

Delegation of the Russian Federation

**STATEMENT BY MR. DMITRY BALAKIN,
DEPUTY PERMANENT REPRESENTATIVE OF THE
RUSSIAN FEDERATION, AT THE 1150th MEETING OF THE
OSCE PERMANENT COUNCIL**

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On the violation of the language rights of national minorities in Latvia

Mr. Chairperson,

We are once again obliged to bring up the subject of the repression by the Latvian authorities of linguistic minorities in that country – in this case the provocative steps taken by the Government in Riga in connection with the Russian language.

It turns out that the Ministry of Education and Science has drafted amendments to the regulations of the Cabinet of Ministers regarding the content and procedure for centralized examinations. According to these amendments, students taught in a national minority language must sit examinations (except of course for foreign languages) in Latvian.

The official explanation for this is the supposed increase in the number of Russian-speaking pupils who prefer to take their examinations in Latvian.

In the first place, the desire of some of these pupils to sit examinations in Latvian is already accommodated today, but in the second place it has nothing to do with the right of others to have their knowledge tested in their native language. In reality, however, local experts believe that the possibility today of choosing the examination language is hindering the Latvianization of Russian schools, insofar as it confirms the demand for Russian-speaking teachers, while it is well known that the Latvian authorities are also attempting to get rid of many of these very teachers by any possible means.

The way in which the Ministry of Education and Science is attempting to introduce these innovations is interesting. The amendments were discussed at a meeting of the Ministry's Consultative Council on National Minorities, of which only five out of 15 members belong to national minorities. The meeting ended with the formal approval of the proposed wording, despite the fact that the Latvian Association of Russian-Language Schools had already informed the relevant authorities of its disagreement with the proposed innovations.

In recent times, sufficient evidence has accumulated in this way of the attempts by the Government in Riga to oust the Russian language by all possible means from various aspects of the life of this multi-ethnic country. They include the amendment on the “loyalty” of teachers, language “courts” and the increase in penalties for the non-use of the official State language.

The systematic violations of the rights of the Russian-speaking population of Latvia have clearly reached a critical point and can no longer be dealt with through national legal remedies. We have learned that Latvian human rights defenders recently submitted a request to the Office of the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court to examine this question and the possible prosecution of Latvian officials involved in discrimination for ethnic reasons within the country.

Just a few days ago, it came to light that some Latvian schools had already been severely sanctioned by the Latvian State Language Centre following an inspection by it of graduation balls in schools.

An inspection of this nature took place on 15 June at 16 schools, in five of which so-called “violations” were discovered: teachers there had dared to address their now former pupils in the Russian language. It is well known that activities like this in Latvia are defined as offences subject to administrative penalties.

An administrative file was opened on Valery Episkoposov, principal of Middle School No. 12 in Liepāja, merely because of the fact that at the graduation event for the ninth class teachers at the school addressed Russian-speaking graduates in Russian without offering parallel interpretation into Latvian. The principal will be obliged to pay a heavy fine.

It is clear that actions of this Centre are in line with the general policy of the Government in Riga with regard to national minorities aimed at restricting their right to their own identity. And to this end, any legal pretexts are being ferreted out.

For example, the Centre claims that graduation balls are public events subject to the law on languages, despite the fact that these balls are attended only by the graduates themselves and their parents and teachers. One wonders whether people meeting in a park, let’s say, to celebrate a birthday will also be punished for singing “Happy Birthday” in Russian.

Under these circumstances, the actions of the Latvian inspectorate may be described as nothing less than discriminatory and a gross violation of human rights.

We believe that the OSCE’s specialist bodies, including the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights and the High Commissioner on National Minorities, should respond to this situation.

Thank you for your attention.