

Report by OSCE Chief Observer Ambassador Varga: UK response

Thank you Madam Chairperson. Thank you Ambassador Varga for sharing your report with the Permanent Council and providing a detailed insight into the activities of your Mission. We are very grateful for the vital work you and your team of observers carry out to provide the international community with impartial and transparent reporting, particularly given the additional challenges posed by COVID-19.

Unfortunately, your ability to monitor continues to be severely restricted. Your mission remains present at only two checkpoints along over 400 kilometres of the Ukraine-Russia state border, outside of Ukrainian government control. This is far from the comprehensive border monitoring foreseen under the Minsk agreements.

The challenges faced by your mission are further compounded by unacceptable restrictions placed upon your freedom of movement. Your report outlines that these restrictions create “blind spots” at the two check points and limit your ability to observe persons in military-style outfits in vehicles, ambulances crossing the border during night hours, trains at Gukovo border crossing point and to assess whether vehicles are crossing into Ukraine or not – to name just a few issues. You are also still prohibited from using binoculars, cameras and other observation tools.

Despite these restrictions, the Mission continues to provide useful insight to the international community, including to inform us about the so-called “humanitarian convoys”. From its deployment in July 2014 until 2 February this year, the Mission has reported 99 Russian convoys. In the reporting period, the Mission observed three separate Russian Federation convoys crossing into Ukraine via the Donetsk border checkpoint. These so-called humanitarian convoys cross without Ukraine’s permission and therefore violate its sovereignty. The UK once again calls on Russia to cease this practice and to facilitate the safe delivery of international aid based on an agreed international mechanism, as foreseen under the Minsk agreements.

This is just one example of how Russia has shown a blatant lack of respect for the Ukraine-Russia border. Between 17 September and 31 December 2020, the SMM observed on two occasions at least five vehicles in areas near the international border outside government control in Donetsk region, where there are no border facilities. One instance was on 16 October 2020 when two convoys met in an area close to the border near Manych. 22 people were seen unloading cargo from the vehicles, after which one vehicle was seen driving towards a compound in central Donetsk city and the other to exit Ukraine. SMM reports have repeatedly indicated that further violations would be revealed if the Observer Mission was allowed to comprehensively monitor along the full stretch of the Ukraine-Russia State border.

We will continue to support the work of this Mission, including by calling

for an end to unnecessary limitations on your operations and supporting a longer mandate extension period. We join our international partners in calling again for an expansion of the Mission to the entirety of the uncontrolled section of the border. If Russia has nothing to hide, it should have no objection to this.

Finally, the UK reiterates our unwavering support for Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity within its internationally recognised borders, including its territorial waters.