



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

### **Statement on Freedom of Expression in Belarus**

As delivered by Ambassador Ian Kelly  
to the Permanent Council, Vienna  
September 6, 2012

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The United States is deeply concerned about the continued deterioration of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms in Belarus, particularly in light of upcoming elections. Specifically, we share the concern of the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media, Dunja Mijatović, on the detention and arrests of administrators of social media groups in Belarus.

The detention of Pavel Yevtikheev, Andrey Tkachev, Roman Protasevich, and Oleg Shramuk, administrators of the social media network vkontakte.ru, represents a further crackdown on freedom of expression in Belarus. This action and others taken during the past several months by the government of Belarus against independent journalists and bloggers contravene that country's commitments to freedom of the media as a basic condition for a pluralistic and democratic society, especially in regard to non-discrimination against independent media with respect to affording access to information.

The United States strongly urges Belarus to release Mr. Yevtikheev and Mr. Tkachev and drop all charges against those initially detained immediately, and to work with the Office of the Representative on Freedom of the Media to improve the country's record with regard to media independence and transparency.

The United States also wishes to express its disappointment at the disqualification of 68 parliamentary candidates, including former Presidential candidate Alexander Milinkevich and others, for elections scheduled for September 23. These disqualifications represent yet another attempt by the Belarusian government to stifle dissent and limit opposition to its rule. Moreover, we are especially concerned by the authorities' refusal to allow members of the democratic opposition onto the district election committees, which conduct the actual vote count. The state-controlled Central Election Commission (CEC) included only sixty-one of the 862 nominees presented by members of the democratic opposition to staff 6,301 precinct electoral commissions with 68,945 members, less than 0.1% of the total. Such anti-democratic measures only serve to prevent Belarusian citizens from having the opportunity to express their aspirations for a modern, democratic and prosperous future and remove the possibility of transparency in the electoral process.

Finally, the United States deplores the decision of the Belarusian government to expel the Swedish ambassador and force Sweden to recall its entire diplomatic staff in Minsk. We

stand with our European partners and express the hope that Belarus will soon invite Sweden to re-open its mission to Minsk.

The United States notes these acts by the Belarusian government unnecessarily perpetuate the country's self-imposed isolation.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.