



United States Mission to the OSCE

Statement on Belarus

As delivered by Chargé d'Affaires Bruce Connuck
to the Permanent Council, Vienna
February 12, 2004

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

On the last occasion the OSCE held a Summit, in Istanbul in 1999, our Heads of State adopted a number of key commitments pertaining to NGOs, freedom of expression, and elections. We would like to raise concerns regarding developments in Belarus that pertain to these commitments.

On NGOs, participating states recognized that "NGOs can perform a vital role in the promotion of human rights, democracy, and the rule of law" and pledged 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 heavy fine imposed on the Belarusian Helsinki Federation, that NGO in Belarus most directly linked to the principles that this organization stands for, conveys, once again, the Belarusian Government's disregard for NGOs.

In Istanbul, we also committed ourselves to "ensuring the freedom of the media as a basic condition of pluralistic and democratic societies" and reaffirmed the "importance of independent media and the free flow of information as well as the public's access to information." The Belarusian authorities' repeated efforts to halt the publication and distribution of various independent newspapers, however, have demonstrated Belarus' continued refusal to fulfill this commitment. The OSCE has offered Belarus recommendations on its draft media law that need to be taken into account to bring it into compliance with international norms and principles, including OSCE commitments.

On elections, in Istanbul, we pledged to "ensure fair competition among candidates as well as parties, including through their access to the media and respect for the right of assembly" and recognized the "assistance that ODIHR can provide to participating States in developing and implementing electoral legislation." Yet after elections in 2000, 2001, and 2003, Belarus has yet to take concrete steps to address concerns identified by ODIHR in its reports.

Mr. Chairman, parliamentary elections are scheduled to take place in Belarus in eight short months. In our view, they represent an opportunity for Belarus to demonstrate its commitment to principles adopted at Istanbul. Belarus can take an essential first step by lifting restrictions on the operations of civil society and the

media, and on the participation of political parties. ODIHR, the Office of the Freedom of the Media and the OSCE's Office in Minsk all have a role to play in assisting Belarus. At the end of the day, however, it is up to Belarus to demonstrate its desire to address OSCE concerns and abide by OSCE commitments by implementing the reforms required to ensure a free and fair election.