (Figure 6). These shortcomings were more frequently encountered in the rural areas of eastern Slovakia.

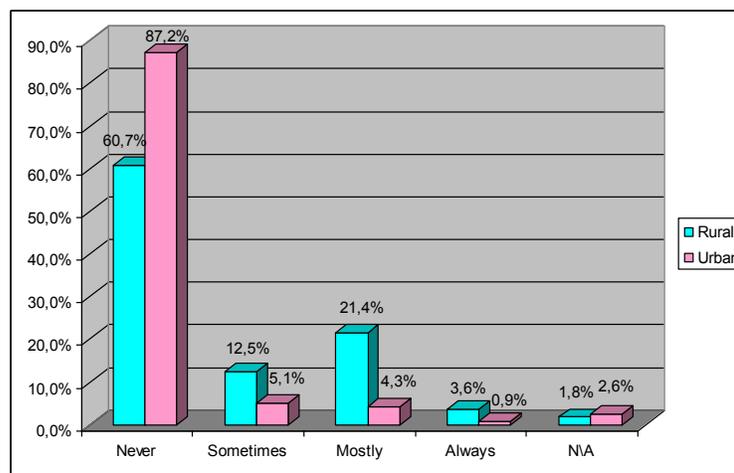


Figure 6. Voting without ID cards

According to the assessment of the observation teams, polling stations were easily identifiable and generally accessible for public. However, the 84,4% of the visited polling places were not provided with special **equipment for disabled persons** (Figure 7). Some polling stations were located on the second floor or higher and lacked entrance ramps or elevators. In

spite of this inconvenience, elderly, physically challenged, and homebound people had a possibility to request a mobile ballot box to be brought to their houses by commission members.

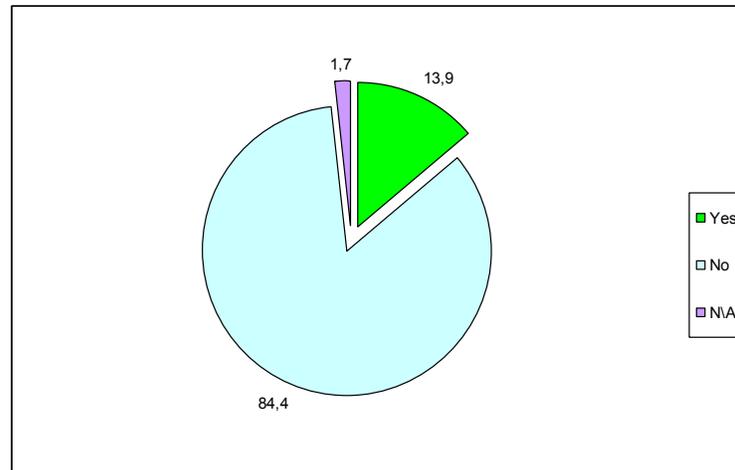


Figure 7. Accessibility for disabled people

By and large, **closing procedures and counting** were conducted in line with the law. However, there were few cases when the lack of a unified technique for preferential vote counting made the process more complicated. One observation team reported that unused ballots were thrown into the trash bin before the actual closing and several teams noted that invalid envelopes and ballots without envelopes were not excluded from the rest of the votes.

Based on the deviations listed above the Belarus Watch Election Observation Mission sets forward the following recommendations.

To improve the organization of the electoral process at each polling station it is essential to:

- Organize unified general training for all the members of the commissions. The training could especially cover such issues as sealing of the ballot box, voter identification, privacy and secrecy of voting;
- Provide additional trainings for the Chairmen of the commissions to cover specific functions and responsibilities of that position and ensure the leading role of the Chairman at the polling station;
- Provide commission members with identification badges to ensure they are recognized by the voters and other people present at the polling station;
- Introduce unified procedure of sealing the ballot box;
- Define the treatment of unmarked ballots during voting;
- Provide polling stations with special equipment for disabled people.

To ensure the secrecy of vote is preserved at all stages it is necessary to:

- Arrange the polling booth in the best possible way to provide secrecy and privacy;
- Equip the polling booths for disabled people with special covers/compartments to guarantee secrecy;
- Introduce unified design of the polling booth for all the polling stations in Slovakia.

To make sure the elections are open for observation it is recommended to:

- State the status of observers more clearly in the electoral law;
- Instruct the commissions about the work of election observers.