



United States Mission to the OSCE

Statement on Plans for a Referendum in Place of Presidential Elections in Kazakhstan

As delivered by Ambassador Ian Kelly
to the Permanent Council, Vienna
January 20, 2011

The United States wishes to again raise our concern that Kazakhstan may cancel presidential elections and instead hold a referendum on whether President Nursultan Nazarbayev should remain in office for additional ten years.

Since we raised this issue one week ago, we were disappointed that despite President Nazarbayev himself rejecting the measure and despite the statements against the referendum from across the globe – particularly from within the OSCE region – the Kazakh parliament nonetheless proceeded with plans to cancel presidential elections.

We want to be very clear. A referendum that simply extends the president's term of office for an additional ten years is not the same as conducting free, fair, and transparent and contested elections. Real elections offer citizens choices of candidates and vigorous debates on ideas for addressing the challenges facing a country, and act as a key foundation of legitimacy of a modern representative democracy. This referendum is not in keeping with Kazakhstan's OSCE commitments on free, fair and periodic elections, nor with its position of leadership within the OSCE as the immediate past Chair-in-Office and as a current member of the OSCE Troika.

We have heard that more than 4.8 million signatures were collected in support of the referendum and that this number represents more than half of the electorate. We have also heard that Kazakhstan's citizens support the extension of the president's term in office because it will provide greater stability.

Kazakh civil society and the media have raised concern about the manner in which signatures were collected and the perceived unlikelihood that so many signatures could be collected and vetted in so short a time. We note that the sheer number of signatures does not dilute the need for Kazakhstan to live up to its OSCE commitments.

Further, according to media reports, Almaty police recently confiscated most copies of the current issue of the *Golos Respubliki* newspaper, which contained criticisms of the referendum proposal. Such intimidation of the press runs counter to Kazakhstan's commitment to develop independent media.

Finally, we urge the leaders of Kazakhstan to reconsider this referendum and to permit an openly competed election to be carried out in accord with its commitments.