



United States Mission to the OSCE

Response to the Report by the Head of Mission in Minsk

As delivered by Chargé d' Affaires Samuel C. Laeuchli
to the Permanent Council, Vienna
June 19, 2008

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The United States welcomes Ambassador Schmidt to the Permanent Council.

We appreciate the efforts of the OSCE Office in Minsk in assisting Belarus meet its OSCE commitments. Regrettably, in the last several months, the situation in Belarus has not improved. Systematic harassment of independent media and civil society, particularly of youth NGOs, and those who oppose President Lukashenka continues. At recent Permanent Council meetings, we have expressed our profound concern regarding these human rights defenders. They are people like Andrei Kim, who was sentenced in April to one and one half years in a penal colony because he and 23 other political activists tried to protest new laws against small entrepreneurs. Or activist Sergey Parsyukevich, originally imprisoned for participating in a peaceful demonstration, who, in our view, was unjustly sentenced to two and a half years' imprisonment for supposedly beating a prison guard, even though his trial was riddled with inconsistencies and he was more the victim of beatings than the other way around.

Moreover, there has been continued suppression of the freedoms of assembly and expression. In March, Belarusian authorities disrupted a peaceful rally and arrested and beat scores of demonstrators. They then detained 30 independent journalists in 12 cities without legitimate cause. The premises of independent media outlets were raided and reporters were harassed and detained. The OSCE's Freedom of the Media representative rightly condemned this action as a targeted assault on the independent media that is "an unconcealed violation of OSCE commitments ... to protect the freedom of the press."

Also worrisome is a proposed revision of Belarus' media law. A new version was passed in its first reading in the National Assembly's House of Representatives, with no public debate and with few details known about its contents. The Belarusian Association of Journalists has expressed concern that proposed changes may include a provision to establish tight control over the Internet. We call on the government to publicize the new version under consideration, to allow review by international media experts, and to ensure that recommendations of the Office of the Representative for Freedom of the Media are incorporated.

All these cases further underscore the need for the OSCE Office in Minsk to play a critical role in monitoring the situation in Belarus. We urge a particular focus on adherence to freedom of speech and assembly, the treatment of political prisoners, and in outreach to the Belarusian people about the rights and obligations that all participating States, including Belarus, have undertaken within the OSCE. We hope the efforts of the Office to seek access to political prisoners and to their trials will expand in the future.

We again call upon the Government of Belarus to release all political prisoners, including Alyaksandr Kazulin, and to take steps to allow independent press and opposition parties to function fully in the run-up to this fall's parliamentary elections. We note Belarus' pledge to allow a full ODIHR election monitoring mission for the September 28th elections, and urge the government to work closely with the Office in Minsk, ODIHR and others so that these elections will be demonstrably freer and more transparent than in the past.

We continue to be concerned by the long process needed to get government approval of proposed projects. We again urge the government of Belarus to work more cooperatively with the Office on project approval and to include a greater role for civil society.

Ambassador Schmidt, as you are well aware, outreach to youth, human rights activists, independent trade unionists, opposition political parties and NGOs remains one of the most important things the OSCE can do in a place like Belarus. We urge the Office to stand up proudly for the promotion of our core OSCE values.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.