



PERMANENT MISSION OF THE REPUBLIC OF LATVIA TO THE UN,  
OSCE AND OTHER INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS IN VIENNA

**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 855,  
Vienna, March 24, 2011

Mr Chairperson,

The issue brought up by the Russian Ambassador has been discussed in the OSCE many times. Let me use this opportunity to remind that Latvia rejects any form of totalitarian ideology. My authorities have persistently condemned the crimes committed by Soviet and Nazi regimes, including, of course, the Holocaust. Our position has not changed. Latvia disapproves of all kinds of extremism and radicalism, including anti-Semitism, xenophobia, racism and other forms of intolerance.

What took place in Latvia on 16 March 2011 was a series of private remembrance events organised by war veterans, their friends, supporters and relatives. Some 3,000 people participated in a ceremony at the Monument to Freedom in the very centre of Riga. Small radical groups used these events to stage protests and to promote their views publicly. The number of these radicals was limited – a few dozen at best.

The freedom of assembly and of expression is guaranteed in Latvia. The commemoration events and the protests were authorised by specific rulings of the Administrative Court. The forces of law and order did their best to prevent confrontation between the participants of rival events. They did an excellent job, not a single incident was registered and no person was arrested by the police.

Historical debate is none of OSCE functions. My delegation would prefer to spare the time for more relevant activities. Nevertheless, the pronouncements of the distinguished Ambassador of Russia necessitate a short factual explanation.

Let me recall that Latvia was occupied by Soviet forces in 1940, by German forces in 1941, and again by the Soviet army in 1944-45. Against international conventions, the two occupying powers forced Latvians to serve on both sides of the front. More than 100,000 men had to wear German uniforms.

The Latvian legion was a heterogeneous military formation. Some infantry units were indeed attached to the Waffen SS. Other units were part of the air force or the police. No soldier or officer of the Legion ever became member of the SS organisation. Therefore all allegations that former SS men were freely marching in Riga on March 16 are simply false. Equally wrong are assertions that 65 years after the war the veterans are glorifying Nazi ideology with which they had nothing to do in the past.

As early as in 1950 the US Commission on Displaced Persons concluded that the Baltic legions were to be considered as “separate and distinct in purpose, ideology, activities and qualifications for membership from the German SS”.

It is interesting that exiled Latvian veterans celebrated March 16 in many Western countries already since 1952. The first remembrance event in Latvia was organised in 1990 – weeks before the declaration of independence, when Soviet occupation army was still very much present in the streets of Riga.

Therefore it is difficult to comprehend why certain OSCE participating States started paying close attention to these remembrance events only in 1998. It is not much easier to understand why the Permanent Council should pay attention to March 16 events on annual basis. The position of my government is quite clear – historical debate should be left for historians.

Nevertheless, out of necessity, I have to object to systematic stigmatisation of my country, using March 16 as a pretext. Latvia’s situation during the World War II was not unique. A number of European countries were allied to Axis powers or were occupied by them. The population of these countries had to support the Axis war effort in many ways – as soldiers (both volunteer and mobilised personnel), as labour force (either voluntary or forced), civil servants, and police officers or simply by being economically active under given circumstances. Here I recall that some 500,000 men and women joined the Russian Liberation Army of General Vlasov which, incidentally, comprised several military units attached to the Waffen SS.

What makes the difference between my country and its critics in this hall is the fact that Latvian war veterans, their supporters and their opponents enjoy full civil rights, including the freedom of assembly. All citizens can participate in commemoration events or protest against these events as long as they observe the law. I am quite certain that this will not change in the future. I hope that next year the Permanent Council will not be obliged to listen to ritual speeches condemning non-existent glorification of Nazi ideology and racism in my country.

Thank you very much.