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PC.DEL/687/20
11 June 2020

ENGLISH
Original: RUSSIAN

Delegation of the Russian Federation

**STATEMENT BY MR. ALEXANDER LUKASHEVICH,
PERMANENT REPRESENTATIVE OF THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION,
AT THE 1271st MEETING OF THE OSCE PERMANENT COUNCIL**

11 June 2020

**On violations of freedom of speech by social media platforms
in the United States of America**

Mr. Chairperson,

Two weeks ago, we already raised the issue of the well-oiled system of censoring information flows and attempts by some forces to subordinate the global information space to their own vested interests. We continue to closely monitor the fragmentation of the World Wide Web and note some disconcerting trends.

It is widely known that with the spread of the coronavirus pandemic, the dependence of people on digital media for obtaining information has increased dramatically. In connection with the election race that has begun in the United States of America, we have been witnesses to an unprecedented situation in which even the White House has had to ask social media platforms to stop online censorship.

On 28 May, President Trump signed an executive order instructing the Attorney General to draft proposals for amending US legislation regarding the regulation of social media. According to the document, if media corporations such as Twitter and Google intend to continue to edit and censor information, they should be treated as traditional media. “When large, powerful social media companies censor opinions with which they disagree, they exercise a dangerous power. They cease functioning as passive bulletin boards, and ought to be viewed and treated as content creators.” Interestingly, this approach by the country’s leaders could also be interpreted at the same time as an assumption by it of the role of media censor. This would be contrary to the First Amendment to the US Constitution, which prohibits Congress from promulgating laws restricting freedom of speech or freedom of the press. The executive branch of the United States does not appear to consider itself bound by this constitutional prohibition.

Mention must also be made of a further recent disgraceful initiative to categorize the press. In early June, the US social media company Facebook introduced a system of selective labelling of media that are “wholly or partially controlled by States”. To determine whether a site is controlled by the authorities, Facebook has bypassed universal mechanisms and, together with some experts and media organizations, has developed special – and essentially arbitrary – criteria to assess the presence or absence of such control.

The politically motivated and biased nature of this approach is well illustrated by the results in practice. The pages of Russia Today, Sputnik, RIA Novosti, the Chinese Xinhua News Agency and the

Iranian Press TV broadcasting corporation have already been labelled in this way. No such labels have been attached to the Facebook accounts of the BBC, the media holding France Télévisions or the Deutsche Welle radio and television company. Curiously, in the best tradition of double standards, the government-financed US media Voice of America, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty and others have received exemption from labelling. After all, in the candidly cynical words of the Facebook spokesperson, they “always maintain editorial independence”. Such loyalty will also be duly appreciated in the ruling circles in the United States, which harshly criticized this company not so long ago.

We consider this a flagrant violation of international obligations to ensure free and unhindered access to information, media freedom and freedom of expression, not to mention the First Amendment to the US Constitution referred to earlier.

If the truth be told, it is not important who wins this dispute, the US authorities or the social media platforms. Most likely, they will reach a “mutually beneficial agreement”, as is usually the case in the home of the Pulitzer Prize. The very fact that the global information space can so easily become hostage to the interests of a particular group is a matter of concern. In any case, it is the population who suffer since, in spite of the vociferous calls from various sides for the protection of human rights, they are effectively deprived of the possibility of obtaining information from alternative sources.

In that connection, we once again urge the US authorities to return to fulfilling their international obligations regarding freedom of speech and call on the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media, Mr. Harlem Désir, to assist the US authorities in this task and also to keep a closer watch on projects for censoring both the media and the global information space as a whole.

Thank you for your attention.