

EU Foreign Affairs Council

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Appeal by Steering Committee of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum on the Sea of Azov

Taking into consideration:

- *European Parliament resolution on the situation in the Sea of Azov, 30 October 2018;*
- *EU Statement on “Russia’s Ongoing Aggression against Ukraine and Illegal Occupation of Crimea” at the OSCE Special Permanent Council N° 1204 Vienna, 26 November 2018;*
- *Declaration by the High Representative on behalf of the EU on the escalating tensions in the Azov Sea, 28 November 2018;*
- *Resolution of the EaP CSF Steering Committee on the need to stop Russian aggression and to restore the territorial integrity of Georgia and Ukraine, 12 December 2018;*
- *European Council conclusions on the Multiannual Financial Framework and on external relations, 13 December 2018;*
- *Joint statement following the 5th Association Council meeting between the EU and Ukraine, 17 December 2018;*
- *United Nations General Assembly Resolution “Problem of the militarization of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea and the city of Sevastopol (Ukraine), as well as parts of the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov”, 17 December 2018;*
- *Statement by the MFA of Ukraine on the illegal decision of the Lefortovo District Court of Moscow to prolong the pre-trial detention of 24 Ukrainian Servicemen taken as Prisoners of War by the Russian Federation, 16 January 2019;*
- *PACE Resolution 2259 (2019) “The escalation of tensions around the Sea of Azov and the Kerch Strait and threats to European security”, 24 January 2019;*
- *Individual and joint statements of the EU member-states’ leadership on the Russian military escalation in the Sea of Azov and the Kerch Strait.*

EaP CSF Steering Committee welcomes the political efforts undertaken by the European institutions and the EU member states, to support the territorial integrity of Ukraine and condemn the aggressive actions of the Russian Federation in the Sea of Azov and the Kerch Strait as a breach of international maritime law and Russia’s international commitments.

But what is obvious is that Russia continues to blatantly ignore all the calls for de-escalation and restore the territorial integrity of Ukraine. Indeed, the situation is gradually worsening.

The illegal construction of the Kerch Bridge combined with Russian policy of a selective access and arbitrary detention of Ukrainian and foreign vessels in the Azov Sea, has seen the Kremlin bring new security, economic and ecological threats to the region.

In December 2018, Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) Special Monitoring Mission acknowledged economic losses at the local port of Mariupol caused by Russia's denial of passage. The port's cargo volume has fallen drastically since the beginning of 2018.

There is also no breakthrough on the release of the 24 illegally detained crew members of the Ukrainian vessels seized on 25 November 2018. Furthermore, the Lefortovo District Court of Moscow prolonged the pre-trial detention of Ukrainian servicemen, counter to international humanitarian law.

In these circumstances, it is a high time the EU implements the European institution statements, which closely monitor the situation and to act appropriately to assist the affected regions in South-East Ukraine and put more pressure on Russia.

On 27 January-2 February 2019 a high-level group of EU officials visited the Ukrainian regions adjacent to the Azov Sea to assess a level of economic, social damage in the region after the escalation of 25 November 2018 in the Kerch Strait and the Azov Sea. On 18 February 2019, the EU Foreign Affairs Council will decide on the possible ways to discuss a comprehensive EU response to Russia's aggressive actions, as well as assistance to Ukraine in obtaining the release of Ukrainian prisoners of war and to provide support to the Azov region.

Thus, we call on all members of the EU Foreign Affairs Council – and foreign ministers of the EU states:

- To impose new targeted sanctions against persons, vessels, judges and prosecutors, responsible for the act of aggression, the capturing and arrest of Ukrainian sailors and vessels – as well as legal entities, which use the illegal Kerch bridge and Russian ports in the Sea of Azov and the Kerch Strait;
- To provide targeted EU support to the Azov region, based on findings of the EU high-level assessment mission to Ukraine, as for the economic damage caused by the de facto Russian blockade;
- To reconfirm and secure with all possible means Ukraine's absolute right to have full access to the Sea of Azov, as enshrined in the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea;
- To use all external instruments at EU's disposal to pressure an immediate and unconditional release by Russia of 24 Ukrainian servicemen – prisoners of war.

Meanwhile the prisoner of war status of the Ukrainian servicemen must be respected, misapplication of criminal justice towards them must be halted;

- To follow suit of your fellow colleagues, Foreign Ministers from Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Poland, Denmark and the Czech Republic who visited Mariupol and other parts of South-East Ukraine in January 2019. We encourage you to go there to get a first-hand impression of the social and security hardships caused by the conflict with Russia in Eastern Ukraine.

Members of the Steering Committee of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum