



United States Mission to the OSCE

Statement on Recent Belarusian Violations of OSCE Commitments

As delivered by Ambassador Julie Finley
to the Permanent Council, Vienna
September 1, 2005

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The Government of Belarus' repression of independent civil society continues to intensify, despite the repeated urgings of an overwhelming majority of OSCE participating States to end the steady violation of our Organization's human dimension commitments.

Belarus similarly continues to ignore the repeated offers of assistance from OSCE institutions, not least the OSCE Office in Minsk, that could help Belarus rapidly improve its compliance with basic human rights standards.

The various abuses perpetrated by the Belarusian Government since the statement of the United States on July 7 are too numerous to list in detail. We would like to draw the Permanent Council's attention to some of the most egregious recent cases.

In August, the Belarusian Government once again conjured up spurious legal grounds to deregister the publishers of the independent weekly newspapers *Den* and *Kuryer iz Borisova*.

After raiding their homes and confiscating personal property, Belarusian authorities are also now proceeding with criminal slander cases against three individuals allegedly involved in posting satirical political cartoons on the internet.

The United States notes that, in his March report, OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media Haraszti offered to assist Belarus reform its media laws, including exceedingly harsh provisions on libel that are used to undermine free speech.

As part of its overall clampdown on civil society, in recent months the Belarusian Government has engineered the forcible replacement of the Union of Belarusian Poles' elected leaders. It has harassed and persecuted UBP activists who have stood up for their organization's independence.

The United States views the Government's interference in the UBP as especially alarming because it tramples on the right of a national minority, recognized under Paragraph 32 of the 1990 Copenhagen Document, to independently organize cultural and educational activities.

Despite the effectiveness of the legal bludgeons it already wields against independent NGOs, media and political parties, Belarus has further tightened its already undemocratic legal regime governing political and civic life.

A July edict now prohibits Belarusian organizations and individuals from making or using donations to support legitimate political activities in the country, including preparing for elections; conducting rallies, demonstrations, strikes or other political meetings; and producing and distributing written materials. An August edict similarly bars Belarusian organizations and individuals from using foreign donations for the same purposes.

These decrees, in their all-encompassing scope, violate the OSCE commitment in the 1990 Copenhagen Document under which participating States agreed that groups and individuals seeking to promote human rights and fundamental freedoms are entitled to seek and receive voluntary financial contributions from domestic and foreign sources.

Belarusian authorities have continued to use force and intimidation to break up peaceful demonstrations, including physically abusing Mrs. Svetlana Zavadskaya, who was marking the anniversary of the disappearance of her husband on July 7.

The United States welcomes the release of Professor Yuri Bandazhevsky after six years of imprisonment and the release of Alexander Vasilyev after more than a year. We call on the Belarusian Government not to further harass these men and to allow them to engage unhindered in political and scientific pursuits.

Belarus should also, as applicable, cease prosecution of or release others jailed on political grounds, including Sergey Skrebets, Nikolai Statkevich, Pavel Severinets, Andrei Klimov, Valery Levonevsky and Michael Marinich.

Mr. Chairman, the United States notes that Ambassador Åke Peterson was appointed Head of the OSCE Office in Minsk during the recess. We congratulate him and extend our best wishes for a successful tenure.

We encourage Belarus to seize on Ambassador Peterson's appointment as an opportunity to embark on a new path of good faith cooperation with the OSCE Office and an occasion to begin showing genuine respect for its OSCE commitments.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.