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Dr. h.c. Gernot Erler

Dialogue, Reforms, Security: The OSCE in Ukraine

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For the first time in over a year, the Heads of State and Government of Ukraine, Russia, France and Germany met in Berlin on 19 October in the Normandy format to discuss the conflict in and around Ukraine. The summit demonstrated that the conflict remains high on the European agenda. However, it also showed once more how difficult this process is and how hard it is to achieve even minimal progress.

Why is Germany, together with France, working so hard to find a solution? The answer is simple: the Ukraine conflict is the most serious crisis in European security since the end of the Cold War. It has brought violence, destruction and displacement back to the heart of Europe. Almost 10,000 dead, a large number injured and immense suffering for people in the conflict areas, internally displaced persons and refugees have become the cruel reality.

With the annexation of Crimea in contravention of international law and the destabilisation of eastern Ukraine, Russia has blatantly violated Ukraine's territorial integrity and sovereignty. Moreover, more than 40 years after the adoption of the Helsinki Final Act of 1975, the peaceful order in Europe has been shaken to the core as a result. The most important currency in international politics – mutual trust – has sustained lasting damage.

Germany, along with its European and transatlantic partners, reacted to these ongoing violations of international law on the part of Russia by imposing sanctions. We have thus made it clear that a policy aimed at redrawing internationally recognised borders and violently destabilising neighbouring countries has no place in the 21st century.

It is important to spell this out.. However, clearly stating who is responsible will not resolve the conflict on its own. The sanctions are not an end in themselves but, rather – as part and parcel of a dual strategy of pressure and dialogue – are intended to foster a political solution to the conflict and a return to upholding the Helsinki principles. This is the logic of the Minsk agreements, imperfect as they may be. For we will not tolerate this conflict in the heart of Europe becoming a permanent fixture. That is why lifting the economic sanctions is linked to the implementation of the Minsk agreements.

The German Government has strongly supported the efforts to find a peaceful resolution of the conflict from the outset. On the one hand, together with France as mediators in the

Normandy format, on the other by assuming the Chairmanship of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe in 2016. The Ukraine-Russia conflict has reminded us all of the OSCE's worth as a platform for dialogue and as an indispensable crisis management instrument. Nor could the political negotiation process in the Normandy format function on a long-term basis without the structures and mechanisms of the OSCE.

Firstly, the Trilateral Contact Group with its working groups meeting in Minsk under the aegis of the OSCE is still the only dialogue forum in which all sides discuss the necessary steps to implement the Minsk agreements and agree on concrete measures to improve the humanitarian situation, the security situation as well as economic issues on an ongoing basis.

Secondly, the 57 participating States of the OSCE established the Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine (SMM) in April 2014 to monitor the conflict and to foster dialogue on the ground. As a result of the increasing militarisation of the conflict in summer of 2014, the mission and its tasks grew; with 700 observers at present, the SMM is now the largest OSCE mission. It has been invaluable in helping to calm the situation, foster confidence-building on the ground and promote transparency. Day in and day out, the SMM carries out between 70 and 100 patrols in the conflict area alone, covering more than 10,000 km in the process.

The SMM not only observes; it supports and facilitates mutual agreements designed to make life easier for people on both sides of the line of contact: local agreements on the establishment of crossings, on the restoration of water and power supplies, as well as on mine clearance. Thanks to the SMM reports, every day the world receives an objective overview of what is happening in eastern Ukraine. That this conflict is still covered by the international media is partly thanks to this mission. We owe gratitude and respect to the observers for the courageous work they carry out day and night, under difficult and sometimes dangerous conditions.

To ensure that the SMM can fully observe and support compliance with the ceasefire, its security and the observers' unhindered access to the entire conflict area must finally be guaranteed. Attempts to hinder SMM patrols and attacks on the mission, which mainly – but not only – happen in the areas not under the control of the Ukrainian Government, are totally unacceptable! The German OSCE Chairmanship will continue to make the protection and safety of the SMM observers, who were sent to eastern Ukraine by 45 OSCE participating States, a top priority.

The dialogue process in the various formats and the work done by the OSCE observers have helped to ensure that the conflict has not escalated further. During the last few weeks, some progress has been made in disengaging the troops in two or three pilot zones. A corresponding framework agreement was negotiated in the Trilateral Contact Group. Further zones of this kind are being discussed.

Despite this modest, local progress, violations of the already fragile ceasefire have increased considerably in other sections of the line of contact during the last few weeks. There have been new victims on both sides, also among the civilian population. Further decisive steps are needed in order to stabilise the security situation on a lasting basis. In particular, the sides will

have to finally make headway with the withdrawal of heavy weapons and the disengagement of the combatants along the line of contact.

For no international mission can enforce a resolution of this conflict from the outside. No mission can replace the will of those involved on the ground to respect the ceasefire. I am therefore convinced that there is no alternative to the step-by-step implementation of the Minsk agreements – no matter how tough, frustrating and laborious this process may be for everyone.

I am aware that this will require political foresight and resolve and that it will present Ukraine with major challenges. For it is evident that the security situation and the political dimension of the Minsk agreements are interconnected. The political aspects can only advance if the security situation is stabilised and confidence in the political process grows. At the same time, however, stabilisation of the security situation can only be lasting if there is a realistic prospect of a durable political process, including local elections in areas not under the control of the Government, and if bold steps are taken to put the necessary framework in place.

The Heads of State reaffirmed this at the Berlin summit and mandated their negotiators to continue working on a roadmap on how these steps can be implemented swiftly. The resilience and ability to function of the Ukrainian state is therefore a decisive factor in managing this crisis. It is essential that the reform process gains new momentum and that the many different projects on modernising the justice system and administration and on fighting corruption are not only resolutely tackled but also rigorously implemented. This is the only way to ensure that confidence can grow on a durable basis among international investors and, above all, among people in Ukraine.

That is my third point. The OSCE is also contributing to the domestic reform process. Let me give you just one example: the Project Co-ordinator in Ukraine (PCU) is fostering the exchange between the central administration and the individual regions in a large-scale dialogue project. This is intended to help the Government to tailor new draft laws to the needs of the population and to initiate them in line with good governance standards. The PCU is also supporting the reforms in the police and justice systems as well as assistance for internally displaced persons.

People in Ukraine can be proud that a strong and self-confident civil society has developed in their country over the last few years. It has evolved into an independent political force which provides key impetus, demands reform results and monitors the Government's actions. The commitment, patriotism, selflessness as well as the perseverance of these people are admirable. My talks with representatives of Ukrainian NGOs and local initiatives in Donbas and in Kyiv during the last couple of days give me cause for hope that Ukraine's civil society will continue to work for the country's future.

This active participation of the Ukrainian people and the impressive will to advance reforms is not least an inspiration and an incentive for Germany and the EU to continue to stand firmly by Ukraine's side as it advances along this path.