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AT THE 1035th MEETING OF THE
OSCE PERMANENT COUNCIL**

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On freedom of expression in the OSCE area

It is not the first time that the subject raised by our colleagues from the European Union countries has been considered at meetings of the Permanent Council. Freedom of expression is indeed one of the basic human rights, and the OSCE has a number of commitments to ensure its observance.

At the same time, there is a need to abandon the one-sided approach to the presentation of the material. Once again, freedom of expression is being discussed as if it were absolute, but there is nothing absolute about it. Freedom does not mean total permissiveness. In the first instance it is a responsibility. We believe that this aspect should be given greater attention, both by the participating States and by the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media.

In that context, we should like to draw the attention of the Permanent Council to the problem of developing an attitude of mutual respect and religious tolerance in society. The OSCE has adopted a number of decisions on this extremely topical question. As the statement by the representative of the European Union shows, however, even the tragedy in France has made no difference to attempts to place freedom of expression above other human rights, despite the fact that all rights not only have equal status but are also interlinked.

In multicultural, multi-ethnic and multi-religious societies, the development of an attitude of mutual respect and understanding for different cultures and traditions, and a solicitous attitude to the religious convictions of others are vitally important to the maintenance of peace and stability. Freedom of expression should not be used to justify the mockery of representatives of any race, ethnic group or religion. The responsible use of one's freedom is a very difficult question.

We all have lessons to learn from the events in France, not only about combating terrorism but also about respect for different cultures and religions. Obviously, acts of terrorism can never be justified as a means of punishing offenders. But we should not ignore the behaviour of those who provoke protest movements, sometimes because of a lack of

culture but also – and this is particularly worrying – on occasion through the deliberate dissemination of insulting information.

Every person, and journalists in particular on account of the special influence they exert on the mood and atmosphere in society, must learn not only mutual respect but also self-regulation. In this regard, the decision of the Ministerial Council meeting in Brussels on the self-regulation of the media and other mechanisms for ensuring increased professionalism, accuracy and adherence to ethical standards among journalists is particularly relevant.

It is the job of satire to highlight human inadequacies. Great satirists and fabulists like Aesop, La Fontaine and Krylov are excellent examples of this. But satire should not mock cultures or religion in general or offend religious sensitivities. Such licence and lack of restraint should not be equated with freedom of expression.

Representatives of more than 190 ethnic groups and over 60 confessions and religions have lived side by side in Russia for centuries. Through the many centuries of coexistence people have come to realize the importance and value of respect for others. And it is not even just a question of blasphemy being an offence in one country and not in another (although there is a serious signal to society here about teaching tolerance and respect) but of citizens and journalists themselves understanding the danger of “trampling” on sacred religious sentiments. For that reason the appeal by the Federal Supervision Agency for Information Technologies and Communications is more of a preventive measure to stop inexperienced journalists from being tempted into provocation and subscribing to the dangerous campaign developing in some Western mass media.

We have seen the massive demonstrations in Paris in support of the victims of the terrorist acts. And we fully support the idea that all members of society should be taught to resolve their problems and grievances in court by legal means.

At the same time, we should not forget other mass rallies, such as those in Chechnya in Grozny in support of tolerance. Almost a million Russian Muslims assembled to express their devotion to and veneration of the Prophet Mohamed. Their call for mutual respect was also supported by representatives of the Orthodox Church. The rally was peaceable without any excess and ended in a common prayer.

This is a serious signal to all OSCE participating States to begin dialogue to establish the fine line between safeguarding freedom of expression and respect for the rights and freedoms of others, between freedom of speech and tolerance, the delicate balance ensuring that the assertion of the rights of some does not entail a violation of the rights of others, and that multiculturalism does not mean the parallel existence of different cultures and religions without respect for the convictions, traditions and sentiments of others but rather respectful and peaceful coexistence with mutual support in the most vital aspects of public life.

We urge the OSCE participating States to encourage this dialogue and the exchange of best practices. We are willing to co-operate in this endeavour.

Thank you for your attention.