

Report by OSCE Chief Observer Ambassador Varga: UK statement

Thank you Madam Chairperson. Ambassador Varga we are grateful to you for briefing the Permanent Council here in person and for providing a detailed insight into the activities of your Mission. We thank you and your team of observers for your ongoing work to provide the international community with impartial and transparent reporting on the situation on the ground, particularly given additional challenges posed by COVID-19.

Your work is all the more important given the fragile security situation in eastern Ukraine and the recent increase in regional tensions. The UK therefore remains deeply disappointed that the Mission's recent mandate extension was reduced from four months to two, due to unrelated political considerations.

Ambassador Varga, your report outlines that this has had a detrimental impact on the wellbeing of the Mission's staff, who already work in challenging conditions and now face increased uncertainty. The reduced mandate extension has also unnecessarily increased the administrative and operational burden incurred by your Mission, impeding your ability to carry out your mandate efficiently. Given these consequences of the shortened mandate period, we are concerned that this decision by Russia represents a negative political signal at a time when confidence and transparency are in dire need.

The excessive restrictions placed on the Mission by Russia mean that it already faces many challenges to carrying out monitoring activities, which if allowed would provide greater transparency around the situation at the border. The Mission remains present at only two checkpoints along over 400 kilometres of the uncontrolled section of the Ukraine-Russia state border, outside government control. As we have repeatedly stated, this is a far cry from the comprehensive monitoring of the border foreseen under the Minsk agreements.

Moreover, at the two checkpoints where the Mission is allowed to be present, its freedom of movement remains severely limited and it is still prohibited from using any observation tools, including binoculars or cameras. Ambassador Varga, as outlined in your report, the result is that "blind spots" are created, where the Mission is unable to observe persons in military style outfits or to assess whether vehicles are crossing in to Ukraine or not.

Despite these limitations, the Mission is able to provide valuable reporting on the situation on the ground. Its reports have shown that between 2 February and 1 June this year, 78 persons in military style outfits crossed from Russia in to Ukraine. The Mission has also recorded a substantial increase in traffic across the two check points in both directions, including 940,000 people during the last 4 month period, compared to roughly 540,000 people during the same period in 2020. Despite the increased movement at these checkpoints, the Russia-backed armed formations continue to use

Covid-19 as a pretence for heavily restricting civilians' ability to cross the Line of Contact.

The UK will continue to support the work of this Mission. We join our international partners in calling on Russia to end all undue restrictions placed on the Observer Mission and to end its objection to the expansion of the Mission to the entirety of the uncontrolled section of the border. We will also continue to call for the Mission to be given a longer mandate extension. If Russia has nothing to hide, we see no reason why it should object to this.

I take this opportunity to reiterate the UK's unwavering support for Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity, within its internationally recognised borders, including its territorial waters. Thank you, Madam Chair.