



United States Mission to the OSCE

Statement on Freedom of Assembly in Belarus

As delivered by Political Counselor Casey Christensen
to the Permanent Council, Vienna
February 25, 2010

On numerous occasions, the United States has taken the floor to address serious and specific concerns regarding the fundamental freedom of assembly and association in various OSCE countries. As we all know, this fundamental freedom is outlined succinctly in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and many specific OSCE commitments. The most notable of the latter come from Copenhagen 1990, which the Chairmanship and the Government of Denmark will celebrate with a special event this summer. Specifically, all participating States committed at Copenhagen that “everyone will have the right of peaceful assembly and demonstration,” and this “...right of association will be guaranteed ...including the right to form, join and participate effectively in non-governmental organizations....”

Likewise at Copenhagen, participating States committed that, “Persons belonging to national minorities have the right freely to express, preserve and develop their ethnic, cultural, linguistic or religious identity, and to maintain and develop their culture in all its aspects.”

It is for these reasons that we must voice our concern over recent, very troubling developments in Belarus. This is not an attempt to politicize the situation, as some participating States might suggest. We must point out that participating States likewise expressed their commitment at Copenhagen to “respect the right of everyone, individually or in association with others, to seek, receive, and impart freely views and information on human rights and fundamental freedoms.” This is one step, in accordance with our OSCE commitments, we are taking today.

For a few months, we had observed incidences that we hoped showed positive Belarusian government reaction to peaceful assembly and association. Monthly solidarity demonstrations were allowed to occur without interference and without incident. Unfortunately, the recent treatment of demonstrators has reversed the more positive approach. On February 8, 14, and 16, peaceful demonstrations were forcefully disrupted by Belarusian security forces, many of whom refused to identify themselves, and demonstrators were harassed, man-handled, arrested and detained. Moreover, there were deliberate attempts to block media coverage of the actions, in violation of Belarusian law.

At the same time, there appears to have been increasing action by the Government of Belarus to systematically marginalize and repress selected portions of the Polish minority in Belarus, most recently in Ivieniets outside of Minsk. This has raised serious concern in the United States, as it has in Europe. We hope that the Belarusian government will take a constructive approach to reaching a fair and lasting solution to this issue.

We note that the Government of Belarus has failed to abolish criminal code provisions that penalize activities by unregistered organizations, contrary to its commitments to the OSCE. We continue to urge the Government of Belarus to review these laws and their implementation to ensure they are in compliance with OSCE commitments regarding the fundamental freedom of assembly and association and the rights of national minorities. In accordance with our OSCE commitments, we stand ready to work with the Government of Belarus, by whatever means necessary, in this endeavor.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.