



EUROPEAN UNION

OSCE Forum for Security Co-operation N°973 Vienna, 28 April 2021

EU Statement on the security situation in and around Ukraine

Mr. Chairperson, Russia's unusual military build-up in the areas adjacent to the state border of Ukraine and in the illegally-annexed Crimean peninsula was at the centre of our attention in the recent weeks. We commend Ukraine for the activation of the Risk Reduction Mechanism under the Vienna Document and regret that Russia failed to engage in a meaningful dialogue in order to dispel tensions. We take note of the announcement last Thursday by the Russian Minister of Defence of the withdrawal of some troops at the border with Ukraine, which was a first step in the right direction. We will closely follow further developments of the situation, also with a view to the upcoming military exercise "Zapad-2021". Furthermore, we are concerned about other escalatory actions, such as Russia's plans to close certain areas of the Black Sea to foreign State-owned ships until October 2021.

It was particularly worrying that the escalation at the border came hand in hand with an increased disinformation campaign against Ukraine, as well as "broadening of kinetic activities along the contact line", the latter aspect also confirmed by Chief Monitor Y. Halit Çevik at the Permanent Council last week. Although the numbers of ceasefire violations are still significantly lower than a year ago, their occasional peaks and fluctuations show a worrying pattern and the overall fragility of the ceasefire.

We, therefore, concur with the statement of Ambassador Grau at the same PC meeting that the stabilization of the ceasefire should be at the core of current efforts. Ensuring lasting security on the ground is critical for further steps in the settlement of this conflict. We commend Ukraine for its restraint and urge Russia to focus its efforts on reducing the tensions along the contact line, in particular through constructive engagement in the Trilateral Contact Group on recommitment to the ceasefire, also in the spirit of the upcoming Orthodox Easter.

We reiterate our strong support to the SMM and commend its monitors for carrying out their tasks in extremely challenging conditions, exacerbated by the ongoing pandemic. The fourth anniversary of the tragic death of Joseph Stone, the SMM medic killed by a landmine in Luhansk region, which we marked last Friday, was a sad reminder of the serious risks the monitors are facing on a daily basis.

The SMM must be granted safe and secure access to the entire territory of Ukraine, including Crimea and along the whole Ukraine-Russia state border. The continuing serious restrictions are unacceptable as they violate the SMM's mandate and significantly affect its operational posture. In the latest thematic report, the SMM confirmed what we already suspected: 93% of the restrictions between 1 January and 20 March occurred in non-governmental controlled areas and half of them were cases when the Russia-backed armed formations prevented the SMM from crossing the contact line. In the recent weeks, we saw almost daily reports on systematic denial of access to SMM patrols by the Russia-backed armed formations. In addition, the SMM UAVs are exposed to increased GPS signal interference and gunfire, which limit the SMM's monitoring activities and put Mission members and technological assets at risk. We are also concerned about the installation of two camera-like objects on the mast of an SMM camera system in the non-government controlled area of Donetsk, without the SMM's permission, which forced the SMM to switch off its camera. We urge Russia to use its considerable influence over the armed formations it backs in order to make sure that all restrictions are lifted and attacks stopped.

Mr. Chairperson, the EU continues to follow closely the worrying developments on the

illegally-annexed Crimean peninsula which is part of Ukraine. Therefore, we strongly condemn the recent announcement of yet another conscription of residents of the peninsula to the Russian Federation Armed Forces. This is a violation of international humanitarian law, which Russia is also bound by.

In conclusion, we remain firm in our 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. Respect for these principles and commitments must be restored. We underline Russia's responsibility in this regard and once again call on Russia to use its considerable influence over the armed formations it backs to meet these commitments in full. We reiterate our deep concern about the presence of military equipment and personnel from Russia in the conflict zone. We call on Russia to immediately stop providing financial and military support to the armed formations. The ceasefire must be respected. All Minsk-regulated weapons must be withdrawn. All foreign armed formations, military equipment and mercenaries must be removed from Ukraine. Re-establishing full Ukrainian control over its state border is essential.

We recall our unwavering support to the sovereignty, territorial integrity, unity and independence of Ukraine within its internationally recognised borders and call upon Russia to do likewise. We urge Russia to recognise 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. We continue to call on Russia to ensure unhindered and free passage to and from the Sea of Azov in accordance with international law. We express our deep concern about the ongoing large-scale militarisation of the Crimean peninsula by Russia, which continues to impact the security situation in the Black Sea region and beyond.

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

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