



United States Mission to the OSCE

Russia's Ongoing Aggression against Ukraine and Illegal Occupation of Crimea

As delivered by Deputy Political Counselor Lane Darnell Bahl
to the Permanent Council, Vienna
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Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Recent developments in eastern Ukraine are encouraging. Since Russia and Ukraine recommitted to the ceasefire on July 21, overall levels of violence decreased. As the guns drew generally quieter, the sides began long-awaited repairs to the pedestrian bridge at the Stanytsia-Luhanska crossing points. We welcomed the progress on a bypass bridge, as well as continued progress on demining. We also welcome the recent dialogue between Ukraine and Russia, and we look forward to further de-escalation of the conflict, beginning with disengagement in Zolote and Petrivske on October 7.

Our focus must remain on security; we call on Russia to implement its commitments under the Minsk agreements, including fully implementing the ceasefire, withdrawing its forces and support, and disarming and disbanding the illegal armed groups operating in the so-called "people's republics" before local elections in eastern Ukraine can proceed.

Ceasefire violations decreased since July 21, and, in Luhansk, we saw three days with zero ceasefire violations. The broader situation in eastern Ukraine remains volatile, however, and the last week has seen a concerning uptick in violence.

Since the Permanent Council last met in early September, a civilian has been killed and several more wounded by small-arms fire, shelling, or shrapnel.

The United States welcomed news on September 7 of an initial detainee exchange between Russia and Ukraine. We were pleased the 24 Ukrainian crewmembers detained in the Black Sea near the Kerch Strait last fall returned home, as well as 11 other political prisoners that Russia held unjustly, including the filmmaker Oleh Sentsov.

We encourage Russia to release all other unjustly imprisoned Ukrainians it is holding, including the dozens of Crimean Tatars arrested on baseless terrorism pretexts, like human rights activists Server Mustafayev, Seyran Saliyev, and Emir-Usain Kuku. We condemn the October 2 conviction of independent Crimean Tatar blogger Nariman Memedeminov, who was sentenced to two and a half years in prison in apparent retaliation for his work with the *Crimean Solidarity* human rights movement.

We note that Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty correspondent Stanislav Aseyev, who has been imprisoned by Russian-led forces in Donetsk since June 2017 in retaliation for his reporting, marked his 30th birthday behind bars this week. We again call for his immediate release.

The Special Monitoring Mission is the eyes and ears of OSCE participating States in eastern Ukraine and—with the OSCE's Border Observation Mission—provides information that enhances our understanding of the situation on the ground. Unfortunately, the Monitoring Mission continues to face daily restrictions of its movement.

The Mission's most recent thematic report provides detailed insight into the challenges the monitors face in their daily work. Although overall restrictions of the Mission's movement decreased by 37 percent in the first six months of 2019 compared with the last half of 2018, instances of restrictions of movement involving gunfire near Monitoring Mission patrols or direct threats or threatening behavior toward Mission personnel *doubled* in the same period.

While we remind both sides of the need to afford the SMM the freedom it needs to fulfil its mandated tasks, we note that almost *90 percent of restrictions* occurred in non-government-controlled areas. The United States calls upon Russia and the forces it arms, trains, leads, and fights alongside to cease its restrictions of the Monitoring Mission.

In this same period, the Mission's UAVs were subjected repeatedly to gunfire and signal interference. Between January 1 and June 30, the Mission reported that 86 percent of long-range UAV flights experienced signal interference. Fifteen percent of mini- and mid-range UAV flights experienced some form of probable jamming, and mini-UAVs came under fire on 35 occasions. All told, the Mission has lost three long-range UAVs, one mid-range UAV, and four-mini UAVs via small-arms fire or signal interference. Any participating State that willfully destroys these valuable assets should be held accountable, both financially and politically.

Mr. Chairperson, the United States highlights human rights abuses in occupied Crimea at each sitting of the Permanent Council. We have called for Russia to end impunity and hold those responsible accountable. Russia has responded by denying that human rights abuses occur, holding sham trials to convict individuals of politically motivated charges and imprisoning them in Crimea or transferring them to prisons in Russia, and often denying them appropriate medical care.

Russia would have us believe that all is well in Crimea, yet it refuses to allow independent international observers in to assess the human rights situation.

Last week at HDIM, the United States joined Ukraine, Canada, Denmark, Estonia, Georgia, Ireland, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, and Sweden in convening a well-attended side event to discuss the need for independent, international human rights monitoring in Crimea. Speakers from government and international organizations, as well as courageous civil society activists, spoke about repression in Crimea and called on Russia to facilitate access for independent monitors. We repeat that call today.

Mr. Chairperson, 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 that our Minsk-related sanctions against Russia will remain in place until Russia fully implements its Minsk commitments. The separate, Crimea-related sanctions will remain in place until Russia returns full control of the peninsula to Ukraine.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

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