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**STATEMENT BY
MR. ALEKSANDR VOLGAREV, DEPUTY PERMANENT REPRESENTATIVE OF
THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION, AT THE 1471st MEETING OF THE
OSCE PERMANENT COUNCIL**

2 May 2024

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

Madam Chairperson,

The situation regarding the Baltic States' compliance with OSCE human dimension commitments carries on deteriorating.

The actions of the Latvian authorities continue to be aggressive and aimed at eradicating all that is connected with Russia, the Russian language and culture, and even all that is connected with the country's own Russian-speaking population. In Latvia, our worst fears are playing out – almost like clockwork – as regards the consequences of fostering, at the highest level, the glorification of Nazism and attendant violations of the rights of national minorities. As elements of the sad reality there we find the brutal persecution of Russian speakers, the deportation of elderly people and persons with disabilities, the harassment of children in schools and kindergartens, and the hounding of journalists and civil society activists for their pro-Russian or anti-fascist views.

In mid-April of this year, the Saeima (Latvian Parliament) gave the green light for the latest amendments to the Immigration Act, which broaden the category of Russian citizens who are required to obtain, within the space of a year, official status as permanent residents of the European Union. This refers to those who obtained a Latvian passport before July 2023. There are 4,700 such people. They are mainly military pensioners and their family members. Elderly people will have to jump through additional linguistic and bureaucratic hoops, as it were. If the necessary paperwork is not submitted, their residence permits will simply be cancelled.

In view of the growing pressure exerted on them by the Latvian authorities, we regret that the process of appointing an OSCE representative to the Latvian-Russian Joint Commission on Military Pensioners has come to a standstill. We understand that this personnel issue was bequeathed to the Maltese OSCE Chairmanship by its unprincipled predecessor, the OSCE Chairmanship of North Macedonia. Unfortunately, the authorities in Skopje simply ignored, without giving any reasons, our repeated calls for this issue to be resolved. We nevertheless urge Malta to settle the matter as soon as possible, as stipulated by the relevant OSCE commitments and the mandate of the Chairmanship-in-Office.

In late April of this year, it became known that Latvia intended to abandon the teaching of Russian as a second foreign language in schools. Until recently this option was still available as the sole opportunity for schoolchildren to study their native language; going forward, 40 per cent of them will be deprived of that opportunity. This is being done in contradiction of data from the Ministry of Education and Science indicating that more than half the pupils at secondary education institutions choose precisely Russian as a second foreign language. From the 2026 academic year onwards, schoolchildren will be asked to choose one of the official languages of the European Union or the member countries of the European Economic Area, or a foreign language the teaching of which is governed by intergovernmental agreements on education.

The Latvian authorities have decided to take this discriminatory step despite hundreds of submissions filed by parents and international human rights bodies. We regard such actions as constituting a gradual segregation of the Russian-speaking population on linguistic and ethnic grounds that is aimed at erasing the cultural and linguistic identity of minors. Is it not time that the EU bloc finally reined in the chauvinistic aspirations of one of its Member States?

The same also applies to what is happening in Estonia, where the authorities are planning a veritable religious war on the Estonian Orthodox Church (EOC) under the Moscow Patriarch. In mid-April of this year, the country's Minister of the Interior, Lauri Läänemets, announced a proposal to designate the Moscow Patriarchate of the Russian Orthodox Church a "terrorist association" and to subsequently seek a court injunction against the activities of the EOC. Certain undisclosed assessments by the Ministry of the Interior and the security police have served as grounds for launching veritable reprisals. A propaganda campaign is at present being actively waged in the media to vilify the Russian Orthodox Church; pressure is being exerted on parish leaders. Consider, for example, the personal visit paid by the aforementioned Minister to the Pühtitsa Convent in order to convince – or, in effect, force – the Mother Superior to "voluntarily" (essentially under duress) end the Convent's subordination to the Russian Orthodox Church. Moreover, should there be refusal to comply with the ultimatums being imposed, Estonia's officials are not ruling out the forcible liquidation of churches.

We regard the actions that are unfolding as an encroachment on freedom of religion, as incitement to religious intolerance and as a violation of the constitutional rights of that OSCE participating State's inhabitants. The lack of a reaction on the part of the Personal Representative of the OSCE Chairperson-in-Office tasked with combating discrimination, including discrimination against Christians, Regina Polak, comes as no surprise to us. We have observed similar behaviour by this Austrian professor in connection with another sad example, namely the Kyiv regime's actions against the Ukrainian Orthodox Church. This gives reason to assume that she is deliberately turning a blind eye to infringement of the rights of Christians in the OSCE area. We call upon the Maltese Chairmanship to educate her on how she should be implementing her mandate in good faith.

Madam Chairperson,

Nor can it be said that Lithuania is lagging behind its neighbours. A few days ago, we learned that a scheduled international bus that was travelling from St. Petersburg to Tiraspol was held up at the Lithuanian border and not allowed to cross for 48 hours. The people inside, an overwhelming majority of whom were Moldovan citizens, were subjected to most thorough questioning. According to media reports, some of them were removed from the bus for having given incorrect – from the Lithuanian authorities' point of view – answers to customs officers' provocative questions on political and geographical matters. What is this if not an egregious example of inhumane and inhuman treatment, to say nothing of a violation of the right to freedom of movement? Such incidents are by no means isolated instances. Even children are targeted, as was the case back in March, for example, with the members of a Moldovan choir called "Rapsodia".

The Lithuanian authorities' prejudiced, discriminatory attitude towards Russian and Belarusian citizens also manifested itself in the latest extension of the ban on their entering and staying on Lithuanian territory. Of a piece with this is the condition imposed on the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) not to include those two countries' citizens in an election observation mission – a condition that runs counter to OSCE commitments. As is known, the upshot was that the ODIHR took the decision – an unusually sensible one for current times – not to monitor the presidential election at all.

In general, the Lithuanian Government's migration policy has long been a cause of concern for non-governmental organizations (NGOs) working in the field of human rights and for civil society activists. In late February of this year, over ten European and Lithuanian NGOs issued an appeal to the authorities to reconsider their "problematic" migration policy. Among the main issues raised were the inhumane conditions in which migrants were being held, illegal deportations and the lack of opportunities for the newly arrived to seek asylum. Civil society activists from Sienos Grupė ("Border Group") have submitted a request to the Prosecutor General's Office asking for investigations to be resumed into incidents causing death or injury to those who arrived in the country between 2021 and 2023. A body of evidence on abuses of the rights of migrants during 2023 is to be found in a dedicated study by Lithuania's Human Rights Monitoring Institute.

Madam Chairperson,

The examples we have cited attest to a flagrant violation of OSCE human dimension commitments by the three Baltic States. Clearly, the state of nationalistic frenzy in which the authorities of these three countries find themselves is being fuelled by the forbearance for manifestations of this kind shown by the EU bloc, but also by international human rights bodies, including the specialized executive structures of our Organization. It is to these that we are appealing today. Nothing productive can come of dialogue with the representatives of the European Union, Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia at this venue in view of the nonsensical replies and remarks we are being treated to.

We stress once more that we regard the silence of those whom the Organization has invested with a relevant mandate as being tantamount to the encouragement of unlawful acts and also as yet another manifestation of double standards in the field of human rights. Our statement today is the latest reminder to OSCE functionaries of their outrageous inaction. It is time to put an end to it.

Thank you for your attention.