



## EUROPEAN UNION

### **OSCE Permanent Council No. 1225 Vienna, 11 April 2019**

### **EU Statement on “Russia’s Ongoing Aggression against Ukraine and Illegal Occupation of Crimea”**

Mr. Chairperson, the last SMM weekly report clearly illustrates the high price that civilians living close to the contact line continue to pay for this conflict. Adding to the bleak picture of civilian hardship, are the persistent shelling near residential areas, the poor conditions at entry-exit checkpoints and the lack of demining and the laying of new mines.

The EU is concerned by the severe consequences of the increased ceasefire violations on the civilian population and the number of civilian fatalities during the past weeks. On 29 March in government-controlled Verkhnotoretske, a young man suffered shrapnel wounds across his body due to gunfire and an explosion outside his house. On 4 March in Sakhanka, an area held by Russia-backed armed formations, another man died from shrapnel injuries to his head sustained while he was in his own home. He became the first civilian to lose his life due to shelling in 2019. In non-government controlled Sentianivka on 25 March, a 12 year old boy suffered a concussion while attempting to seek shelter from shelling. His great-grandmother suffered injuries to her shoulder as she stayed outside. In non-government controlled Pikuzy, where the SMM has faced systematic access restrictions for most of 2018 and 2019, the SMM saw an elderly woman and man who had been injured by shelling while in their homes on 22 March. The SMM also observed fresh damage to houses, a school and other infrastructure caused

by gunfire and shelling in non-government controlled residential areas. In government-controlled areas, the SMM saw shattered windows in residential buildings and holes caused by shrapnel in windows of an operational school in Zolote-2/Karbonit. We expect the sides to recommit and to adhere to ceasefire on the occasion of the Easter holidays and we call on them to show the necessary political will to work for a permanent and sustainable ceasefire.

Regrettably, the SMM continued to observe hardship for civilians waiting at or passing through entry-exit checkpoints. On 27 March, the Mission saw the body of a 60-year-old man who had reportedly died from cardiovascular issues that morning, north of the checkpoint of the Russia-backed armed formations and south of the Stanytsia Luhanska bridge. On 28 March, at the wooden ramps of the Stanytsia Luhanska bridge, the SMM saw about 15-20 elderly people with canes struggling to climb the ramp. Adding to the hardship is the decision of the Russia-backed armed formations to close the pedestrian checkpoint in Betmanove. It is usually facilitating passage for more than 4,000 people living on both sides of the contact line to commute in both directions in order to go to work and school, as well as to visit their relatives. The closing is of utmost concern as the number of entry-exit checkpoints is already too low. The closest alternative to Betmanove is 60 kilometres away in Maiorsk and we therefore urge an immediate reopening. It is worth stressing that two major crossing points at Marinka and Hnutove have been closed in the recent period, adding to the difficulties to cross the line of contact. We urge to avoid creating new additional obstacles for the civilians when crossing the contact line.

Despite the prohibition of laying new mines and the obligation to remove all previously laid mines, the SMM continues to observe anti-tank mines. The SMM saw for the first time at least 150 anti-tank mines in a field near nongovernment-controlled Pikuzy and five anti-tank mines south of road T-0504 near a Ukrainian Armed Forces checkpoint in the eastern outskirts of government-controlled Popasna. SMM unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) once more spotted 56 anti-tank mines near government-controlled Novotoshkivske, as well as at least 100 newly-observed mines north-west of non-government controlled Oleksandrivka. In this context we welcome the statement on the occasion of International Day for Mine Awareness and Assistance in Mine Action by Chief Monitor Ertugrul Apakan and OSCE Project Co-ordinator in Ukraine Henrik Villadsen, highlighting the

importance of mine action in the conflict-affected areas of eastern Ukraine. We strongly agree with the statement of Ambassador Apakan, “that mines continue to take and disrupt the lives of Ukrainians on both sides of the contact line, leaving no doubt that more humanitarian de-mining is immediately required.” In the past 12 months, at least 70 people have lost their lives or sustained injuries as a result of explosions of mines and UXO. Eighteen of these were children. The EU deplore this disregard for human lives by the sides and urge immediate and comprehensive demining also as a step towards permanent and sustainable ceasefire.

We condemn any impediments to the safe, secure and unhindered access for the SMM in accordance with their mandate, which we have all signed up to. This includes the illegally annexed Crimean peninsula and the Ukraine-Russia state border to which the SMM is systematically denied access. We condemn the incident on 2 April near non-government controlled Zaichenko when a vehicle with civilian license plates driven by men in military style outfits manoeuvred aggressively towards two SMM vehicles travelling in the opposite direction, and repeated the manoeuvre later when the SMM vehicles were stationary. During the latest reporting period, SMM technical assets were regrettably once again targeted and jammed. On at least five occasions during the reporting period heavy-machinegun and small-arms fire was directed at SMM UAVs - four times in non-government controlled areas and once in government-controlled areas. In addition, further analysis has shown that at least 14 bursts of heavy-machinegun fire was aimed at the LR UAV that was targeted on 20 March near non-government-controlled Dovhe. Moreover, the SMM continues to observe several pieces of sophisticated electronic jamming equipment. We reiterate that the operational, security and financial consequences of all obstructions of SMM UAVs must be assessed. We are deeply concerned about the losses which have a substantial negative impact on the operational effectiveness of the SMM. Those responsible for any wilful damage, destruction or loss of SMM UAVs and other assets should be held accountable, both politically and financially.

Our position on the unjustified use of force by Russia at the Kerch Strait on 25 November 2018 and its negative impact in the Azov Sea and Russia’s violations of international law is well known. We strongly call on Russia to release the crew members and return their vessels unconditionally and without delay. We expect

Russia to ensure unhindered and free passage through the Kerch Strait to and from the Azov Sea, in accordance with international law. The increasing militarization of Crimea continues to impact negatively the security situation in the Black Sea region. We encourage the SMM to continue its monitoring and reporting on the situation in the coastal area of the Sea of Azov.

The EU remains firm in its call on all sides to swiftly and fully implement the Minsk agreements and honour their commitments in full in order to achieve a sustainable political solution to the conflict in line with OSCE principles and commitments. We call on Russia to fully assume its responsibility in this regard and to use its considerable influence over the armed formations it backs to meet the Minsk commitments in full. Respect for these principles and commitments must be restored. We again call on Russia to immediately stop fuelling the conflict by providing financial and military support to the armed formations, and we remain deeply concerned about information on the presence of Russian military equipment and personnel in areas held by Russia-backed armed formations. The duration of the European Union's economic sanctions against Russia is linked to the complete implementation of the Minsk agreements.

The EU recalls its unwavering support to the sovereignty, territorial integrity, unity and independence of Ukraine within its internationally recognised borders, and calls upon Russia to do likewise. We urge Russia to uphold these fundamental principles that it has itself invoked many times and to contribute, by acts and public pronouncements, to stabilising the situation and reversing moves that contravene these principles. We strongly condemn the clear violation of Ukrainian sovereignty and territorial integrity by acts of aggression by the Russian armed forces since February 2014 and the illegal annexation of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea and the city of Sevastopol to the Russian Federation, which we will not recognise. The European Union will remain committed to fully implement its non-recognition policy, including through restrictive measures.

The Candidate Countries NORTH MACEDONIA\*, MONTENEGRO\*, and ALBANIA and the EFTA countries ICELAND, LIECHTENSTEIN and NORWAY, members of the European Economic Area, as well as the REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA and GEORGIA align themselves with this statement.

\* North Macedonia, Montenegro and Albania continue to be part of the Stabilisation and Association Process.