



United States Mission to the OSCE

Ongoing Violations of International Law and Defiance of OSCE Principles and Commitments by the Russian Federation in Ukraine

As delivered by Ambassador Daniel B. Baer
to the Permanent Council, Vienna
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The United States is concerned that the number of observed ceasefire violations in eastern Ukraine is at the highest level since August 2015, exceeding 3,800 in the last week; combined-Russian separatist forces are responsible for the majority of them. Combined Russian-separatist forces have also attacked Ukrainian positions with proscribed heavy weapons, including grad rocket launchers, high caliber mortars, and heavy artillery. We regret that Russia and the separatists have chosen to again escalate the violence ahead of today's Normandy format Foreign Ministers meeting in Paris. This violence threatens progress toward finding a peaceful resolution to the conflict and calls into question Russia's and the separatists' commitment to full implementation of the Minsk agreements.

The reports of the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine reveal a clear concentration of separatist attacks in strategically-important areas: Marinka, which is the last government-controlled area in the suburbs of Donetsk, and Svitlodarsk, which has a power plant that supplies separatist-controlled territory. For the first time in many weeks, we have also seen renewed violence along the line of contact in Luhansk oblast. Despite these provocations by combined Russian-separatist forces, just yesterday in the Trilateral Contact Group, Ukraine signed agreements on ending live-fire exercises near the line of contact and on demining, which will help deescalate the situation in the conflict zone and contribute to a sustainable ceasefire.

Colleagues, Russia has repeatedly claimed in the Permanent Council that this is an internal conflict despite conclusive evidence that Russia supplies, trains, directs, and finances forces in eastern Ukraine. While the Russian Federation has repeatedly sought to mask its aggression against Ukraine, fresh evidence of Russia's role in the fighting continues to emerge. On February 22, the OSCE Border Checkpoint Observation Mission spotted a van entering Russia from Ukraine with the sign "Cargo 200" – a reference to the transport of Russian military casualties. On February 26, the SMM spotted a soldier wearing Russian military insignia in separatist-controlled territory. We hope that Russia will take responsibility for its actions in Ukraine, end its direct support for the separatists, and fulfill the commitments it made when it signed the Minsk agreements. I thank our distinguished Ukrainian colleague for sharing reports of new weapons deliveries from Russia – this is obviously very disappointing. And I think it's important that we recognize that this not only has human costs, which so many of our colleagues have raised today, but it also raises questions about the credibility of Russia's political leadership, who purport to support the Minsk agreements even as Russia continues to flout them.

Adherence to the Minsk agreements is particularly important for protecting civilians. Withdrawing heavy weapons followed by the full demilitarization of critical hotspots – under careful observation by the SMM – can allow a sustainable ceasefire to take hold. Stopping the attacks is the best way to protect people in the conflict zone. But to sustain an end to the violence, it must be accompanied by continued monitoring, which means Russia and the separatists must provide the SMM unrestricted access throughout the entirety of Ukraine, including along the international border, as required by the SMM mandate and the Minsk agreements. SMM reports continue to show the vast majority of restrictions on its movements are imposed by Russia-backed separatists. Restrictions on the SMM by any actor, including the jamming of its UAVs, are completely unacceptable. The Ukrainian government should continue to ensure that instructions to facilitate the unhindered access for the SMM are sent to all military units in the area.

Mr. Chair, sustained improvement of the security situation in eastern Ukraine is essential for – and can generate positive momentum for – implementing the political elements of the Minsk agreements, which is why the Normandy-format meeting today in Paris is so important. We hope that consensus will be reached both on securing an end to the violence and on election modalities in the special status area.

Security and respect for human rights will be critical to holding local elections in separatist-controlled territory that meet OSCE standards and are in line with Ukrainian law. We remain deeply concerned by reports of abductions, intimidation, and torture in separatist-controlled territory. On January 26, separatists abducted Ihor Kozlovsky, the head of a local NGO in Donetsk; his fate remains unknown. Human Rights Watch has documented 20 cases in which combined Russian-separatist forces have captured civilians; 12 of these people reported being subjected to beatings and mock executions. We are concerned by the continued detention of Maria Varfolomeyeva, a Ukrainian journalist who was arrested in Luhansk by armed separatists over a year ago. The separatists subjected her to a series of carefully staged “interrogations” and then “sentenced” her to 15 years in prison. On February 15, independent Ukrainian and Russian media and journalist trade unions jointly condemned Ms. Varfolomeyeva’s captivity.

We also remain concerned over repression in Russia-occupied Crimea. The Russian government continues to pursue a ban on the Crimean Mejlis – the legitimate, elected body of the Crimean Tatar community. During last week’s OSCE Parliamentary Assembly meeting, the Mejlis’ former leader, Refat Chubarov, said Russian officials had told him harassment of the Mejlis would stop if the Tatars accepted Russia’s claim of sovereignty over Crimea.

Colleagues, two years ago last week, Russian forces covertly and illegally entered Ukraine and began Russia’s occupation of Crimea. We call on the Russian Federation to end its aggression against Ukraine. We remind the Russian Federation that the economic sanctions against it will remain in place until the Minsk agreements are fully implemented, and Russia ends its occupation of Ukrainian territory.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.