



## **United States Mission to the OSCE**

### **Response to the Report by the Special Representative of the OSCE Chairperson-in-Office in Ukraine and in the Trilateral Contact Group and the Chief Monitor of the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine**

As delivered by Chargé d’Affaires Courtney Austrian  
to the Permanent Council, Vienna  
February 4, 2021

Ambassador Cevik, welcome back to the Permanent Council; Mr. Riccò, thank you for joining us in Ambassador Grau’s stead. The United States joins the other members of this Council in expressing our gratitude for your efforts on the ground across Ukraine and within the *Trilateral Contact Group* discussions. You have our strongest support.

Chief Monitor Cevik, the last year has been one of the most challenging in the mission’s history. Despite challenges related to the pandemic and increased movement restrictions in Russia-controlled territory, the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine (SMM) continued to provide daily, weekly, and thematic reports in accordance with its mandate. We appreciate the perseverance demonstrated by the entire SMM team. Your most recent report is disturbing to read: daily levels of violence are again increasing after six months of significantly lower levels of kinetic activity since Russia instigated this conflict in 2014. And I wonder, in your analysis, what factors are causing this resurgence of violence?

As illustrated by your report, Ambassador Cevik, the civilians of eastern Ukraine continue to face significant hardships as a result of Russia’s aggression. The SMM corroborated 27 civilian casualties occurred in the reporting period, including six fatalities. While casualties attributed to shelling are thankfully lower, civilians in the Donbas still face significant danger from mines, unexploded ordinance, and other explosive devices.

Further compounding their hardships are the continued restrictions civilians face in the course of their daily lives. Chief Monitor Cevik, your report notes that only two official entry-exit crossing points (EECPs) are operational. Despite the opening of new EECPs at Zolote and Shchastiya on the government-controlled side of the *Line of Contact*, the corresponding checkpoints in Russia-controlled territory remain closed. As we regularly note in this forum, preventing civilians from crossing into government-controlled territory makes it impossible for them to retrieve pension payments, purchase medicine, or conduct other necessary travel within their own country, all activities most people are regularly able to undertake, even under the restrictions imposed by a global pandemic. There is no justification for prolonging civilian suffering, and we call upon Russia to open the EECPs in areas it controls.

The vast majority of daily restrictions of the SMM’s movement occur in areas held by Russia-led forces—94 percent, in fact, according to your report. As you note, the Mission finds itself essentially split into three separate entities—government-controlled areas, non-government-controlled areas of Donetsk and non-government-controlled areas of Luhansk region—caused solely by Russia’s obstruction of monitors’ movements; this situation is unacceptable. It is time for Russia to direct the forces it arms,

trains, leads, finances, and fights alongside to afford the SMM the unrestricted access it needs to fulfil its mandate.

We appreciate Ambassador Grau's continued efforts within the *Trilateral Contact Group* to assist Ukraine and Russia to resolve key issues discussed at the 2019 *Normandy Summit* in Paris. There remains much work ahead, to mark tangible progress on demining, disengaging forces, opening additional entry-exit crossing points, and exchanging detainees.

We recognize that this is a truly difficult job. We encourage the Ambassador to persevere in pushing for real, concrete progress on the ground for the civilian communities of eastern Ukraine. Moscow would have you believe that media freedom means it is acceptable to manipulate the media in another sovereign country. Let me be clear: Media freedom does not include the right to spread malicious propaganda and disinformation. We support Ukraine's decision to defend its sovereignty and territorial integrity by countering Russia's blatant and malign influence.

The media entities that my Russian colleague referred to are controlled by Victor Medvedchuk, who has direct personal ties to Vladimir Putin and was sanctioned by the United States in 2014 for actions that threatened the peace, security, stability, sovereignty, and territorial integrity of Ukraine. He fled to Russia for most of the next five years to escape accountability. Medvedchuk has a long history of using media entities to promote pro-Kremlin positions that undermine Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity.

Additional media outlets shut down by Ukraine are well-known tools of Russian propaganda aimed at destabilizing Ukraine.

In Crimea, the situation remains worrying. We continue to follow the reports of politically-motivated trials of Crimean Tatars. We note the ongoing trial of Ruslan Bekirov, who is charged with perjury in apparent retaliation for a dramatic 2019 courtroom retraction of his false testimony against a Crimean Tatar political prisoner, which he maintains had been coerced by the Russian Federal Security Service. The perjury case is entirely based on the account of a "secret witness"—a reportedly common tactic used by occupation authorities against Crimean Tatars.

Moreover, Russia continues in its effort to militarize the peninsula, as well as the Black Sea, the Kerch Strait, and the Sea of Azov, "drafting" more than 28,000 young residents of Crimea into its Armed Forces. According to new monitoring data released last week by *Crimea Human Rights Group*, the number of draft evasion cases brought against Crimeans for refusing to serve in the army of the occupier is sharply increasing. There were 81 such cases in 2020 alone, compared with a combined total of 82 such cases between 2014 and 2019. The United Nations reported on other concerning trends, including illicit trafficking of cultural property, restricted access to information, the stripping of all Ukrainian language instruction, and even compulsory "military-patriotic" education for children and youth, all under Russia's oppressive occupation. We call on Russia to end its occupation of Crimea and remove its forces and material from eastern Ukraine.

Mr. Chair, the United States fully supports Ukraine's sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity within its internationally recognized borders, including its territorial waters. We do not, nor will we ever, recognize Russia's purported annexation of Crimea. We join our European and other partners in affirming our Minsk-related sanctions against Russia will remain in place until Russia fully implements its Minsk commitments. The Crimea-related sanctions will remain in place until Russia returns full control of the peninsula to Ukraine.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.