



Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
The Representative on Freedom of the Media
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Statement at the Permanent Council
(Review of Current Issues)

Vienna, 26.04.2001

Statement on Cancellation of April Visit to Belarus

Today I would like to explain to the Permanent Council my decision not to travel to Minsk, Belarus, as scheduled 25 April 2001. Let me be clear about the reason: the Government of Belarus, while publicly welcoming my visit and issuing my visa, late last week denied a visa to my senior advisor on many participating States, including Belarus, who was to accompany me. I consider this a severe interference in the independence of the institution of the OSCE Office of the Representative on Freedom of Media.

I firmly believe that no OSCE participating State should dictate for or against any of the staff members of an OSCE institution. I cannot accept this interference by the Government of the Republic of Belarus, for to do so would set a precedent which would weaken the working conditions of OSCE institutions.

The media situation in Belarus is one which has concerned me greatly for a long time, and it is a situation which appears to continue to deteriorate. I have made several trips to Minsk in cooperation with the OSCE Advisory and Monitoring Group (AMG) and have met with a wide range of independent and state journalists, media NGOs and Belarusian government officials. This particular trip had been planned for several months, both the AMG and I agreeing that it is of utmost importance, in light of the upcoming presidential elections. Access to the media and the free flow of information are critical to Belarus's achieving OSCE certification of its elections as free and fair. In January I issued the first bulletin Belarus and Freedom of Media in order to draw attention to the media situation in that country, and I have followed that with a report to the Foreign Minister for February and March. It is my firm intention to continue these reports on a regular basis.

During the Ministerial Council meeting in November, my trip was discussed with then Foreign Minister and Deputy Prime Minister Ural Latypov, and he welcomed me to come to Minsk, stating the intention of his Government to work with the AMG on a full and balanced program. The dates of the visit were first fixed for March and both I and my senior adviser received visas to travel to Minsk at that time. However, a few days before we were to leave, Belarusian Foreign Minister Khvostov urgently asked me to postpone my visit because of scheduling considerations, and this I did, while fixing the new dates for the 25-27 April. But this time, the Belarusian Government decided not to issue a visa to my senior adviser. This I cannot accept for the precedent it would set.

I have been in very close contact with Ambassador Bota, with Secretary General Kubis and with Ambassador Wieck, and we are in complete accord about this matter. Moreover, my Office and the AMG have decided to invite in the near future a group of independent Belarusian media representatives to a Vienna Public Workshop on Freedom of Media for an exchange of views with the participating States and European journalists.

Over the weekend, a group of chief editors of some 15 non-state media outlets addressed a letter to me, confirming that they are facing escalating pressure, especially of an economic nature, on their editorial boards. Their existence is in peril because of a huge discrepancy in price for the delivery of state and non-state periodicals. This is one of the problems I would have discussed in Minsk, and it will be central to our discussions at the Vienna Workshop.

Finally, today, 26 April, is the fifteenth anniversary of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster, which severely affected the Belarusian people, land, health and economy. I have long believed that if there had been free expression at that time in the former Soviet Union, it is possible that this extended tragedy might not have happened. Let us remember today all those people who lost their lives and who continue to suffer the consequences of this disaster.