



United States Mission to the OSCE

Ongoing Violations of International Law and Defiance of OSCE Principles and Commitments by the Russian Federation in Ukraine

As delivered by Ambassador Daniel B. Baer
to the Permanent Council, Vienna
February 18, 2016

The United States remains deeply concerned about the escalation of fighting at the line of contact in eastern Ukraine. Combined Russian-separatist forces continue to violate their commitments under the September 1 ceasefire and the Minsk Agreements, launching barrage after barrage of small arms and heavy weapons attacks on Ukrainian government-held positions. Separatist forces still block the Special Monitoring Mission (SMM) from moving freely throughout Ukraine, and they have continued to treat monitors with open hostility; on February 15 near Kominternove, they once again threatened to shoot SMM members, the third time since January that monitors have been threatened by Russia-backed separatists for doing nothing more than objectively fulfilling the SMM's mandate. Such threats are totally unacceptable. Russia, however, has not once condemned these actions in the OSCE Permanent Council – unlike every other participating State that has taken the floor.

Rather than relying on the SMM to help rebuild confidence on the ground, combined Russian-separatist forces block SMM access to hide their actions from OSCE participating States. The OSCE Secretary General's observations in a recent interview sum up the situation well. He said, "Now we are being pushed back every time which raises suspicion that something is going on." Then the Secretary General asked, "Why are they blocking us so systematically?" The answer to this question can be found in the SMM's own reports, which describe a correlation between access denial and the presence of heavy weapons in proscribed areas and ceasefire violations.

Meanwhile, the security situation in the Donbas is rapidly deteriorating. On February 16, the SMM registered 134 incoming explosions near Ukrainian government-controlled Svitlodarsk – which exceeded the entire number of incoming explosions it counted in all of separatist-controlled territory in Donetsk. And despite Russia's and the separatists' obstruction, an SMM UAV captured film of combined Russian-separatist forces firing grad rockets near Svitlodarsk last week. From February 12-14 alone, Ukrainian armed forces were subjected to over 237 attacks, with Ukraine reporting that roughly a third of these involved heavy weapons. As a result, the death toll of Ukrainian soldiers continues to rise. Since the Minsk Package of

Measures went into effect just over a year ago, Ukraine has lost over 430 soldiers – more than fifty of whom were killed in action after the September 1 ceasefire.

As in the past, Ukraine has made good faith efforts to restore calm to the line of contact – efforts that have been unreciprocated. Shortly after the ceasefire went into effect on September 1, Ukraine unilaterally pulled back its heavy weapons from the line of contact, even though it continued to suffer casualties from shelling by combined Russian-separatist forces. Over two weeks ago, Ukraine’s head of the Joint Center for Command and Control warned Russian and separatist forces that Ukraine would be forced to move heavy equipment back to the line of contact if such attacks did not stop. Nonetheless, combined Russian-separatist forces instead intensified their attacks. Similarly, SMM monitors have once again reported the presence of uniformed personnel without insignia operating in separatist-controlled territory, such as a group seen in a military truck marked only with the words “Mortar Team” in Russian.

The international community will judge Russia by its actions. Secretary John Kerry made this clear, on February 13: “The Russian Federation has a simple choice: fully implement Minsk or continue to face economically damaging sanctions. The path to sanctions relief is clear: withdraw weapons and troops from the Donbas; ensure that all Ukrainian hostages are returned; allow full humanitarian access to separatist-controlled territories; support free, fair, and internationally-monitored elections in the Donbas under Ukrainian law; and restore Ukraine’s control of its side of the international border, which belongs to it. Put plainly, Russia can prove by its actions that it will respect Ukraine’s sovereignty, just as it insists on respect for its own.” Russia-backed separatists should ensure free, unfettered access for SMM monitors to assure Ukraine – and the other fifty-five OSCE participating States – of its intention to stop hostilities. All of these options have been and remain at Russia’s disposal.

Colleagues, the people living in the conflict area – and in particular those on the separatist-side of the line of contact – are those suffering the most. According to the World Food Program, over half of the households in separatist-controlled territory do not have the resources to meet basic needs, and food costs comprise over 80% of the average family’s expenses. Intense fighting places people directly and indirectly at risk. Yet Russia-backed separatists continue to block most humanitarian aid organizations from delivering aid to those in need – and despite repeated appeals here in this Council, Russia has not worked toward the establishment of an international mechanism for aid in the Trilateral Contact Group, as called for in the Minsk Package of Measures.

Mr. Chair, Russia has twice recently taken the floor in this Council to call attention to Ukrainian nationalism, but not once has Russia acknowledged the impact of its own actions on Ukraine’s policy; it occupies Ukrainian territory in Crimea, kidnaps Ukrainians and detains them for political reasons, and directs and supports an insurgency on Ukraine’s territory.

Russia’s disregard for Ukrainian sovereignty is not limited to eastern Ukraine as long as Russia’s occupation of Crimea continues. On February 15, a Russian prosecutor requested that the Crimean Tatar Mejlis be listed as an extremist organization. The Mejlis is recognized under

Ukrainian law as the executive body of the Congress of the Crimean Tatar people. It is guilty of no crime – only of protesting Russia’s occupation and repression of the Crimean Tatar people.

Colleagues, let us not forget that Crimean Tatars face repression and discrimination in their homeland, with no representation and no recourse. Almost 10,000 Crimean Tatars have been forced to flee. Those who remain have been subjected to abuses, including interrogations, beatings, arbitrary detentions, and police raids on their homes and mosques. These brutalities must end, as must Russia’s occupation of Crimea.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.