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**STATEMENT BY
MR. ALEKSANDR VOLGAREV, DEPUTY PERMANENT REPRESENTATIVE OF
THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION, AT THE 1438th MEETING OF THE
OSCE PERMANENT COUNCIL**

8 September 2023

**On the ongoing grave violations of OSCE human dimension commitments
by the Baltic States**

Mr. Chairperson,

The authorities in the Baltic countries continue to surpass themselves in finding ways and methods of violating the rights of the Russian and Russian-speaking population. Under spurious pretexts and by invoking imaginary threats, they are brazenly taking it out on thousands of their own inhabitants and throwing them under the bus to indulge their historical complexes and for the sake of opportunistic considerations.

We have already drawn attention to the amendments adopted in 2022 to Latvia's migration laws. In accordance with these amendments, Russian citizens who were previously citizens or non-citizens of Latvia and who have not yet reached the age of 75 must sit an exam to demonstrate in-depth knowledge of the Latvian language in order to extend their permanent residence permits. Shocking video clips have appeared on the Internet that show bedridden invalids literally being carried off to take these exams.

In early August 2023, Ingmārs Līdaka, the head of the Saeima (Latvian Parliament) Commission on Citizenship, Migration and Social Cohesion, announced that the Office for Citizenship and Migration Affairs would order all Russian citizens who had not passed the State language exam to leave the country. The most recent data indicates that only 20 per cent of those who had signed up for the exam got through the testing successfully in July and August; the rest have been given an opportunity for a resit. That being said, some 6,000 Russian citizens did not even bother attempting this language test because of its difficulty. According to the Latvian Ministry of the Interior, out of a total of 25,000 individuals only 2,570 Russian citizens managed to successfully complete all the procedures and obtain a residence permit in accordance with the new requirements.

On 2 September 2023, the Latvian migration services announced that they would proceed to revoke the residence permits of several thousand Russian citizens and send out notifications demanding that they leave the country within 90 days. We should like to stress that the overwhelming majority of Russian citizens to whom this blatantly inhumane and callous measure applies are people of advanced age; many of them are suffering from serious chronic illnesses and, for objective reasons, they could not successfully

navigate these “filtration” procedures. Very often, though, the reason was elderly people’s unawareness of the nuances of this campaign.

It is no secret that the legislative initiative in question came into being at the height of the election campaign season and that its instigators were members of Latvia’s far-right political forces, whose ideological platform is based on aggressive xenophobia and intolerance towards Russians.

In that regard, the amendments recently submitted to the Saeima providing for a two-year grace period give cause for cautious optimism. At the same time, one cannot fail to be concerned over the fact that the country’s parliamentarians will not start reviewing these proposals until after the documents entitling thousands of Russian citizens to legally stay in Latvia have expired. We will continue to carefully monitor developments.

The Lithuanian authorities have likewise intensified their campaign to drive Russian citizens whom they characterize as “unreliable” out of the country. The methods used to carry out these inhumane actions range from the denial of residence permits to the revocation of such permits. In November 2022, a “questionnaire” containing provocative content was introduced for Russian and Belarusian citizens. The State Security Department has drawn conclusions on its basis and declared 254 Russian citizens to be a threat to national security. Most of them have already left the country or been deported. A not inconsiderable number of Russian and Belarusian citizens are currently engaged in litigation to fight the rulings that were made.

In mid-August, yet another Russophobic initiative with markedly racist underpinnings was submitted to the Estonian Parliament for consideration. This time, the party of Prime Minister Kaja Kallas is proposing to “temporarily” deprive Russian and Belarusian citizens of the right to vote in local government elections. Not only the opposition but also the other partners in the ruling coalition are calling into question the constitutionality of that undertaking. It is not ruled out that the relevant judicial bodies will be consulted on this matter. Nevertheless, since the draft law originated with the Prime Minister’s party, it may well, by the look of things, be rammed through the Parliament. What is more, the European Union, which includes Estonia in its ranks, continues to stand quietly by as one of its Member States flagrantly violates international obligations, including the provisions of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination. Among the norms flouted are also OSCE commitments on elections, democracy and the rule of law. We call upon the High Commissioner on National Minorities and the Director of the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights to respond, within their respective mandates, to this latest high-profile matter and to take it properly into account in their interactions with that State. We request that the present statement be regarded as an official request to the aforementioned executive structures.

Public and political life is by no means the only sphere in which segregation is taking place. The systematic destruction of the system of education in national minorities’ languages, including education in the Russian language, continues in Estonia. As you know, amendments were made to the relevant law in December 2022 providing for the transition of the entire education system to teaching in the State language to be completed by 2030. The transition is set to begin in 2024, but already from 1 August 2023 Russian schools with teachers who do not have a command of the Estonian language have been facing draconian fines of up to 10,000 euros.

The Estonian authorities’ systematic violations in the field of education, which go back many years, have been flagged by the United Nations Special Rapporteurs on minority issues, in the field of cultural rights, and on the right to education. In a joint statement published on 17 August 2023, they expressed “grave concern” over new legislation that may “eliminate minority language education”.

The Special Rapporteurs are particularly concerned about “how the new provisions could affect members of the Russian linguistic minority, who make up a significant proportion of the country’s population”. They point out that “despite protests from Russian-speaking parents and their children, a number of Russian-language schools have reportedly been closed in recent years.” The experts also note that such steps aimed at restricting the opportunities for receiving education in minority languages are contrary to international human rights instruments.

Mr. Chairperson,

Once the Russian military operation in Ukraine got under way, the authorities in the Baltic countries – which until then had preferred to ignore the comments from various international human rights bodies – altogether stopped reacting to external “irritants” in the form of criticism from the United Nations, the OSCE and the Council of Europe. It is as if Russia’s special military operation had given the Estonian, Latvian and Lithuanian Governments a licence to commit gross violations of the rights of Russian and Russian-speaking people.

These sick manoeuvres by the “Baltic troika” are of a piece with their policies aimed at rewriting history, glorifying Nazis and their accomplices, and pandering to manifestations of neo-Nazism. We reiterate that the actions being carried out by those countries’ authorities have markedly racist underpinnings and run counter to their international obligations, including OSCE commitments. This refers, in particular, to Decision No. 10/07 adopted by the OSCE Ministerial Council in Madrid, which calls for “continued efforts by political representatives ... strongly to reject and condemn manifestations of racism, xenophobia, anti-Semitism, discrimination and intolerance, ... as well as violent manifestations of extremism associated with aggressive nationalism and neo-Nazism, while continuing to respect freedom of expression”.

In that regard, we once again call upon the High Commissioner on National Minorities and the Director of the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights to duly respond, within their respective mandates, to these egregious violations of OSCE commitments.

Thank you for your attention.