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**EU Statement on Russia's Ongoing Aggression against  
Ukraine and Violations of OSCE Principles and Commitments**

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Two weeks ago, the Secretary General described the ceasefire situation as being at its worst point since September 2015. And yet last week the SMM recorded an even higher number of ceasefire violations, noting in particular the extensive use of mortars. The first three weeks of February alone saw more than 1,350 mortar explosions. As a first step, the sides must take immediate action to halt this deeply disturbing deterioration. We urge all sides to honour their commitments and ensure full respect of the ceasefire in order to advance a sustainable political settlement in line with OSCE commitments and principles.

We welcome today's Foreign Ministers' meeting in the Normandy Format in Paris and hope it will inject much-needed impetus into the Minsk-process, not least in securing a genuine and sustainable ceasefire.

We welcome Ambassador Sajdik's announcement following yesterday's meeting of the Trilateral Contact Group that agreement has been reached to end live fire exercises in the vicinity of the contact line, taking effect from March 4. We also welcome his announcement on an agreement obliging parties before March 31 to designate priority areas for demining and to complete the mapping of areas to be cleared.

A sustainable ceasefire requires the unconditional and verifiable withdrawal of all Minsk-regulated weapons. We hear every week from the SMM of violations and failures in cooperation in verification. We urge all sides to follow through, without further delay and in full cooperation with the SMM, on their commitment to the

withdrawal process as stipulated in the Minsk Package of Measures and the Addendum.

The vast majority of restrictions on the SMM's freedom of movement continue to occur in Russia-backed separatist-held areas, significantly impeding the implementation of the Minsk agreements and severely obstructing the SMM's work. In the past week, the SMM has continued to report on further denial of access, particularly northeast of Mariupol and in areas along the State border between Russia and Ukraine in areas of Luhansk oblast outside Ukrainian government control. Moreover, obstruction of the SMM's UAVs on both sides of the line of contact continues to further hamper the SMM's work. On February 18, the SMM lost contact with two UAVs due to jamming, according to the SMM's assessment. They have yet to be recovered. We call on all sides to immediately put an end to such obstruction, which are in clear violation of the Minsk agreements. Full, safe and unhindered access throughout Ukraine, including along the Ukrainian-Russian State border, is crucial for the SMM to fulfil its mandate. We reiterate that the SMM's mandate covers the whole of Ukraine, including Crimea.

We reiterate our call to the participants in the Political Working Group of the Trilateral Contact Group to reach an agreement without delay on modalities for local elections in certain parts of Donetsk and Luhansk regions in accordance with Ukrainian legislation, relevant OSCE standards and monitored by ODIHR. Established conditions for ODIHR observation must be met, including ensuring security and access for ODIHR.

As we discuss the crisis in and around Ukraine, we must not forget the impact on the civilian population. The humanitarian situation remains dire, particularly in separatist-held areas. Children are particularly vulnerable. According to UNICEF, the crisis in and around Ukraine has deeply affected the lives of more than 580,000 children living in non-government controlled areas and close to the front line in eastern Ukraine. We join UNICEF's call on all parties to ensure safe movement and unhindered humanitarian access to help children in need. We also continue to be concerned by the situation for Internally Displaced People, the majority of whom are women and children. As noted by UNFPA, there are persistent high levels of sexual and gender-based violence in the conflict-affected areas.

Mr. Chairperson, as we discuss challenges in the implementation of the Minsk agreements, we should recognise that part of the underlying problem is the shrinking space for open public discourse, eroding trust and fomenting division. Extensive Russian state-driven propaganda continues to distort and cloud developments on the ground. As stressed by the Representative on Freedom of the Media in her recommendations, governments and political leaders should refrain from funding and using propaganda, especially when it may lead to intolerance, discriminatory stereotyping or may incite war, violence or hostility. In separatist-held areas, we see today the consequences of the illegal take-over of broadcasting stations and TV channels, closing the information space and contributing to a climate of fear and distrust. As Amnesty International recently reported, journalists with pro-Ukrainian views are unable to operate freely in separatist-held areas and on Crimea. We again urge the Russian Federation to abide by its international commitments and ensure media freedom and pluralism, to allow for a genuine and open public discourse about issues of concern, including in relation to the crisis in and around Ukraine.

In government-controlled parts of Ukraine, while media freedom has seen significant progress, clear challenges also remain. As highlighted by the Representative on Freedom of the Media last week, harassment of some media outlets and individuals perceived to express pro-Russian views continues to occur, compromising free media and the safety of journalists.

The European Union remains firm in its call on all parties to swiftly and fully implement the Minsk agreements and honour their commitments. We underline Russia's responsibility in this regard and also yet again call on Russia to use its considerable influence over the separatists it backs to meet their commitments. We recall that the duration of the EU economic sanctions against Russia is linked to the complete implementation of the Minsk agreements. The ceasefire must be respected. All Minsk-regulated weapons must be withdrawn and foreign armed formations, military equipment and mercenaries removed from Ukraine. Re-establishing full Ukrainian control over its state border is essential. We reiterate our concern about reports regarding the presence of military equipment and personnel from Russia.

Mr Chair, the European Union recalls its unwavering support to the sovereignty, territorial integrity, unity and independence of Ukraine, and calls upon Russia to do likewise. We urge Russia to recognise these fundamental principles that it has itself invoked many times, to contribute, by acts and public pronouncements, to stabilise the situation and to reverse moves that contravene these principles. We reiterate our strong condemnation of the illegal annexation of Crimea and Sevastopol to the Russian Federation and we will not recognise it.

The Candidate Countries MONTENEGRO\* and ALBANIA\*, the Country of the Stabilisation and Association Process and Potential Candidate BOSNIA and HERZEGOVINA, and the EFTA countries ICELAND and NORWAY, members of the European Economic Area, as well as UKRAINE, the REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA, GEORGIA and SAN MARINO align themselves with this statement.

\* MONTENEGRO and ALBANIA continue to be part of the Stabilisation and Association Process.