



Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
The Representative on Freedom of the Media
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Statement to the Permanent Council
Review of current issues

Vienna, 25 February 1999

Statement on media issues in Belarus

I would like to draw your attention to the current situation regarding freedom of the media in Belarus. I was informed that the State Committee for Press last week has addressed preliminary warnings against six independent newspapers about their coverage of the opposition's plans to hold presidential elections this May. These newspapers were accused of allegedly "calling for the seizure of power."

The six publications, Naviny, Belorusskaya Delovaya Gazeta, Narodnaya Volya, Belorusskaya Gazeta, Belorussky Rynok and Imya, risk to have their license revoked after two admonitions by the State Committee for Press and could then be eventually closed.

The practice of this Committee has certainly never promoted freedom of the media, but rather favoured tendencies towards self-censorship among independent journalists. The Committee checks publications for violations of the law and of numerous financial regulations. It issues formal admonitions, if it considers that information could cause intolerance within the society or defame the honour of government officials. The Head of the State Committee claims to sign about a dozen admonitions a week.

I have noticed with interest that the State Committee agreed in November 1998 to form a tripartite working - group with the OSCE Advisory and Monitoring Group and with a representative of the independent media to discuss its decisions.

This tripartite group is expected to meet for the first time tomorrow in Minsk.

There is in my view an urgent need to review the preliminary warnings against the independent newspapers during this meeting. I therefore urge the Government of Belarus to ensure the success of this meeting which I hope will be an important step in safeguarding freedom of expression in Belarus.

I am intending to go to Minsk in mid-March and to raise these and other matters with the Government.