



Search

[Press service](#) / [Speeches by the official representative](#) / [Briefings](#) /

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Briefing by Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova on the sidelines of the International Public Diplomacy Forum, Dialogue on the Volga: Peace and Mutual Understanding in the 21st Century, Volgograd, November 1, 2019

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Table of contents

1. International Public Diplomacy Forum, Dialogue on the Volga: Peace and Mutual Understanding in the 21st Century
2. The New Generation Programme
3. Events to celebrate 75 years of the twin cities of Volgograd and Coventry
4. Volgograd Region's international and inter-regional ties
5. Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's talks with Foreign Minister of Burundi Ezeziel Nibigira
6. Conference on Freedom of the Media and Safety of Journalists in the Russian Federation and in the OSCE Region
7. Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's talks with Greek Minister of Foreign Affairs Nikos Dendias
8. Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's participation in the Moscow Nonproliferation Conference
9. Update on Syria

10. US funding the White Helmets pseudo-humanitarian organization
11. Briefings by Director of the Russian NGO Foundation for the Study of Democracy Maxim Grigoriev on the humanitarian situation in the Syrian camps of internally displaced persons
12. Developments in Lebanon
13. Update on Venezuela
14. Developments in Bolivia
15. Update on unrest in Chile
16. Developments around Konstantin Yaroshenko
17. Investigation into the attack on Russian citizen Mikhail Krasnoshchyokov, a UN mission member in Kosovo
18. 2020 UN General Assembly First Committee and UN Disarmament Commission sessions in Vienna or Geneva
19. International Day to End Impunity for Crimes against Journalists
20. Visa support agencies and errors in e-visa applications for trips to certain regions of the Russian Federation
21. Red Army soldiers' graves vandalised in Czech Republic
22. New acts of vandalism against Soviet soldiers' monuments in Estonia and Latvia
23. Persistent campaign against Rossiya Segodnya in the Baltic countries
24. Monument to Fyodor Martens in St Petersburg unveiled after renovation
25. Promoting Russian cinema in the Czech Republic
26. 2019 Geographical Dictation international educational event
27. 9th International Forum The Arctic: Today and the Future
28. Launch of the Foreign Ministry's official website in Portuguese

Answers to media questions

1. Statement by Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights Dunja Mijatovic on Ukrainian and Latvian policies with regard to the Russian-speaking population
2. Western activists' initiative to install a bust to Franz Josef Strauss and hold an exhibition dedicated to Field Marshal Friedrich von Paulus  The role of the Volgograd Region in public diplomacy
3. Russian-Georgian dialogue in the Karasin-Abashidze format
4. The role of social media networks in diplomacy

International Public Diplomacy Forum, Dialogue on the Volga: Peace and Mutual Understanding in the 21st Century

We are holding this field briefing in Volgograd, where the International Public Diplomacy Forum, Dialogue on the Volga: Peace and Mutual Understanding in the 21st Century, is being held from October 31 to November 1. It is always a pleasure to be in this city of amazing history and fate and simply a beautiful city. This time, we are here for an exciting occasion. The forum is being hosted by the Committee for Economic Policy and Development of the Volgograd Region and the Federal Agency for the Commonwealth of Independent States, Compatriots Living Abroad and International Humanitarian Cooperation (Rossotrudnichestvo). This forum has been held in the Volgograd Region since 2014. It is timed to coincide with World Cities Day marked on October 31, which was designated on that date by a UN General Assembly resolution in 2014, and the 75th anniversary of the international twin cities movement (I will talk more about these commemorative events later).

This forum is a platform for interaction between representatives of the authorities, science, the business community and the people of the Russian Federation and its foreign partners for the purpose of strengthening cooperation, expanding international public relations and promoting external openness for the most effective resolution of global and regional problems and the peaceful and safe development of peoples and states.

New opportunities for promoting international, inter-municipal and interregional ties and implementing joint bilateral and multilateral projects are being discussed on the sidelines of the event, and direct contacts are being established between representatives of business, education and public organisations.

The New Generation Programme

A meeting with the participants of the New Generation programme – short-term study trips to Russia by young representatives of political, public, scientific and business circles from foreign countries – will be held as part of the forum after the briefing.

As you may be aware, the programme is being implemented under Presidential Executive Order No. 1394 On the Approval of the Concept for the Programme of Short-Term Study Trips to the Russian Federation by Young Representatives of Political, Public, Scientific and Business Circles of Foreign States, dated October 19, 2011. The Federal Agency for the Commonwealth of Independent States, Compatriots Living Abroad and International Humanitarian Cooperation (Rossotrudnichestvo) is acting as coordinator.

Young leaders aged 25-35 who are not Russian citizens and have not been involved in the programme

before, can apply for participation in the programme. Prospective participants will be selected by the Russian centres of science and culture located in over 80 countries, as well as partner organisations.

Over 7,000 participants from 122 countries have taken part in the programme from 2011 to October 2019.

The permanent partners of the programme include the State Duma and the Federation Council of the Federal Assembly, the Foreign Ministry, the Russian Parliamentary European Club, Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency and the Russian Academy of Radio.

