



United States Mission to the OSCE
U.S. Statement for the
Forum for Security Cooperation:
General Statements –
Russia’s War of Aggression Against Ukraine

As delivered by Chief Arms Control Delegate Daniel Wartko
July 19, 2023

Thank you, Madam Chair,

As the world takes stock of the ecological disaster that followed the destruction of the Nova Kakhovka Dam, the Russian Federation continues playing a very dangerous game of brinksmanship through its seizure and ongoing control of the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant. Russia’s militarization of this nuclear power plant jeopardizes not only the lives of Ukrainian staff, who operate the plant, but nuclear safety and security for the entire region.

It is appalling that Russia, with first-hand knowledge of the destruction that followed the Soviet nuclear disaster at Chernobyl, continues its reckless behavior while knowing full well that radiation respects no boundaries, and that an incident could have impact far beyond the immediate vicinity of the plant. Russia’s leadership should think long and hard about the consequences of causing a nuclear catastrophe. Let me be clear – Russia will be held to account in the case of any nuclear disaster. We reiterate our call on Russia to withdraw its military and civilian personnel from the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant, to allow the IAEA unfettered access, to return full control of the plant to the competent Ukrainian authorities, and to refrain from taking any actions that could result in a nuclear incident.

Sadly, Russia is not the only country playing fast and loose with nuclear threats. President Lukashenka continues to crow about the placement of nuclear weapons on Belarus territory, with Lukashenka himself saying on July 6 that he “will not hesitate to use them.” When challenged that they were not his to use, Lukashenka compared them to conventional weapons and asked incredulously, “Why can't I fight using someone else's weapons?”

We recall the words of the Russian delegation in this forum on June 2, and I quote, “On 25 May, the Defense Ministers of Russia and Belarus signed documents laying down the procedure for Russian non-strategic nuclear weapons to be stored at a special storage facility on Belarusian territory without control over these being transferred.” End of quote. So, Russia asserts that these nuclear weapons placed in Belarus will remain under Russia’s control, while Lukashenka asserts publicly that he can use them as he wishes. Of course, such a transfer of control from Russia would violate Article I of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, the NPT, which prohibits each Nuclear Weapon State Party from transferring nuclear weapons or control over such weapons. This public mixed messaging regarding the control of nuclear weapons is both dangerous and unacceptable.

While our Belarusian colleagues like to conflate the stationing of nuclear weapons on their territory with that of NATO’s nuclear burden sharing arrangements, they are mistaken. The United States maintains a clear line of command and control of its nuclear weapons. Compare this to Lukashenka himself publicly bragging of his supposed control over Russia’s nuclear weapons. Russia has not helped to clarify the circumstances surrounding the stationing of its nuclear weapons in Belarus, and repeatedly raises irresponsible and intimidating nuclear rhetoric. So, perhaps the distinguished delegate from Belarus could clarify whether or not his President has the ability to use these nuclear weapons as he has claimed.

Madam Chair,

Russia’s disregard for international law and norms, as well as for diplomatic decency, has lost its shock value after years of flagrant violations. However, this does not mean we should accept this as the new normal. Just as we view Russia’s nuclear saber-rattling as abhorrent, we are also appalled by its flaunting of international commitments and its disgraceful treatment of prisoners of war (POWs). Our Russian colleagues revel in the idea of “liquidating” captured soldiers of foreign origin fighting as uniformed members of Ukraine’s Armed Forces, while Russia’s own mercenaries, which Putin admitted were paid for by the Russian state, run amok beyond state control in the occupied areas of Ukraine, in Russia’s own territory, in Syria, Libya, Sudan, the Central African Republic, Mali, and now potentially Belarus. Time and again in this forum, Russia

plasters its propaganda presentations gratuitously with the faces of Ukrainian POWs. And to what end? There is no purpose other than to provoke and to insult.

We condemn the Russian delegation's gratuitous parading of POWs on the screens of this Forum and remind Russia of its obligations under Article 13 of the Third Geneva Convention, in particular that "[p]risoners of war must at all times be humanely treated" and "must at all times be protected, particularly against acts of violence or intimidation and against insults and public curiosity."

Madam Chair,

There will be a reckoning, and we assure you that there will be justice and accountability for Russia's abhorrent actions and its trampling of international norms and commitments.

Thank you, Madam Chair.