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United States Mission to the OSCE

Latest Developments in Belarus in the Context of the Upcoming Presidential Elections

As delivered by Acting Political Counselor Lane Darnell Bahl
to the Permanent Council, Vienna
July 23, 2020

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The United States has taken note of worrying trends in Belarus in the run-up to its August 9 presidential election, especially the restrictions placed on *Freedom of Expression* and *Freedom of Assembly* that run counter to the country's international law obligations and *Helsinki Final Act* commitments with respect to human rights and fundamental freedoms. We are concerned by restrictive measures put in place to prevent potential candidates from fulfilling registration procedures, arrests of and intimidation tactics employed against multiple opposition candidates, and the harassment, arrests, and detentions of peaceful protestors and journalists. Such actions are inconsistent with Belarus's commitments as an OSCE participating State, including those under the 1990 *Copenhagen Document*. We call on the Belarusian authorities to cease these activities at once.

We support the rights of individuals to express their opinions and protest peacefully. Journalists must be free to report on any such demonstrations and other events in the country. An active civil society and the work of an independent press are essential to accountable, democratic governments.

Free and genuinely contested elections are the basis for the authority and legitimacy of all governments. We note with deep disappointment that Belarus's failure to issue a timely invitation has resulted in OSCE/ODIHR's inability to monitor the elections. OSCE observers lend credibility to and help counter perceptions of electoral impropriety. However, free and fair elections are about more than what happens on election day. The United States urges the government of Belarus to ensure a level playing field for all taking part in the election, welcome a plurality of candidates, embrace its active civil society, ensure that the media can do its job without fear of reprisal, and pave the way for free and fair elections. Belarus's demonstration of its adherence to democratic values, human rights, and fundamental freedoms in keeping with its OSCE commitments is crucial for the strengthening of the United States' bilateral relationship with Belarus.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

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