



United States Mission to the OSCE

Statement on Upcoming Elections In Belarus

As delivered by Ambassador Julie Finley
to the Permanent Council, Vienna
September 25, 2008

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The United States welcomed the August release of three prisoners of conscience by the government of Belarus in the hope that this positive gesture signaled a desire by that government to embark on true democratic reforms and a respect for human rights.

Such steps could lead to a significant improvement of relations between the United States and Belarus, including the removal of visa and economic sanctions. To signal our support for the release of the prisoners of conscience, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs David Merkel traveled to Minsk on August 21-23 for discussions with Belarusian government officials and with the democratic opposition. We temporarily suspended sanctions against two Belarusian companies in the hope that further positive action by the government of Belarus would allow the United States to consider a further suspension of sanctions.

The United States and other countries have stated that further improvements in relations will greatly depend on the conduct of parliamentary elections in September. We are therefore disappointed to learn of some serious shortcomings in the run up to the parliamentary elections. The latest ODIHR interim election report and media reports raise significant concerns. The democratic opposition comprises only three percent of district election commissions and less than one percent of precinct election commissions. Approximately twenty percent of opposition candidates have been denied registration—some for trivial reasons such as the candidate who was denied registration for failure to list ownership of a car he had sold years earlier. Some candidates are reporting difficulty in meeting with voters and in accessing media due to government restrictions. The harsh limitation of the equivalent of 585 Euro on campaign spending prevents candidates from printing materials and getting their message to the voters. The state media is largely silent on the campaign, making this an almost invisible election.

It is too late to correct many of these problems, but there are other areas of concern highlighted in the report that can still be addressed before September 28th. We are concerned about reports of lax controls of the ballots during the extensive early voting period of September 23-27 and about official pressure on students, workers and others to cast early votes. ODIHR has not been assured that it will be able to observe the vote count, and it has not received information about the number of ballots distributed or the number of voters registered in Belarus. Without this access and information, it will be impossible for ODIHR to assess the accuracy of the vote tabulation.

We urge the government to take immediate steps to ensure transparency of voting, ballot box security and vote tabulation, including during early voting. Without full access for the OSCE/ODIHR election observers in these critical areas of the election process, it is difficult to see how any effective international observation could verify the reliability of the election process, nor conclude with any confidence that meaningful improvement has taken place in Belarus over previous elections in 2004 and 2006.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.