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**STATEMENT BY MR. ALEXANDER LUKASHEVICH,
PERMANENT REPRESENTATIVE OF THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION,
AT THE 1184th MEETING OF THE
OSCE PERMANENT COUNCIL**

3 May 2018

On the persecution and detention of Mr. Alexander Gaponenko in Latvia

Mr. Chairperson,

We are deeply concerned about the latest arrest on 20 April in Riga of Alexander Gaponenko, the well-known human rights activist, blogger, public figure, co-chairman of the United Congress of Russian Communities and chairman of the Congress of Non-Citizens. Unreasonable force was used by the Latvian security police to arrest him. He was beaten and handcuffed for 11 hours. Mr. Gaponenko went on hunger strike in protest against this arbitrary treatment.

According to the Latvian authorities, Mr. Gaponenko's actions were supposedly aimed at undermining State sovereignty, territorial integrity, State authority and the political system of Latvia and at inciting inter-ethnic discord. In reality, he was arrested for anti-Nazi postings on Facebook. The human rights defender faces up to eight years' imprisonment. We consider the accusations to be absurd.

For many years now and in spite of unprecedented pressure by the country's intelligence services, Mr. Gaponenko has consistently defended the rights of the Russian-speaking population in Latvia, including the right to education in their native language as set forth in key international documents.

As you know, at its final reading on 23 March, the Saeima of Latvia approved amendments to the Law on Education, which provide for the switch to the official State language for teaching in all schools by the 2021–2022 academic year. At the same time, Mr. Gaponenko was to have travelled to Moscow to present his film *Let Russian Schools Be* about the Latvian Government's policy towards national minority education at a documentary film festival.

The accusations against Mr. Gaponenko of inciting inter-ethnic discord seem hypocritical given the evident disregard by the ruling coalition in Latvia for real manifestations of this kind. One need only recall the appeals by local nationalist radicals for "non-citizens" and "disloyal" Russian-speaking inhabitants to be rounded up in a "ghetto".

This is an example of blatant prejudice and the policy of double standards by the Latvian authorities with regard to dissidents who have the courage to call out the discriminatory attitude of Latvia's political leadership. All this provokes the rightful indignation of that part of Latvian society whose voice and rights the authorities choose to ignore. Indeed, human rights organizations in Estonia have also expressed their support for Mr. Gaponenko.

The actions of the Latvian leadership violate the provisions of universal and European international legal documents on human rights and the rights of national minorities and the basic principles of the European Union. These measures demonstrate the wide gulf between the statements about respect for democratic values and the policies of the Latvian authorities in practice.

We recall that in the Concluding Document of the 1986 Vienna Meeting participating States undertook to "ensure access by all to the various types and levels of education without discrimination as to race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status." In Istanbul in 1999, the OSCE States reaffirmed their "commitment to ensure that laws and policies fully respect the rights of persons belonging to national minorities, in particular in relation to issues affecting cultural identity." Specifically, they emphasized "the requirement that laws and policies regarding the educational, linguistic and participatory rights of persons belonging to national minorities conform to applicable international standards and conventions."

We regard the persecution of Mr. Gaponenko as a violation of the right to freedom of expression and the dissemination of information. It is quite clear that his arrest is meant to intimidate all Russian-speaking inhabitants of Latvia, particularly those who speak in support of education in the Russian language. We urge the OSCE participating States to apply pressure on Latvia to force it to respect its obligation to protect human rights. It is significant that not once have we heard concerns expressed at Permanent Council meetings by the United States of America, the EU or individual Member States about the actions of the Latvian authorities in connection with human rights activists defending the rights of the Russian-speaking population. It seems that the authorities in Washington and Brussels are not interested in these cases of arbitrary detentions, the excessive use of force by security services, the persecution of dissidents and the "shrinking space for civil society".

We expect the High Commissioner on National Minorities, Mr. Lamberto Zannier, and the Director of the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, Ms. Ingibjörg Sólrún Gísladóttir, to provide an objective assessment of the events in Latvia, as their mandates demand.

Thank you for your attention.