



United States Mission to the OSCE

Statement on Russian Parliamentary Elections

As delivered by Ambassador Julie Finley
to the Permanent Council, Vienna
December 6, 2007

Mr. Chairman,

The United States, like the rest of the world, has watched closely the events surrounding the December 2 parliamentary elections held in Russia. The observation mission made up of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) and the OSCE's Parliamentary Assembly declared that "the elections were not fair and failed to meet many OSCE and COE commitments on democracy." The mission went on to say that "the elections took place in an atmosphere which seriously limited political competition."

International and domestic observers as well as a number of Russian political figures and analysts cited specific concerns that included the significant administrative resources used across Russia in favor of the United Russia party headed by President Putin, unequal access to the media, biased media coverage, severe impediments to the opposition's freedom of assembly and freedom of speech. Opposition parties and NGO observers also reported widespread fraud on election day, including irregularities in registration, ballot stuffing with absentee ballots, and pressure on individuals, state institutions and students to vote for United Russia.

It has been reported that serious deficiencies were not limited to election day and included disruption of opposition rallies and the arrest of opposition candidates who were exercising their rights to free speech and assembly. The OSCE's own Representative on Freedom of the Media concluded that harassment of media outlets, legislative limitations and arbitrary application of rules prevented equal access to the media by the political opposition. Moreover, PACE and OSCE PA also raised concerns regarding the merging of the state with a political party, terming it an abuse of power and a violation of paragraph 5.4 of our Copenhagen commitments. The new election code also was cause for concern as it made it extremely difficult for new and smaller parties to compete.

We also regret that unprecedented restrictions, including visa delays, imposed by the Russian government on election monitors prevented OSCE's ODIHR from fielding an election observation mission. ODIHR plays a vital role in helping OSCE states fulfill their democratic commitments; it can also play a useful role in providing technical advice to avoid some of the shortcomings noted by the parliamentary observation mission.

We join our European colleagues in urging the Russian government to investigate the reports of election abuses in a serious effort to address any shortcomings before the presidential elections next March. We call on the Russian government to extend full cooperation to ODIHR well in advance of next March's presidential election, so that it can undertake a thorough observation of the entire election process.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.