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**STATEMENT BY MR. ALEXANDER LUKASHEVICH,
PERMANENT REPRESENTATIVE OF THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION,
AT THE 1265th MEETING OF THE OSCE PERMANENT COUNCIL
VIA VIDEO TELECONFERENCE**

30 April 2020

World Press Freedom Day

Mr. Chairperson,

On 3 May, we shall be celebrating World Press Freedom Day, which was proclaimed by the United Nations General Assembly in 1993.

Upholding the rights of journalists, ensuring unrestricted access to information, and supporting independent and pluralistic media have always ranked high among Russia's priorities. There are problems related to freedom of the press and the safety of journalists in practically all participating States. Our country, too, has such problems. However, we are doing everything we can to resolve them: this also includes holding accountable those responsible for any violations. In order to ensure offenders' accountability, we closely monitor such violations and work together with relevant international institutions, including the Office of the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media.

The significance of World Press Freedom Day – especially in the context of a global pandemic – cannot be emphasized highly enough. It is regrettable that the ongoing grave crisis has not led to a consolidation of international efforts to combat the epidemic. Instead of displaying international solidarity on a range of issues and abstaining from politicized approaches, some Western countries continue to cast States that are not to their liking in an unfavourable light. This also applies to the situation regarding freedom of the media in Russia.

Thus, we have noticed a number of statements by the European External Action Service (EEAS) in which, true to the lecturing spirit that characterizes the EEAS, criticisms have been levelled at Russia. This is a bit rich bearing in mind how, as everyone knows, the state of affairs in the European Union is far from ideal in that regard. The situation of Russian media outlets in France remains dire, with journalists from the news agencies Russia Today and Sputnik still being prevented from fully exercising their profession. The discriminatory campaign unleashed against Russian-language media in the Baltic countries is a cause for concern. This campaign has culminated in the unprecedented pressure brought to bear by the Estonian Government on employees of the Russian news agency Sputnik Estonia, who on pain of prosecution were forced to terminate their contracts with their employer, Rossiya Segodnya.

In Latvia, the information sphere continues to be “purged” of dissenting opinions. The policy of exerting pressure on Russian-language media – among other things, by means of financial and political leverage – has resulted in unacceptable operating conditions for independent media there that are not State-controlled. Thus, on 20 March the First Baltic Channel ceased broadcasting the daily news bulletin “Latviiskoe vremya” (“Latvian times”) and the “Novosti Estonii” (“Estonian News”) programmes. Moreover, on 23 April the Saeima (Latvian Parliament) adopted, at second reading, amendments to the Electronic Media Act that essentially entail a reduction in the broadcasting of television programmes in the Russian language. And all this is happening at the height of a pandemic, when information in the language that is the mother tongue of a significant proportion of the population is particularly in demand. In such a context one cannot but marvel at the silence maintained by the EU’s relevant bodies regarding the Baltic countries’ latest encroachments on freedom of the media and the rights of national minorities.

In some Western States, discrimination against Russian media is very often carried out on the pretext of combating disinformation. Attempts are made to promote certain international initiatives, ostensibly with the aim of standing up for “clean” journalism. We are convinced that non-inclusive projects of this kind are counter-productive. In our view, they are simply an attempt at fraudulent substitution of existing obligations under international law with regard to freedom of expression, freedom of the media and unhindered access to information.

The situation regarding press freedom in Ukraine remains critical. The Ukrainian Government continues to pursue its policy of wholesale purging of the information sphere, systematic repression of media workers and intimidation of sources who provide information that are not to its liking. The Ukrainian law enforcement bodies and judiciary have failed to establish all the circumstances of the murders of Anatoly Klyan, Anton Voloshin, Igor Kornelyuk, Andrey Stenin, Andrea Rocchelli (the sentence in this case was pronounced not by a Ukrainian court but by an Italian one), Oles Buzina, Sergey Dolgov, Vyacheslav Veremiy, Pavel Sheremet and Vadim Komarov. US servers continue to host the obnoxious Mirotvoret website, which by divulging the personal details of journalists puts their lives at immediate risk.

We agree with the assessments made by the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media, Mr. Harlem Désir, regarding the draft law on the media that is currently being examined by the Verkhovna Rada (Ukrainian Parliament). If the bill were to be passed, it would lead to a further tightening of State control of the media and would legally enshrine political censorship in Ukraine. Indeed, Serhiy Tomilenko, head of the National Union of Journalists of Ukraine, has described the draft law as a “serious attack on freedom of speech and blatant interference in the work of journalists”.

In that respect, the reaction of the EU Special Representative for Human Rights, Mr. Eamon Gilmore, to the Ukrainian initiative is puzzling. He claims that the draft law is on the whole consistent with the EU’s Audiovisual Media Services Directive and believes that its aim is to ensure freedom of the media. This is a clear case of the European Commission effectively glossing over the Ukrainian authorities’ discriminatory approach towards regulation of the media and towards freedom of information.

We are concerned about freedom of speech in the United States of America. In addition to the negative remarks regularly addressed by US State officials to representatives of the press, there have been instances of journalists being subjected to physical violence. Lawsuits are widely used as one of various means of exerting pressure on media outlets that criticize the authorities. Moreover, human rights defenders are understandably alarmed by the way in which journalists may be stopped and searched when crossing the US border, and how they can even be forced to disclose confidential sources of information. Now, all these things are going on when the economic situation of the media in the country as a whole is appalling: *The New York Times* reported on 20 April that, as a result of the pandemic, some 36,000 media workers have

already been laid off or made to take unpaid leave; many have had their salaries cut drastically. Quite a few federal and local media outlets have been forced to suspend their work or even to shut down completely.

Additionally, in the United States a number of foreign media outlets are subjected to undisguised discrimination. We share Mr. Désir's concerns over the Foreign Agents Registration Act. Russian media outlets (Russia Today and Sputnik) and Chinese ones (China Global Television Network and Xinhua) have already been targeted by the US authorities; in March it was the turn of the Turkish Radio and Television Corporation. US law does not allow these media outlets – or their US partners – to go about their journalistic activities properly. On social media, moreover, we have drawn our US colleagues' attention to the Foreign Missions Act, which now gives US authorities the right to interfere even with the recruitment policy of foreign media bureaux that are accredited in the United States.

The plight of the Australian journalist and publicist Julian Assange, who is being held at Belmarsh prison in the United Kingdom, continues to be a cause for concern. In view of reports about the spread of the coronavirus in that prison, international human rights bodies have once again called for Mr. Assange's immediate release, since any further confinement there could well lead to a worsening of his already poor health. However, the arguments advanced by the international community are being ignored.

In this connection, we once again urge that double standards be renounced, thereby making it possible ultimately to move on to open and frank dialogue for the benefit of journalism and of our societies as a whole.

Thank you for your attention.