

Interview with Italian newspaper Corriere della Sera

Ahead of the official visit to Italy, Vladimir Putin gave an interview to a leading Italian daily Corriere della Sera.

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Question: Relations between Russia and Italy seem positive. Our government is among the few in Europe to be pushing for the revision of sanctions. Yet it is Italy that suffers the largest losses due to the ban on supplies of various consumer goods introduced by the Russian government as a countermeasure. Wouldn't it be a kind gesture on Russia's part to make the first step and start unilaterally lifting retaliatory sanctions?

President of Russia Vladimir Putin: Indeed, we enjoy special time-tested relations with Italy. There is a trusted dialogue with the Italian leadership. Continuous joint work is underway in the political, economic, scientific and humanitarian fields. We highly appreciate this asset of mutual trust and partnership.

Of course, we kept this in mind. And we had no desire to extend the restrictions to the economic relations with Italy. But the thing is, our response measures – in retaliation for the illegitimate sanctions imposed – were supposed to be non-discriminative, because otherwise we would face problems in the World Trade Organisation. I would like to note that the decisions to impose sanctions against Russia were taken by the European Commission and supported by all EU countries.

At the same time, I would like to stress that the mentioned response measures are of a local nature and do not hinder, by and large, the effective development of our

investment and industrial cooperation. None of the Italian companies have thus withdrawn from the Russian market. At the recent Economic Forum in Saint-Petersburg, a number of promising bilateral contracts in the industrial, oil and gas and petrochemical sectors were signed.

As for the removal of sanctions, I have spoken on this subject time and time again. The one behind the sanctions is the one to make the first step; I am talking about the European Union. After that, Russia will be able to abolish its countermeasures. It is our hope that common sense will eventually prevail and Europe will prioritise its own interests rather than follow instructions given by somebody else. Then we will be able to develop mutually beneficial, multi-faceted and forward-looking cooperation.

Question: In today's world, which seems in certain aspects even more unstable than that of the Cold War era, Russia-US disarmament arrangements are in crisis. We are standing on the verge of a new arms race with its unforeseeable consequences, in spite of what looked like a good start in your relations with Mr Trump. To what extent do you think your country is responsible for such development?

Vladimir Putin: To no extent! The breakdown of the system of international security began with the US unilateral withdrawal from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty. This instrument was the cornerstone of the entire arms control architecture.

Just compare the sum Russia spends on defence – about \$48 billion – and the US military budget, which is more than \$700 billion. Is there any sign of an actual arms race here? We are not willing to get dragged into it. But at the same time we must ensure our security. That is why, we had to develop advanced weapons and equipment – in response to the increasing military expenditure and the clearly destructive actions of the United States.

The situation with the INF Treaty is a glaring example here. We approached the US more than once, suggesting that we sort out issues pertaining to this document, yet we faced the refusal. As a result, the Americans are destroying yet another

important treaty regime.

Prospects of our cooperation in the field of strategic arms reduction remain unclear. The START Treaty will expire in early 2021. At the moment, the US does not seem ready to discuss its extension or the possibility of elaborating a new full-scale agreement.

One more fact should be mentioned here. Last October, we offered the US to adopt a joint statement on the inadmissibility of a nuclear war and the recognition of its devastating consequences. There has been no response from the US.

Recently, the administration in Washington has begun to reflect on the possibility of restarting our bilateral dialogue on a broad strategic agenda. I believe that reaching concrete agreements in the field of ensuring arms control would help improve international stability. Russia has political will to do this; now it is for the US to make a decision. I reiterated this position at our meeting with President Trump on the sidelines of the G20 Summit in Japan not long ago.

Question: There is much talking in Russia about NATO's expansion. Many European countries, particularly those in Eastern Europe, claim that they fear possible acts of aggression from Moscow. How can these mutual fears be overcome? Can we hope for new Helsinki agreements? Do you think it possible for Russia and Italy to jointly put forward a new dialogue initiative, like the one on creating the NATO-Russia Council, which was launched in Pratica di Mare in 2002?

Vladimir Putin: To overcome the current unhealthy situation, we have to abandon the archaic concepts of 'deterrence' and 'bloc philosophy' from the Cold War era.

The security system should be common and indivisible. Such architecture should be based on the fundamental principles of inter-state relations enshrined in the UN Charter and the Helsinki Final Act, including the non-use of force or the threat of force, non-interference in the internal affairs of sovereign states, and peaceful political settlement of disputes.

