



United States Mission to the OSCE

Statement on the British Council

As delivered by Ambassador Julie Finley
to the Permanent Council, Vienna
January 17, 2008

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The last few weeks have provided us two contrasting stories on the importance of cultural ties in relations among nations.

Back in October, President Putin of Russia announced his intention to support the establishment of an NGO in the United States and in Western Europe that would focus on human rights and democracy from the Russian perspective, just as organizations such as Freedom House do in the Russian Federation. Two weeks ago, the offices of the Institute of Democracy and Cooperation were officially established in New York. We welcome this organization in the United States because we believe that the marketplace for ideas should remain open, and that peoples in the OSCE region benefit from hearing a wide range of views.

This basic approach was one accepted clearly in the Helsinki Final Act, where cooperation and exchanges in the field of culture were highlighted as important factors in our overall security concept. We reaffirmed in 1975 that cultural exchanges and cooperation contribute to better understanding among people, and help promote lasting understanding among States.

That is why the second major story in this regard is disturbing. We regret reports of an escalation of actions taken by Russian authorities against staff and activities of the British Council in St. Petersburg and Yekaterinburg. The British Council's efforts to promote cultural and educational exchanges play a vital role in promoting understanding between the peoples of the UK and Russia.

The British Council is one of the most distinguished and well-respected organizations in the cultural field in the world, and a move to shut off the Russian population from the benefits of this cultural exchange is unfortunate, to say the least. Neither the citizens of Russia who have relied on the Council for valuable English-language courses and access to English language literature and research sources, nor those who have benefited from the British Council's cultural programs, film showings, and musical events, nor certainly the cause of international understanding and cultural cooperation to which this Organization is dedicated benefit from such a move. We hope this matter can be resolved expeditiously and in a manner that would allow the British Council to continue to operate in Russia.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.