



United States Mission to the OSCE

Statement on Freedom of Assembly in Belarus

As delivered by Charge d'affaires, a. i., Carol Fuller
to the Permanent Council, Vienna
July 7, 2011

The United States remains gravely concerned about the Belarusian government's failure to uphold democratic principles and the continuing crackdown on civil society, independent media, opposition political parties and movements, and those that defend them.

Since June 8, hundreds of Belarusian citizens have been detained for exercising their right to peacefully protest against government policies. These "silent protesters," assembling in more than 40 cities in Belarus, have been arrested by officers in plain clothes and without identification for simply clapping their hands. There have been no slogans, no signs, no party identification -- and all protests have taken place within areas freely accessible to the public. Some demonstrators have been convicted of administrative offenses and sentenced to up to 15 days in prison.

The right to assemble peacefully, together with freedom of expression and freedom of association, rests at the core of any functioning democratic system. The right to freedom of assembly is clearly stated in Article 11 of the European Convention on Human Rights and in the OSCE's 1990 Copenhagen Document. Belarus is a signatory to both. *

Our shared OSCE commitment from Copenhagen regarding freedom of assembly states "everyone will have the right of peaceful assembly and demonstration. Any restrictions which may be placed on the exercise of these rights will be prescribed by law and consistent with international standards." These peaceful demonstrations have clearly not been a threat to national security or public safety, public order, the protection of public health or morals or the rights and freedoms of others.

The protesters have used social networks to organize themselves. Thus the reported government attempts to block the social network sites Twitter, Facebook and Vkontakte temporarily are part of the overall restriction on the right to assemble and peacefully demonstrate.

Independent and even state-controlled media have been particularly targeted during these crackdowns. At least 15 journalists were detained during peaceful Independence Day protests throughout Belarus on July 3. In Minsk, security forces used tear gas against journalists who were attempting to film and photograph the events. Police broke and confiscated cameras and erased media recordings.

** The Belarusian Delegation correctly pointed out that Belarus is not a signatory to the European Convention on Human Rights*

We remind the Government of Belarus that journalists must be allowed to do their job and, as recently declared by the UN special rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression, Internet access falls under freedom of expression and is a basic human right. We urge the Government of Belarus to respect and protect this right.

Even last evening, over 300 peaceful protesters were reportedly dragged off to jail throughout Belarus, 185 alone in Minsk.

We join with the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media, Dunja Mijatović, in urging that Mr. Lukashenko put an end to the unprecedented repression of media since the December 2010 presidential election.

In response to the crackdown, the United States is pursuing a policy, in concert with the European Union and others, to press the Government of Belarus to free political prisoners and to support those in Belarus seeking democracy.

Thank you, Chair.