

Delegation of the Russian Federation

**STATEMENT BY MR. ALEXANDER LUKASHEVICH,
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AT THE 1119th MEETING OF THE
OSCE PERMANENT COUNCIL**

17 November 2016

**Regarding the violations of the
language rights of national minorities in Latvia and Lithuania**

Mr. Chairperson,

We should like to draw the Permanent Council's attention to the situation of national minorities in Latvia and Lithuania. It concerns the severe restrictions established in these countries regarding the use by minorities of their mother tongue in the spelling of their own names, signs and place names in areas with a large minority population.

Back in 2010, when considering the appeal Leonid Raihman versus Latvia, the United Nations Human Rights Committee noted that recording first names and surnames in Latvian identity documents exclusively following the rules of the Latvian language amounts to direct interference on the part of the State with privacy and gross violation of Article 17 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Unfortunately, we are still forced to note a persistent unwillingness on the part of the Latvian Government to heed the comments in this regard from the UN and other specialist organizations.

In that regard, it is telling that when it ratified the Council of Europe's Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities the Latvian Saeima (parliament) made two reservations. They revoked for Latvia those provisions of the Convention which gave national minorities the right to communicate with the authorities in their native language and to use it in topographical names in areas with a large minority population.

A similar situation has emerged in Lithuania. Its Seimas (parliament) consistently votes down anything intended to regulate this matter, including compromise draft laws. The formal pretext is that such initiatives contravene the country's constitution, which enshrined the Lithuanian language as the State language.

In that connection, the Court of Justice of the European Union was forced to note in its judgement that if the failure to amend the spelling of names results in serious administrative, professional or personal inconvenience then the rights and freedoms of the citizen may be "unduly restricted".

This problem has also been examined by the Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, which noted in its conclusion two years ago that a vacuum persists in Lithuania regarding the legal protection of national minorities. Things have not changed for the better since then.

We are not talking only about the Russian-speaking inhabitants of Lithuania. For many years, the authorities of that country have been preventing the Polish minority (they account for around 6.5 per cent of the population) from exercising their right to spell their first names and surnames in official documents using letters of both the Lithuanian and Polish alphabet. Furthermore, pursuant to the Polish-Lithuanian treaty on friendship and good-neighbourly relations signed back in 1994, Lithuanian Poles and Polish Lithuanians are guaranteed the right to spell their first names and surnames in their native language. However, this provision is not being implemented in Lithuania in practice. The Lithuanian Government argues that this is because the letters Q, W and X do not exist in the Lithuanian alphabet.

Fundamental difficulties on account of this discrepancy arise in principle in mixed families, for example, when crossing borders and identifying family relationships. In this way, restrictions on freedom of movement, human contacts and even family reunification are added to the violation of the language and cultural rights of minorities.

There is also a serious problem with the spelling of topographical names in places with a large national minority population – in the towns of Visaginas and Klaipeda, where there is a large Russian-speaking population, and also in the Šalčininkai district, where 80 per cent of the population are Poles.

Overall, this phenomenon needs to be examined in the context of the entire language policy of Latvia and Lithuania, which is aimed essentially at dismantling the minority language education system, closing schools, forcing the Russian language off television and radio, not to mention the fact that knowledge of the State language is effectively a criterion for the loyalty of the residents of these countries.

We once again urge the Latvian and Lithuanian authorities to reconsider their discriminatory approaches to national minorities and to meet their international commitments to protect their human rights. This refers in particular to the special provisions of the CSCE/OSCE documents and decisions adopted in Vienna in 1989, in Copenhagen in 1990, in Paris in 1990, in Helsinki in 1992, in Istanbul in 1999 and a number of others.

We also firmly believe that the situation requires greater attention on the part of the OSCE specialist structures, first and foremost the future High Commissioner on National Minorities and the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights.

Thank you for your attention.