



Permanent Mission of Ukraine
to the International
Organizations in Vienna

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Statement on Russia's ongoing aggression against Ukraine and illegal occupation of Crimea

As delivered by Ambassador Ihor Prokopchuk,
Permanent Representative of Ukraine to the International Organizations in Vienna,
to the 1219th meeting of the Permanent Council,
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Mr. Chairperson,

The analysis by the General Staff of Ukraine's Armed Forces of the situation in Russia-occupied Crimea and parts of Donbas as well as near the borders indicates that Russia continues to build up its offensive capabilities increasing the risks of large-scale invasion into Ukraine. Yesterday the President of the Russian Federation signed the law which bans the use of smartphones by the Russian military personnel, thus further fostering secrecy regarding the movements of Russian troops and servicemen. As we all know, in the past few years plenty of evidence of Russia's aggression and illegal military presence on the sovereign territory of Ukraine appeared directly from Russian servicemen and their activity in social networks.

In Donbas there are no signs of Russia's readiness to cease hostilities and to start implementing the Minsk agreements. The very first provision of all three Minsk - Protocol, Memorandum and Package of Measures – regarding immediate establishment of comprehensive ceasefire is flagrantly violated by the Russian armed formations. In the last few days, localities of Troitske, Travneve, Zaitseve, and Novoluhanske were targeted, including by mortars. The hostilities are driven by Russia's constant provision of resupplies of fuel, lubricants as well as ammunition and military equipment. In the last 3 weeks 28 cisterns, 60 tons each, arrived to the occupied Rovenky. Sophisticated Russian electronic warfare systems continue to be registered by the SMM, this time in Yasynuvata on 3 March. Last week, new trench networks of the Russian armed formations were spotted by the SMM near Vedenske. While the Russian delegation to the OSCE, as well as the Russian diplomacy throughout the world, continue to deny Russia's direct role in the armed conflict in Donbas, the facts on the ground, established in particular by the SMM, tell a different story. Last week the Ukrainian military downed a modern Russian UAV "Eleron". Russia's military publicly admit the use of these UAVs in the conflict in Syria, but they also do the same in the Donbas region of Ukraine and try to hide it.

Mr. Chairperson,

We are very concerned over the ongoing suppression of the fact-finding capabilities of the SMM by the Russian armed formations and occupation administration. The SMM thematic report released on 28 February provides a disturbing summary of these restrictions, encountered by the Mission in the second half of 2018. We find it important to draw attention to few elements of the report that capture alarming trends in Russia-occupied parts of Donbas.

The SMM encountered 720 restrictions of its freedom of movement and access, a more than 60 per cent increase, compared with the previous six months, with vast majority of them (75 per cent) taking place in Russia-occupied territories. In these territories the most systematic restrictions continued at checkpoints near the contact line and in areas near Ukrainian-Russian state border, where the rate of restrictions increased from 36 to 50 per cent. As underlined in the report, “many settlements close to the contact line and areas near the border with the Russian Federation remained inaccessible to SMM monitors”. It is telling that at the checkpoint of the Russian armed formations near Verkhnohshyrokyvske, the SMM was denied passage on 37 occasions compared to nine in the first half of 2018. To avoid further SMM’s visits, on 7 November 2018 the Russian fighters installed near this checkpoint a MON-100 anti-personnel mine, strictly prohibited by the international law and Ukrainian legislation, and refused to remove it despite repeated requests from the SMM. Thus the Mission’s patrols were prevented from crossing this checkpoint for the remainder of the year. There has been no progress on opening additional SMM patrol hubs and forward patrol bases in Russia-occupied border areas, as the Russian armed formations continued to deny the necessary security assurances.

A part of the SMM mandate relating to monitoring and supporting respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms also continued to be grossly undermined by the Russian side. Under Russia’s occupation, civilians “remained hesitant to talk with SMM monitors, often citing an “order” from those in control” or expressed “a fear of repercussions”. In particular, such reaction was widespread when monitors attempted to interact with medical staff at hospitals or with representatives of educational facilities.

The climate of fear perpetrated by Russia and its proxies aims at hiding the dire humanitarian and social consequences of the Russian aggression and occupation. It largely affects local civilians, but also has impact on international monitors. The SMM points out to “unfounded allegations targeting the Mission, which continued to emanate from media affiliated with groups in non-government-controlled areas or directly from senior members of those groups themselves”. The SMM concludes that “these unfounded allegations may have facilitated an environment in which the Mission’s movement was restricted (sometimes with violence or threats) with impunity, which represents a considerable security risk for the civilian monitors”. All four cases of direct threats and aggressive behaviour towards SMM staff took place in Russia-occupied areas of Ukraine. We urge again the Russian Federation to exercise responsibility and put an immediate end to the practices of breaching the SMM’s mandate agreed by all participating States, including Russia.

