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PERMANENT REPRESENTATIVE OF THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION, AT THE  
1311th MEETING OF THE OSCE PERMANENT COUNCIL  
VIA VIDEO TELECONFERENCE**

29 April 2021

**World Press Freedom Day**

Madam Chairperson,

The 3rd of May is World Press Freedom Day, which was proclaimed by the United Nations General Assembly in 1993. This is a good opportunity once again to address urgent media-related issues. An essential component of any democratic society is a free, independent and pluralistic press.

A comprehensive and integrated approach to ensuring freedom of speech is enshrined in Russian legislation. Under the Constitution of the Russian Federation, everyone is guaranteed the right to freedom of thought and speech; freedom of the media is also guaranteed, while censorship is forbidden. In accordance with these basic provisions, Article 114 was incorporated into the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation; it establishes penalties for obstructing the lawful professional activities of journalists.

That being said, no one is immune from problems regarding freedom of the media: such problems occur in Russia too. We strive to tackle them using all possible legal techniques. We are also prepared to discuss them frankly and openly. However, instead of constructive dialogue, some in the West continue time and again to cast our country in an unfavourable light and they do the same with other “undesirable” States. As for the problems they have in their own backyard, they are not so alert or scrupulous towards those.

Well then, let us fill in the gaps. For example, in the OSCE area we may single out the phenomenon of a total censorship that from day to day takes on ever new forms in relation to sources presenting alternative points of view. The purging of the information sphere has reached its apogee in the Baltic States. A whole set of repressive measures are applied there against members of the press: detentions, interrogations, searches, confiscation of equipment, closing of bank accounts, and so on.

We would remind you that on 14 April the Latvian State Security Service summoned for questioning five journalists working with Russian-owned Sputnik Latvia and Baltnews, a Russian-language news agency. In the previous month, the National Electronic Mass Media Council of Latvia blocked the Latvian people’s access to the websites of the Russia Today and NTV television channels and to the rus24.tv and teledays.net servers. This February, the Latvian authorities suspended broadcasts by the Rossiya RTR

television channel for a year, while in December 2020 criminal proceedings were instituted against seven freelance correspondents from, again, Sputnik Latvia and Baltnews.

In Estonia, the Baltnews contributor Sergey Seredenko was arrested in early March on politically motivated charges, while in Lithuania broadcasting of the Russian-owned television channel Russia Today was suspended in July 2020.

The situation regarding press freedom remains critical in Ukraine. The Ukrainian Government is continuing its policy of wholesale purging of the information sphere, systematic persecution and intimidation of journalists. 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. Among them are three television news channels: 112 Ukraine, NewsOne and ZIK. Their broadcasting in Ukraine is currently suspended, and their licences to use telecommunications networks and radio frequencies have been revoked. With deep regret we learned that YouTube, capitulating to the Ukrainian Government, decided after all to block these channels’ broadcasts on 24 April.

Discrimination against Russian-owned media also continues in some Western States, which on the one hand are so fond of discoursing on the paramountcy of freedom of speech, and on the other blithely violate that principle to satisfy their opportunistic interests. For example, on 26 February this year, Germany’s Commerzbank sent out a notification regarding the closure of the accounts of the news agencies Russia Today Germany and Ruptly as of 31 May. The lack of any justification for such a step on the part of the bank is evidence of its clearly having been “commissioned” for political reasons. The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs has urged the German Government to bring its influence to bear on the situation. However, the matter remains unresolved.

No less zealous are the Polish authorities, who on 16 March announced that the correspondent Yevgeny Reshetnev from the All-Russia State Television and Broadcasting Company (VGTRK) had been banned from entering the country for five years and the Schengen zone for three years. According to the media, these penalties may have been motivated by his report on the Red Army’s liberation of the Nazi concentration camp at Auschwitz. Another version suggests that the Polish Government responded in this way to the piece filmed by Mr. Reshetnev about the US military contingent stationed in one Polish city. In addition, Poland extended by five more years the ban prohibiting the Sputnik journalist Leonid Sviridov from entering the Schengen zone countries.

The situation of Russian-owned media outlets in France remains difficult, with journalists from Russia Today and Sputnik still being prevented from going about their professional activities properly. A recent example is how the RIA Novosti correspondent in Paris was denied access to three events related to the recent visit to France by President Zelenskyy of Ukraine.

The Netherlands is not lagging behind either. There, too, they know how to turn a blind eye to violations of basic rights and freedoms in their own country. Recent confirmation of this may be found in the direct threats made by one official against journalists who had uncovered facts showing that the Office of the National Coordinator for Security and Counterterrorism had been illegally collecting and disseminating confidential information on civilians. Although the news about these crude attacks on members of the press was published in open sources, the authorities restricted themselves to a disciplinary investigation concerning the official who had overstepped the mark.

We are obliged to note that the accelerating process of digitalization has merely increased the fragmentation of the global information sphere. This has prompted a wave of criticism from the international

community, together with calls by some States for joint work to be initiated on developing a universal mechanism for the regulation of social media platforms. Yet, there has been no progress. We are of course first and foremost concerned about the blocking of Russian-language content by such information technology giants as Twitter, Facebook and YouTube. For example, in the first four months of this year, YouTube alone shut off access to three accounts belonging to and five items produced by Russian-owned media outlets. The restrictions affected, *inter alia*, the official accounts of the television channels NTV, Rossiya 24, TV Tsentr, RT and Sputnik. Under spurious pretexts, items have been blocked dealing with, for example, Russia's historic contribution to the victory over Nazism or the tragic events of 2004 in Beslan.

Cases of physical violence being used by law enforcement officers against reporters continue to occur in the United States of America as well, notably when these reporters are covering protests. According to information from the US Press Freedom Tracker (an NGO), just during rallies that took place in connection with the killing, on 11 April, of the young African American Daunte Wright, a total of 25 detentions of media workers were recorded, as were 19 instances of assault and three instances of intimidation against such workers, along with seven instances of damage to their equipment.

Additionally, in the United States a number of foreign media outlets are subjected to undisguised discrimination. A couple of days ago, it became known that the Federal Communications Commission had voted unanimously in favour of even stricter identification of programmes by foreign broadcasters that are being aired in the United States. The new rules require the specific "disclosure of information", which should take place at the start and end of each programme and at least once an hour in the case of programmes lasting longer than 60 minutes.

In the United Kingdom, too, things are complicated. We have noted media reports about legislative initiatives by the UK Government to counter "hostile States". As reported, one such regulation would involve the establishment of a kind of register of foreign agents, with registration being made compulsory for all natural persons and legal entities acting on British territory in the interests of foreign States. Engaging in such activities without registration would be grounds for prosecution and deportation. I would remind you that all this is coming from the UK Government, which fiercely criticized the Russian law on foreign agents. Those in Whitehall have naturally chosen to keep mum about the far more draconian corresponding US law from 1938 despite its "vintage" status.

It is evident that the information sphere remains an arena where political tensions can escalate. Yet, our shared duty is to work towards constructive discussion of existing problems in the OSCE area. We once again exhort the OSCE participating States to eschew double standards and refrain from politicizing media-related issues. The relevant executive structures – above all the Representative on Freedom of the Media – have a lot of work to get on with, not least in terms of methodology. An open and honest dialogue for the benefit of professional journalism and of our societies is essential.

Thank you for your attention.