We appreciate the efforts made by Italy to enhance mutual understanding in the Euro-Atlantic region. We are always open for joint work with our Italian and other western partners in countering real security challenges and threats, including international terrorism, drug trafficking and cybercrime.

Question: A lot has been said about incidents of interference by Russia-based hackers during the European Parliamentary elections campaign. Some countries made explicit accusations against the Russian authorities. What did you say to that? Don't you think that the issue of interference is a serious problem in relations with Europe?

Vladimir Putin: The absurd reached its apogee when Russia was accused of interfering in the American elections. We know well how this story ended – with a zilch. And the findings of the Mueller committee that there had been no such collusion were not surprising – the committee failed to scrape up any evidence since there could be no evidence in principle.

But here is the interesting part: the sanctions imposed against our country under the pretext of those accusations are still in effect.

All the speculations about Russia's interference in the electoral processes in the European Union are of the same kind. They were persistently spread on the eve of the European elections, as if to give the Europeans a 'hint' that it was "Russia's malicious interference" which was to blame for such low results of certain political forces in the elections. Besides, the authors of such assumptions pursued the same objective – to continue 'demonizing' Russia in the eyes of ordinary Europeans.

Let me emphasize: we have never interfered in the internal affairs of the European Union member states or any other states and we are not going to. This is what makes us markedly different from the US and some of its allies which, for instance, supported the coup d'état in Ukraine in February 2014.

We are interested in restoring full-fledged interaction between Russia and the EU

and maintaining peace, security and stability on the continent we share. We are ready for constructive collaboration with all political forces that received mandate from European voters.

Question: What kind of relations does Russia have with the League party of Matteo Salvini? Do you consider him the Italian leader to be reckoned with? How would you describe your relationship with Silvio Berlusconi?

Vladimir Putin: Contacts with political parties of foreign states are generally maintained at the party level. Thus, Italy's League and our United Russia interact within the framework of a cooperation agreement. The League party and its leader Matteo Salvini actively support restoring full cooperation between Italy and Russia and advocate an early lifting of anti-Russian sanctions imposed by the US and the EU. That is where we concur.

Matteo Salvini has warm feelings for Russia, and he is well familiar with its realities. We met in 2014 in Milan, where we discussed prospects for development of Russian-Italian ties, as well as Russia's relations with the European Union. Since then, as far as I know, Mr Salvini and his party members have maintained contacts with their Russian colleagues, who are interested in stepping up cooperation with their Italian partners.

I have already said on many occasions and will repeat: in our relations with foreign states we have regard for lawfully elected, legitimate leaders. We are ready to work and will work with those who have been elected by the Italian people regardless of their political affiliation.

As for Silvio Berlusconi, we have been friends for many years. Silvio is a politician of international standing, a true leader who strenuously defended the interests of his country in the international arena. His earnest determination to preserve and increase the potential developed in relations between our countries inspires respect. We rarely meet, but when we have such an opportunity, he never lets himself discuss domestic issues. Neither do I.

It is important that in Italy there is an absolute consensus among all political forces on the need to develop good relations with Russia. And we fully reciprocate it.

Question: The European Commission has launched an excessive deficit procedure against Italy for its excessive public deficit. In this regard, did you discuss with Prime Minister Conte, during his recent visit, the possible acquisition of Italian sovereign bonds by Russia?

Vladimir Putin: We did not mention this issue during Mr Conte's visit to Moscow. And, as far as I know, we have not received any formal request from the Italian side either.

Question: Many expected that the election of Vladimir Zelensky as President of Ukraine would bring a thaw in its relations with Moscow and along with it the earliest settlement of the conflict in Donbass and establishment of a constructive dialogue. Is it possible?

Vladimir Putin: Yes, it is possible if Mr Zelensky starts carrying out his election promises, including if he engages in direct contact with his compatriots in Donbass and stops labelling them 'separatists,' if the Ukrainian authorities implement the Minsk Agreements rather than ignore them.

Forced Ukrainization, bans on using the Russian language, which is native for millions of Ukrainian citizens, including teaching in Russian in universities and schools, frenzy of neo-Nazism, civil conflict in the south-east of the country, attempts of the previous government to break the fragile inter-faith peace – it is only a small part of the ugly "baggage" the new President will have to deal with. Therefore, I shall repeat: the Ukrainian citizens do not want any declarations from V. Zelensky and his team – they want real action and quick changes for the better.

