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United States Mission to the OSCE

Statement on Belarusian Actions Limiting Freedom of Media and Information

As delivered by Ambassador Julie Finley
to the Permanent Council, Vienna
November 17, 2005

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The United States is disappointed that we need once again to raise the issue of Belarus' disregard for its OSCE commitments on free media and freedom of information here in the Permanent Council.

In recent days, the Belarusian state postal agency, Belpochta, informed several independent newspapers, such as *Narodnaya Volya*, *Salidarnasts* and *Zhoda*, that they would no longer be included in Belpochta's list of periodicals available for subscription in 2006. As a public monopoly, Belpochta should be expected to provide non-discriminatory treatment to all customers, whether government or private, paying for its services.

Mr. Chairman, Belpochta's actions are only the latest in a series of steps against independent information providers in Belarus over the last year. For example, *Narodnaya Volya* and *Zhoda* are being harassed through libel cases, the publishers of the newspapers *Den* and *Kuryer iz Borisova* have been shut down and several newspapers were forced to re-register under new names due to an arbitrary requirement that they not use the terms "national" or "Belarusian" in their titles.

We are deeply concerned that the deaths of journalists Veronika Cherkasova in October 2004 and Vasily Grodnikov in October 2005 also remain unsolved.

The United States further notes that the Independent Institute of Social, Economic and Political Studies was closed in April 2005. We understand that Belarus recently decided to require any organization that conducts public surveys on national political issues and elections to apply for accreditation to a special panel under the Belarusian National Academy of Sciences, which includes representatives of the Information and Justice Ministries.

In light of Belarus' record, the United States fears that such a requirement will prove yet another tool abused by authorities to control the flow of information in Belarus.

Mr. Chairman, in the 1999 Istanbul Charter for European Security, all participating States reaffirmed "the importance of independent media and the free flow of information as well as the public's access to information." They further committed themselves "to take all necessary steps to ensure the basic conditions for free and independent media and unimpeded transborder and intra-State flow of information."

The United States calls on Belarus to ensure private media's access to distribution through Belpochta, desist from libel cases and other forms of harassment against such media and facilitate, rather than restrict, the activities of independent research organizations.

Belarusian repression of free media and independent public opinion research is a disturbing trend in the run-up to presidential balloting in 2006. Such repression already calls into question Belarus' intention to hold an election in line with OSCE commitments.

Just what does the Government of Belarus fear? The judgment and intelligence of fellow Belarusians? How very elitist. How very intolerant. And what a great way to continue the prevention of progress economically, environmentally, educationally, and certainly democratically.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.