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**STATEMENT BY MR. ALEXANDER LUKASHEVICH,
PERMANENT REPRESENTATIVE OF THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION,
AT THE 1299th MEETING OF THE OSCE PERMANENT COUNCIL
VIA VIDEO TELECONFERENCE**

21 January 2021

On censorship of digital information in the United States of America

Madam Chairperson,

Over the past year, we have repeatedly drawn attention in our statements to the growing censorship of the global information space and online resources. We have also emphasized the unacceptability of handing over the regulation of media freedom and access to information to private information technology (IT) companies.

The arbitrary treatment of Russian and Russian-language media by digital platforms in the United States of America remains of deep concern. The mass blocking and removal of Russian content in recent months has become systemic and constitutes blatant censorship. The clear political subtext of Big Tech's actions is quite evident. These actions are in line with the US Government's foreign policy objectives of excluding from the global airwaves those sources of information that present an alternative viewpoint and that seriously compete with the Western media mainstream. For example, Facebook, Twitter and Google have restricted access to material from some 20 Russian media outlets, not to mention private users. This includes the pages of RIA Novosti and Sputnik and the television channels Russia Today and Rossiya 1. In addition, the administrators of YouTube have blacklisted around 200 Russian-language channels in recent years.

Last week we witnessed another round of witch-hunts in the United States itself. In a massive politically motivated sweep of the digital space, the largest US social media platforms blocked the accounts of outgoing US President Donald Trump, who has more than 200 million followers. On the heels of the blocking of Trump's accounts, those of his campaign headquarters and tens of thousands of his supporters have also been suspended. Various online resources with a certain political orientation have been subjected to "deplatforming", as it is called, which is basically tantamount to their digital liquidation. This was done in circumvention of legal mechanisms and without a court decision or consultation with any relevant ethics body. Overnight, hundreds of millions of subscribers were deprived of access to their chosen sources of information. The question inevitably arises as to who are these "higher judges", who have decided that they can, of their own free will and effectively on account of their political leanings, restrict the right of a multimillion audience to freedom of information and access to it.

This blatant disregard for free speech by IT giants has also raised concerns among many European leaders, including German Chancellor Angela Merkel, French Economics and Finance Minister Bruno Le Maire, and British Secretary of State for Health and Social Care Matt Hancock. And the European Commissioner for Internal Market Thierry Breton likened the danger of a precedent-setting digital démarche against the Head of the United States to the biggest terrorist attack in the country's history: "Just as 9/11 marked a paradigm shift for global security, 20 years later we are witnessing a before-and-after in the role of digital platforms in our democracy."

This kind of brazen, corporate censorship, at this level and independent of the State, is extraordinary. It represents a new and very serious threat to freedom of expression and the media. It is unacceptable that a few private corporations are effectively allowed to abuse their near-monopoly position in the information space and manipulate news and facts at their discretion and on a global scale. Already, many experts have accused such private entities of violating "digital sovereignty" and seeking to establish a "digital dictatorship". If a concerted effort is not made today, tomorrow the global community may not have free access to information and therefore no chance of obtaining an objective impression of what is going on.

The US authorities argue that they are not formally violating freedom of speech in the United States, as all of this is the work of private corporations. We cannot agree with this. Even a cursory analysis of the shareholding and investment systems of Big Tech companies demonstrates that they are backed by the structures that make up the corporate foundation of the US economy with close ties to the country's political establishment. The full concurrence of Big Tech's supposedly independent censorship policy with the ideological tenets of such an establishment speaks for itself.

The international community will not look on submissively at attempts to forcibly and crudely establish global censorship on the basis of a monopoly position in key segments of the World Wide Web. Alternatives to US resources are being actively created in countries where they do not yet exist and which have an interest in preserving genuine information pluralism. And the United States and its corporations will bear responsibility for the inevitable deglobalization of the Internet, tearing the once unified web of information into national shreds.

We call on the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media, Ms. Teresa Ribeiro, to closely monitor illicit attempts to arbitrarily censor the digital information space and to assist the United States in establishing respect for freedom of speech.

Thank you for your attention.