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**STATEMENT BY MR. ALEXANDER LUKASHEVICH,
PERMANENT REPRESENTATIVE OF THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION, AT THE
1306th MEETING OF THE OSCE PERMANENT COUNCIL
VIA VIDEO TELECONFERENCE**

18 March 2021

On the situation in Ukraine and the need to implement the Minsk agreements

Madam Chairperson,

The situation as regards the settlement of the crisis in Ukraine is increasingly reminiscent of a deep impasse. During the video briefings last week on 10 and 12 March, the Special Representative of the OSCE Chairperson-in-Office in Ukraine and in the Trilateral Contact Group (TCG), Heidi Grau, and the Co-ordinator of the Security Working Group of the Minsk-based TCG, Chief Monitor of the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine (SMM), Yaşar Halit Çevik, commented on the lack of progress.

The lack of momentum in the negotiations was again confirmed by the outcome of the online meetings of the TCG and its four working groups on 16 and 17 March. Stagnation is observed in all aspects of the settlement. The main reason for this remains the unwillingness of the Ukrainian Government to engage in direct and meaningful dialogue with the representatives of Donbas as stipulated in the Minsk Package of Measures.

Against this backdrop, the situation along the line of contact in Donbas is seriously deteriorating. The SMM has recorded an increase in the intensity of the daily exchanges of fire. For example, in the first half of March the average number of ceasefire violations was almost five times higher than the average recorded during the first three months after the measures to support the ceasefire regime took effect on 27 July 2020 (as stated in the SMM weekly report dated 16 March). There are reports of growing concern among the civilian population about the intensification of the shelling near the line of contact, which Donbas residents have shared with the SMM monitors.

The Ukrainian military continues to deliberately flaunt its weaponry as, I dare say, the main line of reasoning for its solution to the “Donbas problem”. Of the total number of Ukrainian tanks and weapons sighted by the SMM since 1 March in Donbas in violation of and beyond the withdrawal lines, but outside the designated storage sites, more than 80 per cent – over 210 units – were spotted at railway stations in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions. The active transportation of weapons, including large-calibre artillery, rightly raises questions as to the Ukrainian Government’s true intentions. We call on the SMM to continue its active monitoring there so as to be able to provide early warning of a dangerous escalation.

Yesterday, during discussions in the TCG, Ukraine's representatives once again demonstrated that they were in no way willing to either reach agreement on the functional scope of the co-ordination mechanism for responding to ceasefire violations, or to ensure that it was fully operational. The measures signed on 22 July 2020 to strengthen the ceasefire required the leadership of the Ukrainian armed forces and the leadership of the armed formations of certain areas of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions to issue orders that should take into account the need to create and involve a co-ordination mechanism. This mechanism should operate through the facilitation of the Joint Centre for Control and Co-ordination (JCCC) in its current form. As Mr. Çevik noted during the briefing on 12 March, disagreements over the current composition of the JCCC are preventing the mechanism from becoming fully operational.

Today, it is only the Ukrainian Government that is refusing to accept reality in this matter. Namely, that when the measures to strengthen the ceasefire regime were signed, the actual JCCC personnel in certain areas of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions consisted exclusively of representatives of the armed formations from Donbas. According to the SMM's reports, no other JCCC participants in these territories were observed by the Mission in 2020, nor are any observed today. The Ukrainian Government's blocking of the work to make the co-ordination mechanism fully operational is undoubtedly having a negative impact on the overall security situation, the response to violations, verification and disciplinary action. Furthermore, in February, the Secretary of the National Security and Defence Council, Oleksiy Danilov, the Prime Minister, Denys Shmyhal, and the spokesperson of the Ukrainian delegation to the TCG, Oleksiy Arestovych, confirmed that Ukrainian soldiers are allowed to open fire with impunity – they are not disciplined for doing so.

These and other unconstructive actions are undermining the implementation of the measures to strengthen the ceasefire regime. In fact, the Ukrainian Government has nullified most of the agreed security guarantees and is provoking an escalation of the conflict in Donbas.

