



## United States Mission to the OSCE

# Statement on Recent Developments in Belarus and Ukraine

As delivered by Ambassador Julie Finley  
to the Permanent Council, Vienna  
March 30, 2006

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

In the past two weeks, we have seen a marked contrast in how governments treat their citizens and their commitments to the democratic pluralism, a sort of tale of two elections, if you will.

In Belarus, the government demonstrated flagrant and total disregard for the democratic process and OSCE values. It set an election, but put in place a structure of hurdles and barriers that prohibited the right of other voices to be heard, and denied the Belarusian people a real choice. Yet in roughly the same neighborhood, in fact next door, the people of Ukraine were being treated to an election process provided by a government, refreshing in its ability to produce the freest and fairest election in Ukraine's history.

Let's look more closely. The lead-up to the Belarus elections was peppered with detentions, minimal media access and the denial of the freedom to assemble. Even following March 19<sup>th</sup>, it doesn't stop.

In the past week, Belarusian security services seized and detained, forcibly, people who were demonstrating, peacefully, against the fraudulent March 19<sup>th</sup> election results. Those detained include opposition presidential candidate Aleksandr Kozulin, as well as the former Polish ambassador to Belarus, at least seven Russian citizens, and the citizens of several other nations. We have serious concerns about the lack of due process accorded to those who have been detained and the reported conditions in the detention centers. It is also important that the Belarusian government permit regular access to those detained and makes appropriate information available to their families and to the public. The United States calls on Belarusian authorities to release without delay the hundreds of citizens who have been detained for simply expressing their political views.

In consultation and coordination with the European Union, the United States is imposing targeted travel restrictions and is planning financial sanctions against those individuals in Belarus responsible for the recent electoral fraud. We welcome the European Council's March 24<sup>th</sup> decision to take restrictive measures against those responsible for violations of international electoral standards, including President Lukashenko. We will continue to remain united with the European Union in our response to the situation in Belarus, and will continue to stand with the Belarusian people in their aspirations for democracy.

Meanwhile back up the road, we have an outcome where ODIHR's Election Observation mission, headed by ambassador Kopaj, could conclude that the election process in Ukraine can be deemed competitive and covered comprehensively by the media. For this government and the Rada had not only taken note of key problems cited in a preliminary report, they even passed laws to address them.

Ambassador Yelchenko, you and your fellow citizens have a right to be proud. Ukraine has made an astonishing amount of progress in the past year and should serve as an inspiration to others. In Ukraine today, there appears to exist the political will and desire to do the tough work necessary to build a flourishing democracy.

That is where the promise of the OSCE lies. Not here, with ambassadors often talking past each other. But in each of our respective countries, at the grassroots, doing what we can and should do to fulfill all those commitments that we have agreed to over the years.

We have been disappointed with recent criticism by the Russian Federation of the Belarus opposition protests and of OSCE activities including most notably ODIHR. And in spite of having 40 Russian observers under ODIHR's umbrella for this election we regret that the Russian Federation has chosen to focus on criticism of ODIHR and not stand with the international community's condemnation of the Belarusian government's actions against its own people, including beatings and arrests. One Russian observer participating in the Belarus Election Observation Mission reportedly broke the observer code of conduct by publicly criticizing ODIHR's findings. Clearly, no observer can extrapolate from his/her personal observations of a limited number of polling stations a proper assessment of an entire election. ODIHR's methodology is designed precisely to avoid such bias.

Mr. Chairman, Russia's statements cut to the heart of the debate within the OSCE over the past few years, and that has been a basis for the Russian Federation's agenda in this organization we believe. We all established, at Helsinki, through Copenhagen, and up to today, clear guidelines on what constitute the basic commitments toward free and democratic process. Election processes are a clear element, but so too are freedom of expression, freedom of media, freedom of association, and fair and transparent judicial processes.

ODIHR has been tasked to monitor progress made on fulfilling commitments on democracy and respect for human rights, not just whether the mechanics work properly on election day. ODIHR's preliminary reports reflect expert analysis of the key elements in a free and fair electoral campaign. We support strongly their understanding of what this entails, and believe it reflects accurately the commitments we have all made within this organization. We welcomed their analysis of the election in Belarus, just as we did the preliminary reports and the initial assessment following the elections in Ukraine. In both cases, ODIHR used the same methodology. The criticism from Russia appears to be based not on the methodology used, but political disagreement with the conclusions drawn from them.

We call on all OSCE participating States, and of course including the Russian Federation, to help press and encourage the Belarusian authorities to respect the rights of the Belarusian people and to fulfill their OSCE commitments.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.