



Statement by the Chairperson in Office

H.E. Miroslav Lajčák

Farwell ceremony for SMM Chief Monitor Amb. Apakan

OSCE

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*Good morning,*

*Ambassador Apakan,*

*Excellencies,*

*dear colleagues,*

We are here for a special reason; to say thank you to the first Chief Monitor of the Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine – Ambassador Apakan.

Today is not about me, so I will speak very briefly, and limit myself to three main points.

First, I want to say that, yes, we are here to thank Ambassador Apakan.

But, actually, I don't want to start by doing that.

I want to focus, first, on something else: his team.

The men and women of the Special Monitoring Mission.

Right now, they are on the ground, reporting on ceasefire violations.

They are working tirelessly to open space for humanitarian efforts -from the reconnection of power lines to the repair of damaged buildings.

And, they are often operating at great risk.

At times, this risk has escalated into real crisis.

And still, today, the monitors face daily challenges and threats. These come from denials of access; from exposure to indirect fire; from the jamming and downing of their Unmanned Aerial Vehicles.

I am not speaking about all of this to distract us from Ambassador Apakan.

In fact, I am following his lead.

Time and time again, he has sat at this table - and stood up for the SMM and the people working for it.

He has reminded us of our duty to ensure that the Mission can carry out the mandate we have given it. And, to do everything we can to secure the safety of each and every monitor.

And, outside this room, he has been there, on the ground, working with his team, finding solutions and providing leadership.

Which is why, as my second point, I want to focus on Ambassador Apakan directly.

Five years ago, he took on the challenge of a lifetime.

And he did so without knowing what, exactly, it would entail.

In fact, we were all in the dark about the SMM.

We did not know how long it would last.

We did not know how its mandate would be implemented.

And, we did not know how many challenges it would face, going forward.

We were in uncharted waters. But, Ambassador Apakan steered us through them.

And, he did so with many achievements along the way.

For example, from his role within the Trilateral Contact Group, he showed his commitment to people. He found creative ways to take tangible steps forward – from the withdrawal of heavy weapons to humanitarian demining.

Also when crisis struck, he reacted immediately. He used facts and logic to find what first seemed like impossible solutions – working to secure the safety of his staff, without risking the viability of the Mission.

And, he created an environment that was open to new ideas and ways of working. This included a personal commitment to the mainstreaming of gender across the Mission.

Back in 2014, Ambassador Apakan took on an SMM with an uncertain future and a few dozen staff members working for it.

Now, it is a fully-fledged mission - with a highly skilled team of over a thousand people.

It is known throughout the world for the crucial and unique role it plays in Ukraine.

It has strengthened the reputation of the OSCE as a major regional security organization.

And, it acts as the eyes and ears of the international community on the ground.

Much of that is down to the leadership of Ambassador Apakan. Which is why I am honoured to award him today the Golden Medal of the Slovak Foreign Service – our most distinguished award.

However, as my third point, I want to stress something else.

We can celebrate the legacy of Ambassador Apakan today.

But that is where our celebrations must end.

Because, unfortunately, the crisis is not over.

I saw this myself, last January - when I travelled to the country.

The people on the ground are suffering.

Greatly.

We can debate the reasons why - but we cannot debate that it is happening.

And it is happening now, on the ground, not too far away from where we sit today.

That is something we must never forget. And, even on this happy occasion, we must focus on ways to take more steps forward.

So, today is our opportunity to honour Ambassador Apakan.

But the best way to honour his legacy is, I believe, to live it.

This means staying calm - even in the face of roaring challenges.

It means placing facts and realities above politics and emotions.

It means coming up against divisions - but still finding ways to build trust.

It means remaining hopeful that, no matter how bad things get, there will always still be a way to take tangible steps forward.

And, finally, it means putting people - and the need to end their suffering - first.

Thank you all for being here today.

And thank you, Ambassador Apakan, for your service to the OSCE.