



United States Mission to the OSCE

Statement on Belarus

Delivered by Ambassador Stephan M. Minikes
to the Permanent Council, Vienna
October 23, 2003

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. We share the concerns expressed by the EU regarding the assault on the NGO community in Belarus. Since June of this year alone, Belarusian courts have closed or dissolved two NGOs, Legal Assistance to the Populations and Youth Christian Social Union, four NGO resource centers in Grodno, Gomel, Baranovichi, and Vitebsk, one trade union – the Belarusian Trade Union of Air Traffic Controllers, and several independent media entities such as the Novaya Gazeta and Smorgoni. That is an alarming record.

Currently, Vesna, a Human Rights Center which provides legal advice and reports on human rights concerns faces dissolution in a case before the Supreme Court of Belarus. Other NGOs have received warnings that subject them to possible closure.

Mr. Chairman, respect for non-governmental organizations is enshrined in OSCE commitments. In Copenhagen in 1990, participating States pledged to “ensure that individuals are permitted to exercise the right to association, including the right to form, join and participate effectively in non-governmental organizations which seek the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms, including trade unions and human rights monitoring groups.” More recently, in the Charter for European Security adopted at the OSCE Summit in Istanbul in 1999, participating States went a step further, by pledging to “enhance the ability of NGOs to make their full contribution to the further development of civil society and respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms.”

The assault on the NGO community in Belarus flies in the face of these commitments. No doubt, Belarus will want to argue it is simply complying with Belarusian law. That defense is unacceptable. If, in fact, there are laws that exist in Belarus and, applied properly, allow for a campaign of this kind, there is either a serious problem with the laws or their implementation. Either way, it is simply not tenable for Belarus to contend it is meeting its OSCE obligations to respect NGOs in the face of a campaign of this scale against them.

We urge Belarus to cease its attacks on NGOs and to allow them to make their invaluable contribution to Belarusian society. Belarus can take the first step by dismissing the case against Vesna. That should be quickly followed by decisions to reverse the closure of the other groups closed in recent months and to uphold media freedoms.

Mr. Chairman, Belarus is isolating itself and that is not in any one’s interest, not in its own, not in that of the United States, nor in any State gathered round this table. But only Belarus can overcome this plight by manifesting, in action, its respect for the principles of democracy and human rights enshrined in OSCE commitments. The OSCE’s Office in Minsk and ODIHR can provide valuable assistance. But, ultimately, the potential for genuine, substantive progress resides in the political will of the Belarusian government. Thank you.