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**STATEMENT BY MR. ALEXANDER LUKASHEVICH,
PERMANENT REPRESENTATIVE OF THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION,
AT THE 1269th MEETING OF THE OSCE PERMANENT COUNCIL
VIA VIDEO TELECONFERENCE**

28 May 2020

On challenges to information access in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic

Mr. Chairperson,

Commenting on the situation in a number of so-called “developed democracies”, the famous US intellectual and dissident Noam Chomsky said recently: “Democratic societies can’t force people. Therefore, they have to control what they think.” This approach very accurately describes the current situation.

Even 15 years ago, when Facebook, YouTube and Google were beginning to open up the information space and attract subscribers, it was hard to imagine that before long these companies would move from total freedom to a strict system of control over information flows and to the censorship of “undesirable media”.

Thus, on 20 May, it became known that the video platform YouTube, which is effectively controlled by the United States of America, deleted the accounts of the Crimean television channel Krim24, as well as those of two Russian news agencies, Anna News and News Front, which specialize in broadcasting from hotspots. I would stress that this was done without warning or explanation of the reasons for the block. Overnight, thousands of subscribers were deprived of access to videos that had tens of millions of views. As for the channel Krim24, one of the most popular sources of information on the Russian peninsula, its YouTube channel featured live broadcasts of meetings of the coronavirus crisis centre of the Republic of Crimea.

Unfortunately, this is not the first time there have been attacks on the Russian media. In April, the US company Google blocked the content of the Federal News Agency and its associated YouTube account. At the same time, Facebook blocked access to the profiles of all foreign-language editors of the News Front agency. It is common knowledge that this was done at the instigation of some non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that have openly declared war on undesirable media. For example, the International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy, operating in Georgia and funded by a number of Western countries, admitted that it is working to minimize the number of alternative media outlets in the run-up to the parliamentary elections in Georgia. At the same time, it openly boasted that on the basis of a tip by it, 14 pages from various news agencies, including News Front, were removed for allegedly anti-Western content.

Moreover, the address to the Russian people by the President of Russia Vladimir Putin on the coronavirus situation was removed from NTV's YouTube channel on 24 March, and the interview with Denis Protsenko, chief doctor of Municipal Hospital No. 40 (in the Kommunarka district of Moscow), on 11 April. The latter, they say, did not comply with some rules, which, of course, were not communicated. The company later recognized that the decisions had been wrong and restored the videos.

Earlier, in January 2019, under far-fetched pretexts, Facebook moderators deleted more than 500 pages relating to Russia, including material from the news agency Sputnik.

Paradoxically, this "cleansing" somehow still leaves out the disgraceful Mirotvorets website. This extremist resource continues to operate on US servers and poses a direct threat to all journalists in its database. The United States seems to see no threat in this and is not taking the necessary action, contrary to the OSCE Milan Ministerial Council decision on the safety of journalists.

It is clear that Internet platforms have long ceased to be independent players in the information space. For a long time now, no one has been in any doubt that they are controlled by the United States. We all witnessed how the US Congress summoned Facebook chief Mark Zuckerberg for a hearing in March 2018 in connection with Russia's alleged interference in the US elections. The information about Russian interference was never confirmed, nor indeed could it be confirmed. It was made use of, however, to specify to Facebook and others the "correct" format for work in the media sphere.

Under the veneer of high-flown pronouncements about democracy and freedom of speech, the information space is being systematically cleaned up by Internet platforms under US control. That's democracy US-style. Such policies are in flagrant violation of international obligations to ensure free and unhindered access to information, freedom of the media and freedom of expression. We are talking about direct censorship, but now on a global scale. We note that this problem has become particularly acute with the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, when the population is more dependent than ever on digital media for obtaining information. The United States has effectively turned us all into characters in George Orwell's *1984*.

We are also obliged to draw attention to the discrimination on the World Wide Web against Russian-language media in the countries of the European Union. Under the pretext of fighting the exaggerated threat of Russian disinformation, various EU bodies are adopting a huge array of resolutions and initiatives to promote censorship and are exerting pressure on Russian-language media on the Internet. The new European media standards are one recent disgraceful example. On 18 December 2019, the European Committee for Standardization published recommendations to digital platforms and national media regulators to take into account published press "standards" in their work and support only those media that comply with them. In addition, after publication of the document, the department urged the media to voluntarily submit themselves to this "standardization". This is tantamount to the creation of a censorship mechanism bypassing international obligations and permitting the functioning of the global information "matrix" to be influenced. In fact, countries that promote such initiatives are depriving their own populations of access to the full range of information sources, including alternative ones. George Orwell was indeed a brilliant writer.

Ukraine is also keeping up with its "big brothers". On 15 May it was announced that President Volodymyr Zelenskyi has signed a decree extending the ban on access to Russian websites and social media platforms in that country for three years. It concerns the unilateral restrictive measures taken by the authorities in Kyiv in 2017 with regard to 468 Russian Internet sites, social media and information technology companies, including Yandex, Yandex-Ukraine, Mail.ru, VKontakte, Odnoklassniki and

Kaspersky Lab. The Ukrainian leadership has once again demonstrated that it does not intend to reconsider its discriminatory policy with regard to Russian media outlets.

From the outset, it has been clear that each player – whether the State, an Internet platform or an NGO – has its place in what is a systematic and targeted campaign to fragment the global information space. We have repeatedly drawn attention to the behind-the-scenes project by the NGO Reporters Without Borders to create media “whitelists”. If there are “whitelists”, there must also be “blacklists”. The plan is that Western information technology companies will give priority in any search results to media outlets from the “whitelist”. The promotion of such non-inclusive and non-transparent initiatives to regulate the Internet at an international level is unacceptable and extremely dangerous.

We call upon the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media, Mr. Harlem Désir, to monitor the situation in accordance with his mandate and to respond promptly to cases of discriminatory pressure on the media and, more broadly, to systematic attempts to make the global information space subordinate to narrow vested interests of States.

Thank you for your attention.