

PC.DEL/735/17
2 June 2017

ENGLISH
Original: RUSSIAN

Delegation of the Russian Federation

**STATEMENT BY MR. ALEXANDER LUKASHEVICH,
PERMANENT REPRESENTATIVE OF THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION,
AT THE 1148th MEETING OF THE
OSCE PERMANENT COUNCIL**

1 June 2017

On violations of the language rights of national minorities in Latvia

Mr. Chairperson,

The recent legislative initiatives in Latvia, which will clearly give rise to even greater violations of the language rights of national minorities in that country, are a cause for major concern.

In October last year already, the Cabinet of Ministers of Latvia approved amendments to the Law on Education drafted by the Ministry of Education and Science, making it possible for employers to terminate immediately the employment of the heads of educational establishments or teachers if they are shown to be “disloyal” to Latvia and its Constitution or if during the teaching processes they encourage an “improper attitude” by pupils “to themselves, other people, culture, society and the State”.

According to the drafters of the document, one of its aims is to “counter risks to the interests of the State and society, democracy, security and development that could arise through illegal activities by the head of an education establishment or teacher disloyal to Latvia and its Constitution” and also to reduce the inefficient use of State budgetary resources.

Typically, the Minister for Education and Science Karlis Shadurskis has stated that these amendments do not provide for a specific procedure to evaluate the so-called loyalty of teachers. In other words, the Minister effectively acknowledges that this is nothing other than a blanket instrument for dealing with undesirable employees within the education system. According to information received, the State Education Review Service is already considering around 30 submissions concerning a number of “ambiguous” statements by teachers and administrators in various schools.

Legislation of this type has prompted an explosive reaction in local socio-political and expert circles. Many people describe amendments that do not fall within the framework of comparable legislative norms as “travesties” of the law. Even members of the titular nation recognize that these amendments are being used to settle accounts.

Coincidentally or not, the approval of these amendments coincided with the case of Innova, a private school whose accreditation was withdrawn for political reasons – its school management is one of the organizers of the Immortal Regiment campaign in Latvia. Its licence to provide basic education has been revoked. Complaints through all possible channels by the school about the illegality of the action have been frustrated. The parents of pupils taught there have been strongly advised to seek other schools. The effective closing down of Innova is a prime example of how these “loyalty amendments” will be employed in practice.

Unfortunately, this does nothing to reduce the problem of the respect for the language rights of national minorities in Latvia. Amendments to the Code of Administrative Offences are said to be under consideration in the Saeima that would significantly increase the penalty (up to 700 euros for individuals and up to 10,000 euros for legal entities) “for non-use of the State language to the extent required while exercising an official function” and “disrespect” for the State language.

A corresponding draft law was submitted on 25 May this year for consideration by the Parliamentary Law Committee. This amendment creates a tool that allows municipal offices, including mayors of towns, to be dismissed for language violations.

In fact, the authors of the amendments do not even attempt to hide the fact that their intention is to eliminate the “unjustified” use of other languages, which effectively prevents the leaders of administrative bodies from communicating with Russian-speaking inhabitants of their towns in their native language. Typically, one of the initiators was the deputy from the National Alliance, former Minister for the Environment and Regional Development, Einārs Cilinskis, who has taken part in SS marches in Riga.

We believe that the adoption of these laws does nothing to promote the effective integration of national minorities into Latvian society and tramples roughshod on international norms on the use of native languages, including CSCE/OSCE commitments. We would remind you that the 1990 Copenhagen Document states that “the participating States will endeavour to ensure that persons belonging to national minorities, notwithstanding the need to learn the official language or languages of the State concerned, have adequate opportunities for instruction of their mother tongue or in their mother tongue, as well as, wherever possible and necessary, for its use before public authorities, in conformity with applicable national legislation.”

The legislative initiatives of the Latvian authorities hardly live up to these commitments and are interpreted wherever possible to the disadvantage of national or linguistic minorities.

This also runs contrary to the 1998 Oslo Recommendations by the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities stating that “persons belonging to national minorities shall have adequate possibilities to use their language in communications with administrative authorities.”

Moreover, the notion itself of “loyalty” to a country is highly equivocal from a legal point of view, given the absence of clear criteria for its assessment. It is not in line with democratic standards and is clearly part of a political propaganda agenda.

We hope that common sense will prevail and that these language amendments will not enter into force. This calls for an appropriate response by the international community, legal institutions, non-governmental organizations and all those concerned about the observance of basic human rights.

In that connection, we urge the Office of the High Commissioner to keep a close watch on developments and to send the necessary signals to the authorities in Riga.

Thank you for your attention.