



United States Mission to the OSCE

Response to Chief of the Observer Mission at the Russian Checkpoints of Gukovo and Donetsk

As delivered by Ambassador Daniel B. Baer
to the Permanent Council, Vienna
December 10, 2015

The United States warmly welcomes Mr. Eugster to the Permanent Council, and thanks him for his informative report on the OSCE Observer Mission at the Russian Checkpoints of Gukovo and Donetsk. We wish to express our appreciation for the work of the Mission's observers in difficult conditions. As the Chief Observer has suggested, early renewal or even a longer mandate would facilitate the planning and execution of the Mission's work. We ask all participating States to consider renewing the Observer Mission's mandate for six months rather than the typical three months and to do so at an early date.

The Mission's current mandate limits observation to exactly two pinpoints along the 2,300 kilometer Russian-Ukrainian border, hundreds of kilometers of which remains a black hole to which the Ukrainian government, the Observer Mission, and the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission do not have sustained, meaningful access. The United States finds it deeply regrettable that the Russian Federation continues to block expansion of the geographic scope of the Observer Mission, despite the clear, strong, and continued support from other participating States to do so, and despite the commitment that Russia made to international observation of the border in the Minsk Protocol fifteen months ago.

If Russia were serious about respecting the OSCE principles and commitments it has contravened in Ukraine, it would allow for the expansion of the Observation Mission. Its failure to do so shows that Russia continues to try to cover up its participation in and facilitation of the flow of illegal arms, funding, and personnel to separatists in eastern Ukraine. Every week, the Mission continues to observe indications of this destabilizing and destructive activity, despite the strict limits imposed on its mandate.

This includes reports of more than 8,000 individuals who crossed the two checkpoints in military-style dress this year—some of whom even crossed the Donetsk border crossing point walking in what resembled a military formation. Continued border crossings by physically-fit young men wearing camouflage cannot be explained away by claims that they are following fashion trends or going mushroom picking. It is obvious to all that these are Russian soldiers or hired fighters crossing into Ukraine to fight. Thousands of Russian military personnel or fighters have crossed the border at the two points where the OSCE has a presence. We remain concerned about the untold number that may have crossed where there are no international observers.

The OSCE Mission continues to register convoys of Russian vehicles crossing into Ukraine through the two border checkpoints. Each of these convoys is a violation of Ukrainian sovereignty and we urge Russia to make good on commitments to deliver any assistance in line with international standards. OSCE observers have only been able to see these convoys from a distance. We know from previous Observer Mission briefings that when Ukrainian border guards are allowed to look inside these vehicles, the back doors of the vehicles are opened for 30 seconds, approximately, and the Ukrainians typically see a wall of boxes. What is behind these boxes remains a mystery. Russia may call these “humanitarian convoys,” but their arrival often coincides with an increase in fighting.

Mr. Chief Observer, you said that the position of the Observer Mission is “sufficient for seeing everything.” And in your closing remarks I ask you to clarify: does that mean that you know exactly what’s in every one of those trucks. When you say the position is “sufficient for seeing everything” could you clarify what you mean?

The Observer Mission has observed vehicles carrying coffins crossing into Russia, as well as vehicles entering Russia marked with “Cargo 200,” a Russian military term used for personnel killed in action. These and other observations point clearly to Russia’s aggression and destabilizing actions in eastern Ukraine.

In closing, Mr. Eugster, let me thank you for your leadership of a Mission that is a vital part of the OSCE’s effort to contribute to a lasting peace in Ukraine. Your efforts to keep the international community aware of the situation on the ground, and its attention focused on the need for full implementation of the Minsk agreements, remain the best means toward a peaceful resolution to the conflict in eastern Ukraine.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.