



United States Mission to the OSCE

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

As delivered by U.S. Ambassador Daniel B. Baer
to the Permanent Council, Vienna
June 16, 2016

The United States warmly welcomes Colonel Flavien Schaller to the Permanent Council, and thanks him for his informative report on the OSCE Observer Mission at the Russian Checkpoints of Gukovo and Donetsk. Colonel Schaller, we also wish to express our appreciation for your own and your team's work in difficult and restrictive conditions.

The United States finds it deeply regrettable that the Russian Federation has thus far failed to respond meaningfully to proposals to "ensure the permanent monitoring of the Ukrainian-Russian border and verification by the OSCE" as Russia committed to do in signing the September 2014 Minsk Protocol. More than 30 participating States have regularly called to expand the geographic scope of the OSCE Observer Mission beyond the current two checkpoints to cover the entire length of the border now outside the control of the Ukrainian government, including the other ten crossing points and the areas between them. Combined Russian-separatist forces also continue to routinely block the Special Monitoring Mission (SMM) from access to areas near the border. The SMM has been ready for months to open new forward patrol bases and patrol hubs near the border that would allow for real, meaningful coverage of the border. Yet Russia-backed separatists have refused to provide the security assurances necessary for the mission to do so.

The Russian Federation has justified its opposition to enhancing OSCE monitoring of the border by arguing that it only agreed to allow the Observer Mission on Russian territory as a "goodwill gesture." Colleagues, it is not a show of goodwill to methodically obstruct the OSCE by blocking expansion of the Observer Mission while at the same time ensuring the SMM is given only conditional, episodic access to the border whenever combined Russian-separatist forces are certain there is nothing of consequence for the SMM to see. Russia's obstructionism confirms that it continues to facilitate the flow of illegal arms, equipment, funding, and personnel to the separatists.

Despite the strict limits imposed on the Observer Mission's mandate and operating procedures, the Mission has nevertheless recorded clear indications of Russia's destabilizing and destructive activity in Donbas, including reports of more than 28,000 crossings of individuals in military-style dress at the two checkpoints since the Observer Mission's operations began. Numerous individuals even clarified to OSCE observers that while they do not cross with weapons, they retrieve weapons in separatist-held parts of Ukraine. Despite Russian attempts to portray these men and women as simple civilians, it is clear to all that they are crossing into Ukraine to fight. The Observer Mission has reported on clearly marked military funerary vehicles returning to Russia on 26 different occasions since the inception of the Observer Mission – most recently on April 6. Such evidence is further corroborated by the SMM, which on June 10 observed the exhumation of a soldier in a Russian military uniform, and spoke with a gunman who freely admitted he came from the

Russian Federation to fight for the separatists. Thousands of Russian military personnel or mercenaries have crossed the border at the two points where the OSCE has a presence. Untold thousands of additional personnel may have crossed where there are no international observers.

Russia's lack of transparency applies to virtually all cross-border traffic in separatist-controlled areas. On June 10 at the border crossing in Donetsk, the SMM asked drivers of a convoy of covered trucks about their cargo, but they refused to answer. Near the border in Luhansk on June 8, Russia-backed separatists refused to allow SMM monitors access to a rail hub. These are not isolated incidents, but part of a strategy of denial and deception by Russia and the separatists that undermines confidence in the ceasefire and Russia's commitment to the Minsk agreements – which remains the only way to end Russia's aggression and resolve the conflict in eastern Ukraine.

Finally, Mr. Chair, we join the European Union in condemning Russia's continued practice of sending white truck convoys across the border. Each truck, each convoy is another violation of Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity.

Colonel Schaller, let me thank you for your leadership of a Mission that, in spite of Russia's repeated refusals to expand, is a vital part of the OSCE's effort to contribute to a lasting peace in Ukraine.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.