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Permanent Mission of the Russian Federation to the OSCE

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

27 May 2004

Mr. Chairman,

On 20 May the Latvian Saeim adopted amendments to the Law on the Status of Citizens of the Former USSR under which “non-citizens” of Latvia can be deprived of their status if they receive permission to take up permanent residence in some other country. It is further provided that a child born in Latvia shall invariably have the status of a foreigner if one of its parents is a “non-citizen” and the other a foreigner. In our opinion, such measures are nothing other than the continuation of a discriminatory policy towards a substantial part of the country’s population. The amendments in question, unfortunately, are fully in line with the recently promulgated position of the Latvian Government, which can be summed up as “Be a Latvian or go to Russia”.

Mr. Chairman, this is only one — and possibly not the crudest — manifestation of the authorities’ attitude regarding observance of the rights to which the Russian-speaking population of Latvia is entitled. We trust it will not come as a surprise to European Union (EU) countries that on 6 May the Latvian Saeim once again turned down the proposal of the parliamentary fraction “For human rights in a united Latvia” that the Council of Europe’s Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities should be brought before the relevant parliamentary committees for their consideration. Thus Latvia remains the only one of the new EU Member States that has not ratified the Convention despite the urgent recommendations of the OSCE, the Council of Europe and other international organizations to do so. We believe that a stubborn refusal to accede to such an important international agreement affects the interests of people belonging to other national minorities as well who are permanently resident in Latvia.

Latvia and Estonia are members of the European Union with full rights, and this is quite enough in our view to require that problems involving human rights and the rights of persons belonging to minorities should be handled in those countries on the basis of the same approach as that taken in the European Union as a whole, appropriate use being made of the positive experience of other EU States having large national and linguistic communities. We are convinced that the authority of the European Union and its active approach to the defence

of human rights can play an important part in solving existing problems. Let us recall here just a few of the most important ones.

First of all there is the question of social integration. We want to emphasize here that we are talking of integration and not assimilation, and about its objective indicator — namely the rate of naturalization. At present we are witnessing, at least in Latvia, a substantial gap between the number of people who have actually received citizenship and the numbers who have applied for it. The queue is growing, and at the same time the financing of bodies responsible for considering applications is being reduced. We would not want to think, Mr. Chairman, that this is in some way connected with the forthcoming elections to the European Parliament.

Educational reform, in its present guise, can best be described as a factor promoting social disintegration. The position of the Russian-speaking population of Latvia on this issue is well known: on the one hand one must acknowledge the unquestionable necessity of knowing the State language, and on the other hand one must acknowledge the right of national minorities to have access to quality education in their mother tongue. Artificial limitations imposed on either of these two requirements are bound, objectively speaking, to lead to social tension.

Granting permanently resident non-citizens the right to vote in municipal elections is an exceptionally important issue; if it were granted in fact, we would, by 2005, be able to speak of progress towards integration. Let me recall that in Estonia this right is granted to non-citizens. It would be exceedingly strange, Mr. Chairman, if in the forthcoming elections in Latvia citizens of other countries of the European Union permanently resident in Latvia were able to exercise the right to vote — and this means people who are foreigners — while people born and brought up and permanently resident in Latvia who do not have the country's citizenship or citizenship of the European Union were denied that right once again.

The right to use one's mother tongue in dealings with the authorities in municipalities where the non-titular population constitutes a majority or about 50 per cent of the total is also an important issue. Such a right exists in many countries, for example under Estonian law. However, we regret, Mr. Chairman, that up to the present time the population of, say, the town of Narva has not been able to exercise such a right despite the repeated appeals of the town's municipal council to the Government of Estonia accompanied by an appropriate application. We hope that in future the Estonian authorities will consider such appeals in a spirit consonant with democratic European standards.

We hope, Mr. Chairman, that the problems we have mentioned as well as other problems in the Baltic States that are familiar to the Permanent Council, will soon — considering the membership of these countries in the European Union — be taken up and solved in an appropriately positive and dynamic manner.