



United States Mission to the OSCE

Statement on the Passage of Draconian Legal Amendments in Belarus

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

The United States notes with grave concern the passage by the Belarusian parliament on October 3 of amendments to laws that significantly increase limitations on the fundamental freedoms of assembly, association, and expression. At the same time, other draft amendments before the parliament, if passed, would expand the power of state security forces. These steps are inconsistent with Belarus' political commitments as an OSCE participating State.

Specifically, amendments to the Law on Mass Events in Belarus include a prohibition on planned gatherings of people for the public expression of their interests, including through the use of the Internet or other social networks. Even sanctioned assemblies would encounter new constraints.

Amendments to the Law on Public Associations would further restrict the fundamental freedom of association guaranteed in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to which Belarus is a State Party, and contained in Belarus' OSCE commitments. One provision would severely restrict the ability of Belarusian organizations to engage with foreign and/or international civil society organizations. Another appears designed to deny civil society organizations financial resources and expressly prohibits them from conducting financial transactions in foreign states.

Simply put, these amendments represent serious steps away from international norms. They would criminalize many exercises of freedom of association and empower the security services to take action.

We urge the Government of Belarus to reconsider these draft amendments before they enter into force. We urge the Council of Ministers to withdraw the draft amendments to the State Security Law, and the Parliament to hold public discussions on these proposals.

The United States has called on Belarus to release all political prisoners immediately and unconditionally, and we reiterate that call today. Unconditional release includes the restoration of civil and political rights. The United States also continues to call for an end to the campaign of harassment against critics of the government. The draft amendments described above, unfortunately, do not represent a step in the right direction.

The United States, in concert with our European partners, will continue to hold accountable those Belarusian officials responsible for repressive actions through targeted sanctions. At the same time, we remain committed to supporting the democratic aspirations of the Belarusian people.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.