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**STATEMENT BY MR. ALEXANDER LUKASHEVICH,
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AT THE 1283rd MEETING OF THE OSCE PERMANENT COUNCIL**

1 October 2020

On violations of the rights of migrants and refugees in the European Union

Mr. Chairperson,

The item on violations of the rights of migrants and refugees in the European Union has been included on the agenda since 2015. Most of the problems are of a long-term, chronic nature, for example, overcrowding in refugee camps, the harsh conditions experienced by migrants inside the camps and limited access to medical care. Moreover, many of the challenges currently facing the international community, such as trafficking in human beings, drug trafficking, terrorism, rising racism and xenophobia, are in one way or another related to the migration processes in this region.

The origins of the unprecedented scale of migration flows are well known. First and foremost, it is the efforts of external forces to destabilize the situation in the Middle East and North Africa and to interfere in the internal affairs of sovereign States in an attempt to overthrow undesirable governments. Now the West itself, including the European Union countries, has to deal with the consequences of its short-sighted and aggressive policy.

Under these circumstances, migrant children find themselves in a particularly vulnerable situation, some of whom, upon arrival in Europe, either go missing or are held in unacceptable conditions. This has been confirmed by reports of the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, and also of international non-governmental organizations. There are also problems involving overcrowding in temporary detention centres for asylum seekers and the continuing practice of collective forced expulsions. Furthermore, female migrants are often victims of violence, notably by border guards or law enforcement officials. This evidence confirms the European Union's reluctance or unwillingness to address migration issues and its desire to shift responsibility on to individual Member States, which bear the heaviest burden in receiving migrants and refugees. The same rebuke may be administered to certain transit countries outside the European Union whose policy is to expel persecuted aliens from their territory.

The reports of a number of human rights organizations, including Amnesty International, on the ill-treatment and intimidation of migrants by Croatian intelligence services are of serious concern. For example, in May, security forces detained a group of Afghans and Pakistanis, who were tortured in the woods and then handed over to the police. The migrants were then deported to Bosnia and Herzegovina.

According to human rights activists, 20 to 50 people are escorted out of Croatia every day using such methods.

The pandemic has exacerbated an already difficult situation in this area. Because of the severe social and economic consequences in the countries of origin, the flow of migrants will increase. This, in turn, will have an impact on the already overcrowded refugee camps in destination countries, which often become epicentres of coronavirus outbreaks.

According to the online newspaper “EUobserver”, cases of mass outbreaks of COVID-19 were recorded back in April in migrant detention centres in Germany. For example, the disease was diagnosed in 250 out of 587 people in the Ellwangen migration centre in Baden-Württemberg. A similar situation occurred at the Halberstadt centre in Sachsen-Anhalt, where around one hundred refugees went on hunger strike to protest against the inappropriate measures to contain the coronavirus outbreak.

Back in March, the Chair of the Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs of the European Parliament, Juan Fernando López Aguilar, drew the European Commission’s attention to the plight of 42,000 asylum seekers in tent camps on the Greek islands of Samos, Chios, Lesbos and Kos. Many of them were suffering from poor health owing to the lack of adequate housing, access to water and medical care, and also the prevailing unsanitary conditions. At the largest camp Moria on the island Lesbos, which was designed to hold 3,000 refugees, up to 26,000 migrants were living there, which is almost nine times more than its accommodation capacity. Not to mention the fact that there were only six intensive care beds on the whole island.

It was not long until we were able to witness the outcome of the European Union’s mismanagement. As you know, on 9 September, a fire broke out at the Moria camp, which actually destroyed this settlement. According to the Director of the Doctors Without Borders’ Medical Operational Support Unit in Greece, Apostolos Veizis, the fire in Moria was a consequence of European policies. It was predictable and could have been prevented. It was a deliberate policy, clearly formulated as a deterrent and punishment for these people. The COVID-19 pandemic was used, is used and will continue to be used to strengthen deterrence and fear policies, and also to justify inhumane policies.

According to human rights defenders, against the backdrop of the migration policy of Italy and Malta, conflicts between the authorities of these States and non-governmental organizations, which rescued illegal immigrants in the Mediterranean Sea and brought them to the shores of these countries, occurred with greater frequency in 2019 and 2020. The situation worsened in April, when Italian and Maltese ports were declared unsafe to receive refugees because of the coronavirus threat.

All this confirms that the European Union is not used to solving migration-related problems by means of humane methods with respect for international law and human rights. The Pact on Migration and Asylum, which was recently drafted by the European Commission, also gives little hope that the situation will improve.

Against this background, we once again call on the leadership of the European Union and its Member States to meet their international commitments in this area, including those adopted within the framework of the OSCE.

Thank you for your attention.