



United States Mission to the OSCE

Statement on the Situation in Belarus

As delivered by Ambassador Ian Kelly
to the Permanent Council, Vienna
March 3, 2011

The United States would like to once again call attention to the unacceptable situation in Belarus. We remain gravely concerned about the government's failure to uphold democratic principles; the continuing crackdown on civil society, independent media, and opposition political parties and movements; the beginning of trials and harsh sentences of those detained; the harassment of lawyers who represent detainees; limited access by families and legal representatives to those incarcerated in KGB facilities; the conditions under which the detainees are being held and their treatment while in detention; and the closure of the OSCE Office in Minsk.

The quick trials, verdicts and sentencing of additional detainees to harsh prison terms demonstrates fresh attempts to imprison individuals for apparently political reasons, and indicates the Lukashenka government intends to continue its suppression of voices that express positions other than those demanded by the government. In other words, the government continues to try to take its people backwards and undermine Belarus's movement toward Europe. We again urge the release of all detained protesters immediately, without charges or sentences.

Additionally, although Foreign Minister Martynov assured the OSCE Chairman-in-Office in his December 31 letter announcing the decision to close the OSCE Office in Minsk that Belarus "will be constructively working with the participating States, [the] Secretariat and the Organization's institutions on the entire spectrum of issues on its agenda," Belarus has not:

- Responded to the Representative on Freedom of the Media's request to visit Belarus; or
- Allowed ODIHR to freely observe the trials of detainees. This is regrettably in direct violation of Belarus' commitment in paragraph 12 of the 1990 Copenhagen Document, in which participating States agreed "to adopt as a confidence-building measure the presence of observers sent by participating States and representatives of non-governmental organizations at proceedings before courts."

Although the Foreign Minister pledged to constructively cooperate with OSCE executive structures, these words must be backed up by deeds. The Representative on Freedom of the Media must receive permission to visit and carry out their work without conditions and without delay.

To meet this end, Belarus is in discussions with ODIHR regarding trial observations. I hope ODIHR observers will be allowed to observe trials as soon as possible.

The public statement issued by former presidential candidate Ales Mikhalevich on February 28 is particularly disturbing. Mr. Mikhalevich declares that he and other detainees were systematically tortured by KGB officials. He states that he was forced to agree to become a KGB informant in order to be released. We strongly urge the Government of Belarus to allow an independent investigation into these very grave allegations.

We listened carefully to Ambassador Sychov's remarks at the February 10 Permanent Council meeting, and his comment that "there was nothing new" in our statement. This was not the case. We highlighted increased harassment of lawyers, including the disbarment of lawyers involved in the so-called "mass riot" case, and called attention to the specific cases against independent journalists Natalya Radzina and Iryna Khalip. We continue to call for the immediate, unconditional release of all those detained for political motives. We stress the importance of observing due process and the rule of law, and we reaffirm the critical need to uphold OSCE and international commitments.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.