

No opposition MPs in the new parliament

On September 28, 2008 Belarus held elections to the 110-seated lower chamber of Belarusian Parliament (the House of Representatives). Although 70 opposition candidates (out of 263) took part in the election campaign, and the President Aliaksander Lukashenka made assurances that the elections will be "free and fair", not a single oppositional nominee made it into the parliament.

According to some analysts and representatives of the Central Election Commission, the elections took place in a quiet manner with no bigger interferences. The observers of the Commonwealth of Independent States and of Parliamentary Assembly of the Union of Belarus and Russia did not report any violations of the election rules. According to them the elections were "democratic and progressive".

Nevertheless, other observers pointed out at very low media coverage of the campaigning and the fact that the election campaign took place "within a strictly regulated environment." The Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) particularly stressed the impossibility to observe the early voting process (more than ¼ of the voters used this option) and the fact that only 37% of OSCE observers were able to observe the vote count, while out of them, more than 40% noted serious irregularities during the count. On the other hand, OSCE acknowledged "minor improvements" as compared to previous elections in 2004. These included registration of most opposition candidates, slightly higher representation of opposition in the election commissions (43 out of 69,845 members), candidate's access to local media, decrease of harassment of opposition activists and invitation of international observers to the country in particular. As the OSCE report concludes, despite the efforts, the elections "ultimately fell short of OSCE commitments for democratic elections."

In the evening of the Election Day, less than 1000 of opposition supporters gathered in the Minsk city centre to protest against allegedly fraudulent elections calling upon EU and US not to recognize it.

Sources: OSCE, Euronews, RIA Novosti, EUobserver

International reactions to the results of Belarus' parliamentary elections

"Parliamentary elections in Belarus regrettably failed to meet the recognized international standards," said the chairman of European Parliament's Delegation for relations with Belarus Jacek Protasiewicz. Although the EU is concerned about the results of the vote, according to the EU Presidency statement, it "urges the Belarusian authorities to continue their efforts in order to comply with international democratic commitments and in this respect to cooperate fully with the ODIHR."

Following the release of all political prisoners (August 20, 2008) the EU has substantially boosted the communication with Belarusian authorities: several foreign diplomats visited the country (Polish Foreign Minister Radek Sikorski being the most prominent one), and the EU High Representative Javier Solana held an telephone call with the President Lukashenka prior the September 28 elections. Also, some member states suggested easing economic sanctions on Belarus and reviewing the list of Belarusian officials who are currently on the EU visa ban list. Whether the EU will continue the rapprochement with Minsk despite the election results will be known after the meeting of EU foreign ministers later in October.

The spokesman of the US Department of State Robert Wood denounced the elections as falling short of international standards. On the other hand, he admitted the American government has to work with the Belarusian government, trying to "get it on the right

path." Even though the elections were supposedly the key issue in determining next US steps in Belarus, neither further actions, nor decision about possible extension of temporarily lifted economic sanctions were announced.

So far, Russia did not officially react; the only statements regarding the elections were articulated by members of the Russian State Duma who took part in the observation mission. According to Duma deputy Oleg Zholobov, "the elections were held in compliance with the law and election commissions functioned precisely and in a well coordinated fashion." Kremlin's official reaction might come during the visit of the Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin to Belarus on October 6.

Sources: European Parliament, Presidency of the Council, Naviny, Interfax