



EUROPEAN UNION

OSCE Permanent Council No. 1281 Vienna, 17 September 2020

EU Statement in response to the report by the Chief Observer of the OSCE Observer Mission at two Russian Checkpoints on the Russian-Ukrainian border, Ambassador György Varga

Mr. Chairperson, the European Union warmly welcomes Ambassador Varga to the Permanent Council and expresses its gratitude for his latest report. We commend you, Ambassador, and your team for the major effort that you are making in order to implement the mandate of the Observer Mission and maintain its full operational capability through the current challenging circumstances related to the COVID19 pandemic. We commend you in particular, for the precautionary measures adopted to protect the health of the Mission's staff, mindful of the fact that the specificity of the border observation activities does not allow for home office working or telecommuting. We regret to learn that a large part of the Mission members have not been able to take their annual leave and those who have, are currently facing challenges in the return to the place of deployment.

Mr. Chairperson, the European Union believes that the effective and comprehensive monitoring of the Russian-Ukrainian border constitutes a fundamental confidence-building measure towards a sustainable political resolution of the conflict in eastern Ukraine, in line with OSCE principles and commitments. We recall that the Minsk Protocol calls for permanent monitoring of the border and verification by the OSCE, and that the Minsk Package of Measures includes a commitment to reinstate full Ukrainian control over the entirety of its sovereign territory, including the border.

Ambassador Varga, we are disappointed to learn from your report that the freedom of movement of the observer teams continues to be restricted by the Russian authorities and that the use of observation tools such as binoculars or cameras remains prohibited. The persistence of what you describe as “blind spots” represents a violation of the Mission’s mandate which we deeply regret. The limitations imposed on your work, as well as on that of the SMM, which is systematically denied access to certain border areas by Russia-backed armed formations, increase concerns about what is being hidden from the international community. We also regret that the Russian Federation continues to resist an expansion of the Mission and we reiterate our call for a significant expansion of the Mission to all border crossings on the Russia-Ukraine state border currently not under control of the Ukrainian government as well as between these border crossings. We would like to stress once more that these limitations run counter to the confidence-building purposes that this Mission was intended for, and we reiterate that a more cooperative approach from the Russian authorities would be very welcome in order to remove all the existing obstacles.

Equally, we note the decision of the Permanent Council of 3 September to extend the Observer Mission by a further period of four months. The European Union remains convinced that a longer mandate cycle would significantly reduce the administrative burden that each renewal generates on you and your team, and facilitate a more stable functioning of the Mission. We would support, in line with Ambassador Varga, an extension of the mandate cycle for a longer period ensuring a more stable functioning of the Mission. We also urge the Russian Federation, as the host country, to assign the appropriate legal status to the Observer Mission in order for the Mission to be able to operate to its full potential and to secure a legal protection for the Observers.

We welcome and encourage the further development of the cooperation and the exchange of information between the Observer Mission and the SMM, which is certainly highly beneficial for both Missions.

Ambassador, we thank you and your team for your hard work in such constraining conditions. We appreciate your regular briefings and hope to welcome you back soon with more updates on the situation of the Mission.

The Candidate Countries REPUBLIC of 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, GEORGIA, ANDORRA and SAN MARINO align themselves with this statement.

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