



United States Mission to the OSCE

Response to Belarus

As delivered by Ambassador Julie Finley
to the Permanent Council, Vienna
July 18, 2006

Thank you, Mr. Chairman,

At an informal briefing last Thursday, Ambassador Sychov and several representatives from Belarus and Russia presented their views regarding the conduct of the March 19th presidential elections in Belarus and ODIHR's assessment of them. We looked forward to this briefing with enthusiasm and interest. We believe this kind of engagement can be constructive and is what the OSCE should be more about.

Elections must be judged in their totality. This means we must look at, among other things, a level playing field, respect for freedom of expression, freedom of the media, freedom of association, and fair and transparent judicial processes as well election day processes. In that regard, we support strongly ODIHR's final evaluation that Belarus did not fulfill its OSCE commitments to free and fair elections as expected in a purported democratic process.

As we noted in March, the Belarusian government demonstrated flagrant and total disregard for the democratic process and OSCE values. The lead-up to the Belarus elections was marked by detentions, minimal media access and the denial of the freedom of assembly.

One of those detained include opposition presidential candidate Aleksandr Kozulin. Mr. Kozulin had been harassed constantly throughout the run-up to the elections. Indeed, just a few days ago, on July 14th, Mr. Kozulin was sentenced to five and a half years in prison for having organized an unauthorized rally. Four civic activists associated with the non-partisan monitoring group, Partnership, also remain in jail awaiting trial on dubious charges. And just this past weekend, another opposition leader, Anatoliy Lebedko, was detained by police, charged and sentenced for "hooliganism" for planning a peaceful demonstration.

We must say with all due respect that this is a travesty of justice. It makes it impossible for us to believe any attempt by Belarus to say that the elections were held properly or that somehow ODIHR is biased when key opposition figures are harassed and thrown in jail without grounds. This must not happen in a functioning democracy.

It was these sorts of actions that led the United States and the European Union to impose targeted travel restrictions and financial sanctions against those individuals responsible for this recent electoral fraud.

We would like to commend ODIHR for the responsible work it has done under some very difficult circumstances. We all established, at Helsinki, through Copenhagen, and up through today, clear guidelines for basic commitments toward a free and democratic process. We

support strongly ODIHR's understanding of what this entails. We believe it reflects accurately the commitments we have all made within this organization.

We would again ask that Belarus make a good faith effort to fulfill its OSCE commitments. This would include implementation of the recommendations ODIHR has made to improve the conduct of elections and the ability to function without harassment for civil society and opposition parties.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.