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United States Mission to the OSCE

Response to Chief of the Observer Mission at the Russian Checkpoints of Gukovo and Donetsk

As delivered by Chargé d'Affaires, a.i., Kate M. Byrnes
to the Permanent Council, Vienna
March 17, 2015

Mr. Eugster, the United States warmly welcomes you for your final visit to the Permanent Council as Chief Observer of the OSCE Observer Mission at the Russian Checkpoints of Gukovo and Donetsk. We thank you for your service, and wish to express our appreciation for the work of all of the mission's observers, which occurs in restrictive and difficult conditions.

The United States finds it deeply regrettable that the Russian Federation has thus far failed to respond meaningfully to technical proposals that would enable the Observer Mission to operate more effectively, such as removing significant restrictions placed upon the observers or allowing the observers to use even the most basic equipment, such as binoculars, to enhance their ability to observe the border. More than 30 participating States have also called to expand the geographic scope of the mission beyond two small checkpoints. Russia opposes the expansion and justifies its position by arguing that it only agreed to allow the Observer Mission on Russian territory as a "goodwill gesture."

Colleagues, it is not a show of "goodwill" to methodically obstruct the Observer Mission at Gukovo and Donetsk. It is not "goodwill" to block the expansion of the Observer Mission when Russia agreed in the September 2014 Minsk Protocol to "ensure the permanent monitoring of the Ukrainian-Russian border and verification by the OSCE with the creation of security zones in the border regions of Ukraine and the Russian Federation," but has never created a security zone in its border region or allowed permanent monitoring of the border and verification by the OSCE. Allowing the expansion of the Observer Mission and enabling the existing missions to monitor effectively would go a long way toward fulfilling Russia's commitments under the Minsk Protocol.

Russia's refusal to allow the expansion of the Observer Mission is consistent with Moscow's other obstructive actions to prevent international monitors from discovering what is happening in Eastern Ukraine, including evidence of the Russian Federation's military involvement in eastern Ukraine. But, the Observer Mission has revealed evidence of Russia's disregard of Ukraine's sovereignty despite the strict limits imposed on the Observer Mission by Russian authorities. This includes reports of over 2,200 individuals who crossed the two checkpoints in military-style dress in the first three months of 2016 alone. Continued border crossings by young men wearing camouflage cannot be explained away by claims that they are following fashion trends or going mushroom picking. We remain concerned about the untold number of Russian military personnel or mercenaries who may have crossed the border where there are no international observers.

The Observer Mission continues to register convoys of Russian vehicles crossing into Ukraine through the two border checkpoints. OSCE observers have only been able to see these convoys from a distance. We know from previous briefings to the Permanent Council that when Ukrainian border guards are allowed to look inside these vehicles, the back doors of the vehicles are opened for 30 seconds and the Ukrainians typically see a wall of boxes, and are not allowed to inspect cargo entering their sovereign territory.

Mr. Eugster, we applaud the innovations made during your time with the Observer Mission, such as alerting the Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine that cargo carried by rail is crossing from Russia into separatist-held areas of Ukraine. Such efforts take on added importance when Russia refuses to fulfill its commitments under the Minsk Protocol to ensure the permanent monitoring of the Ukrainian-Russian border and verification by the OSCE. The work of the Observer Mission continues to remind this Council of the need for full implementation of the Minsk agreements, which remains the best means toward a peaceful resolution to the conflict in eastern Ukraine.

In closing, Mr. Eugster, let me thank you once again for your work on behalf of the OSCE, and wish you all the best as you return to your work in the Swiss government.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.