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Permanent Mission of the Russian Federation to the OSCE

**STATEMENT BY MR. BORIS TIMOKHOV,
DEPUTY PERMANENT REPRESENTATIVE OF THE
RUSSIAN FEDERATION, AT THE MEETING OF THE
OSCE PERMANENT COUNCIL**

26 February 2004

Mr. Chairman,

On 6 March, Riga will host the Congress of Latvian Committees for the Protection of Schools using Russian as the Language of Instruction — schools which provide education for national minorities in their native language. This conference was organized by the well-known human rights organization, the Latvian Centre for Human Rights and Ethnic Studies, which very recently received the Max van der Stoel prize for its efforts to promote European humanitarian standards in Latvia. We should like to draw the particular attention of the chairmanship to this event and we hope that the OSCE and the directors of its institutions will respond to the invitation of the Latvian non-governmental organizations and play a direct role in the congress. As far as we are aware, invitations of this kind have been sent to representatives of the OSCE, the Council of Europe and the European Union.

In that connection, Mr. Chairman, we should like to reiterate that many international organizations, including the Council of Europe and the UN Treaty Bodies, are paying considerably more attention to the situation in the Baltic States than the OSCE and believe that their concern is completely justified. The reports of Mr. Alvaro Gil-Robles, Commissioner for Human Rights of the Council of Europe, on the results of his trips to Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania in the autumn of 2003, have very recently appeared on the Council of Europe website (www.coe.int). These reports, in our view, constitute a balanced and objective analysis of the human rights situation, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities. In addition, and this is the main thing, they contain recommendations aimed at solving many social and inter-ethnic problems in these States.

Careful study of the reports and recommendations confirms that the Russian concerns are well founded with regard to mass statelessness and the slow naturalization rates in Latvia and Estonia as well as the potentially negative effect of Latvian secondary school reform, which threatens to lower educational standards for Russian-speaking youth, the significant differences in the status and scope of the rights of citizens and non-citizens, and many other problems which we have repeatedly spoken about at Permanent Council meetings.

Allow me, Mr. Chairman, to mention just a few of Mr. Gil-Robles' recommendations for Latvia with regard to accelerating the naturalization of non-citizens. Above all, these

concern facilitating the naturalization of the elderly, the disabled and children, eventual elimination of the charges made for naturalization, and arrangements which would make it easier for parents to inform the authorities of their wishes regarding the choice of citizenship for children undergoing registration.

This is the first time that a Commissioner's report has so emphatically raised the issue of naturalizing orphans who live in children's homes and other State institutions of this kind. Until now, the authorities responsible for the administration of children's homes and boarding schools have shown interest in granting these orphans citizenship only if they are physically gifted children the State would like to see take part in sporting events abroad, issuing them with passports as required.

As a whole, the section on naturalization contains some highly significant statistics attesting to reasons for the decline in statelessness over the last 10 years and the rates of this decline. Out of 250,000 non-citizens permanently resident in Latvia who have changed their citizenship, only 69,000 have gone through the naturalization procedure. The rest have ceased to be non-citizens either as a result of emigration or as a result, so to speak, of their departure to another world. It is easy to estimate how long the naturalization process will take for 490,000 non-citizens at this rate.

Of exceptional importance for us is Mr. Gil-Robles' recommendation with regard to granting non-citizens the right to take part in local elections — this would be a direct route to the social integration proclaimed by Latvia, which is not, however, being realized because up until now hundreds of thousands of non-citizens are still barred from participating in public life.

Traditional recommendations of the Council of Europe to Latvia are to ratify the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, to enable minorities to deal with the authorities in their native language and to increase the availability of free courses for learning the national language. However, in the light of recent events, a recommendation of particular importance would appear to be that of ensuring a high level of education for national minorities at a time of school reform, strengthening co-operation between the Ministry of Education, teachers and parents; among other things this would involve training a sufficient number of teachers to teach subjects in minority languages and at the same time ensuring the publication of the requisite textbooks.

The comments of the Latvian authorities regarding this report are also very revealing; they leave little hope that Mr. Gil-Robles' recommendations will be followed, although these recommendations do not in any way at all exceed the boundaries of international standards and, in our view, fully correspond to the interests of Latvia and her multinational society.

Equally important is the Commissioner's report on Estonia, which also highlights the problems of statelessness, which has in fact marginalized 12 per cent of the population; the report notes the restrictive interpretation placed by Estonia on the whole concept of "national minority"; emphasizes the need to eliminate statelessness among children born in Estonia after 26 February 1992; urges that the Estonian language exam should be made even easier for vulnerable categories of the population; stresses the importance of making more thorough preparations for the secondary education reform to be introduced in 2007–2008; and recommends the adoption of measures to protect minority languages as well as the use of these languages in dealings between the authorities and national minorities who do not

necessarily constitute more than 50 per cent of the population but who nevertheless represent a significant part thereof.

We hope, Mr. Chairman, that participating States will treat with due care the reports of the Council of Europe's Commissioner for Human Rights on the human rights situation in the Baltic States. Please believe me, they deserve to be treated in this way.