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United States Mission to the OSCE

Statement on Russian NGO Law and Fining of the NGO Golos

As delivered by Ambassador Ian Kelly
to the Permanent Council,
Vienna, May 2, 2013

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The United States is concerned that Russian law enforcement, tax offices, and other regulatory agencies have continued to conduct unannounced inspections not only of international human rights organizations like Amnesty International and long-established non-governmental groups like the Moscow Helsinki Group and Memorial, but also of environmental and religious organizations throughout Russia. Hundreds of searches have taken place at the offices of organizations across Russia since March 6.

Mr. Chairman, we are particularly concerned by the April 25 decision of a Moscow district court, which declared, for the first time under the new law, a Russian NGO to be a “foreign agent.” The NGO, Golos, was established by Russians to protect and defend the electoral rights of Russian citizens.

OSCE commitments, from Principle VII of the Helsinki Final Act forward, emphasize the ability of civil society to monitor and seek implementation of the human rights and fundamental freedom commitments to which we have unanimously agreed.

Most recently, in Astana in 2010, we reaffirmed “the important role played by civil society and free media in helping us to ensure full respect for human rights, fundamental freedoms, democracy, including free and fair elections, and the rule of law.” Participating States reaffirmed in the Astana Commemorative Declaration the principles of Helsinki and all the commitments made to date. All of us also reaffirmed in Astana unequivocally that human rights are not solely a domestic issue, but also a matter of “direct and legitimate” interest to other States.

The United States would also note again that Russia’s legislation differs from the United States’ Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA). The United States’ FARA is not aimed specifically at NGOs, but is largely applied to law firms and public relations agencies hired by a foreign government acting as an agent of a foreign principal.

The United States remains committed to supporting the development of civil society and respect for fundamental freedoms around the world, and we will continue to monitor the situation in Russia closely.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.