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1335th MEETING OF THE OSCE PERMANENT COUNCIL**

16 September 2021

On the 30th anniversary of the Baltic countries' accession to the OSCE

Madam Chairperson,

We join in congratulating our esteemed colleagues on the anniversary of their countries' accession to the Organization. This occasion gives us an opportunity to evaluate the fulfilment by Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia of their OSCE commitments.

Unfortunately, there is nothing to boast about here, especially in the area of human rights, which over a period of three decades has proved to be a failure for the Baltic countries. For example, the shameful phenomenon of mass statelessness has existed in Latvia and Estonia since the 1990s. Let me remind you that there are 216,700 non-citizens in Latvia, that is 12 per cent of the population (figures provided by the Office of Citizenship and Migration Affairs of the Latvian Ministry of the Interior), while there are around 69,000 such persons in Estonia, that is 6 per cent of the population. Almost a third of a century later and the problem has still not been solved, which is totally inconceivable for States that call themselves democracies.

The stories concerning refugees are an equally ugly business. The current migration crisis has revealed the Latvian and Lithuanian Governments' complete disregard for the rights of these people. The same can be said for their international obligations in this area. This can be seen from the disgraceful conditions in which migrants are being held, the refusal to consider their asylum applications, and so on. Respected human rights organizations have already expressed their concern about what is happening, including the Council of Europe through its Commissioner for Human Rights Dunja Mijatović. Perhaps it is time to listen to their opinion?

The situation regarding freedom of speech and of the press continues to deteriorate. A whole set of repressive measures are being applied against members of the press in the Baltic countries: detentions, interrogations, searches, confiscation of equipment, closing of bank accounts, and so on. The most outrageous example of the past year was the opening of criminal cases in Latvia (and let us emphasize the word "criminal") against 14 journalists working with the Russian news agencies Sputnik Latvia and Baltnews. Furthermore, the authorities in the Baltic States demonstratively ignore requests and applications from such Russian media outlets accredited there as Interfax, RIA Novosti, TASS and VGTRK. Their journalists are not allowed to enter the premises of State institutions and do not receive accreditation for official events.

To this we must add the policy of the authorities in Riga, Vilnius and Tallinn aimed at completely purging the information space of Russian-language media. Television channels are banned from broadcasting, access to their websites is blocked, and news resources are shut down under pressure from the law enforcement agencies. I would remind you that the First Baltic Channel ceased broadcasting in Latvia as from 1 February; as from 9 February, the following television channels were banned – REN TV Baltic, NTV Mir Baltic, Karusel International, NTV Serial, NTV Stil, NTV Pravo, Kinomiks, Nashe novoye kino, Rodnoye kino, Indiyaskoye kino, Kinokomediya, Kinoseriya, KVN TV, Kukhnya TV, Boks TV and HD Life. The population also had their access to the websites of the Russia Today and NTV television channels and to the rus24.ru and teledays.net servers blocked. The situation is similar in Estonia and Lithuania.

In the educational sphere, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania are also pursuing a targeted strategy to squeeze out the Russian language. Striking proof of this is the so-called educational reform, which continues to gather momentum in Latvia and is aimed at the *de facto* abolition of bilingual schools and the discontinuation of the use of the Russian language in educational institutions. Russian-language kindergartens, secondary schools and private educational institutions have already been put through the mangle, as it were.

Similar processes are also taking place in Estonia, where the Russian language has virtually been banished from the higher education system. Under the pretext of “optimization”, the Estonian Government is conducting a programme for the merging of Russian-language and Estonian upper secondary schools. With no consideration for the interests of Russian pupils and their parents, fully Estonian-language educational institutions are springing up in such cities and towns as Keila, Tartu, Rakvere, Kohtla-Järve and Võru, among others. Estonian and Russian upper secondary schools are scheduled to merge in 2022 in Narva, where Russian speakers make up 90 per cent of the population. This “optimization” has already affected secondary schools. For example, in 2019, the municipal authorities in Keila closed down the only Russian-language school, and this against the backdrop of parents’ objections and protests to defend that Russian-language educational institution.

The situation of national minorities in Lithuania is no better; a monolingual education system has been in place there for a long time. We recall that the 2011 Law on Education introduced Lithuanian as the sole language of instruction in all schools and standardized the State language exam in grades 10 and 12. This created considerable difficulties for children belonging to national minorities and incurred the displeasure of international bodies. For example, the Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities notes that the authorities’ efforts to mitigate the negative effects of assimilation policies on minority language learners have been insufficient.

A further long-standing problem is the persecution of dissidents, or rather those people whom the local authorities deem to be such. At the end of March, it became known in Estonia that the human rights defender and lawyer Sergey Seredenko had been detained on charges of having committed a crime against the Republic of Estonia. On 1 September, the Office of the Prosecutor General completed its investigation of the human rights defender, and its indictment was sent to the court. In the meantime, Mr. Seredenko remains in custody to this day. As we have noted previously, the charges against him are politicized and unsubstantiated. Prominent politicians and public figures from the Baltics and other countries who have written to the Estonian leadership demanding that this political persecution be abandoned are in agreement with us.

Former diplomat and member of the Saeima (Lithuanian Parliament) Algirdas Paleckis was arrested in Lithuania back in 2018. It was only at the end of July this year that the Šiauliai District Court handed

down its verdict, sentencing him to six years' deprivation of liberty. However, no convincing evidence of his guilt has been presented to the public. His criminal case was fabricated from the outset and is of a politicized nature. It is yet another example of the Lithuanian Government using punitive justice against those who have a different view from the official authorities regarding the events of 13 January 1991 at the Vilnius television tower.

Having one's own views on history is becoming grounds for the criminal prosecution of dissidents in Latvia as well. In 2019, criminal proceedings were instituted against Alexander Filey, organizer of the "Total Dictation" event in Riga. The criminal prosecution of the leader of the Congress of Non-citizens, Yuri Alekseev, continues in connection with his comments on social media that are at odds with the official interpretation of the Soviet period of history. On 17 December 2020, the human rights defender Alexander Gaponenko was handed a suspended prison sentence of one year and two years of supervision under the Latvian Probation Service for criticizing the glorification of Nazism in Latvia.

These stories are closely linked with the glorification of Nazism by Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania at the official level. History is being rewritten to suit the political agenda, and Nazi criminals and their accomplices are being declared heroes at the prompting of the authorities, while the Soviets are accused of all manner of wrongdoings.

The Baltic countries are doing all of this with the tacit approval of the European Union. And yet, when Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania acceded to the European Union and NATO, there were assurances that their new-found status would not affect the situation of ethnic minorities nor the countries' relations with Russia. Decades later, however, we see that the situation is the exact opposite. And it also contravenes numerous OSCE commitments of these countries. We shall not enumerate now exactly which ones – it would take too long to do so. Read our previous statements on this topic.

Once again, we call on the Baltic countries, after 30 years of participation in the OSCE, to finally start fulfilling their commitments within the framework of the Organization. The OSCE executive structures, including the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, the High Commissioner on National Minorities and the Representative on Freedom of the Media, should provide the authorities in Riga, Vilnius and Tallinn with the necessary assistance.

Thank you for your attention.