

Delegation of Belarus

**STATEMENT BY MR. ALYAKSANDR SYCHOV,
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TO THE OSCE, AT THE MEETING OF THE OSCE
PERMANENT COUNCIL**

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**In response to the statements by the European Union and the
United States of America on Belarus**

Mr. Chairman,

We have listened attentively to the statements on Belarus by the delegation of Spain on behalf of the European Union and by the United States of America and shall notify Minsk of their contents.

In commenting on these statements, our delegation would like first to address a number of fundamental aspects of importance to a general understanding of the situation.

First, the necessary conditions exist in Belarus for national minorities including the Poles to exercise their rights. The State provides substantial financial and other support to public organizations representing the Polish national minority, including the Union of Poles in Belarus. Representatives of the Polish minority in Belarus participate widely in the country's government bodies, including the Parliament. There are 16 "Polish Houses" in the country and six magazines or newspapers in Polish are published. There are over 22,000 full-time students of the Polish language in Belarus, not just in the places where the ethnic Poles are concentrated. Polish is the main language of instruction in two secondary schools. There are Polish Studies departments in seven higher education establishments, in all of the regional centres. Support by the Belarusian State to Polish national minority organizations include numerous ethnic, cultural, educational, scientific and sports activities.

We doubt that even official bodies in Warsaw will question these facts. It would be desirable if similar conditions were created for the Belarusian minority in Poland.

Unfortunately, ethnic Belarusians have practically no representation at present in Polish government bodies. There are no schools in Poland with teaching in the Belarusian language. It is studied only in the places where the ethnic Belarusians are concentrated and is taught at only one higher education establishment, the University of Białystok. There are no teachers of the Belarusian language from Belarus in Poland, whereas there are three teachers from Poland working in Belarus.

Second, the situation with the Union of Poles in Belarus (UPB) is not essentially a matter of limiting the rights of a national minority in any way but rather of an internal schism and a leadership struggle within the public organization representing the interests of citizens of Belarus of Polish nationality.

The conflict in connection with the Polish House in Iveryanets is a dispute between two groups within the Polish national minority about part of the assets of the Union of Poles.

In January this year the election took place of the new directors of the Iveryanets regional office of the Union of Poles in Belarus. Naturally, from this time these representatives were also authorized to manage all of the assets, including the building and equipment. It transpired, however, that the former managers, who, moreover, had committed numerous financial abuses, obstructed the transfer of property, caused a scandal and tried to politicize the whole thing.

As a result the UPB management was obliged to take the matter to court. However, instead of arguing her case in court, this Angelika Borys and her supporters deliberately began to disrupt the public proceedings, barricaded the Polish House building, organized unauthorized rallies, and ignored police orders, etc. The accused were subsequently sentenced by the court in accordance with the law to administrative sanctions in the form of a fine or a short period of detention.

Under the court decision of 17 February the Union of Poles in Belarus relinquished ownership of the Polish House in Iveryanets. An appeal can be made against this decision to the Minsk regional court within ten days.

Mr. Chairman,

There is a time-limit for statements made at Permanent Council meetings and our delegation cannot therefore comment on every aspect of what is a relatively complex issue. We shall be distributing suitably detailed factual information to the delegations of the participating States. We hope that this information will clear up the situation and prevent hasty and superficial conclusions from being drawn.

I should like merely to emphasize once again that Belarus regards its role as one of upholding the law and ensuring transparency in the settlement of conflicts in strict compliance with the laws of the country. All activities are carried out exclusively within the framework of the laws of Belarus. It is not our intention to meddle in the affairs of the UPB or to dictate to its members how they should settle their internal problems.

We expect fair treatment of all Belarusian citizens who regard themselves as ethnic Poles, also on the part of the official Polish authorities.

Unfortunately, officials in Poland at present distinguish between "their own" and "foreign", in other words "first-class" and "second-class", Poles in our country. The members of the UPB, the largest Polish minority organization in Belarus, are being well and truly sanctioned: hundreds of Poles in Belarus, including veterans and invalids decorated by Poland, are being refused entry into that country. They are not received by the Polish

embassy or the consular departments. How can this be reconciled with the spirit and principles of the OSCE?

We are also obliged to note that the law on a Polish charter adopted in Poland – without account being taken of the recommendations of the Council of Europe Venice Commission or the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities or of the opinion of Belarus – has given rise to a certain amount of conflict among the Polish diaspora in Belarus. The selective granting of the “Polish charter” effectively results in citizens of Belarus of Polish nationality being singled out and discriminated against.

It would appear that certain interested parties are trying to artificially blow up the question of nationality in Belarus in furtherance of their own exclusively political aspirations. They are actively endeavouring to involve partisan media and key European institutions in this process. We are seriously concerned about the public anti-Belarus campaign unfolding in Poland, which verges on hate speech with direct threats to Belarusian citizens including diplomats. It is most regrettable that some of our partners have been drawn into this political venture without giving it due analysis.

In our opinion, attempts to artificially blow up and politicize this issue are counter-productive and not conducive to its resolution.

In conclusion, I should like to mention that freedom of association practised within the framework of the law is guaranteed by the constitution and safeguarded in practice in Belarus in full compliance with the provisions of the OSCE Copenhagen Document mentioned by the United States delegation. Paragraph 32.2 of this document states that people belonging to national minorities have the right “to establish and maintain their own educational, cultural and religious institutions, organizations or associations, which can seek voluntary financial and other contributions as well as public assistance, in conformity with national legislation”.

I should like once again to emphasize Belarus’s commitment to observing its OSCE obligations including those concerning the rights of national minorities and freedom of association and its willingness to continue bilateral dialogue with Poland with a view to identifying mutually acceptable ways of removing the concerns of both sides.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.