



Permanent Mission of Ukraine
to the International
Organizations in Vienna

**Statement in response to the issue raised
by the Russian delegation “On violations of freedom of the media in
the OSCE Area”**

As delivered by Ambassador Yevhenii Tsymbaliuk,
Permanent Representative of Ukraine to the International Organizations in Vienna,
to the 1302nd meeting of the Permanent Council,
11 January 2021

Madam Chairperson,

As Ukraine was mentioned in the statement of the Russian Federation I feel myself compelled to exercise the right of reply.

Ukraine recognizes the fundamental importance of the freedom of expression, and free, independent and pluralistic media as a core element of democracy. We believe that the free media and the professional journalism play a decisive role in the processes of democratic transformation in Ukraine.

At the same time the continued Russian armed aggression remains the biggest challenge to the media freedom and the security in Ukraine, as the Russian Federation exploits the media as an instrument of its hybrid warfare.

Disinformation is an important part of this warfare. It should be reminded that immediately after Russia occupied Crimea, it prohibited the Ukrainian television broadcasts. Later, it did the same in the temporarily occupied regions of the eastern Ukraine.

Ukraine has undertaken various measures to protect itself, which included establishing a number of fact-checking initiatives since 2014. We spared no efforts to explain the threat of the Russian propaganda to our Western partners. Unfortunately many of our warnings were taken seriously too late, after Russia turned to attacking the Western democracies directly.

Ukraine's own efforts included banning the Russian TV channels in 2014. We have heard a lot of criticism back then, but actually there was no decline in the freedom of speech as a result of our defensive actions.

Ukraine has always protected, protects and will be protecting its national security, including its information space.

All defensive measures to counter the information aggression are undertaken in line with the Ukrainian legislation and the international standards in the field of human rights and rule of law, including those on the protection of the national security and the territorial integrity, enshrined in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms.

On February 2, 2020, Ukraine's National Defense and Security Council decided to sanction three pro-Kremlin Ukrainian TV channels - 112, ZIK and Newsone - formally belonging to the Ukrainian MP Taras Kozak.

These three channels exploited the democratic freedoms and have nothing to do with journalism but represent Russian disinformation warfare. They filled

Ukraine's information field with fake news. The channels consistently violated journalism ethics and standards in pushing forward false narratives that presented a distorted reality. National media council issued numerous warnings, which had little or no effect.

Moreover, according to the Security Service of Ukraine, there is irrefutable evidence that the sanctioned entities have been financed from the Russian sources. The formal owner of these media outlets is alleged to have engaged in economic activity that helped to finance the terrorist operations in the Donbas.

The illegal activities of the TV channels 112, ZIK and Newsone are not new in Ukraine. Thus, the restrictive measures applied by the National Security and Defense Council of Ukraine are result of at least two-year discussions and considerations. The issue of restricting the activities of this so-called media outlets was first discussed in autumn 2018 by the Parliament of Ukraine.

The decision of the NDSC enacted by the President of Ukraine enjoys broad support by the vast majority of the media professionals, the independent experts and the representatives of civil society. A joint statement by 10 prominent Ukrainian civil society organizations, including disinformation watchdog Stop Fake, is a vivid example in this respect. In the abovementioned statement the independent experts concluded that the alleged Russian Trojan Horse channels "constitute tools of foreign influence operations, and therefore are a systemic threat to the information security of Ukraine." Sanctions against these channels "do not constitute an attack on the freedom of speech".

We also wish to express our appreciation to our partners who are aware of the challenges Ukraine faces in the hybrid war being waged against it and voiced their support for Ukraine's use of the lawful mechanisms to preserve its sovereignty, while preserving media freedom.

Ukraine now perfectly knows, and there are numerous examples around the world, including in the EU and the US, that Russia considers non-military means, including the subversion through media and social media, as the main tool of its military doctrine, sees it as even more important than conventional military means. Measures to protect democracies against these highly dangerous efforts are not only understandable, but critically needed. For Ukraine, as a country which for almost seven years now has fought against the multifaceted Russian aggression and its anti-democratic narratives, it's a matter of survival, not a matter of choice. This is the best contribution to protecting democracies, including the right to freedom of speech.

To conclude I would stress that the Russian disinformation constitutes a serious transnational threat, that creates smokescreen for unlawful actions by the Russian authorities both across the OSCE region and at home. Russian disinformation aimed at justifying the violations of OSCE principles and commitments, starting from the military intervention into the neighboring states and the interference in the elections in several countries to the internal human rights abuses and repression against political opposition, freedom of expression and pluralistic media in Russia itself.

At least 120 cases of detention, obstruction and violence against journalists have been recorded on 31 January as a result of media coverage of protests in support of the jailed opposition leader Alexei Navalny.

Thank you!