As noted by Ambassador Grau at the briefing on 10 March, the work of the thematic working groups and the TCG itself has been greatly complicated. The relative "silence" established in Donbas in recent months has not been accompanied by steps to resolve the political settlement issues. This is especially the case after the adoption of the resolution of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine (Ukrainian Parliament) of 15 July 2020, which, as we know, runs counter to the letter of the Package of Measures, as it in fact rules out the possibility of holding local elections in certain areas of Donbas. As a result, discussions on specific practical aspects have still not started in the Political Working Group.

The road map for a settlement submitted by the Ukrainian Government in November 2020 contradicts almost 80 per cent of the Minsk agreements. The Ukrainian negotiators refuse to consider written proposals from the Donbas representatives for the implementation of the Package of Measures and even demand that they be declared non-existent. The Ukrainian Government does not even want to work on the consolidated draft by the working group's co-ordinator, Pierre Morel, because they say it contains proposals submitted by Donetsk and Luhansk.

Furthermore, under a spurious pretext, Ukraine's representatives decided to completely block work on a political settlement. In this connection, in the TCG, they issued an ultimatum demanding that Maya Pirogova's participation in the Donetsk delegation as a representative of the people of Donbas be terminated. The reason for this is that she had been convicted in Ukraine on charges of "terrorist activity". The Ukrainian negotiators have not responded to the Donbas representatives' constructive suggestions on how to resolve this situation. In doing so, they have called into question the resumption of the Political Working Group's work in the near future. It is understood that, in this way, the Ukrainian Government has decided to eliminate the need to discuss what are for it uncomfortable settlement issues.

Finally, the aforementioned Mr. Arestovych revealed a few interesting details about the Ukrainian Government's approach to Donbas a few days ago in an interview with a Ukrainian television channel. When asked about the timeline for the end of the conflict and the Ukrainian Government's reconciliation with Donbas, he said that this would not happen in the foreseeable future: "It's all very simple: never. That is what you have to understand and keep in mind. Over the next few years, it will be the same old, same old: bang bang, soldiers getting killed from time to time; we will do some shooting, they will shoot at us." He also added that "sooner or later someone will get strong enough – either they will knock our teeth out and take everything, or we will knock their teeth out."

Such comments are completely in line with the Ukrainian Government's policy of sabotaging the political settlement based on the Minsk agreements, and also of developing, building up and concentrating military capabilities in Donbas to subsequently resolve the conflict by force.

The position taken against this backdrop by a number of foreign political sponsors of the current authorities in Ukraine is not conducive to peace. This is manifested, for example, in encouraging the Ukrainian Government to sabotage the Package of Measures while at the same time increasing military-technical co-operation. The United States of America, Canada, the United Kingdom and a number of European Union countries continue to train and supply arms to the Ukrainian army and effectively incite it to engage in further violence against the people of Donbas.

For example, in 2020 alone, the US Department of Defense provided military goods worth more than 500 million dollars to the Ukrainian Government as part of foreign military contracts, which is double the figure for previous years. Of the 350 million dollars in military appropriations for Ukraine from the US defence budget for the 2021 financial year, half is for arms supplies (75 million dollars more than in the 2020 financial year).

In January of this year, the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine adopted a law endorsing President Zelensky's decision to allow units and subunits of the armed forces of other States to participate in military exercises on Ukrainian territory in 2021. This decision allows for the long-term presence in Ukraine of up to 2,000 US soldiers and the same number from other NATO member countries. This is 1,000 more than the year before. The law also provides for the year-round presence of foreign military equipment in Ukraine.

Under these circumstances, it is not surprising that many representatives of the politico-military leadership of Ukraine interpret the deepening of military-technical co-operation with NATO States as an endorsement both of the policy of sabotaging the implementation of the Minsk agreements and of their militaristic aspirations in Donbas.

We emphasize that the crisis can and should be resolved exclusively by peaceful means on the basis of the implementation of the Minsk agreements within the framework of direct dialogue between the representatives of the Ukrainian Government and the Donetsk and Luhansk authorities. Attempts to divert attention with politicized propaganda about some external "aggression" and "occupation" against the backdrop of the Ukrainian Government's lack of political will to advance the work of the TCG make the prospects for peace and social harmony in Ukraine increasingly remote.

Thank you for your attention.