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United States Mission to the OSCE

Ongoing Violations of International Law and Defiance of OSCE Principles and Commitments by the Russian Federation in Ukraine

As delivered by Deputy Chief of Mission Courtney Austrian
to the Permanent Council, Vienna
October 29, 2020

As October draws to a close, we are encouraged by another month of lower levels of violence in eastern Ukraine. It has now been three months since the July 27 agreement, and the civilian communities of eastern Ukraine have experienced the longest period of relative calm since Russia launched this conflict in 2014.

The situation is far from normal, however, as explosive devices continue to maim or kill civilians. In October, the Special Monitoring Mission reported seven civilians injured and one killed by explosive devices, a stark reminder of the risks that will plague these communities for years to come. Every day that Russia delays its removal of forces and equipment from Ukraine only extends that suffering.

Russia-led forces continue to impede the work of the SMM, restricting the movement of its monitors and preventing them from fulfilling the mission's mandate.

SMM UAVs continue to experience weekly instances of signal interference or targeting by small arms fire. As we, and others, have done on countless occasions in this Permanent Council, we again call on Russia to direct its forces to cease their harassment of the Special Monitoring Mission.

We congratulate Ukraine on its local elections and welcome the latest chapter in Ukraine's democracy. After years of reform, Kyiv has successfully put more power in the hands of its citizenry and local officials. It is regrettable that Ukraine's citizens living under Russian occupation in Crimea and under Russian control in parts of the Donbas were not able to join their fellow Ukrainian citizens in the voting booths. We look forward to the day when they will live in Ukraine's flourishing, vibrant democracy unlike anything Russia can offer.

Moscow and its proxies have stalled progress in the Trilateral Contact Group throughout the summer, choosing to block substantive discussions on concrete deliverables via a months-long debate over the July 15 Rada resolution on local elections. Ukraine and a number of participating States have been clear on this issue: free and fair elections cannot take place at the barrel of a gun. There can be no elections in areas of the Donbas now under Russia's

control until a safe and secure environment exists; until Russia withdraws its forces, equipment, and support for armed formations, as the Minsk agreements demand.

It is time for Russia to end its obstructionism and engage in genuine diplomacy. As we have said before, the quieter situation on the ground in eastern Ukraine provides the political space needed for progress on concrete deliverables like de-mining, establishing new entry-exit crossing points and disengagement areas, and facilitating the mutual exchange of detainees. It is now time for Moscow to match the political will shown by Ukraine. Only then can we expect to see real, substantive progress.

In Crimea, which is undeniably part of Ukraine, Russia's occupation authorities continue to repress Crimean Tatars, ethnic Ukrainians, and those opposed to the occupation. Those who exercise of freedom of expression and religion and the rights of peaceful assembly and association are punished by politically motivated harassment, prosecution, and detention.

Russia and Russia-led forces continue to commit abuses against Crimean Tatars and religious minorities in Crimea, including Jehovah's Witnesses. We call your attention to the case of four Jehovah's Witnesses -- Yevgeny Zhukov, Vladimir Sakad, Vladimir Maladyk, and Igor Schmidt -- who were detained on October 2 purely for being members of a faith that Russian occupation authorities criminalize as an "extremist organization." On October 16 and October 22, Russia-controlled courts in Crimea upheld previous rulings to keep them in pretrial detention. We call on Russia to immediately cease its abuses against Jehovah's Witnesses, Crimean Tatars, and other Ukrainian citizens residing on the peninsula, and to immediately release all political prisoners.

Russian authorities' abuses in Crimea also include conscripting more than 24,000 Crimean residents into its armed forces, which is inconsistent with international law. Recently we learned that 500 additional Crimean residents were conscripted into the Russian Armed Forces and reportedly assigned to a military district with command responsibility for operations in the Donbas. Such reports are not new, yet they continue to shock us. Sending Ukrainian citizens to fight against their fellow countrymen is truly depraved.

We call on Russia to end its multi-year campaign of repression in Crimea, end the forcible conscription of young Crimeans, release all Ukrainian political prisoners, and return control of the peninsula to Ukraine.

As Ukraine continues down its chosen path as a free, democratic, and diverse country, it will always remain one of Russia's neighbors. There is no benefit to the people of Russia in the Kremlin's costly policy of relentless hostility toward Ukraine. To do right by its own citizens as well as the people of Ukraine, Moscow must withdraw from eastern Ukraine and Crimea and begin the process of establishing friendly and mutually respectful relations between these two countries.

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, Madam Chair.