

The OSCE Secretariat bears no responsibility for the content of this document and circulates it without altering its content. The distribution by OSCE Conference Services of this document is without prejudice to OSCE decisions, as set out in documents agreed by OSCE participating States.

PC.DEL/713/20  
19 June 2020

ENGLISH  
Original: RUSSIAN

Delegation of the Russian Federation

**STATEMENT BY MR. ALEXANDER LUKASHEVICH,  
PERMANENT REPRESENTATIVE OF THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION,  
AT THE 1272nd MEETING OF THE OSCE PERMANENT COUNCIL**

18 June 2020

**On violations of freedom of the media in Latvia**

Mr. Chairperson,

Regarding the situation of national minorities in Latvia, we should like first to say something on a different topic and to congratulate our Latvian colleagues on the fact that common sense and a legal mind-set, even if not always, are prevailing in that country. On 11 June, the Constitutional Court of Latvia ruled that the ban on studying in Russian at private universities, which affected about 30 per cent of all students, was unconstitutional. This creates an important precedent in the protection of the rights of national minorities. Local human rights defenders on the whole welcomed this decision.

However, on that same day, 11 June, the Saeima (Latvian Parliament) presented another unpleasant surprise for the Russian-speaking population of the country and adopted in its final reading the amendments to the law on electronic media developed on the initiative of President Egils Levits. In accordance with the new additions, which enter into force on 1 July 2021, 80 per cent of the content of basic service packages must be in the official languages of the European Union and the European Economic Area. Thus, only 20 per cent is allocated for programmes in other languages, including Russian.

In addition, a provision has been introduced prohibiting broadcasts by television stations that have been banned by the National Electronic Media Council of Latvia in the past three years. This Council can also ban broadcasts by stations if the beneficiary is a person “endangering the national security of the country or engaged in a criminal organization”. These restrictions apply, for example, to Russian television stations such as Rossiya RTR, Petersburg Channel 5, Dom Kino and Muzika Pervogo. We recall that in recent years the National Electronic Media Council of Latvia has repeatedly adopted decisions to close down Russian broadcasters, claiming that their programmes feature “propagandistic” or “hostile” content. The ban even applied to the television station Bobyor, whose programmes are about modern design and the interior furnishing of apartments and houses. Apparently, the creation of a comfortable home is considered by the Latvian authorities to be a “danger to national security”.

During the drafting of the amendments and at the meeting of the Saeima itself, some deputies made no bones about the media at which the legislative initiatives are aimed. Thus, the head of the Human Rights and Public Affairs Committee, Artuss Kaimiņš, stated openly that “stations that broadcast the Kremlin line

should not be included in the package of channels offered by cable operators and other television service providers”.

This is a gross violation of Latvia’s obligation to respect freedom of speech and access to information. The adopted amendments were condemned by Miroslav Mitrofanov, Co-Chair of the Latvian Russian Union, who criticized their “mindless severity” and “extreme racism”. The politician pointed out that not only Russian State television stations but also Russian-language opposition programmes offering alternative or politically neutral information fell under the repressive measures.

Operators still have the possibility of creating additional special packages in which they can include television stations in Russian, but this will entail an increase in the cost of the service. As a result of what is another absurd “witch-hunt”, the end consumer will suffer – in this case, Russian-speaking citizens, who will have to pay for both the basic package and the additional set of stations. There is no doubt that, with the coronavirus pandemic and the ensuing sharp drop in income for many families, such measures will hit the most vulnerable socio-economic groups particularly hard.

The amendments to the electronic media law are not the first example of a discriminatory policy with regard to Russian or Russian-language media in Latvia. Let me remind you that in early February of this year a series of searches took place in the offices of the Latvian media holding Baltic Media Alliance, after which the Russian-language First Baltic Channel had its operations suspended. In 2019, by the way, this was the second most popular station in this Baltic State. On 20 March, the daily Russian-language news programme “Latvian Time” and the talk show programmes “Behind the Scenes” and “Five Kopeykas” also stopped broadcasting. Over the past few years, the Russian media have regularly been attacked by the Latvian authorities: Russian television stations have been banned and journalists expelled from the country.

In view of the fact that 40 per cent of the population of Latvia uses the Russian language, we find it absolutely unacceptable for this section of the population to have its access to sources of information, including alternative ones, restricted. In that regard, it might be worth recalling the resolution on national equality signed back in 1990, in which the parliaments of the three Baltic States expressed their “determination to ensure respect for the rights of all people living in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, irrespective of their nationality, native language, or political and religious beliefs, in accordance with international human rights instruments and with the laws of our States, and the compliance of these laws and regulations with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights”.

Incidentally, Latvia’s media policy was one of the topics mentioned in a telephone conversation between the Russian Minister for Foreign Affairs, Sergey Lavrov, and the European Union High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Josep Borrel, on 16 June. The Russian Minister called on his colleague to analyse the actions of the Latvian authorities and to assess them accordingly. We hope that the authorities in Brussels, who care so much about high democratic standards outside the European Union, will pay attention to the latest manifestation of “freedom of speech” Latvian-style.

We recall that in the 2018 OSCE Milan Ministerial Council decision on the safety of journalists, participating States urged “political leaders, public officials and/or authorities to refrain from intimidating, threatening or condoning ... violence against journalists” and reaffirmed “that the media in their territory should enjoy unrestricted access to foreign news and information services, that the public will enjoy similar freedom to receive and impart information and ideas without interference by public authority”.

Similar obligations are contained in other CSCE/OSCE documents. Thus the 1975 Helsinki Final Act states that participating States should “make it their aim to facilitate the freer and wider dissemination of information of all kinds, to encourage co-operation in the field of information and the exchange of

information with other countries, and to improve the conditions under which journalists from one participating State exercise their profession in another participating State”. And the 1990 Document of the Copenhagen Meeting of the Conference on the Human Dimension of the CSCE stated that participating States should “encourage, facilitate and, where appropriate, support practical co-operative endeavours and the sharing of information, ideas and expertise among themselves”, including “access to information”. The 1991 Document of the Moscow Meeting of the Conference on the Human Dimension of the CSCE, the 1999 OSCE Istanbul Summit Declaration and others are in the same vein.

We call on the authorities in Riga to end political censorship of the information space, and on the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media and the High Commissioner on National Minorities to respond to this latest egregious example of the trampling on freedom of speech in Latvia.

Thank you for your attention.