For its part, the Government of Ukraine fully shares SMM's view that its freedom of movement is critical to the execution of the mandated tasks. I wish to draw attention of the Permanent Council that, as stated in the SMM's thematic report, even during the martial law temporarily introduced in ten regions of Ukraine, an increased presence of Ukrainian Armed Forces personnel and of police in some of the affected regions observed by the Mission did not affect its freedom of movement.

Mr. Chairperson,

This year, the negative trends highlighted in the SMM's thematic report continue: in the first two months of 2019, the Mission faced 118 instances of restrictions and denials of access, of which 107 took place in Russia-occupied parts of Donbas. Russia does not want to change its irresponsible behaviour. Last October the SMM's long-range UAV was shot down by Russian forces near the Ukrainian-Russian border. The shooting as the cause of the crash was confirmed by the OSCE Secretary General at the last PC meeting. As the Russian Federation has managed until now to escape responsibility, including financial, for this deliberate attack, the Russian armed formations disabled, after heavy jamming, another SMM long-range UAV on 18 February this year. No explanations were provided yet by the Russian delegation on either of these incidents with UAVs, or on the presence of the modern radio intelligence and electronic warfare systems, produced exclusively by the Russian Federation for the Russian Armed Forces, which continue to be registered by the SMM in the occupied parts of Donbas. We again urge the Russian delegation to provide explanations.

Having deep concern regarding the plight of the civilian population under Russian occupation we draw attention of the Chairmanship and the Permanent Council to the fact that yesterday four trucks with the humanitarian aid of ICRC proceeded to the occupied territories through the entry/exit checkpoint of Novotroytske. However, three of them were not allowed entry by the Russian armed formations and were forced to turn back without explanation. We condemn such unacceptable behaviour and urge Russia to lift all restrictions affecting the functioning of humanitarian organisations in Russia-occupied parts of Donbas.

Distinguished colleagues,

Tuesday this week marked 100 days since 24 Ukrainian servicemen were captured by Russia during an unprovoked armed attack near the Kerch Strait. They remain in captivity of the Russian Federation, which defies their status of prisoners of war and breaches the norms of international humanitarian law by taking the captured military personnel to a civilian court. The Russian regime makes it clear that it openly enlarges the list of hostages to be used by Kremlin for its political purposes. We urge Russia to release them, as well as dozens of Ukrainian citizens illegally detained by the Russian authorities in the occupied Crimea and in the territory of the Russian Federation. We reiterate readiness of the Ukrainian side to release Russian citizens convicted for crimes in Ukraine against Ukraine, in exchange for release by Russia of illegally detained Ukrainian citizens.

Mr. Chairperson,

In the last two meetings of the Permanent Council, the Ukrainian delegation drew attention to the ongoing attempts of the Russian occupation administration in Crimea to terminate the presence of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church and the religious life of its remaining eight parishes. Such persecution flagrantly violates the OSCE principles and commitments regarding the freedom of religion or belief. It is a part of broader Russia's attempts to force out of the occupied Crimea any pro-Ukrainian structures and people. Last Sunday Archbishop Klyment, Head of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine in Russia-occupied Crimea, was detained at the bus station in Simferopol while departing to Rostov-on-Don to attend the next day's court hearing in the so called "trial" of Pavlo Hryb. Archbishop Klyment was recently appointed the head of the Orthodox Mission to help victims of human rights abuses and illegal imprisonment in Russia and occupied territories. He was heading to Russia to implement his mission and to support Pavlo Hryb who had been kidnapped by the Russian authorities from the territory of Belarus in August 2017. The Russian occupation administration again resorts to absurd and false accusations. This time they accused the Archbishop of stealing religious items from the church run by him, and later of minor hooliganism, i.e. "swearing" in public at the bus station. Archbishop Klyment was released only after over 5 hours of detention, but continues to face the risks of further persecution. Ukraine strongly condemns the acts of repression and persecution perpetrated by the Russian authorities in the occupied territories of Ukraine and calls for putting an immediate end to them. We call upon the Chairmanship, the OSCE Institutions and the SMM to pay close attention to the situation with human rights and fundamental freedoms, including the freedom of religion or belief, in the Russia-occupied Crimea and Donbas.

We again urge the Russian Federation to reverse its illegal occupation of Crimea and to stop its aggression against Ukraine, including by withdrawing its armed formations from the temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine and fully implementing its commitments under the Minsk agreements.

Thank you, Mr. Chairperson.