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Delegation of the Russian Federation

**STATEMENT BY MR. ALEXANDER LUKASHEVICH,  
PERMANENT REPRESENTATIVE OF THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION, AT THE  
1324th MEETING OF THE OSCE PERMANENT COUNCIL**

15 July 2021

**On human rights violations in Estonia**

Madam Chairperson,

We are once again compelled to address the human rights situation in Estonia. Since the 1990s this country has been featuring in the documents of international human rights organizations as one of those that systematically violate the rights of national minorities. The unfavourable situation of people in that category, above all the Russian-speaking population, along with the many serious failings when it comes to ensuring freedom of expression and other basic human rights, refutes the Estonian authorities' claims that their country has a well-developed human rights system.

The Estonian Government is ignoring the numerous recommendations and comments made by relevant structures of the United Nations, the OSCE and the Council of Europe, first and foremost the Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities. Estonia has to this day not acceded to a number of key international instruments protecting the rights of such minorities. The international treaties it has ratified – above all the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages – are not being fully implemented under formal pretexts. As for its official human rights institutions, they serve rather as a tool for justifying the authorities' harsh “ethnocratic” course.

Among the most outrageous manifestations of the State policy of discrimination on the basis of linguistic and national characteristics is the persistence of mass statelessness, notably taking the form of the ever so humiliating categorization of people as “non-citizens”. As of 1 October 2020, there were around 69,000 stateless persons in the country (approximately 6 per cent of the population), the overwhelming majority of these being Russians. Estonia ranks in the world's top ten countries with the greatest numbers of stateless persons.

The Estonian authorities, sticking to the course established in 1991 that pursues the construction of a monoethnic and monolingual State, refuse to grant full citizenship to inhabitants who fall into the aforementioned category and demand, instead, that they pass exams to demonstrate a high level of proficiency in the Estonian language. This is done in spite of regular criticisms from international organizations, including the United Nations, the OSCE and even the European Union (through the European Parliament), and also from human rights non-governmental organizations. The Estonian Government also continues to ignore The Hague Recommendations regarding the Education Rights of National Minorities

drawn up in October 1996 at the initiative of the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities, Max van der Stoel.

The Russian language has virtually been squeezed out of the higher education system. Under the pretext of “optimization”, the Government of Estonia is conducting a programme for the merging of Russian-language and Estonian secondary schools. With no consideration for the interests of Russian pupils and their parents, fully Estonian-language educational institutions are springing up in such cities and towns as Keila, Tartu, Rakvere, Haapsalu, Viljandi, Kohtla-Järve, Põlva and Võru, among others. The latest example is the closing of the Russian school in the town of Kallaste on 1 July this year.

The discrimination against non-Estonians is bolstered by the activities of the Language Inspectorate, a specialized oversight and prosecutorial body that is not subject to parliamentary or public control. Its functions boil down exclusively to identifying instances of insufficient proficiency in or use of the Estonian language, followed by the imposition of penalties and hefty fines on natural persons and legal entities. Significantly, the authorities turn a blind eye to comments about the repressive nature and arbitrariness of such inspections.

A further long-standing problem in Estonia is the persecution of dissidents, or rather those people whom the local authorities deem to be such. At the end of March, it became known that the human rights defender and lawyer Sergey Seredenko had been arrested on charges of having committed a crime against the Republic of Estonia. We have spoken about this at the Permanent Council. The authorities hushed up his arrest for almost a month. Local human rights defenders, along with their colleagues from other Baltic countries, have pointed out that the reason for these actions by the Estonian authorities was the spirited engagement of Mr. Seredenko and other Russian activists in efforts to preserve Russian-language education and protect monuments to Red Army soldiers who died fighting to liberate Estonia from Nazism. For a long time, Mr. Seredenko performed, on a voluntary basis, the duties of a “Russian ombudsman”. Public opinion is being moulded in the Estonian media so as to show him in a bad light. Many facts relating to the pressure exerted on him are being deliberately suppressed. For example, no mention is made of how Mr. Seredenko, despite having two university degrees, lately had to work as a caretaker at a secondary school in Maardu, since he was unable to find work in his profession as a result of being on file with the security police. He was also providing legal counselling free of charge to human rights defenders and activists from the Russian communities of Latvia and Lithuania. What is now happening to Mr. Seredenko?

Further, a draconian “editorial policy” has been established in the Estonian media – essentially covert censorship – which does not permit them to publish positive or even neutral material on Russia, criticize the shortcomings of State policy on inter-ethnic relations, call into question the notion of a “Soviet occupation”, talk about the liberation of Estonian territory from the Nazis during the Great Patriotic War, cover in a positive vein Estonia’s experience as part of the USSR, and so on.

The Russian media in Estonia are obliged to work in an environment where they are faced with open antagonism by the authorities, which view them as carriers of “enemy propaganda”. For example, the activities of the Estonian office of the Sputnik news agency have been suspended since 1 January 2020, its staff having been threatened with criminal prosecution by the Ministry of the Interior’s information office for money laundering. On 20 March 2020, under pressure from government and law enforcement agencies, the First Baltic Channel ceased broadcasting “Novosti Estonii” (“Estonian News”), a daily news programme.

The few journalists from Russia who are accredited in Estonia have been denied access to official events with no reason being given. State and municipal officials avoid contact with them under formal pretexts. The Estonian authorities demonstratively ignore requests and applications from such news agencies

as Interfax, RIA Novosti, TASS and VGTRK. Correspondents do not receive newsletters and press releases from the Estonian government agencies; they are not allowed to enter the premises of State institutions. They are also subjected to financial pressure. “Nudged” by the intelligence agencies, banking institutions refuse to serve them. Accounts are closed arbitrarily, contractual obligations are reneged upon unilaterally, and so forth.

This is by no means a complete list of what is going on in Estonia. Among the issues calling for particular attention one must also cite the glorification of Nazism that is occurring at the State level and the numerous acts of vandalism against monuments.

The situation in Estonia has on more than one occasion appeared on the radar of relevant international institutions, including specialized OSCE structures. We urge them to pay greater attention to violations in this OSCE participating State.

As for the European Union, it unfortunately looks on benignly at the negative processes taking place there. We therefore call on the authorities in Tallinn and Brussels to take immediate steps to remedy the situation in accordance with their international commitments.

Thank you for your attention.