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**STATEMENT BY MR. VLADIMIR ZHEGLOV,
DEPUTY PERMANENT REPRESENTATIVE OF THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION,
AT THE 1301st MEETING OF THE OSCE PERMANENT COUNCIL
VIA VIDEO TELECONFERENCE**

4 February 2021

On freedom of peaceful assembly in the OSCE area

Mr. Chairperson,

At the previous Permanent Council meeting, we already discussed this same topic. Regrettably, the past week has been marked by a new wave of protests of various kinds in a number of OSCE participating States, including in our country.

On 31 January and 2 February, the latest unauthorized rallies of Alexei Navalny's supporters were held in Russian cities. They were not approved by the authorities in accordance with the provisions of Russian law. We note once again that similar and even more serious requirements, not to mention the penalties for non-compliance with the law, are in force in a number of European Union States, the United States of America and other Western countries. The Ministry of Internal Affairs and the Office of the Prosecutor General of the Russian Federation notified citizens in advance of the specific legal consequences of participating in unlawful protests.

Law enforcement officials took the necessary measures to ensure order and safety at the demonstrations. Protesters were even provided with medical masks and hot tea. The police acted in accordance with the prescribed procedures. We are forced to admit that, alas, there were occasional instances of overzealousness on the part of law enforcement officers. Nevertheless, Alexander Verkhovsky, head of the Sova human rights centre, stated that he did not observe any "brutal police violence". Force was used only against citizens who resisted arrest and in response to outright provocation.

The situation is currently being monitored by the Presidential Council for Civil Society and Human Rights and also by federal and regional human rights ombudspersons. There were isolated arrests of those who called themselves journalists, but many of them did not have press identification or press cards. Most were released immediately after their documents had been checked. The Russian Union of Journalists is keeping a close watch on such cases. I emphasize that all complaints about violations of the rights of demonstrators will be investigated and those responsible will be punished in accordance with the law, as is done in a State governed by the rule of law, such as the Russian Federation.

Unfortunately, some protesters committed acts of aggression against law enforcement officers, including setting fire in central Moscow to a bus belonging to the Russian National Guard. Encroachment on the life of a law enforcement officer, the use of violence against a representative of authority and also insulting him or her are criminal offences (Articles 317 to 319 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation). Again, with a few exceptions, law enforcement officers used force only in the most extreme cases. And this, according even to our Western colleagues in the OSCE, is quite legitimate. As the distinguished Permanent Representative of Germany, Ms. Bräutigam, underlined at the last Permanent Council meeting: “If participants in assemblies do not abide by ... conditions [established by the State] ... [t]he State may use coercive measures in the process, always on condition, needless to say, that they are reasonable.”

Harsher methods – water cannons, rubber bullets and firearms – are the trademark not of the Russian police, but rather of law enforcement agencies in Europe, the United States and Canada. The same goes for the highest administrative fines for participating in unauthorized actions. This week also brought sad examples.

Protests against the Global Security Act were held in France on 30 January. Paris law enforcement officers used physical force, water cannons and tear gas against the protesters. Journalists covering the events were also injured as a result of the police action. An RT France correspondent, for example, was hit by a tear gas grenade. The Internet and social media were flooded with video and photo evidence of the forcible dispersal of the demonstration.

Disproportionate use of force was seen in Poland, where thousands took to the streets last week in opposition to stricter abortion laws. The police fired tear gas almost immediately.

In Brussels, Belgium, on 30 January, the police did not hold back in dealing with opponents of the COVID-19 restrictions, using force to immobilize them. Hundreds of people were detained and will be heavily fined.

Thousands of people protested on 31 January here in Vienna. Law enforcement officers brutally restrained and pushed back the demonstrators. According to the Austrian Interior Ministry, 2,000 people were charged with administrative offences and 13 people were arrested.

In the Netherlands, hundreds of protesters gathered again on Museumplein in Amsterdam on 31 January. This time no water cannons were used, but it was obvious that they were on standby and could have been used at any moment. Speaking of water cannons, the girl who was blasted with water on 24 January suffered very serious injuries – she received 18 stitches and is being treated for a fractured skull. She was not a participant in the protests but was just taking pictures of them. The reaction of Janine Kramer, spokesperson for the Dutch prosecutors, is telling: “There was an emergency order and there were several announcements that you had to leave. If you do not leave, then you are in principle punishable.” It sounds logical. There is just one question for the distinguished Permanent Representative of the Netherlands: how can your alignment with the criticism of Russia be reconciled with this approach by your country’s judiciary?

We could give dozens more examples of undemocratic – by the standards of our own Western colleagues – suppression of freedom of assembly in their own countries.

Under the circumstances, we would have expected a reaction from States, as well as international bodies, to these and other cases of disregard for freedom of assembly and the disproportionate use of force by law enforcement officers during protests in the European Union and the United States. But in vain.

According to your logic, protesters in Russia or Belarus are always “peaceful”, whereas in your countries they are “vandals” and “domestic terrorists”. Cynical hypocrisy and double standards again.

As we did a week ago, we urge our colleagues not to dramatize events in Russia. Instead, think about the situation at home: how to make your law enforcement officers more humane and ensure genuine freedom of assembly and endeavour to hear the wants and needs of your own citizens. To back up our words, we will conclude by showing a video that clearly demonstrates what I have talked about. Incidentally, the video we showed last week was hastily removed from YouTube. Not surprisingly. This fits in well with the current policy of the United States and US digital platforms of cleansing the information space completely of alternative views. It is not for nothing that the distinguished US representative today so zealously justified the crude censorship by the Ukrainian Government. But enjoy watching the video nonetheless. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OsXDK-DfWCI>.

Thank you for your attention.