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PC.DEL/812/20
2 July 2020

ENGLISH
Original: RUSSIAN

Delegation of Belarus

STATEMENT BY THE PERMANENT DELEGATION OF THE REPUBLIC OF BELARUS TO THE OSCE AT THE 1273rd MEETING OF THE OSCE PERMANENT COUNCIL

2 July 2020

In response to the statement by the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media

Mr. Chairperson,

We join our colleagues in welcoming the distinguished OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media, Mr. Harlem Désir, to the Permanent Council meeting and thank him for his report, which, in terms of its geographic and thematic scope, is extensive and well balanced on the whole.

We wish to emphasize Belarus's responsible attitude when it comes to fulfilling OSCE commitments on freedom of expression, freedom of the media, access to information and on ensuring appropriate conditions for the professional activities of journalists, including foreign ones.

Throughout our country, journalists are able to carry out their work in a free and unimpeded manner. For instance, some 220 journalists representing 60 different foreign media outlets from more than 20 countries are at present permanently accredited to work in Belarus.

The issues of press freedom, ensuring the rights of citizens to take part in mass events, and other topics related to human rights questions are regularly discussed by Belarus with its Western partners as part of the Human Rights Dialogue with the European Union and at meetings of the EU-Belarus Coordination Group. It is important to stress that these platforms are used not for one party to teach the other, but for a mutually respectful exchange of opinions on issues where the views of the parties do not always coincide.

We should like to point out that, in the context of the spread of the coronavirus, the general public in Belarus has full access to information on the pandemic, including information provided by independent media. We consider it important to follow a responsible approach to the dissemination of information during the COVID-19 pandemic, which means above all preventing the spread of fake news in the media. In line with its responsible approach to these issues, Belarus – alongside more than 130 United Nations Member States, including the United States of America, the United Kingdom, Canada and the European Union countries – endorsed, on 12 June 2020, the Cross-Regional Statement on “Infodemic” in the Context of COVID-19.

As highlighted by Mr. Désir's report, there are problems with freedom of the media and the safety of journalists in many OSCE participating States. Belarus conducts – also in co-operation with relevant

international institutions – regular monitoring of offences in this field. The necessary measures are taken to prevent and curb such offences. During the second session of the second Supplementary Human Dimension Meeting of 2020, which took place last week, the chairperson of the Belarusian Union of Journalists provided information on an initiative to set up a Committee for the Protection of Journalists – an initiative that has already attracted support among a number of law enforcement agencies and civil society actors in Belarus.

At the meeting of the Permanent Council on 21 May we already replied to several delegations' questions in relation to the administrative penalties imposed on some journalists and bloggers for their participation in unauthorized mass events in Belarus. These issues are also mentioned by Mr. Désir in his written report.

We once again wish to draw your attention to the fact that the individuals in question did not have on them any official identification (accreditation) of media journalists or any markings clearly identifying them as media representatives. The detentions of these persons were in no way related to their journalistic activities. The actions of the law enforcement agencies were strictly in line with current legislation and were not aimed at obstructing the conduct of lawful mass events and the coverage of them by journalists.

We would urge our colleagues to make use of verified information when assessing the situation in Belarus and not to try to dramatize things.

Finally, we reaffirm our readiness to continue Belarus's constructive dialogue with the Office of the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media.

Thank you, Mr. Chairperson.