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**STATEMENT BY MR. ALEXANDER LUKASHEVICH,
PERMANENT REPRESENTATIVE OF THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION, AT THE
1302nd MEETING OF THE OSCE PERMANENT COUNCIL
VIA VIDEO TELECONFERENCE**

11 February 2021

On violations of freedom of the media in the OSCE area

Madam Chairperson,

We are obliged ever more frequently to draw attention to the deteriorating situation in the media sphere across the OSCE area. One may at present observe a collapse of standards pertaining to freedom of the media and freedom of expression in those participating States that are most inclined – evidently by virtue of tradition and as a “reflex action” – to count themselves as democracies.

Ukraine is keen to break all the negative records in that respect. As is known, on 2 February, a decree of President Volodymyr Zelenskyy gave effect to the decision by the National Security and Defence Council entitled “On the application of special personal economic measures and other restrictive measures”. This has to do with the blocking of a number of Ukrainian television companies, such as Novy Format, Ariadna TV, TV Vybor, Partner TV, Lider TV, the television and radio broadcaster 112-TV, Novosti 24 Chasa, and Novye Kommunikatsii. Among them are also three major television news channels with a huge audience: 112, NewsOne and ZIK. Their broadcasting in Ukraine is currently suspended, and their licences to use telecommunications networks and radio frequencies have been revoked. For now, they are able to broadcast via the YouTube platform, but the Ukrainian Government has signalled its intention to have them blocked there too. It is worth noting that these channels have been taken off air as a result of the large-scale campaign by the Ukrainian authorities to exert pressure on the media operating in the country.

But there is more to come. The Verkhovna Rada (Ukrainian Parliament) is currently scrutinizing a draft law on the media, while the Ministry of Culture and Information Policy of Ukraine is preparing a draft law on countering disinformation. These draft laws not only formalize the Ukrainian security services’ monitoring role with regard to journalists’ work, but also give these services wide-ranging powers to interfere in the editorial policy of the media – what is more, of private as well as State media. Last year, the then OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media, Harlem Désir, expressed his concern over these developments.

We would remind you that, on 4 October 2018, 229 members of parliament from the pro-presidential coalition in the Verkhovna Rada adopted Resolution no. 9157, in which they requested the National Security and Defence Council to impose restrictions on the activities of the aforementioned channels. A separate

review of them was initiated, as a result of which the National Council of Television and Radio Broadcasting of Ukraine attempted, on 28 January 2021, to fine the television channel 112 for allegedly disseminating material that “shows signs of bias”. However, the Council did not present any clear criteria defining this “bias”.

This time round, President Zelenskyy simply accused the television channels 112, NewsOne and ZIK of spreading some vaguely defined “propaganda” and arranged for them to be shut down without due process of law – all this despite the fact that barely one and a half years ago, he had promised a journalist from NewsOne, as it happens, that he would “never shut down any channels”. The Kyiv regime’s apparatus of repression, which has been working for many years to purge the information space of undesirable media, websites, print publications and even children’s books, is ratcheting up the pressure.

It is worth noting that the decision by the President of Ukraine has nothing whatsoever to do either with responsible information policy or with the principle of rule of law. Even in the highly “colourful” arena of Ukrainian politics, the opinion has emerged that such a measure is not in keeping with the law.

What is going on is cause for indignation, but not for surprise. After all, the nature of the political regime in Ukraine and the degree of its subjectivity are plain for all to see. What we are curious about is something else. How do undisguised censorship of the media and overt suppression of dissent square with the values of our Western colleagues, who are benevolently watching over their protégés in the Ukrainian Government?

They square quite well, by the looks of it. Literally at the last meeting of the Permanent Council, the distinguished Permanent Representative of the United States of America exerted herself more zealously almost than the distinguished Ambassador of Ukraine in justifying the unseemly actions of that country’s authorities. In doing so, she invoked the need “to defend its [Ukraine’s] sovereignty and territorial integrity by countering Russia’s [...] malign influence”. Favourable comments on the stifling of media pluralism in Ukraine through extrajudicial political decisions were made by the European Union’s functionaries and by the official representatives of Germany, the United Kingdom and Canada, not to mention the main beneficiary of the information purge in Ukraine, namely the United States. People in those countries should evidently be asking themselves whether their own right to choose their sources of information is not likely to encounter the same fate.

Let us take the United States, for example. At the Permanent Council on 21 January, we already raised the issue of the severe information censorship taking place there and the wave of criticism it has elicited from the international community. Yet, US digital platforms pretend that this has nothing to do with them and have continued to purge the Internet. For instance, the video hosting websites YouTube and Vimeo recently removed Mike Lindell’s documentary film, “Absolute Proof”, about the machinations during the US presidential election and the doubts cast on the legitimacy of the election results. We do not claim to have the same ratings, but our video clip on protests in the OSCE area, which was shown at the Permanent Council, was also swiftly removed by YouTube. Simultaneously a witch-hunt is taking place on social media against Donald Trump and his supporters.

Traditional journalism, too, is being subjected to a massive onslaught. According to a study by the Freedom of the Press Foundation that was prepared on the basis of data from the US Press Freedom Tracker (an NGO), 117 journalists were arrested in the United States in 2020, which is a record number. On the whole, more than a thousand violations of freedom of the media have been recorded, including instances of assault, denial of access to information and so on. This situation can hardly be described as normal.

Let us move on to the United Kingdom. As has been reported, that country's Office of Communications (Ofcom) last week revoked the licence of the Chinese television channel CGTN under a touchingly simple pretext: its content is allegedly controlled by the Chinese Communist Party and not by the licence-holding company. The channel had allegedly violated the Ofcom Broadcasting Code by its biased coverage of the protests in Hong Kong. Similarly, in 2019, Ofcom fined both the legal entity behind the Russian television channel RT, namely the autonomous non-profit organization TV Novosti, and the licence-holder of the television channel NTV Mir Baltic for their allegedly biased reporting on the long-debunked myth about the "poisoning" of Sergei and Yulia Skripal. This conduct by the UK media regulator smacks of extreme hypocrisy, given that none other than the BBC is funded from the State budget and that Voice of America, which also operates in the United Kingdom, is controlled by the US Department of State.

In Latvia, the aggressive campaign to purge the information space continues. A few days ago, the National Electronic Mass Media Council suspended broadcasts by the Russian television channel Rossiya RTR for a year; it also imposed a broadcasting ban on an additional 16 Russian channels, many of which had nothing whatsoever to do with politics. These prohibitions are part and parcel of the Latvian Government's determined policy of squeezing Russian and Russian-language media, the Russian language and indeed any form of dissent out of the country's information space. I would remind you that the channels of the All-Russia State Television and Radio Broadcasting Company have been subjected to persecution in Latvia under far-fetched pretexts for several years running. This current issue is no exception. The presenters of the talk show "60 Minutes" are accused of "incitement to hatred" and "slander", even though it is a discussion programme, where sharp words are par for the course. It is interesting that Latvia's media regulator behaves in completely the opposite way with regard to the no less "trenchant" content disseminated by Western information sources.

We urge the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media, Ms. Teresa Ribeiro, to monitor carefully any attempts at arbitrary censorship of information and to respond accordingly. What is currently going on transcends all the processes whereby media rights have been restricted in previous years – we are now dealing with a campaign of a completely different dimension that is being conducted across the entire Western-centric world to impose dictatorial control over information by the official and quasi-official media. This calls for a more active and principled response.

Thank you for your attention.