



PC.DEL/253/19
8 March 2019

ENGLISH only

EUROPEAN UNION

**OSCE Permanent Council No. 1219
Vienna, 7 March 2019**

**EU Statement on “Russia’s Ongoing Aggression against
Ukraine and Illegal Occupation of Crimea”**

Mr. Chairperson, the mandate of the SMM specifies that it shall have safe and secure access throughout Ukraine. This includes the Ukraine-Russia state border and illegally annexed Crimea. We strongly condemn any attempts to restrict the SMM’s freedom of movement or impede the fulfilment of its mandate. Unrestricted and unconditional access to all areas is essential to ensure effective monitoring and reporting of the security situation, the ceasefire, the withdrawal of weapons, demining, as well as disengagement. We are therefore deeply concerned that restrictions of the SMM’s freedom of movement rose by no less than 60% during the latter half of 2018 as stated in a recently published thematic report by the SMM. The majority of these restrictions continue to take place in areas held by Russia-backed armed formations – 75 per cent in the reporting period – hindering inter alia the Mission’s ability to monitor the withdrawal of weapons which is an essential prerequisite for a sustainable and permanent ceasefire. We also note with concern an increase in restrictions in government controlled areas. We expect the Russian Federation and Ukraine to give their full support to a recommitment to the ceasefire starting on March 8, that should be implemented in a sustainable and comprehensive way. Following the last meeting of the TCG in Minsk a final decision should be taken today and will hopefully be positive.

We further share the concern raised by the SMM in their latest thematic report about the trend of systematic denials of access by armed formations in parts of southern Donetsk region and to border areas. More than half of the attempted visits to border areas were prevented by Russia-backed armed formations which is a significant increase compared with the previous six months. These systematic denials of access raise profound suspicions about what is being hidden from the SMM. Combined with the refusal of those in control of these areas to provide security assurances that

would enable the SMM to open a patrol hub and forward patrol locations in towns near these border areas renders the Mission's observations in border areas partial and ineffective. Restrictions also put the monitors at risk. On four occasions during the last half of 2018 - all of them in areas held by Russia-backed armed formations - restrictions involved threats and aggressive behaviour toward SMM staff. We repeat our strong condemnation of any actions that put our monitors at risk. In this context, we once again reiterate our call on Russia to return to the JCCC, from which it withdrew on 18 December 2017, and to restore its functionality. The JCCC in its original set-up played an important role with regards to securing the safety of SMM monitors and to contribute to immediate resolution of impediments encountered by SMM patrols.

We reiterate our condemnation of the deliberate attempts to down or blind the SMM UAVs including the actions leading to the two crashes of LR UAVs in areas held by Russia-backed armed formations. Cameras and UAVs have helped the SMM to increase its remote observation capabilities and make up an essential part of their tools to carry out their mandate. However, during the latter half of 2018 the Mission's UAVs were subjected to gunfire or signal interference in more than 150 cases. We strongly reiterate our call on the Russian Federation to provide us with a substantial explanation regarding the downing of the SMM LR UAV on 27 October last year and to hand over the debris. We underline that the operational, security and financial consequences of all obstructions must be assessed. We are deeply concerned about these losses which have a substantial negative impact on the operational effectiveness of the SMM. Those responsible for any willful damage, destruction or loss of SMM UAVs and other assets should be held accountable, both politically and financially.

The likely presence of mines and UXOs continues to prevent the Mission from patrolling several areas along the contact line, including critical routes. In addition, the Mission's access to disengagement areas remained fully or partially restricted due to the inaction by the sides in ensuring safe and secure access. This includes not removing mines and UXO in violation of undertaken commitments to do so. Disengagement and comprehensive demining would considerably ease the movement of the SMM as well as that of civilians crossing the contact line.

Regrettably, not only did the Mission not see demining activity in these areas in the second half of 2018, but instead it reported the presence of additional mines and UXO. We again strongly condemn laying of new mines and call on the sides to start comprehensive demining. Mines together with ongoing fighting continue to pose a severe danger to civilians residing close to the contact line, whose living conditions further deteriorate due to the conflict. The infrastructure that they depend on is repeatedly damaged and shelling takes place in residential areas adding significantly to the hardship that they already suffer under.

Our position on the incident at the Kerch Strait on 25 November 2018 and its negative impact in the Azov Sea and Russia's violations of international law is well known. Russia's aggressive actions also affect the security situation in the entire Black Sea region. We strongly call on Russia to release the crew members and return their vessels unconditionally and without delay. We expect Russia to ensure unhindered and free passage through the Kerch Strait to and from the Azov Sea, in accordance with international law.

The EU remains firm in its call on all sides to swiftly and fully implement the Minsk agreements and honour their commitments in full in order to achieve a sustainable political solution to the conflict in line with OSCE principles and commitments. We call on Russia to fully assume its responsibility in this regard and to use its considerable influence over the armed formations it backs to meet the Minsk commitments in full. Respect for these principles and commitments must be restored. We again call on Russia to immediately stop fuelling the conflict by providing financial and military support to the armed formations, and we remain deeply concerned about information on the presence of Russian military equipment and personnel in areas held by Russia-backed armed formations. The duration of the European Union's economic sanctions against Russia is linked to the complete implementation of the Minsk agreements.

The EU recalls its unwavering support to the sovereignty, territorial integrity, unity and independence of Ukraine within its internationally recognised borders, and calls upon Russia to do likewise. We urge Russia to uphold these fundamental principles that it has itself invoked many times and to contribute, by acts and public

pronouncements, to stabilising the situation and reversing moves that contravene these principles. We strongly condemn the clear violation of Ukrainian sovereignty and territorial integrity by acts of aggression by the Russian armed forces since February 2014 and the illegal annexation of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea and the city of Sevastopol to the Russian Federation, which we will not recognise. The European Union will remain committed to fully implement its non-recognition policy, including through restrictive measures.

The Candidate Countries NORTH MACEDONIA*, MONTENEGRO* and ALBANIA*, and the EFTA countries ICELAND, LIECHTENSTEIN and NORWAY, members of the European Economic Area, as well as the REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA and GEORGIA align themselves with this statement.

* North Macedonia, Montenegro and Albania continue to be part of the Stabilisation and Association Process.