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PC.DEL/801/19
4 July 2019

ENGLISH
Original: RUSSIAN

Delegation of the Russian Federation

**STATEMENT BY MR. ALEXANDER LUKASHEVICH,
PERMANENT REPRESENTATIVE OF THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION,
AT THE 1234th MEETING OF THE OSCE PERMANENT COUNCIL**

4 July 2019

**In response to the report by the OSCE Representative on
Freedom of the Media, Mr. Harlem Désir**

Ms. Chairperson,
Mr. Désir,

We thank you for this detailed review of your Office's activities during the reporting period. We take note of your efforts to advance media freedom and pluralism, and to promote the protection of journalists. The Milan Ministerial Council decision on the safety of journalists is, in our view, a most timely and important benchmark for such work. We hope that the participating States will conscientiously fulfil the commitments they have made.

We can see how the situation regarding freedom of speech is worsening in a number of OSCE countries. Violations of freedom of speech have gone beyond all limits in Ukraine, where the authorities are continuing to pursue a policy of harsh censorship. According to the findings of a survey carried out by the Ilko Kucheriv Democratic Initiatives Foundation, 70 per cent of journalists consider censorship by media proprietors to be the main factor restricting freedom of speech in Ukraine. No less than 41 per cent of the respondents reported having been subjected to threats of physical violence by, *inter alia*, representatives of the State authorities. Moreover, 78 per cent complained about officials refusing to provide them with information of public interest, 42 per cent said that their copy had been subjected to censorship and not approved for publication, and 38 per cent reported having received requests to disseminate information known to be false.

Overt pressure is being exerted on journalists, notably by means of illegal arrests and physical violence. Kirill Vyshinsky, the director of the Internet portal "RIA Novosti Ukraine", has now been held in custody for more than a year after being arrested on false and absurd charges of high treason. We exhort you, Mr. Désir, to continue monitoring the case and trying to secure this journalist's release.

As before, the killings of various journalists in Ukraine – Anatoly Klyan, Anton Voloshin, Igor Kornelyuk, Andrey Stenin, Andrea Rocchelli, Oles Buzina, Sergey Dolgov, Vyacheslav Veremiy, Pavel Sheremet and many more – remain unsolved. A few weeks ago, the name of the journalist Vadim Komarov had to be added to this sorry list after he died as the result of a brutal assault in the city of Cherkasy. On 27 June, reporters from the "RIA Novosti" news agency came under fire by Ukrainian

security forces on the outskirts of Donetsk, while on 2 July a camera crew from the All-Russia State Television and Radio Broadcasting Company (VGTRK) came under mortar fire: in both cases, they were risking their lives to record the consequences of the destructive shelling of that city's residential quarters by the Ukrainian armed forces.

To quote Serhiy Tomilenko, head of the National Union of Journalists of Ukraine (NUJU), the safety situation of media workers in Ukraine is "extremely tragic". According to the "Journalist Safety Index" that is maintained by the NUJU, no less than 80 attacks on journalists are recorded every year in Ukraine.

We share the view of the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, Dunja Mijatović, that investigations into the killings of media workers in Ukraine are "all too often ineffective", and that "[t]his has contributed to a climate of impunity which has paved the way for further attacks against journalists".

With the connivance of the authorities of Ukraine and the United States of America, the notorious "Mirotvorets" website continues to operate. For media workers, being added to the site's "blacklist" means that they have to start fearing for their life and health.

Serious problems are also to be observed in a number of other OSCE countries. Since the start of the "gilets jaunes" (yellow vests) protest movement in France, some 120 journalists have been involved in incidents, of which 54 suffered violence at the hands of the police, according to information provided by Reporters Without Borders. These victims included Victoria Ivanova, a "RIA Novosti" correspondent, and Frédéric Aigouy, a correspondent from the television channel "Russia Today France". Both of them were beaten by police officers who completely disregarded the fact that they were carrying press passes.

The Georgian authorities, too, are unable to guarantee the safety of journalists. Thus, as reported by human rights defenders, 31 staff members of national and international media were injured during a demonstration in Georgia on 20 June, including one who lost an eye. During a rally on 22 June, violent radicals attacked a camera crew from the television channel "Rossiya-24". We call upon the Georgian Government to guarantee the safety of any journalists on its national territory. We assume that you, Mr. Désir, are keeping track of all attacks on media representatives occurring in all of the participating States. It is essential to have your reaction to any such incident, regardless of the country in which it took place.

It is noticeable that your Office is paying attention to the issue of countering disinformation and "fake news". However, we are of the opinion that a number of OSCE participating States are using that as a pretext to restrict freedom of speech, ban "inconvenient" media outlets, suspend broadcasts, and block websites and social media. There continue to be attempts to segregate the press on the basis of "whitelists" and "blacklists". We are convinced that, instead of fragmenting the information space and tacking absurd labels such as "propaganda mouthpiece" on to certain media, it would be far more helpful to seek to join forces at the international level in order to lay down universal principles for combating disinformation, along with clear and transparent rules.

Among recent examples of attempts to establish a monopoly on information we may cite Lithuania's decision to bar the editor-in-chief of the news agency "Sputnik Lithuania", Marat Kasem, from entering the country and calls by members of its parliament to block access within Lithuania to that agency's website. We fully agree, Mr. Désir, with your criticism of this outrageous violation of freedom of speech. We would recall that in the Helsinki Final Act of 1975 the participating States undertook "to facilitate the freer and wider dissemination of information of all kinds, to encourage co-operation in the field of information and the exchange of information with other countries, and to improve the conditions under which journalists from one participating State exercise their profession in another participating State".

Another example is the case of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange. As the United Nations Special Rapporteur on torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, Nils Melzer, explained at a briefing in Geneva a few days ago, an article that he had written listing all the violations committed by the Swedish, British and United States authorities in connection with the Assange case was rejected for publication by all the leading Western media, including *The Guardian*, *The Times*, the *Financial Times*, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, *The Australian*, *The Canberra Times*, *The Telegraph*, *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, the Thomson Reuters Foundation and *Newsweek*. Moreover, according to Mr. Melzer, the British television channel BBC refused to allow him to appear on a talk show. We fully support this international expert's view that such trends are dangerous because the hushing-up of facts and of public interest in the Assange case could have grave implications for democracy. I would remind you that in the United States, which has requested Mr. Assange's extradition, the death penalty is still applied.

The Russian media in France continue to suffer discrimination. Thus, they are subjected to hostile rhetoric, even from the highest political quarters. Not a single one of the nine journalists from the "Sputnik" news agency working in France has to this date been issued with a press pass by the country's Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The review of the relevant applications has been dragging on for more than a year now. As a result, these journalists remain without a clear-cut legal status: they have effectively been turned into "outlaws" who have to work at their own risk and peril.

We would point out that all foreign journalists with accreditation to work in Russia continue to this day to be able to exercise their professional duties under the most favourable conditions, irrespective of their nationality.

In conclusion, we should like to emphasize that Russia co-operates in good faith with the Office of the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media, seeks to answer all requests and provides information on the topics that interest the Office. We trust that our own concerns will be listened to in return. We look forward to strengthening our co-operation further.

Thank you for your attention.