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Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's remarks at the meeting of the IMEMO RAS Academic Council, on the 90th birth anniversary of Yevgeny Primakov, Moscow, October 28, 2019

Mr Dynkin,
Ms Primakova,
Colleagues,

I am happy to have this opportunity to speak at the meeting of the IMEMO RAS Academic Council, on the 90th birth anniversary of Academician Yevgeny Primakov, an outstanding statesman, diplomat and scientist. At present, the holding of many events linked with this date is nearing completion. The pinnacle event is scheduled for tomorrow. This is the unveiling of a monument to Yevgeny Primakov in the square outside the Foreign Ministry.

I would like to use this opportunity to express my sincere gratitude to IMEMO RAS and its leaders for their careful and respectful attitude towards the memory of Yevgeny Primakov, for their efforts to preserve and popularise his legacy. Our current meeting is a graphic evidence of this. I will also mention the Primakov Readings which Alexander Dynkin, President of IMEMO RAS, has already spoken about. They are held every year. They really gather the renowned experts in international relations from Russia and abroad and are a venue for very interesting debates on the most pressing issues of our time.

Many of those present were lucky not only to be acquainted with Mr Primakov but also to work under his leadership. I am one of them. I think it would be correct to say that the majority of those who worked with Mr Primakov at one time or another consider him their genuine teacher. This is no surprise. He was a personality of global dimensions, and his activities were diverse and all-embracing. Mr Primakov was only guided by the interests of our homeland and brilliantly coped with the most difficult tasks in every assignment he was given. Mr Dynkin gave us some examples today. He won immutable authority of our citizens who highly valued his professional and personal qualities. He made a priceless contribution to the consolidation of Russian statehood and the promotion of Russia's position in the world. It is with good reason that President of Russia Vladimir Putin called Mr Primakov "a great citizen of Russia."

As far as I know, Mr Primakov's intelligence and scientific work will also be discussed today. I see representatives of our intelligence and scientific circles here, those who worked with Mr Primakov. I would like to speak in more detail about his diplomatic experience. His arrival at Smolenskaya Square in January 1996 took place at a very difficult time when Russia was facing a host of grievous internal and external problems. Many people in the world believed that after the collapse of the USSR the bipolar system was over for good, having been replaced by the unipolar system with a decision-making centre in Washington. To recall Francis Fukuyama, they saw this as the end of history.

Back then, Primakov was one of the few who managed, as they say, to “get a glimpse beyond the horizon” and to predict the evolution of the world order towards multipolarity implying a multiplicity of power centres and development models. I don't think I need to tell this audience in detail that life has proved the correctness of his assessments. The world is changing right before our eyes, and is becoming more diverse and democratic. New growth centres continue to strengthen their positions and to achieve impressive results relying on the principles of independence, state sovereignty and cultural and civilisational identity. Associations based on collegiality, mutual respect and consideration for each other's interests rather than the discipline of the rod are becoming more authoritative and influential. The G20 is one of them, even though the West was forced to create it after it realised that neither the G7 nor the G8 were capable of resolving every issues, since the key states of Asia, Latin America and Africa were not represented there. BRICS and the SCO, that is, the organisations where our country is an active member, are also on that list.

Yevgeny Primakov resolutely rejected the policy of following in the wake of the “historical West” led by Washington, as was often the case in the first half of the 1990s. When Mr Primakov became head of the Foreign Ministry, he quickly and clearly articulated and put into practice conceptual foreign policy principles which Russian diplomacy continues to rely on today. I don't remember him telling us to write down things that were absolutely necessary in the left column, and things that the Foreign Ministry will never do in the right column. I don't think he filled out the right column when working in intelligence, either. In any case, he formulated principles which included a multi-vector approach, independence, autonomy and pragmatism. These provisions are included in every edition of the Concept of Russia's Foreign Policy and remain the main strategic benchmark in our routine work.

Mr Primakov focused a lot on CIS policy, all the more so as he personally knew many of the leaders of the newly independent states. He was well aware of all the ramifications of the disintegration of the Soviet Union, in which he was born and matured and became a statesman. So, he strongly advocated the preservation of centuries-old and all-encompassing ties uniting our peoples.

His multi-format and “multi-speed” efforts to expand and augment intra-CIS integration collaboration (but always under the principles of equality, mutual respect and consideration for each other's interests) received wide acclaim. The Treaty on Establishing the Community of Russia and Belarus that evolved into the Union State under a 1999 treaty was the first step during this multi-speed and multi-format integration.

Time has proven the correctness of the line of this multi-speed and multi-format movement on post-Soviet space. Today, associations like the Union State, the Eurasian Economic Union, the Collective Security Treaty Organisation and the CIS have asserted themselves as very important elements of stability and security in the Eurasian region. For example, I would like to note expanded intra-EAEU collaboration where we have managed to come a long way over a short time period – from the elimination of customs barriers to establishing a common goods, services, capital and workforce market, even though with some difficulties which still persist and which reflect each participant's desire to obtain the maximum possible economic benefits. Meanwhile, the agenda looks years ahead into the future, including formation of a common energy resources market.

