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**STATEMENT BY MR. ALEXANDER LUKASHEVICH,
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1343rd MEETING OF THE OSCE PERMANENT COUNCIL**

4 November 2021

On flagrant violations of freedom of the media in Latvia

Madam Chairperson,

We are unfortunately once again obliged to raise the issue of Latvia's flagrant and systematic violations of its commitments on freedom of the press and pluralism of the media. Last week, we saw how brazenly the Latvian Government continued its onslaught on Russian and Russian-language media resources.

Thus, on 26 October, following a decision by the Latvian media regulator, the First Baltic Channel – one of the most popular information resources among the Russian-speaking population – was stripped of its licence. The alleged reason was that it had committed “significant breaches” of Latvian law.

It is not the first time that this television channel has been subject to attack. On previous occasions, the channel was charged with “illegally” showing news programmes from Russia's Channel One, with breaching the Latvian Electronic Mass Media Act and the directive on audiovisual media services issued by the European Parliament and the Council of the European Union, and with broadcasting programmes that “endangered public health”. Although some accusations were of a clearly politicized nature, the management of the First Baltic Channel did everything they could to avoid a ban. In particular, they announced that, on 27 September, the channel would switch to broadcasting in the Latvian language. A series of programmes was also organized in Russian and Latvian on the importance of vaccination against the coronavirus disease. However, despite the measures taken, the licence of this popular television channel was nevertheless revoked.

The plight of the First Baltic Channel once again confirms that the objective of the Latvian authorities is to fully “purge” the country's media landscape of Russian and Russian-language media, and at the same time of sources of information presenting a point of view that differs from the Latvian Government's political narratives.

This is not the only recent example of repressive treatment of the press. On 26 October, it became known that the State Security Service had completed its investigation in the criminal proceedings instituted in December 2020 against 14 freelance reporters working with the Russian-owned outlets Sputnik Latvia and Baltnews. On the basis of that investigation's findings, criminal charges were formally pressed against

these journalists under Part 1, Article 84, of the Latvian Penal Act for the “violation of sanctions imposed by the European Union”. They face up to four years in prison. Think about it: simply for fulfilling their professional duty!

That is not all. On 29 October, the Pārdaugava court in Riga sentenced the well-known opposition publicist Yuri Alekseev to one year and two months’ imprisonment. The founder of IMHOclub, a popular Internet portal in Latvia, was convicted on account of material exposing acute social and political issues – for example, the infamous actions of the Latvian authorities in relation to national minorities. At his trial, Mr. Alekseev made a closing statement in which he pointed out that he had worked in journalism for 30 years and had been in charge of the *Biznes & Baltija* newspaper, the *Kommersant Baltic* and *Biznes LV* journals and the IMHOclub Internet portal. He stressed, in particular, that during all those years not a single thing published by him had been flagged for supposedly inciting ethnic discord.

We call on the Latvian Government once more to abandon its political censorship of the media landscape and to stop using the illegitimate EU sanctions as a pretext when squeezing out sources of information that are not to its liking.

According to the 1994 Budapest Document “Towards a Genuine Partnership in a New Era”, “freedom of expression is a fundamental human right and a basic component of a democratic society.” In the 2018 Milan Ministerial Council decision on the safety of journalists, the participating States undertook to “[b]ring their laws, policies and practices, pertaining to media freedom, fully in compliance with their international obligations and commitments and to review and, where necessary, repeal or amend them so that they do not limit the ability of journalists to perform their work independently and without undue interference”.

We are surprised at the lack of a meaningful response from the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media, Teresa Ribeiro, to the Latvian Government’s endless persecution of members of the Russian and Russian-language media. This signals to the Latvian Government that the Organization is in fact incapable of assessing adequately what is going on, and gives it an even freer hand to combat dissent.

We, on the other hand, entertain no illusions regarding the situation in Latvia: it amounts essentially to political censorship and reprisals, a practice that is all too familiar from certain historical periods. It does not matter how this criminal oppression is justified – especially if it is done so absurdly, on the basis of sanctions. As a rule, such societal processes in large countries have consequences that extend far beyond their borders; they shape general approaches within blocs. Here one could cite the example of the European Union, which modestly looks the other way whenever its members perform “experiments” on human rights. Let us say it outright: the EU is directly abetting reprisals against the media. We are not impressed by excuses to the effect that mass media regulation does not fall within the EU’s competence. In that case, the EU should perhaps not be commenting on what is happening in other countries.

In the new EU countries, whose statehood is essentially undergoing a “robustness test” – where, among other things, the maturity of their governance is being evaluated – such tendencies frequently take on a grotesque form. And woe betide those who are caught up in their cogwheels of repression.

Thank you for your attention.