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PC.DEL/1062/20
30 July 2020

ENGLISH
Original: RUSSIAN

Delegation of the Russian Federation

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AT THE 1277th MEETING OF THE OSCE PERMANENT COUNCIL**

30 July 2020

On violations of human rights in the Baltic countries

Mr. Chairperson,

We should like to draw attention yet again to gross and overt violations of human rights in the Baltic countries.

I shall start with the non-compliance by Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania with their obligations regarding freedom of speech and access to information. The wide range of “tools” used to exert pressure on Russian and Russian-language media includes the blocking of Internet content, banning journalists from entering the country, stripping them – under false pretexts – of their official accreditation, closing their bank accounts and so on. This year, even graver violations have been added to that list.

Thus, on 1 January, the Sputnik news agency closed down its Tallinn bureau after staff members recruited from the local population received letters from the Estonian police threatening them with criminal prosecution for collaborating with a Russian media outlet. Moreover, financial and judicial pressure was exerted on the editorial staff by relevant local entities.

Soon after Estonia, the Latvian and Lithuanian Governments, too, decided to expand the scope of European Union sanctions against individuals to target the media, announcing almost simultaneously that seven television channels operated by Russia Today would be forbidden from broadcasting. This prohibition concerned news and documentary channels broadcasting in English, Spanish and Arabic.

Furthermore, in March, the First Baltic Channel had to suspend the production and broadcasting in Estonia and Latvia of news programmes and other regular programmes hosted by presenters, while on 11 June, the Saeima (Latvian Parliament) adopted amendments to the Electronic Media Act resulting in substantial restrictions on television broadcasting in the Russian language. Henceforth, 80 per cent of the broadcasting space in Latvia is to be allocated to languages spoken in the European Union and the European Economic Area, while the remaining 20 per cent is for all other languages, including Russian, which happens to be the native language of over a third of the country’s inhabitants.

A few days ago, it transpired that Latvia’s National Electronic Mass Media Council has initiated steps to restrict the broadcasting of the television channel Rossiya RTR. This was motivated by the

incitement to discord allegedly detected in that channel's talk show "60 Minutes". The aforementioned regulatory body established that certain designations used by the participants in the discussion, including the talk show's host, Ms. Olga Skabeyeva, could perhaps be interpreted as incitement to hatred. One may well ask whether there was any real incitement here or if it was just a case of "perhaps" and "could be". Once again, what we are dealing with are conjectures of the notorious "highly likely" style, though this time in Latvian. On the Council's website it is explained that if any further violation (even if it is just one) is detected in that talk show in the course of a year, the Council will be entitled to decide whether to restrict the broadcasting of that television channel's programmes in Latvia.

Such steps amount to a most blatant violation of freedom of opinion and expression and of freedom of the press. They curtail substantially the rights of a large proportion of the population in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania to access information in their native language and contravene the international obligations of those countries. Specifically, we are dealing with violations of Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), of Article 27 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966), of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities (1992), and of the Council of Europe's Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (1995) – not to mention numerous OSCE instruments, including the 2018 Milan Ministerial Council decision on the safety of journalists.

All these instruments have in common the priority they attach to journalists being able to go about their work freely, irrespective of whether that is to the liking of the authorities or not. Accordingly, one cannot but be puzzled by the silence observed in this regard by international entities, including the European Union, of which those three countries became members in 2004. Such conduct merely serves to strengthen the conviction of the Estonian, Latvian and Lithuanian Governments that their actions enjoy complete impunity.

Similar developments are taking place in the field of education, where these three States have over many years been conducting a systematic campaign to squeeze out the Russian language.

Clear confirmation of this is to be found in the so-called educational reform in Latvia, which continues to gather momentum. Among the most recent examples we may cite the Latvian Parliament's adoption, on 2 July, of the overtly discriminatory International Schools Act. As stipulated by its provisions, teaching in such educational facilities may be conducted only in the languages of countries belonging to the European Union and NATO. The proposals made by certain politicians to include in that list the languages of States with which Latvia has established official diplomatic relations were met with undisguised hostility by the Members of the Latvian Parliament. For example, the head of the Parliament's Foreign Affairs Committee, Mr. Rihards Kols, openly stated that it was the Government's duty not to allow schools teaching in Russian or Chinese to spring up in Latvia. In view of such a pronouncement, one must assume that the "geopoliticians" in Riga will by no means restrict themselves to those two languages alone. Yet, not so long ago as February this year, the Minister of Education of Latvia, Ms. Ilga Šuplinska, spoke in an interview with the radio station Baltkom about the possibility of establishing an international Russian school in the country on the basis of a bilateral treaty. Unfortunately, these were mere words without substance.

The new law effectively establishes that some children in Latvia are more equal than others. Moreover, this inequality is reinforced by invoking the principle of national, linguistic and – given the country's religious make-up – also religious affiliation. In practice, for one group of "privileged" pupils it will be sufficient to master the alphabet in the State language and to have some basic knowledge of the country, whereas another group, consisting mainly of Russian-speaking children, will be faced with much stricter requirements. There are quite a few historical examples of such segregation policies carried out at the State level. The tragic consequences that they led to are also well known.

When speaking of the curtailment of educational and linguistic rights, it is impossible not to mention the discriminatory amendments to the Education Act adopted in Latvia on 14 May. These concern Russian-language kindergartens, which henceforth must, on demand, set up groups with Latvian as the language of instruction. Significantly, no provision is made for such groups to be set up with teaching in Russian if so requested.

This selective approach by the authorities in Latvia, which is aimed at unceremoniously squeezing out the Russian language, is utterly at odds with the country's international commitments and violates, among others, a number of European Union norms, notably Articles 21 and 22 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union and also Articles 165(1) and 165(2) of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union. The lack of a clear response from the European Union to such policies and practices by these three Baltic States is absolutely unacceptable in our view.

Furthermore, the European Union's attempts to turn a blind eye to the infamous phenomenon of statelessness that is so widespread in Estonia and Latvia do not stand up to scrutiny either. I would remind you that in Estonia there are around 71,000 "non-citizens", or 6 per cent of the country's population, while in Latvia they number approximately 205,000, or 11 per cent of the population.

We once again urge the Baltic countries to put a stop to policies of discrimination against their Russian-speaking inhabitants and to return, finally, to the implementation of their international commitments. Likewise, we call on the European Union, which is so zealous about the observance of human rights beyond its frontiers, to offer them whatever support it can.

Thank you for your attention.