

Open letter to parliamentarians observing forthcoming presidential election in Belarus

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Free and fair elections are the essential element of every democratic political system. Unfortunately, they remain a rarity in the Eastern Partnership (EaP) countries even though they lie at the very centre of the reforms upon which the Eastern Partnership programme is based. Despite the efforts of the Council of Europe and its Venice Commission, and the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) to improve election legislation, some of the leaders of the EaP countries continue to see elections as a plebiscite designed to confirm their rule as in Soviet times and not as a real contest between opposing political forces designed to allow the citizens to choose a government of their liking. Fraud, bribery of voters and candidates as well as harassment of political opponents remain the norm and only lately in Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine have voters had a real choice. Elsewhere the political landscape is bleak.

Nevertheless election observation by European democratic institutions such as the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE), the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly (OSCE PA), the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (OSCE/ODIHR), and the European Parliament continue to be a beacon for those in the EaP countries who believe that, one day, free and fair elections will become a reality throughout the region.

This is why election observers must perform their duties conscientiously and report their conclusions about the conduct of elections without any bias or regard for the feelings of their country's rulers.

Local people expect to hear a fair report from foreign election observers, especially those representing parliamentary institutions. Anything less than this will be greeted with dismay and what is more, will damage the credibility of European parliamentary institutions and set back the cause of democratic reform even further.

This autumn there are parliamentary elections in Azerbaijan and presidential election in Belarus. The failure of the Azerbaijani authorities to agree on the necessary number of observers from the OSCE/ODIHR to monitor the elections has led the election monitoring group to call off its mission to Azerbaijan. The European Parliament has followed suit. It is in Azerbaijan that Anar Mammadli, an experienced election observer, is serving a 4.5-year prison sentence, in effect, for his election monitoring activities.

The election in Belarus will be monitored by the observers from the PACE, OSCE PA and OSCE/ODIHR. Belarus currently appears to be developing a rapprochement with the European Union. However observers from the EU member states must not sacrifice the credibility of their election observation mission to the cause of better relations between Minsk and Brussels. European observers must deliver to the Belarusian people an accurate picture of the way their authorities conduct elections in their country.

Free and fair elections legitimise rulers and legislatures and the laws which they pass. Free and fair elections allow citizens to choose their rulers in a peaceful and civilised way. Free and fair elections provide stability and allow societies to develop without fear of disruption through corruption and authoritarian rule. The cause of free and fair elections must remain at the centre of the Eastern Partnership programme and European observers must fulfil their mandate to observe elections without fear or favour.

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