



**Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
The Representative on Freedom of the Media
Freimut Duve**

23 August 2001

Statement under Review of Current Issues

Mr. Chairman, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like to draw your attention to a number of recent developments concerning the ongoing, problematic treatment of the independent press in Belarus. The OSCE considers equal access to the media essential for free and fair elections. Unfortunately, the non-state, private media in Belarus continues to find it very difficult to operate in general and in particular, to provide necessary information about challengers to the country's leading politician, President Lukashenko.

The latest serious incident concerns the independent newspaper, *Nasha Svaboda*. On 17 August 400,000 copies of a special issue containing information about Vladimir Goncharik, the single democratic opposition candidate in the upcoming elections were confiscated by the Committee for Financial Investigation for "inaccuracies" in the financial accounts of the *Magic* private printing house where *Nasha Svaboda* is printed. In addition, *Nasha Svaboda* received a warning from the State Press Committee for publishing information about a statement allegedly made by President Lukashenko during a meeting with his executive branch, a statement reported in a variety of media, including in Russia, two weeks ago. This warning by State Press Committee, we understand, could lead to the closing down of *Nasha Svaboda*.

There have been numerous other incidents of pressure on the independent media in this pre-election period which are affecting the media's work. On 22 August alone, tax police officers confiscated several computers belonging to the independent daily, *Narodnaya Volya*, the State Committee for Financial Investigation "visited" *Nasha Svaboda* and another independent newspaper, *Belorusskaya Delovaya Gazeta*, and in the evening officers from the Committee raided the private printing house, *Magic*, which prints the country's major independent newspapers and sealed up the pressroom. This action interrupted the printing of a *Narodnaya Volya* edition containing the election platform of the opposition candidate, Vladimir Goncharik. Also on 22 August the state company newstand distribution company refused to sign a contract with *Belorusskaya Delovaya Gazeta* to sell an addition print run in September. Last week, law enforcement authorities in Orsha in eastern Belarus seized all the computers of the private newspaper *Kutseina*, while the private newspaper *Pahonya* in Grodno near the Polish border has been subject to pressure by the law enforcement agencies, an action condemned by the *Belarusian Association of Journalists*.

I have appealed to the Government of Belarus through interventions to Foreign Minister Khvostov to cease these non-ending, blatant violations of freedom of expression in Belarus, to release *Nasha Svaboda's* special issue and to ensure that all citizens of Belarus are able to receive full and balanced information in this critical pre-election period.