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PERMANENT REPRESENTATIVE OF THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION, AT THE  
1306th MEETING OF THE OSCE PERMANENT COUNCIL  
VIA VIDEO TELECONFERENCE**

18 March 2021

**On protests and police violence in some Western European countries**

Madam Chairperson,

The past two weeks have once again been marked by violent repression of protests and violations of freedom of assembly in a number of Western European OSCE participating States.

In the Netherlands, for example, the police did not hold back in dealing with the opponents of the coronavirus restrictions who took to the streets of The Hague last Sunday (14 March). Water cannons, rubber batons and mounted police were used against the demonstrators; they were even set upon by police dogs. For example, a video clip of two police officers mercilessly beating a man lying on the ground and baiting him with an out-of-control dog is being widely discussed on social media. These incidents are in no way in keeping with the image imposed globally of The Hague as the supposed world capital of justice and human rights.

A week earlier, an unauthorized rally took place in Amsterdam, where law enforcement officers detained 28 participants. No riot control equipment was used on that occasion, but it was at the ready as usual.

Last weekend, a wave of protests against coronavirus restrictions also swept through Germany. In Dresden, security forces brutally pushed back protesters. Some one thousand administrative offences were recorded, which entail hefty fines. The police were also poised to use water cannons at any time. A similar picture was observed in Munich, where law enforcement officers forced the protesters to disperse.

On 13 March in Liège, Belgium, police used tear gas and water cannons to disperse a demonstration by supporters of the Black Lives Matter movement. Four people were injured. People took to the streets after a video of the brutal detention of a black girl appeared on the Internet. Against this backdrop, many drew parallels with the arrest of George Floyd in the United States of America in May 2020, which – we would remind you – resulted in the death of an African American man as a result of police brutality. There is no denying that Belgian law enforcement officers resorted to the use of riot control equipment in order to prevent disorderly behaviour by the demonstrators. However, can this response of the law enforcement officers be considered proportional?

Similar measures were also used against protesters in Greece on 12 March. Residents of Athens and Thessaloniki were outraged at the excessive powers of the police in connection with the curfew imposed in the country, as well as the patrolling of university campuses. Once again, tear gas, water cannons and stun grenades were used in response.

In Zurich, Switzerland, on 6 March, police broke up a demonstration of several hundred women on the occasion of International Women's Day. The police used tear gas. And yet Swiss politicians, including Alain Berset, a member of the Federal Council, declare on various international platforms their commitment to combating all forms of violence against women. It turns out that the Swiss Government's public rhetoric is in stark contrast to the practices that victimize the country's population, including women.

The same is also happening in the United Kingdom, where, in London last Sunday, law enforcement officers unceremoniously detained demonstrators who had gathered in memory of Sarah Everard, who was allegedly murdered by a police officer in early March of this year. According to the organizers, the aim of the rally was to protest against violence against women and police brutality. The very brutality that the participants encountered during the rally. In some of the footage, we can see the security forces brutally twisting the arms of several peaceful and unarmed female protesters in order to handcuff them. Four people were arrested. Detentions with the use of force continued during the protests on 15 March. One can hardly call such aggressive behaviour by law enforcement officers proportional or justified. This also begs the very logical question: can the British Government really claim to be a crusader against violence against women if this very violence is multiplying on the country's streets?

A similar question arises concerning the United Kingdom's self-appropriated "right" to external mentorship on issues of freedom of assembly. Especially against the background of existing laws and recent legislative initiatives in that country. As you know, the British Parliament is about to pass the "Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill", Article 59 of which reads: "[A person commits an offence] if the person does an act" that "causes serious harm to the public or a section of the public".<sup>1</sup> That person is then liable "to imprisonment for a term not exceeding 10 years". In this case, "serious harm" means, among other things, causing or threatening to cause "serious annoyance". So, in fact, it will now be possible in the United Kingdom to go to prison for up to ten years, for example, for holding or organizing an unauthorized rally that might cause such "annoyance". According to experts, it is clear that this bill will do nothing to contribute to the development of freedom of assembly in that country.

In addition, it will also be more difficult for foreign students to participate in demonstrations. Back in 2015, *The Guardian* newspaper wrote that the Home Office could revoke a student visa if a student was found to be involved in activities that "represent a threat to national security". According to the journalists, such a "threat" could also include international students' participation in protests.

In connection with these disturbing incidents, which are already becoming a steady trend, we strongly urge the authorities of the Netherlands, Germany, Belgium, Greece, Switzerland and the United Kingdom to ensure freedom of assembly as guaranteed by various international instruments, including relevant OSCE commitments and the European Convention on Human Rights. The authorities and law enforcement agencies of these countries should refrain from any disproportionate measures against demonstrators, including the excessive use of force. Those who have been arbitrarily detained for exercising their right to freedom of assembly should be immediately released. We hope that the European Union will also stop turning a blind eye to such actions by its Member States.

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1 Translator's note: Additional wording in square brackets has been included from the English-language document quoted for the sake of clarity.

One further point: a little about Eastern Europe. Because of the pandemic, no mass marches involving admirers of Latvia's Nazi past were held in Riga on 16 March this year. However, there were those who wished to lay flowers and wreaths at the Freedom Monument and the "Daugavas Vanagi" monument in memory of Latvian SS legionnaires who were involved in mass war crimes during the Second World War, including participation in the Holocaust. Here, of course, freedom of assembly was not violated. With this we congratulate the Latvian authorities. The European Union can be proud of you.

Thank you for your attention.