

Press-Release
“Election Observation: Theory and Practice”
Belarus Watch
Parliamentary election, Estonia, 6 March 2011

On 6 March 2011, a group of short-term international observers from the project “Election Observation: Theory and Practice” accredited under a non-governmental organization “Belarus Watch” observed the conduct of the Parliamentary elections in Estonia. The observers concentrated on procedures during the Election Day, namely opening of the polling stations, voting and counting. The observers visited 135 polling stations all over Estonia (22% out of all polling stations). The mission evaluated the voting process based on international standards and OSCE principles as well as the Electoral Act of Estonia.

In general, the election process during voting was extremely well organized, which was noted by all the teams of the mission. The procedures specified in the law were followed by the polling station officials. The commission members were helpful, cooperative, knowledgeable and willing to provide comprehensive information to the observers and voters. The staff was effectively preventing cases of voting in groups (by members of families). Upon request the oral information was also provided to voters in the languages other than Estonian.

The practice of pre-folded ballots used at the polling stations was the additional guarantee to the compliance with the secrecy principle. The instructions posted on the walls of polling stations were helpful for voters and observers and clearly explained the steps for voting.

A high level of voters’ culture and understanding of procedures have to be noted.

However, we would like to express our concern about substantial deviations regarding the counting process. There is a lack of unified practice of counting of votes; the procedures were not followed. Those ballot papers that were not used during the day were not cancelled, as the procedure demands, but were kept until the counting itself was finished.

Counting was not transparent in all the polling stations, numbers sometimes did not match. There were cases when several ballot papers were found missing while the record was being filled in.

The steps regarding to compilation of the protocol were also different. Only a few teams were able to see the numbers introduced in it, the information was not available even upon request. The way of transporting the protocol to the National Election Committee also differed from one polling station to the other.

The mismatching results were corrected in a non-transparent manner; hardly any comments or explanations were made in this regard. A series of non-compliance with the rules led to serious doubts about the accuracy of results at a few of the observed polling stations.

Absence of a clear distinct consequence of the count also introduced certain problems.

With respect to the other procedures, the polling booths in some rare cases were not wide enough and did not cover the whole interior of the booth.

It was also hard to identify observers and other authorized and unauthorized persons as the nametags were only present on the commission members. Often, the observers were not asked to provide the documents.

Despite the mentioned deviations, the election day was conducted professionally and calmly; and also in accordance with international and national standards.

In total, the observation mission comprises of 28 observers from Belarus, Sweden and Lithuania. The Mission is 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 Vilnius (HRH). Previous project missions were held in Norway, Georgia, Lithuania, Ukraine, Poland, Sweden, Latvia and Belarus.

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