



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 Chargé d'Affaires a.i. Kate Byrnes
to the Permanent Council, Vienna
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Russia and the separatists continue to initiate attacks along the contact line in eastern Ukraine, keeping the situation dangerous and highly volatile. Continued provocations by combined Russian-separatist forces place Ukrainian soldiers, civilians, and members of the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission (SMM) at great risk. The explosion of an 82mm mortar shell 60 meters away from an SMM position earlier this week underscores the danger to SMM monitors. We repeat our appeal to combined Russian-separatist forces to stop the shelling and respect the ceasefire, which would allow for the withdrawal of heavy weapons from the contact line to designated storage sites. Furthermore, all shelling of Ukrainian crossing points must come to an immediate halt; these attacks prevent civilians living in separatist-controlled territory from accessing much-needed food and medicine in Ukrainian government-provided humanitarian centers.

As OSCE Chairman in Office Steinmeier said, "We must really advance, first in consolidating the ceasefire and secondly in restarting the political process." The United States applauds the Ukrainian government for signaling in Paris, Minsk, and Vienna, its willingness to de-militarize hotspots in the conflict zone. It is vital that Russia constructively engage with the Ukrainians and the SMM to follow-through immediately on the Normandy Format's request for the SMM to facilitate de-escalation.

We regret that the SMM continues to be subjected to serious, daily restrictions on its ability to move about the country, with the vast majority of these restrictions initiated by the Russia-backed separatists. The United States stresses again that the SMM must be granted full, unhindered access throughout Ukraine, including to the international border. While the SMM does gain access to the border on occasion, this is sporadic and there are parts of the border with Russia from which the SMM is clearly being kept away.

We thank the Chair for his report on the Normandy foreign ministers meeting in Paris. We regret that Russia chose to obstruct progress in Paris on an agreement for local elections in the special status area.

Colleagues, Russia's insistence on direct dialogue between Kyiv and the separatists is predicated on two misleading myths. The first myth is that the crisis in Ukraine is a strictly internal matter – which ignores a mountain of evidence that Russia has armed, trained, and fought alongside separatists in eastern Ukraine. President Putin himself has admitted Russian military involvement in Ukraine. The second myth is that the separatists are politically, militarily, and economically independent of the Russian Federation. Yet Russia delivers fuel, food, soldiers, and weapons to prop up the separatists. Russia is behind the problem; it must also get behind a path to resolution.

The United States firmly believes the implementation of the Minsk agreements is the only way to peacefully resolve the conflict in eastern Ukraine. Under the auspices of the Trilateral Contact Group, Ukraine has engaged in discussions with Russia and the separatists. However, Russia and the separatists have offered nothing but demands for further concessions. If Russia is serious about resolving the conflict, it will negotiate in good faith in the Trilateral Contact Group and in the Normandy Format, and it will push the separatists to engage constructively in the working groups as well.

Colleagues, the United States is also deeply concerned over the human rights situation in separatist-held areas of Ukraine. The UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, in its March 3 report on Ukraine, expressed concern about the dire threats facing civil society actors in separatist-controlled territory. Since January, Russia-backed separatists have detained the founder of a humanitarian NGO, three Jehovah's Witnesses, a religious scholar, and a blogger -- who is being held incommunicado. We also note with concern the takeover of media outlets and the censorship of Ukrainian TV and news websites in separatist-controlled areas. All people must be able to receive and impart information and ideas without interference, and exercise their rights to freedom of expression and association. Such conditions do not yet exist in separatist-controlled areas of Ukraine.

Nor do they exist in Russia-occupied Crimea, where Russia has suppressed independent media, arrested and intimidated journalists, and now threatens to ban the Mejlis, which brings together over 250 locally-elected councils to serve as the representative body of the Crimean Tatar people. We call upon the Russian Federation to recognize its obligations to Ukraine and its commitments to its fellow OSCE participating States by ending without further delay its aggression against Ukraine – including its occupation of Crimea.

Thank you, Madam Chair.