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Delegation of the Russian Federation

**STATEMENT BY MR. ALEXANDER LUKASHEVICH,
PERMANENT REPRESENTATIVE OF THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION, AT THE
1316th MEETING OF THE OSCE PERMANENT COUNCIL**

27 May 2021

Human rights violations in Latvia

Madam Chairperson,

We are once again obliged to draw attention to the ongoing gross and massive violations of human rights in Latvia.

Of particular concern is the situation regarding respect for the rights of the Russian-speaking inhabitants of that country. As reported in the media, the President of Latvia, Egils Levits, personally spoke out in mid-May against the use of the Russian language in the country, calling for the remaining labour market-related requirements on knowledge of Russian to be “eliminated” by legislation. According to his version, such requirements “prevent many people from fulfilling their plans to secure a job” and are “not conducive to the creation of a cohesive society”. We should like to recall that this very society is home to almost 500,000 people, or around 28 per cent of the country’s population, for whom Russian is their native tongue. The President was in effect thus calling for discrimination against a considerable proportion of the inhabitants of the State of which he is head.

This is not something new. The Latvian authorities have already been methodically squeezing the Russian language out of all spheres of public life for a number of years – above all, out of the field of education. At the start of April, the Saeima (Latvian Parliament) definitively adopted, at second reading, amendments to the law on higher education, which effectively introduce a ban on teaching in the Russian language at private higher education institutions. One may now be taught only in the State language. I would remind you that, in June 2020, the country’s Constitutional Court reviewed an appeal lodged by Members of Parliament from the Harmony political party in connection with the ban established in 2018 on the use of languages other than the State language at higher education institutions. The Court ruled that such a regulation was contrary to the Constitution and called on the authorities to amend these norms by 1 May 2021.

And amend them they did. But in such a way that the rights of students to higher education and academic freedom at higher education institutions have been dealt an even heavier blow. On an exceptional basis, apart from Latvian it is now permitted to use only other official languages of the European Union in joint programmes conducted together with foreign higher education institutions and in programmes under European Union projects and international agreements. Significantly, this exception applies to a maximum

of 20 per cent of the overall content of such programmes. Russian is not among the languages covered. It is therefore caught in the trap of “dual discrimination”, reflecting how Ukraine has clearly turned out to be a role model for Latvia.

Latvia has been repeatedly criticized by relevant international organizations and experts, including the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities, the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights and United Nations experts. For example, in March this year, the United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, addressing the Latvian Government, noted that it was “concerned that current language policies ... may have a discriminatory impact against persons belonging to minorities ..., especially in the fields of education, employment, and access to services”.

Such an approach by the authorities, which is aimed at squeezing out the Russian language, not only runs contrary to Latvia’s international commitments, including its OSCE commitments, but also violates a number of European Union norms – in particular, Articles 21 and 22 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, which stipulate, respectively, that any discrimination is to be prohibited, including discrimination based on membership of a national minority, and that linguistic diversity must be respected. Unfortunately, we have yet to hear any response from the European Union “bloc” to these discriminatory actions by the Latvian Government.

At the European Union they are also closing their eyes to the shameful phenomenon of mass statelessness that exists in that country, where it affects 205,000 people, or around 11 per cent of Latvia’s population. This objectionable situation has also been noted by the United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, which recommended that the Latvian Government expedite the naturalization process for “non-citizens” while respecting their economic, social and cultural rights on the basis of non-discrimination.

Incidentally, the United Nations experts singled out other serious human rights-related shortcomings in Latvia as well. These include doubts as to the effectiveness of the judiciary and the office of the ombudsman for human rights; the high level of corruption and related impunity; the vulnerability of child orphans; and the need to eliminate discrimination based on religious, ethnic and racial characteristics.

To this list we must add the authorities’ intention to purge the information space fully of Russian-language media. This refers, in particular, to how the Latvian State Security Service has acted towards journalists working with Russian-owned Sputnik Latvia and Baltnews, a Russian-language news agency. In April this year, they were summoned for questioning, while somewhat earlier, in December 2020, criminal proceedings were instituted against freelance correspondents from these outlets. Also to be added to that list are the suspension of broadcasts by the Rossiya RTR television channel for a year and the National Electronic Mass Media Council of Latvia’s blocking of access to the websites of the Russia Today and NTV television channels and to the rus24.tv and teledays.net servers.

The persecution of public figures continues. For example, in December 2020, the well-known civil activist Alexander Gaponenko was handed a suspended prison sentence of one year and two years of supervision under the Latvian State Probation Service. We have already brought up this topic here. He is essentially being persecuted for anti-military and anti-fascist statements on social media. That is, for speaking the truth. After all, Nazi accomplices are openly honoured in Latvia and even officials frequently take part in these celebrations. Marches of the Latvian Legion of the SS are held in Riga every year; only during the pandemic were they suspended. Despite the protests by human rights defenders, anti-fascist organizations and the general public, the Latvian authorities invariably try to present these home-grown members of the SS as “defenders of freedom” and “victims of the tragedy” that befell the Latvian people.

The situation has also become invidious in the realm of sport, where the inadmissibility of discrimination is one of the key elements of the relevant international documents, including those adopted under the aegis of the OSCE. In recent days, with the Ice Hockey World Championship currently taking place in Riga, we have been able to observe the Latvian Government's striving to politicize sports. On Monday, the Minister for Foreign Affairs of Latvia, Edgars Rinkēvičs, and the Mayor of Riga, Mārtiņš Staķis, replaced the State flag of the Republic of Belarus in the display of flags set up for the championship with a white-red-white cloth. This political stunt has already been condemned by the President of the International Ice Hockey Federation (IIHF), René Fasel, who described such fooling around with symbols as "unacceptable" and demanded that either the flag of Belarus be restored to its original place or the IIHF flags be removed. The Latvian authorities naturally opted for confrontation. On the square in front of the Radisson Blu Latvija Hotel, the flag of the Russian Federation was also replaced, namely with the flag of the Russian Olympic Committee, under the pretext of the sanctions imposed by the World Anti-Doping Agency. However, if there are no symbols relating to the championship where the flags are located, then this means that the decision by the local authorities to have the flags replaced was groundless. Taken together, what we are dealing with is undisguised discrimination against athletes who are representing their States at international competitions.

Such blatant politicization not only undermines relations between countries but also contravenes the provisions of the 1975 Helsinki Final Act. It is laid down there that "in order to expand existing links and co-operation in the field of sport, the participating States will encourage contacts and exchanges of this kind, including sports meetings and competitions of all sorts, on the basis of the established international rules, regulations and practice." The flag incident does not square with either international rules or practice.

We call on the Latvian authorities to desist from trampling upon the rights of national minorities and freedom of the media, and also from violating their commitments on countering aggressive nationalism and neo-Nazism – not to mention stopping the manifestations of discrimination and intolerance (in the field of sport among others), which run counter to the principles of the Olympic movement and to OSCE commitments. The relevant structures of our Organization must give a proper assessment of these actions.

Thank you for your attention.