



United States Mission to the OSCE

Statement on Belarus

As delivered by Charge d'Affaires Douglas Davidson
to the Permanent Council, Vienna
May 20, 2004

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The United States joins the EU in condemning Belarusian State Television's broadcast of the program entitled, "The Road to Nowhere." As the OSCE Office in Minsk has reported, the program called into question the "sanity, competence, credibility, and honor" of several members of the political opposition. We find it ironic that the Belarusian government, while attacking independent media and jailing independent journalists allegedly for criminal libel, has used an official media outlet to hurl baseless accusations at the opposition.

The program in question also attacked the United States of America. It made an odious comparison of U.S. government training programs with training that Nazi Germany provided to collaborationists in Belarus. This segment was interspersed with clips of Nazis torturing and murdering innocent civilians. We object strenuously to this blatant case of slander.

The record should be absolutely clear. The United States government's assistance programs in Belarus, as elsewhere in the world, are designed to strengthen democratic institutions. This aim is entirely consistent with OSCE principles. The Belarusian Government's efforts to misrepresent and suppress such programs speaks volumes about its own lack of commitment to democratic institutions and respect for the views of its own citizens.

At the same time that the Belarusian authorities are using official media outlets to attack the opposition, they are redoubling efforts to muzzle the free press. We are disturbed at reports that the Belarusian KGB on May 11 raided the offices of the Grodno-based newspaper, *Den*, and seized four of its computers. This is the latest in a series of actions that make clear that the Belarusian authorities have targeted *Den's* editor, Nikolai Markevich with the intent of forcing the closure of the new independent weekly. We join the EU in requesting the Representative on Freedom of the Media to monitor closely the situation in Belarus, especially in the run up to this year's elections.

Mr. Chairman, the rising crackdown on civil society and the opposition in Belarus represents a challenge to this organization and the principles upon which it was founded. The OSCE's Office in Minsk is charged with assisting Belarusian authorities with strengthening democratic institutions and reporting on its efforts. We support those efforts and urge it to keep the Permanent Council well informed of developments that undercut democratic institutions in Belarus.

As participating States, each of us has assumed serious commitments to respect human rights and promote democratic institutions. This Permanent Council represents a legitimate forum in which to raise concerns about the failure to meet those commitments, as is clearly the case in Belarus. We repeat our call on the Belarusian government to end its assault on civil society, the media and the democratic opposition. At the same time, we also call on the Permanent Council and OSCE institutions to consider ways to strengthen our efforts to address the problems we confront in Belarus and provide fuller support to civil society.