



## **United States Mission to the OSCE**

### **Right of Reply: Belarus**

As delivered by Deputy Chief of Mission Paul W. Jones  
to the Permanent Council, Vienna  
October 28, 2004

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

In his statement to the Permanent Council on October 21, the distinguished ambassador of Belarus offered criticisms of some election procedures in the U.S. presidential election that will be held this coming Tuesday. These criticisms ranged from our use of the Electoral College system to the supposed disenfranchisement of voters in the District of Columbia.

In our response to similar criticism from Ukraine, we gave a reply on October 21. Those remarks are equally valid today in response to the statement from Belarus. As we mentioned last week, many of the answers to these criticisms are contained in the ODIHR September 28 Needs Assessment Mission Report.

The concerns raised by Belarus and Ukraine are serious and we take them seriously. They are being addressed in the various ways that mature democratic societies resolve such issues: through open discussion fostered by a free and active media, and through litigation and legislation that addresses the people's concerns and meets international standards.

But there is another issue here, which we also raised last week. And that is the degree to which certain delegations seek to divert attention from their own shortcomings to meet OSCE commitments on free and fair elections and their unwillingness to follow ODIHR recommendations in this regard.

On October 17, Belarus held parliamentary elections and a referendum to decide whether to amend the constitution to eliminate term limits to the presidency and thereby allow President Aleksandr Lukashenko to run for a third term. The OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Mission found that the Belarusian parliamentary elections fell significantly short of OSCE commitments for democratic elections. The Copenhagen Document states that the will of the people must serve as the basis of the authority of government. The Election Observation Mission said that Belarusian authorities failed to create the conditions to ensure that this fundamental commitment could be fulfilled. Specifically, the Mission said that rights of expression, association and assembly, guaranteed by the Belarus constitution and OSCE commitments, were seriously restricted.

In such an atmosphere, it is hardly surprising that, of all the open seats in the parliament, not one went to an opposition candidate. Independent exit polling showed results that differed substantially from official results.

Although ODIHR was not sent to monitor the Belarusian presidential referendum, the Election Observation Mission found the same flawed conditions that undermine the legitimacy of the referendum results, as well.

Regrettably, the opinions of the Election Observation Mission were rejected wholesale by Belarusian authorities.

As we said last week, our electoral system is not perfect; nor have we ever claimed such perfection. We are always trying to make it better. It is in that spirit that we welcome the OSCE observation mission and will listen carefully to its suggestions.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.