

STATEMENT

by Oleg Kravchenko, Charge d'Affaires a.i. of the Republic of Belarus in the United States, on "Business as Usual? Belarus on the Eve of Elections"

United States Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe
September 16, 2008

Chairman Hastings,
Co-Chairman Cardin,
Members of the Commission,

Thank you for the opportunity to address the hearing on the upcoming parliamentary elections in my country. On September 28 the voters of Belarus will decide on the composition of the fourth convocation of the House of Representatives of the National Assembly of the Republic of Belarus.

The elections will be a major political event of considerable importance for Belarus. The free and fair elections are also considered by the United States and the European countries as a prerequisite for the further improvement of relations with Belarus. Belarus has repeatedly confirmed its willingness to improve and develop relations with the United States and the European Union, as well as its determination to hold the parliamentary elections in an open, democratic and transparent manner.

The elections will be held in full accord with the Belarusian legislation and OSCE commitments. To ensure the elections' compliance with the international standards, Belarus has vigorously taken a number of legislative and political steps aimed at creating a truly democratic electoral process.

To further reinforce the constitutional right of political parties to participate in the electoral process the Presidential Decree № 13 of June 24, 2008 empowered them to nominate their representatives to the Central Electoral Commission (CEC) with a consultative voice.

8 officially running political parties, including Belarusian Social Democratic Party (Hramada), United Civic Party, Belarusian Popular Front (BPF) Party, appointed their representatives to the CEC. They are entitled to make statements, put questions, propose items on the CEC agenda and participate in its deliberations.

In seeking to ensure an equal access to mass media for all candidates the Central Election Commission adopted on August 22, 2008 modalities for the distribution of the candidates' air time. Each candidate will be entitled to 5 minutes of TV and radio appearance paid by the State. Candidates will also be able to publish their electoral programmes in national newspapers and regional print media.

Responding to proposals from the OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Mission the Central Election Commission will double the time allotted to each candidate on TV and radio by broadcasting their presentations for the second time. As another additional goodwill step even more convenient air time for a maximum outreach to the audience will be provided for the second airing of the presentations.

As an element of public control the CEC also established the Media Supervisory Council, with non-government participation, which will oversee the conduct of the electoral campaign in the media and will act as a focal point for all possible related complaints and appeals.

The General Prosecutor's Office set up an *ad hoc* Working group to monitor the implementation of the election legislation with a view to ensuring a stable and free environment for the electoral campaign and to efficiently prevent possible irregularities.

Out of 151 political parties' members in district electoral commissions, 38 represent the opposition. On the average, the proportion of opposition presence in district election commissions increased three times: 32 per cent of all opposition nominees made it to district electoral commissions this year compared with 10 per cent in 2004.

Belarus' Central Electoral Commission registered 424 initiative groups that collected voters' signatures on behalf of nominees (out of the original 454 applications). The percentage of rejections for registration decreased twofold compared to previous elections.

Political parties accounted for 40 per cent of all applications. Most of them (97) were filed by the "United Democratic Forces" opposition bloc that registered 95 initiative groups.

365 persons submitted to the election commissions documents for registration as candidates to participate in the parliamentary elections. 40 percent of all nominees were affiliated with opposition political forces.

By the deadline of August 28, 2008 75.6 per cent of nominees (276 out of 365) have been registered by the district election commissions as candidates to the deputies of the House of Representatives of the National Assembly. In the previous elections only 51.9 per cent of nominees (359 out of 692) were registered as candidates. Almost 80 per cent of nominated representatives of political parties have been registered (92 out of 117).

The rejections of registration were mainly due to the applicants' failure to provide correct lists of voters' signatures or income declarations. The Central Election Commission thoroughly considered all appeals against the decisions of the district election commissions to deny registration, and 8 of such decisions have been reconsidered.

The Supreme Court of the Republic of Belarus received 18 appeals of non-registered candidates against the CEC decisions. This represents a major, fivefold decrease in complaints compared to 2004 campaign's statistics and proves, *inter alia*, the increased election commissions' professionalism in dealing with the applications.

The Supreme Court has been considering these appeals in open hearings and to date has reversed the candidates' rejections in 2 cases.

The ongoing electoral campaign is regulated *inter alia* by the amended Law on Mass Events that shortened the required period for filing a permission request to hold outdoor campaign events from 15 to 5 days.

In order to ensure an open and transparent electoral process in line with its OSCE commitments Belarus has well in advance and without any restrictions invited international observers, including the OSCE ODIHR and the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, to monitor the upcoming elections.

205 international observers have already received their accreditations with the CEC and are being currently deployed throughout Belarus, including 145 observers from the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and 59 – from the OSCE/ODIHR.

Both the OSCE/ODIHR and the CIS election observation missions have publicly expressed their satisfaction with the cooperative stance of the Belarusian authorities in relation to the international observers, noting that all the requests submitted by them were fulfilled and an exhaustive information on the ongoing electoral process was granted.

The steps taken by Belarus are the most vivid proof of the Belarusian leadership's will to ensure the democratic nature of the upcoming elections. Belarus has done it for itself, not for the United States and the European Union. Nor has it been done because of the pressure from their side.

At the same time, we do count on the unbiased assessment and appreciation of the above-mentioned steps by the United States and the European Union. The failure to do so would be extremely counter-productive. The proven ability to recognize the steps forwards by Belarus and to reciprocate would produce positive results for out mutual relations and in the broader international context.

Thank you.