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PC.DEL/505/21  
15 April 2021

ENGLISH  
Original: RUSSIAN

Delegation of the Russian Federation

**STATEMENT BY MR. ALEXANDER LUKASHEVICH,  
PERMANENT REPRESENTATIVE OF THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION, AT THE  
1309th MEETING OF THE OSCE PERMANENT COUNCIL  
VIA VIDEO TELECONFERENCE**

15 April 2021

**On the violation of freedom of assembly in several Western European countries and in the United States of America**

Madam Chairperson,

For over a year now, people around the world have been living in an environment marked by the pandemic and the associated restrictions on fundamental human rights and freedoms, including freedom of assembly. Public weariness over the measures to combat the coronavirus and the forced lockdowns, together with growing socio-economic tensions and inequality, is prompting many to take to the streets. The demonstrators invariably come up against the police using force to repulse them, while the laws in that field are subsequently made even stricter. That then generates a fresh round of protests on an even larger scale.

In certain Western European countries and in the United States of America, mass demonstrations are also brought about by a number of long-standing problems. There is nothing new about the authorities' reaction either: it is violence in response. We have already raised this issue a number of times at the Permanent Council, notably on 18 March, yet with each week that passes the situation merely gets worse. Let us consider just a few examples.

For instance, in the Netherlands, the use of water cannons, mounted police and police dogs (without muzzles, by the way) to break up demonstrations seems to have become a hallmark of law enforcement. That is how officers acted in Amsterdam on 20 and 21 March when faced with opponents of the coronavirus restrictions.

In Germany, police in Kassel on 20 March used water cannons, pepper spray and truncheons to force those protesting against yet another lockdown to disperse. Attacks on journalists are known to have occurred; one photographer was injured.

In France, demonstrators are not handled with kid gloves either. The whole world was able to observe this on several occasions in connection with the months-long protests of the "gilets jaunes". On 21 March, law enforcement officers in Marseille fired tear gas in order to break up a multitudinous carnival that had not been authorized by the authorities because of the pandemic. The reason for this intervention was that the participants in the event were not wearing masks and were not observing social distancing. I should

point out that we are not seeking to excuse people who are reluctant to follow the established rules for the containment of COVID-19. But we do believe that gassing them was a clearly disproportionate measure in this case.

Something similar is happening in Belgium, too. In the evening of 1 April, law enforcement officers in Brussels used water cannons and pepper spray to disperse an unauthorized music festival organized by local opponents of the latest round of quarantine measures. Mounted police and dogs were also on hand.

In Austria, a demonstration last weekend against the coronavirus restrictions ended in a skirmish with the police here in Vienna. The law enforcement officers actively used pepper-spray balls and truncheons.

In Switzerland, the police used rubber bullets and tear gas against demonstrators in St. Gallen on 2 April.

The situation in the United Kingdom is slightly different: people there are taking to the streets on account of the authorities' policy of "tightening the screws". This refers, among other things, to the new Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill. As we already mentioned on 18 March, this instrument would expand the powers of the police, allowing it to restrict even peaceful demonstrations. The bill has not yet become law, but peaceful protests, which by analogy with the well-known Tarantino film are taking place under the slogan "Kill the Bill", are already now being suppressed by force.

Thus, demonstrations against the adoption of the draft law took place in Manchester on 20 March and in Bristol on 25 March. Law enforcement officers "welcomed" the protesters with dogs, tear gas and truncheons. They also acted aggressively towards journalists – even those who were accredited. As reported by the media, a journalist from the British newspaper *Daily Mirror* became a victim of police aggression in Bristol. As in the aforementioned case of Germany, the safety of journalists in the United Kingdom has also come under threat.

Moreover, the riots in Northern Ireland provoked by the dissatisfaction of certain groups of the population with the conditions of Brexit have been going on unabated for a month now. As a result of the protests, there has been serious damage to property, police officers have been injured and scores of local inhabitants, including children, have been arrested. The law enforcement officers used riot control equipment to break up the protests.

In the United States, force is also used to compel those opposing public health measures to disperse. On 21 March, the police in Miami Beach (Florida) used pepper-spray pellets to disperse people who had organized a party in violation of the curfew. They evidently assumed that it would be quicker and more effective that way. However, they forgot that such actions are unambiguously disproportionate and excessively harsh.

Unfortunately, such long-standing problems as systemic racism and police violence are coming to the fore in the United States. We have discussed this subject, too, on many occasions, yet the situation is not improving, even though these phenomena are condemned by US society itself.

On Sunday, 11 April, a young African American, Daunte Wright, was fatally shot by a female police officer. He was just 20 years old. By coincidence, this incident occurred not far from the place where, in May 2020, George Floyd died at the hands of a law enforcement officer. Americans are taking to the streets to protest against racism among the ranks of the police, but there they encounter even greater brutality on the part of the law enforcement agencies. In Brooklyn Center (Minnesota) on 13 April and in Portland (Oregon)

on 14 April, rubber bullets, tear gas and stun grenades were used to disperse protesters. At least two people were injured; scores were arrested.

We hope that the lawlessness – as these actions are referred to in the United States itself – will not reach last year’s level, which was unprecedentedly high compared with the past few years. We recall that during the mass protests that swept through dozens of cities across the whole country at the time, people were killed on the streets. As President Joe Biden stated a few days ago: “No justification for violence; peaceful protest is understandable.” However, it should not be forgotten that one of the things that make a demonstration peaceful is a reasonable response to it on the part of law enforcement officers.

We cannot deny that police officers frequently resort to riot control equipment in order to prevent acts of lawlessness by demonstrators. However, the question remains open as to whether such a brutal response was justified in each of the aforementioned cases.

All these actions by the Western European and US authorities in relation to mass protests, including the excessive use of force, clearly violate freedom of expression and assembly; in a number of cases, they also encroach on freedom of the media and on the safety of journalists. Anti-COVID measures cannot and must not serve as an arbitrary justification for curtailing human rights.

We urge the OSCE participating States enumerated earlier to strictly comply with their human rights obligations. It is necessary to tackle not the consequences but the causes of alarming developments, among which are rising socio-economic inequality in the context of the pandemic, mass unemployment and pauperization of the population. Not to mention the problems linked to systemic racism and the surge in neo-Nazism, anti-Semitism and religious intolerance.

We are convinced that the relevant OSCE executive structures, too – including the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, the Representative on Freedom of the Media and the High Commissioner on National Minorities – ought to closely monitor and duly respond to such challenges.

Thank you for your attention.