



United States Mission to the OSCE

Response to the Chief Observer of the OSCE Observer Mission at the Russian Checkpoints Gukovo and Donetsk, Ambassador György Varga

As delivered by Ambassador James S. Gilmore III
to the Permanent Council, Vienna
May 28, 2020

Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. Thank you for the opportunity to address Ambassador Varga.

Ambassador Varga, we are pleased to have you join us today at this virtual meeting of the Permanent Council. As always, we are very grateful for your leadership of the Observer Mission at the Gukovo and Donetsk checkpoints on the internationally recognized Russian-Ukrainian border.

We are well aware you are operating in a complex and adverse environment, with your observer teams restricted to just two of the 11 official border checkpoints along 400 kilometers of the Russia-Ukraine border abutting Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts. The challenges have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, we know that.

Nonetheless, under these difficult circumstances and working with fewer staff than usual, you continue to provide the Permanent Council with a snapshot of the situation along a portion of the border. Working in tandem with your colleagues in the Special Monitoring Mission, you provide the participating States the most accurate view possible of the situation on the ground in eastern Ukraine, despite the restrictions that Russia, to this day, has imposed.

In your most recent report, you note the number of persons crossing the border has decreased by almost half as compared to the same period of the previous year. We assume this is related to the movement restrictions resulting from the pandemic. Still, your Mission observed more than half a million people crossing between Russia and Russia-controlled parts of Ukraine, including a number of individuals dressed in “military-style outfits.”

Several thousand cargo trucks crossed the border in this most recent reporting period. Your report notes that the vast majority of these trucks were not subject to an X-ray check by Russian border guards and, of course, your Mission is prohibited from inspecting these vehicles to determine their content.

Your observers reported hearing over a hundred trains crossing into Ukraine during the reporting period. The nature and the contents of those trucks and trains are also unknown.

They are unknown because the Russian government affords your observer teams only a partial view of activities at the two sites where they are permitted to work. Without the ability to inspect vehicles crossing the border, we will never be able to fully ascertain the extent to which Russia supports its proxies in eastern Ukraine. As we have asked on many occasions, if the Russian government has nothing to hide, why does it insist on limiting the scope and access of this Mission?

Ambassador Varga, the United States and the vast majority of the participating States of the Permanent Council support the geographic expansion of the Border Observation Mission. We regret that Russia continues to oppose expansion and instead restricts Mission access to just a sliver of the international border that is currently under full Russian control in violation of Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity. We again call upon Russia to expand the Mission beyond the two current checkpoints. Perhaps the Russian Representative at the Permanent Council today would be willing to agree that they would not oppose the expansion to all eleven crossing points. If that is the case, then I am confident we can put together a Permanent Council statement in the immediate future, within the next week, to increase the efficacy, the efficiency, and the ability of this Mission to do its job. The Russians have said that they do this as a matter of courtesy to the OSCE, and we are grateful for that courtesy, but we would be grateful for the courtesy extending to all eleven crossing points.

We recognize that the Observation Mission must adhere to a number of administrative restrictions that must be addressed each time the Mission's mandate comes up for renewal. The participating States have succeeded in increasing the length of the mandate from three months to four months, and I think you have stated the challenges that are faced by this constant having to renew the Mission and the mandate. It would help further alleviate the administrative burdens on the Mission if we were to increase the mandate to six months, with the caveat that Ambassador Varga continues to present his report to this Permanent Council on a quarterly basis. In doing so, we ensure that the participating States are well informed while improving the efficiency of this Mission. I hope all delegations would support such a proposal.

Ambassador, the United States thanks you and your team for increasing the situational awareness of the participating States. We appreciate the work you do under increasingly difficult circumstances. You have our strongest support. And now the United States looks forward to listening to the responses of our additional Permanent Council members today.

Thank you, Mr. Chair