



United States Mission to the OSCE

Response to the Chief Observer of the OSCE Observer Mission at the Russian Checkpoints Gukovo and Donetsk, Ambassador György Varga

As delivered by Ambassador James S. Gilmore III
to the Permanent Council, Vienna
February 13, 2020

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Ambassador Varga, the United States welcomes you back to the Permanent Council. We commend your leadership of the *Observer Mission at the Gukovo and Donetsk checkpoints* on the internationally recognized Russian-Ukrainian border, and we value the detailed updates provided by you and your team.

Your strong collaboration with the *Special Monitoring Mission* provides us with the most accurate picture of the situation on the ground in eastern Ukraine. The coordination between these two important missions is invaluable to our understanding of this deadly conflict, which Russia instigated and fuels.

Ambassador Varga, your most recent report again provides us insight into the forces Russia arms, trains, finances, leads, and fights alongside in eastern Ukraine. During this last reporting period, observation teams noted the movement of nearly 1.5 million people at the Gukovo and Donetsk border crossing points. This included nearly 350 persons in military-style outfits, some wearing badges or emblems of the so-called "Donetsk People's Republic," the so-called "Luhansk People's Republic," and so-called "NovoRossiya." Since July 2014, this severely constrained Mission nevertheless observed 38,851 persons in "military style outfits" and more than 122 funeral vehicles crossing in and out of Ukrainian territory at these two tiny observation stations. These numbers, of course, do not reflect any observations at the other nine border crossing points along the large border area, as the Mission is restricted to operate at only two of the 11 sites. The data, nonetheless, are evidence of how Russia is fomenting the conflict in eastern

Ukraine, which has killed over 13,000 Ukrainians. We wonder how many Russian soldiers have died as a result of Russia's ongoing aggression.

Mr. Chair, the vast majority of participating States support the expansion of the *Border Observation Mission*. Regrettably, Russia opposes any geographic expansion of the Mission and restricts access to the Mission within the areas of Ukrainian territory under Russian control.

Russia blocked any real discussion of this issue during and in the run-up to the December Ministerial Council in Bratislava. As a result, the *Observer Mission* continues to be hamstrung and confined to a minuscule portion of the Russian-Ukrainian border. We call upon Russia to afford the *Border Observation Mission* the access it needs to fulfill its mandate along the internationally recognized Ukraine-Russia border, and allow for the expansion of the mission beyond its current two checkpoints, as provided for in the Minsk agreements and reaffirmed at the Normandy Summit in December.

Even at the two sites where they are permitted to work, the observer teams are afforded only a partial view of activities, as you have reported. These restrictions have a debilitating impact on the *Observer Mission's* ability to fulfill their purpose, and mandate. During the last few months of 2019, the Observer Teams reported weekly occurrences of convoys crossing into Ukraine from Russia and detailed eleven separate convoys that included vehicles marked as carrying "humanitarian" cargo. However, the observer teams were unable to determine the actual contents of the supposed humanitarian shipments. Until Russia permits the teams to inspect the vehicles, we will never be able to fully ascertain the extent to which Russia supports its proxies in eastern Ukraine.

If the contents of these convoys are truly humanitarian, as Russia asserts, why not permit the observer teams to inspect and report on their contents? What is Russia concealing from the international community and its own people?

I would like to assure the Russian Permanent Representative here today, and the citizens of Russia that he represents, that the United States has no ill intentions towards Russia and its people. On the contrary, we encourage Russia to regain its standing as a respected member of the international community by ceasing its aggressive behavior against its neighbors and malign activities in the region.

Ambassador Varga, the United States thanks you and your team for your diligent efforts to inform this Permanent Council under such difficult circumstances. You have our strongest support.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

###