

Original: ENGLISH



United States Mission to the OSCE

Statement on the Imprisonment of Natalya Sokolova, the Blocking of Websites and the Transfer of Prison Authority in Kazakhstan

As delivered by Ambassador Ian Kelly
to the Permanent Council, Vienna
September 1, 2011

The United States wishes to register its concern regarding several events that occurred in Kazakhstan during the OSCE Summer Recess. The first is the August 8 conviction and sentencing to six years imprisonment of Natalya Sokolova, the lawyer for a trade union formed by employees of an oil company in western Kazakhstan. Sokolova's trial appears to have been marred by violations of procedural due process that call the verdict into question. The six-year sentence Sokolova received for inciting social discord and organizing illegal gatherings is particularly harsh. Credible reports indicate that the presiding judge refused to admit into evidence video recordings in support of Sokolova's defense and denied her motions to summon witnesses. We urge the government of Kazakhstan to review the case and to take appropriate steps to remedy the procedural inadequacies.

Secondly, Mr. Chairman, the United States is concerned by new reports of numerous web sites being blocked in Kazakhstan, including the popular LiveJournal and LiveInternet blogging communities. A court in Kazakhstan said the sites – widely used by the Russian language community – were propagating terrorism and inciting hatred, although it failed to provide details or request that they remove any offending material. Wholesale blocking of websites raises serious questions, and we appreciate Prime Minister Karim Masimov's promise to review these recent incidents. We urge Kazakhstan to ensure that any such steps limiting the free flow of information online are in full compliance with OSCE commitments.

Finally, Mr. Chairman, we take this opportunity also to note the August 4 announcement that responsibility for the Kazakhstani prison system has been transferred from the Ministry of Justice to the Ministry of the Interior. We hope that the Ministry of Interior will work closely with Kazakhstan's civil society to ensure humane conditions and treatment for prisoners. We note that progress has been made in improving conditions for prisoners in Kazakhstan during the last several years and today express our firm expectation and sincere hope that, in keeping with Kazakhstan's OSCE commitments, the pace of such improvements will not only continue under the authority of the Interior Ministry, but accelerate as well.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.