



Statement by Ambassador Gints Apals, Permanent Representative of the Republic of Latvia, delivered in response to the statement by the Russian Federation

Permanent Council No.903,
Vienna, 1st March , 2012

Mr Chairman,

Latvian authorities have registered the fact that various representatives of the Russian Federation have questioned the legitimacy of the referendum on constitutional amendments held in Latvia on 18 February 2012. The amendments were aimed at introducing Russian as the second state language in Latvia.

I would like to inform the Permanent Council that the referendum went smoothly. Only 17% of all citizens supported the adoption of Russian as the second state language. The voter turnout was exceptionally high - the participation rate exceeded 71%. The results are very clear – 74,8% of all participants voted against the proposed amendments, while 24,9% had positive opinion. No substantive complaints about the conduct of the referendum were received.

The referendum reaffirmed that sensitive issues could be addressed and resolved through democratic means. Vast majority of the citizens wish to keep Latvian as the only state language. Latvia will continue developing an open and consolidated society on the basis of democratic values and Latvian language.

It is important to keep in mind that Latvian Constitution and laws guarantee and protect the rights of persons belonging to national minorities to preserve and develop their language and their ethnic and cultural identity. Latvia will continue to develop and finance its liberal education model providing state-funded education in eight minority languages: Russian, Polish, Hebrew, Ukrainian, Estonian, Lithuanian, Roma and Belarusian.

I would like to emphasise that the citizenship policy of my country is based on the principle that the Republic of Latvia continues the legal personality of the state which lost its independence in 1940 following the occupation and annexation by the Soviet Union. Latvia did not grant its citizenship to all persons residing on its territory upon regaining of independence in 1991, but ensured a privileged and easy access to naturalisation and citizenship to former citizens of the USSR.

Latvia's non-citizens enjoy a wide range of rights, except some political rights, and are under protection of Latvia when abroad. At the same time, Latvian government remains firmly convinced that participation in elections and referenda is a prerogative of the citizens.

Our legislation on naturalisation and citizenship, as well as our language policy, have been developed in close co-operation with international organisations (including the OSCE) and therefore fully meet all relevant standards.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.