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**STATEMENT BY
MR. ALEKSANDR VOLGAREV, DEPUTY PERMANENT REPRESENTATIVE OF
THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION, AT THE 1355th MEETING OF THE
OSCE PERMANENT COUNCIL**

17 February 2022

On ongoing violations of human rights in Latvia

Mr. Chairperson,

We are obliged once again to draw attention to the deteriorating human rights situation in Latvia.

The shameful phenomenon of mass statelessness persists in that State. According to data from the Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia, approximately 10 per cent of the population, or around 200,000 people, fall into this category and so are deprived of fundamental human rights. International human rights bodies have repeatedly pointed out how these people are being discriminated against – most recently the United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights in 2021. As for the reduction in the number of so-called “non-citizens”, this is happening mainly because of natural population decrease, rather than a high naturalization rate, which the representatives of Latvia here are so fond of invoking.

Moreover, the official Latvian authorities are well known for their barbaric approach towards the rights of national minorities, above all the Russian-speaking population, whom they regard as a destabilizing element. Systemic efforts are being undertaken to completely purge the information space of Russian-language media. The Russian-language education system, too, is in danger of being eliminated. A ban on the provision of higher education in the Russian language is in place. On 1 September 2021, the transitional period of the school reform ended, as a result of which the proportion of instruction in the State language has been substantially increased in national minority educational institutions. The process of “de-Russification” has even extended into kindergartens: the preschool establishments of national minorities must now set up Latvian-language groups upon request.

The actions of the Latvian authorities contravene the international obligations of that State under both the OSCE and the European Union framework. This refers, in particular, to Articles 21 and 22 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, which lay down clearly that any discrimination is to be prohibited, including discrimination based on membership of a national minority, and that linguistic diversity must be respected. We would ask the EU representatives: when will you finally react to the outrageous violations of human rights and fundamental freedoms by one of your Member States?

In the same vein as this unbridled Russophobia is the authorities' attitude towards activists from the Russian-speaking diaspora, who regularly come up against infringements of their civil rights. Their activities are monitored by local security services, criminal proceedings are instituted against them under spurious pretexts. This is particularly true of those who openly criticize the nationalistically oriented policy of that State. In particular, we have repeatedly drawn attention to the politically motivated trials of the activist Alexander Filey, the publicist Yuri Alekseev and the author Alla Berezovskaya, who together with 13 colleagues of hers stands accused of co-operating with the Russian-owned Sputnik Latvia outlet.

However, Latvian justice managed to outdo itself quite recently, on 8 February, when the Vidzeme district court of Riga issued its verdict against a well-known public figure, the anti-fascist Alexander Gaponenko. He is charged with incitement to national or ethnic hatred; activities directed against national independence, sovereignty, territorial unity and the State authorities; and assisting a foreign State in activities against Latvia. Incidentally, the last accusation was based on, *inter alia*, the fact that he had received a number of grants from the Russkiy Mir Foundation for the publication of historical monographs.

Criminal proceedings were initiated against Mr. Gaponenko back in April 2018. The human rights defender spent around four months in a Riga prison at the time; he was released in August 2018 after signing a pledge not to leave the country. Now, after four years of proceedings, he has been handed a conditional sentence of one year and six months' imprisonment. The highly controversial decision was also taken to confiscate the money seized during a search as having been "derived from crime".

The political background of this case against a well-known anti-fascist is evident. His active civic engagement and work as a publicist prompted the persecution against him. It was precisely on account of his uncompromising convictions, his open criticism of the Latvian Government, and his anti-fascist and anti-military statements that he was so inconvenient for the authorities of that country. After all, it is well known that, under the pretext of freedom of expression, Nazi accomplices are openly honoured in Latvia, marches of the Latvian Legion of the Waffen-SS are held every year, and much else besides.

The sentence that was handed down confirms the biased and politicized nature of the Latvian justice system. Moreover, this verdict has established a dangerous judicial precedent: anti-fascist views are now considered to be a criminal offence in Latvia. It is regrettable that the authorities of that State blatantly disregard human rights and, when it suits them, blithely do away with the right of citizens to express themselves freely in their own country.

In our view, this high-profile matter warrants a public assessment by the international human rights community. We call on the OSCE Secretary General, the High Commissioner on National Minorities and the management of the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights to respond, in accordance with their mandates, to this egregious case of harassment of civil society. We also expect to hear relevant assessments from the EU "bloc", which normally keeps such a close eye on any human rights violations in other countries.

We call on the Latvian authorities to fulfil their international obligations in good faith, stop this "witch-hunt", and ensure, on the one hand, that members of civil society and journalists are able to continue performing their duties, which are of public importance, and, on the other, that Russian speakers are able to receive education in their native language.

Thank you for your attention.