



PERMANENT MISSION OF THE REPUBLIC OF LATVIA TO THE UN,
OSCE AND OTHER INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS IN VIENNA

Statement by Ambassador Gints Apals, Permanent Representative of the Republic of Latvia, delivered in response to the statement by the Russian Federation

Permanent Council No.906,
Vienna, 22nd March, 2012

Mr Chairman,

The intervention of the Russian Ambassador necessitates both clarification of the position taken by my government and a brief comment on historical questions raised by him. Even though Russian statement concerning the events of March 16 is nothing new, the ritual condemnation of my country cannot be left without proper reaction.

I would like to use this opportunity to remind the Permanent Council and the Russian Delegation in particular that the government of Latvia strongly condemns all forms of totalitarianism. This fully applies to both Nazism and Stalinism – ideologies that led to the crimes against humanity and war crimes committed during World War II. Any accusation concerning alleged glorification of Nazism or neo-Nazi activity in Latvia is absolutely groundless.

March 16 is a day of remembrance observed by Latvian anti-communist war veterans since 1952. For decades private ceremonies have been held on that day throughout the free world. Since 1990 this happens also in Latvia. It is important to note that March 16 is not an official day of commemoration in Latvia. Former soldiers, their friends, relatives and supporters pay respects to the fallen. Church services are held, people gather in cemeteries and at the Monument to Freedom in Riga. These private ceremonies have nothing to do with Nazi ideology. Needless to say, no Nazi uniforms, symbols or slogans appear.

It is unfortunate that the events of March 16 have generated political controversy, protests, media attention and politically motivated criticism. Latvia is a democratic country, the Constitution protects all fundamental rights and freedoms, including the freedom of assembly. All citizens without exception enjoy the right to organise manifestations and gatherings. This is in line with Article 11 of the European Convention on Human Rights stipulating that

Everyone has the right to freedom of peaceful assembly and freedom of association (..) No restrictions shall be placed on the exercise of these rights other than such as prescribed by law and are necessary (..) in the interests of national security or public safety, for the prevention of disorder or crime, for the protection of health or morals or for the protection of the rights and freedoms of others.

The case law of the European Court of Human Rights shows that the right to freedom of assembly is considered to be one of the essential foundations of a democratic society and therefore should not be interpreted restrictively. No doubt, this fully applies to those Latvian citizens who participated in the

World War II. This fully applies also to all those who wish to manifest their views and loyalties in a peaceful manner, even if disliked and criticised by domestic or foreign political opponents.

Historical debate is none of OSCE functions. My delegation would prefer to spare the time for more relevant activities. Nevertheless, the pronouncements of the distinguished Ambassador of Russia necessitate a short factual comment. Let me recall that Latvia was occupied by the Soviet forces in 1940, by German forces in 1941, and again by the Soviet Army in 1944-45. Against international conventions, the two occupying powers forced Latvians to serve on both sides of the front. More than 100,000 Latvian men had to join the armed forces of Nazi Germany.

The situation of my compatriots during the war was not unique. It is a widely known fact that several European countries took part in the war against the Soviet Union. Citizens of at least 20 European countries participated in that war in German uniform, either as volunteers or as conscripts – which was the case also for Latvia. The number of such men and women exceeded 1.5 million. This figure included at least half a million Soviet citizens – mostly Russians who joined the Russian Liberation Army of General Andrei Vlasov. Some Russian units were attached to the Waffen SS, as it happened also to other non-German formations. Soldiers and officers of these units never became members of the SS and therefore cannot be considered as such.

Mr Chairman,

Once again I have to object to systematic stigmatisation and denigration of my country, using the events of March 16 as a pretext. The Permanent Council has listened to Russian statements on this subject for many years. These statements have been rather unpleasant, at times even offensive, but they have failed to humiliate my country. Equally, they have failed to diminish the esteem and trust that the OSCE enjoys among the citizens of Latvia. I am firmly convinced that this debate has to stop since it has little in common with the original goal of this organisation – namely, the promotion of security, stability and trust through cooperation and genuine dialogue.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.