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**STATEMENT BY
MR. ALEKSANDR VOLGAREV, DEPUTY PERMANENT REPRESENTATIVE OF
THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION, AT THE 1510th MEETING OF THE
OSCE PERMANENT COUNCIL**

27 February 2025

On violations of religious freedom in Estonia

Mr. Chairperson,

We are compelled to draw attention once again to the continuing systematic violations of human rights in Estonia. As surprising as it may seem, over the years, the authorities of that OSCE participating State have been hypocritically trying to pass off the results of their internal repressive policies as “democratic achievements”. These include the shameful phenomenon of mass statelessness, the aggressive imposition of the State language in the education system and depriving the Russian-speaking population of the right to study in their native language, the banning of Russian media outlets, the “visa inquisition”, the creeping glorification of the Nazis and their accomplices, the desecration of monuments to and graves of the Red Army liberators, and much more besides.

Under the guise of combating “Russian propaganda”, the country is actively cleansing the public space of any alternative viewpoints. The millstones of the Estonian repressive machine are “grinding down” concerned journalists, civil society activists and public figures.

The Estonian Government has no intention of leaving it at that. Apparently inspired by the criminal practices of the Kyiv regime, the authorities of that State have unleashed a war against the Estonian Orthodox Church (EOC).

We are talking about gross interference in the spiritual life of the Church, namely demands that it sever its canonical ties with the Moscow Patriarchate. As a means of pressure, the Primate of the EOC, Metropolitan Eugene of Tallinn and All Estonia, was deprived of his residence permit in 2024 under the pretext that he posed a “security threat”. The Church has been pointedly cut off from State funding in 2025. And all this, despite repeated statements by Orthodox hierarchs, including Bishop Daniel of Tartu and the abbess of the Pühtitsa Convent, Mother Superior Filareta, arguing that they are “outside of politics”. The new version of the statute of the Estonian Orthodox Church, in accordance with which the EOC was supposed to remove the reference to the Moscow Patriarchate from its name, is another example of this interference.

However, these concessions did not satisfy the Estonian enforcers, who were out for blood. The main instigator of the repressive crackdown on the EOC, head of the Ministry of the Interior Lauri Läänemets, cynically admitted: “We will no longer engage in dialogue with the Church but will take it to court to impose a ban on its activities.”

To that end, the country’s police department drafted and submitted to Parliament amendments to the Churches and Congregations Act, which passed their first reading on 19 February this year. Under these legislative innovations, a religious organization cannot engage in activities with a person or association that has “significant influence in a foreign State”. It may not be affiliated financially, through its statutes or in any other way with a religious parish, spiritual centre, governing body or spiritual leader located in a foreign country, if they pose a threat to the security of the Estonian State or to constitutional or public order; if they support military aggression or incite war; or act contrary to generally accepted principles of international law. A further provision of the amendments prohibits persons whose residence permit has been refused, has not been extended or has been cancelled from serving as a minister of religion. There is also a simplified procedure for parishes to withdraw from the EOC in the event that they wish to do so. The deadline for implementing these new measures is two months.

As we can see, the reasons for terminating the Church’s activities are wide-ranging. Wording such as “threats to security” or “influence in a foreign State” leaves considerable room for arbitrary or subjective interpretation – to the point of absurdity. For example, it is well known that the head of the Russian Orthodox Church for more than 18 years was Patriarch Aleksey II, whose secular name was Aleksey Mikhailovich Ridiger and who was born in Estonia. But could it have occurred to anyone in our country that a native of Tallinn is an “agent of influence” of Estonia? Moreover, the law enforcement authorities have so far been unable to provide any evidence of unlawful activities on the part of the EOC.

Mr. Chairperson,

Unfortunately, the supporters of this bill ignore the opinion of believers, the position of the Church itself and the legal community, and even criticism from international human rights bodies. For example, the Swiss organization Justice pour Tous Internationale has asked the United Nations Human Rights Council to look into the persecution of Orthodoxy in Estonia.

However, the Estonian authorities are prepared to blatantly disregard the constitutional rights of their own citizens for the sake of short-term political gain.

In particular, the attempt through legislative means to force the severance of canonical ties with the “mother church” and the *de facto* prohibition of the functioning of the Estonian Orthodox Church violates the principle of freedom of religion enshrined in the country’s Constitution.

Furthermore, the Estonian Government’s discriminatory actions run counter to its relevant international commitments, including those undertaken within the OSCE. With regard to the OSCE commitments, we refer, specifically, to provisions in the CSCE Helsinki Final Act of 1975, the CSCE Vienna Concluding Document of 1989 and the CSCE Copenhagen Document of 1990, along with OSCE Ministerial Council decisions adopted in Maastricht in 2003 and Kyiv in 2013. In these documents the participating States unanimously undertook to respect human rights and fundamental freedoms, including freedom of thought, conscience, religion and belief, and to refrain from discrimination on religious grounds. These rights may be restricted only in accordance with international standards. Persons belonging to national minorities “have the right freely to express, preserve and develop their ethnic, cultural ... [and] religious identity ... free of ... attempts at assimilation against their will. [...] to profess and practice their religion, including the ... possession and use of religious materials, and to conduct religious educational activities in

their mother tongue; to establish and maintain unimpeded contacts among themselves ... as well as contacts across frontiers with citizens of other States with whom they share a common ... cultural heritage or religious beliefs”.

Mr. Chairperson,

There can be no winners in the war unleashed by the Estonian authorities against canonical Orthodoxy and, in fact, their own population. The split in society and the growth of religious intolerance can hardly serve as a “reasonable price” to pay for the total Estonianization that the local elite so dreams of. Moreover, Estonia is encouraged in every possible way by the EU bloc, which, in order to satisfy its irrational hatred of everything Russian, writes in advance for its dependants a “blank cheque” for any human rights violations.

Mr. Chairperson,

Frankly, we are not expecting a substantive reaction from the Estonian representative, nor from other Member States of the European Union, which for decades have not only been turning a blind eye to the outrages taking place in the Baltic countries but also actively condoning them. Experience has shown that dialogue with those three States is meaningless, given the empty excuses and comments that we usually receive in response. The facts we have cited today will still be labelled “Russian propaganda”, and the response will be reduced to primitive accusations of “aggression in Ukraine”. I will be very much surprised if this is not the case, since, as we know, miracles do not happen.

Nevertheless, please consider our statement today as a direct appeal to the High Commissioner on National Minorities, Christophe Kamp, the Director of the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, Maria Telalian and the Personal Representative of the OSCE Chairperson-in-Office on combating discrimination, including against Christians, Regina Polak. We will distribute the text immediately. We call upon the OSCE officials to respond publicly, within the framework of their mandates, to the increasing repression of the Estonian Orthodox Church and to take concrete steps to stop the attempts to ban it by legislative means.

Thank you for your attention.