The expanded foreign ties of this integration policy highlight its successful nature. Several dozen countries and sub-regional associations ranging from Asia and Latin America to Africa are interested in talks on concluding free trade agreements with the EAEU. Some have been signed and are entering into force.

Work continues on merging the Eurasian Economic Union with China's Belt and Road Initiative. All this creates conditions for the initiative to forge a Greater Eurasian Partnership, as suggested by President of Russia Vladimir Putin, that would involve the EAEU, the SCO and ASEAN member countries, as well as any other countries on our enormous Eurasian continent.

Yevgeny Primakov, who was guided by the logic of multi-polarity, made a substantial contribution to expanding cooperation with the countries of the Asia Pacific region, the Middle East, Africa and Latin America. It was he who suggested launching trilateral collaboration in the Russia-India-China (RIC) triangle, which was also mentioned by Mr Dynkin today. This time-tested format continues to develop. In February, China hosted the 16th meeting of the Russian, Indian and Chinese foreign ministers. RIC ministers of economics, social and cultural-humanitarian sectors also meet. There are plans to hold Russian-Indian-Chinese cultural-humanitarian festivals and to cooperate in the area of television broadcasting. Russia, India and China are a time-tested triangle that facilitated the creation of BRICS. As I see it, BRICS now ranks among the most important pillars of the emerging polycentric system and is a model of multipolar diplomacy. The five main continents are represented, and all we have to do is include Australia in BRICS, but this can be accomplished in the next stage.

Mr Primakov always focused his efforts on firmly upholding the national interests of Russia. That said, he never pursued a confrontational approach. He persistently explained that a strong Russia (the goal of his policy) must not be seen as a threat. He managed to move towards a multi-directional foreign policy without damaging Russia's diplomatic efforts in the West. He adjusted the Western slant that existed in our policy due to the neglect of numerous opportunities Russia had in the south and the east.

As I mentioned, he was tough in upholding our national interests, like during his famous turn-around over the Atlantic, but he combined this firmness and the upholding of immutable principles of inter-state communication with the goal of reaching commonly acceptable results, negotiability, and realism in assessing the world situation and simply combined everything with common sense. He knew perfectly well that going out with a bang would not resolve anything, that it was possible and necessary to discuss even the most entangled issues. His diplomatic style was distinguished by its amazing ability to win over his negotiating partners and eventually to come to terms with them and reach compromises, and not only with his supporters but also with his opponents. All these qualities won him enormous respect among leaders and his colleagues abroad.

A consistent opponent of archaic "zero sum" games, Mr Primakov always believed it was impossible to overcome the world's many problems without broad interstate cooperation. He was convinced that any existing differences must not prevent countries from pooling their efforts in settling crises and conflicts and countering the common threats of terrorism, drug trafficking, organised crime and WMD proliferation. Mr Primakov's philosophy remains fully current now that the international community still has so many serious issues – from reaching long-term reconciliation in the Middle East and North Africa to ensuring international information security.

Mr Primakov played a special role in Middle Eastern affairs, which he knew inside and out. He understood better than others the dangers of "geopolitical engineering" and "democratising" this region without due respect for its peculiarities. Regrettably, the West failed to listen to his knowledgeable opinion. Those who went into Iraq, Libya and Syria were like a bull in a china shop. We see the results of their activities today: destroyed statehood, outbursts of terrorism, erosion of the ethnic and religious mosaic and a large-scale migration crisis. The consequences of the ventures by the United States and its allies will still have to be

overcome. As you know, this is what we are doing by primarily facilitating the eradication of terrorism in Syria and promoting the resolution of humanitarian issues, the return of refugees and the launching of the political process. We believe that for all intents and purposes this will definitely begin with the work of the Constitutional Committee in Geneva this week.

Mr Primakov's style was always distinguished by his very careful attitude towards people and the desire to understand their problems. During the difficult socio-economic situation in the country when he was the Foreign Minister, Mr Primakov did all he could to improve the working conditions of the ministry's staff. In doing this he preserved the personnel of the domestic diplomatic service and facilitated the return to the ministry of some diplomats that sought jobs in the private sector or in agencies with better financial prospects during those lean years.

Later, while holding high-ranking positions in the Russian Government, the State Duma Federal Assembly and the Chamber of Commerce and Industry, Mr Primakov not only continued to display interest in foreign policy but also actively joined the efforts to settle a number of international crises. His suggestions and prompts were very helpful to us. The importance of situational analyses he conducted at IMEMO was mentioned earlier. I endorse these words wholeheartedly.

I am convinced that many future generations of diplomats will continue to verify their views with his professional and intellectual legacy. We at Smolenskaya Square will always remember Mr Primakov as our mentor, teacher and friend.



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