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United States Mission to the OSCE

Statement on the Release of Political Prisoners in Belarus

As delivered by Political Counselor Sam Laeuchli
to the Permanent Council, Vienna
February 28, 2008

Mr. Chairman,

We welcome the release of political prisoner and former presidential candidate Aleksandr Kozulin by the Belarus government. It is important, however, that his release be made permanent and unconditional. We regret that Mr. Kozulin was not released earlier, prior to the passing of his wife, Irina Kozulina. We offer our condolences to the Kozulin family at this difficult time. In addition to carrying on the battle to free her husband and help bring democracy to Belarus, Mrs. Kozulina courageously used her fight against breast cancer to increase awareness of this disease in Belarus.

We also note that in recent weeks, political prisoners Andrey Klimov, Aleksandr Sdvizkov, Dmitry Dashkevich, Artur Finkevich, Nikolay Avtukhovich and Yuriy Leonov have also been released. This represents a positive step on the part of the Belarus authorities. If Mr. Kozulin's release also becomes permanent, all internationally recognized political prisoners would have been released, at which point the United States would be prepared to begin a dialogue with Belarus on steps to improve bilateral relations. Our focus will be on real improvements in basic rights of citizens and on creating conditions for free and fair elections later this year.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.