And, certainly, the Kiev authorities should finally understand that confrontation between Russia and Ukraine is not in the common interests unlike the development of pragmatic cooperation based on trust and mutual understanding. And we are ready for that.

Question: You have no real political adversaries; in the last-year elections you received nearly 77 percent of votes; there is virtually no opposition. Then why do your development plans hardly get off the ground? What are the main obstacles?

Vladimir Putin: It is not about the number of votes in the elections, it is about the economic realities Russia has to face, namely: decline in or fluctuation of prices in global markets for our traditional export products: oil, gas and metal. Undoubtedly, external constraints have their effect as well.

But we pursue a reasonable and realistic policy. We ensure macroeconomic stability and prevent unemployment growth. Moreover, we have managed to focus significant resources on large-scale national projects, which should enable breakthrough development in key sectors of the economy and social sphere and improvement of peoples' lives.

As for the implementation of the plans, indeed, they are not always realised so fast as we want. There are unforeseen obstacles, difficulties and faults. But it is a common problem for all countries. It is understandable – today we all, including Russia, face challenges that are too ambitious. They concern not only the economic sphere, but other spheres as well. The main idea is that people themselves should change in many aspects, recognise the need for change and their role in those processes, and get involved in the joint work. This does not happen on order. I repeat, everyone should realise that the world around is changing dramatically. Technologies are developing at an increasing pace. That is why our plans are set for the future. We create conditions for realising talents and abilities of each person, particularly the youth. Looking at the many programmes that are in demand in this area I see the Russia – Land of Opportunity project as a very important one; it is aimed at professional and personal growth of the youth and people of various generations. It aims at giving them an opportunity to prove themselves in public administration, business and other important areas. In brief, I am confident that building on the energy, freedom and initiative of our citizens we will surely achieve the objectives we set for ourselves.

Question: Do you think about Russia after Putin, from 2024? Do you intend to quit

politics or, as many believe, will you stay in another capacity?

Vladimir Putin: It is too early to tell. There are five years of intense work ahead. Given the rapid dynamics we observe in today's world, it is hard to make any forecasts. Believe me, I have a lot to do now, in the capacity I am in today.

Question: What is the basis of the Italian-Russian trade and economic relations? What projects are being implemented or discussed now?

Vladimir Putin: Italy is one of the main trading partners for our country (in 2018, it was the fifth after China, Germany, the Netherlands and Belarus) in the world. Around 500 Italian business entities are present in Russia. And despite Italy's participation in anti-Russian sanctions and our retaliation measures, which we have discussed earlier, our bilateral trade and economic relations develop quite successfully.

In 2018, our mutual trade increased by 12.7 percent, up to \$26.9 billion. Cumulative direct investment from Italy reached \$4.7 billion by the beginning of this year, while Russia's investment in Italy is also significant – \$2.7 billion.

A number of major investment projects have already been implemented in Russia and Italy by the two countries' companies. The most important include 4 Enel-operated power plants in the Tver and Sverdlovsk regions and Stavropol Territory; 2 joint ventures with the Pirelli tyre manufacturer in Voronezh and Kirov; plant in Chelyabinsk producing pumps for the oil industry with the participation of Termomeccanica S.p.A. By the way, in Chelyabinsk there are 5 more Russian-Italian enterprises, including metallurgical production, power equipment manufacturing and cryogenic engineering. Last year, a plant producing high-voltage electric motors together with the Italian company Nidec started its work in the region. Such giants as ENI, Maire TECNIMONT and IVECO actively invest in the Russian economy.

As examples of Russia's large-scale investments in Italy, I would mention LUKOIL's oil refinery plant and petrol stations, and one of Europe's biggest alumina refineries

belonging to RUSAL and located on the island of Sardinia.

A number of major investment projects in Russia with the Italian participation are being developed now. They include Enel's wind energy projects, construction of a chemical plant in the Samara Region and a gas refinery in the Amur Region with the participation of Maire TECNIMONT, and Barilla's new pasta manufacturing facility. I will also mention a large Italian-Russian project outside our countries – in Egypt. I mean the Zohr gas field developed by ENI and Rosneft.

I would like to thank our Italian business partners for their principled stand in favour of deepening our business ties. We highly value it and expect that the Italian-Russian economic cooperation will further serve for the benefit of our countries and peoples.

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