We are helping implement the programme and regularly hold meetings with foreign delegations on our site. Thus, during the programme, representatives of the Foreign Ministry's Information and Press Department have met with at least 10 delegations, which included more than 400 people from over 60 countries as part of projects like the Second Forum of European Diplomats, the SputnikPro session, the Russia Beyond school of young journalists, Student Spring BRICS-SCO and other projects.

This year, 12 Russian cities (Moscow, St Petersburg, Stavropol, Sevastopol, Sudak, Pskov, Kaluga, Kaliningrad, Irkutsk, Barnaul, Nizhny Novgorod and Volgograd) are participating in the programme.

Events to celebrate 75 years of the twin cities of Volgograd and Coventry

We have talked about the tradition of establishing twin cities and Volgograd's involvement in this activity at the briefing on January 23, 2019, because on February 2, Volgograd was to celebrate the 76th anniversary of the defeat of Nazi troops in the Battle of Stalingrad. We talked about the twinning of Volgograd and the British city of Coventry. More details are available on our website.

On October 25-28 this year, the Russian city of Volgograd and the British city of Coventry marked the 75th anniversary of twin city relations by holding joint events in both cities. People in Volgograd, in the people's diplomacy project, 75 Years of Volgograd-Coventry Friendship: The Future of Our Heritage, met with City of Coventry Lord Mayor Linda Bigham. On October 27, Russian and British musicians, singers and other performers took part in a gala concert dedicated to the twin city relationship between the two cities that was held at the Albani Theatre in Coventry. Representatives from Russian compatriot organisations and British cultural figures took part in the event. A Volgograd-Coventry video link allowed Volgograd residents to join the audience at the Albany Theatre.

Speaking at the Dialogue on the Volga: Peace and Mutual Understanding in the 21st Century International Public Diplomacy Forum, City of Coventry Lord Mayor Linda Bigham said that a ceremony will be held in Coventry in November to name one of the city's squares after Stalingrad.

Residents of Coventry, a city devastated by German bombing raids, and Stalingrad residents were the first to declare twin-cities, having initiated the global twin city movement. The memory of the common struggle against Nazism is something that brings people in our two countries together.

Volgograd Region's international and inter-regional ties

Usually, when we leave Moscow and travel to other regions in the Russian Federation to hold briefings there, we give a brief description of the region's ties to regions in other countries. This time I would like to speak about the Volgograd Region. The authorities here are working consistently to develop international and external economic relations with regions in other countries.

The Volgograd Region traditionally relies on its vast intellectual potential and resources, as well as the advantage of its geographical position, for cooperation with regions abroad. Its cooperation with the Central Asian countries and those bordering the Caspian Sea in trade, the economy, science and technology, as well as culture and the humanitarian area can be described as very effective.

The Volgograd Region's key partners are the administrations (*akimaty*) of western Kazakhstan and the Atyrau regions in Kazakhstan, and the administrations of the Khwarazm Region in Uzbekistan and the Iranian Province of Mazandaran.

Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's talks with Foreign Minister of Burundi Ezechiel Nibigira

On November 5, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov will have talks with Foreign Minister of the Republic of Burundi Ezechiel Nibigira, who will be in Moscow on a working visit.

The foreign ministers will discuss the current state of traditionally friendly Russian-Burundian ties and prospects for their further development and focus on the practical issues related to promoting cooperation in politics, trade, the economy, culture and other fields, including in the context of the Russia-Africa Summit and Economic Forum held in Sochi on October 23-24.

They are also expected to have a detailed discussion of topical issues on the global and regional agenda, including countering international terrorism and settling crises in Africa.

Conference on Freedom of the Media and Safety of Journalists in the Russian Federation and in the OSCE Region

On November 6, Moscow will host the Conference on Freedom of the Media and Safety of Journalists in the Russian Federation and in the OSCE Region: Challenges and Opportunities in the Digital Age under the auspices of the Office of the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media and with the support of the Foreign Ministry.

The event will be attended by over 200 officials from federal ministries and agencies, representatives of public institutions, Russian and foreign journalists, experts, and scholars. The conference is expected to become a large media event both in Russia and on the global level.

Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media Harlem Desir will take part in the conference's opening plenary session and answer participants' questions.

The agenda includes the following topics: media freedom, media pluralism, safety of journalists, ways to counter disinformation and fake news, internet regulation, international standards on freedom of expression and journalism ethics.

The event starts at 9 am. The Radisson Royal Hotel (2/1 Kutuzovsky Prospekt, Bldg.1, Moscow) will be the venue of the conference.

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Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's talks with Greek Minister of Foreign Affairs Nikos Dendias

On November 6, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov will meet with Minister of Foreign Affairs of Greece Nikos Dendias, who will come to Russia on a working visit.

The two officials intend to discuss the current state of bilateral relations and prospects for their development in the future in view of the new Greek Government, formed in July this year, starting its work. They will also discuss current issues on the international and regional agenda with a focus on the situation in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Balkans.

Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's participation in the Moscow Nonproliferation Conference

On November 7-9, the Centre for Energy and Security Studies, a Russian NGO, will hold the Moscow Nonproliferation Conference together with the Foreign Ministry. In the last 10 years, the conference has become one of the main discussion platforms for nonproliferation and arms control issues. The agenda includes the most important and pressing current issues in this field. A wide range of officials and experts from many countries and international organisations are expected to participate.

On November 8, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov will speak at the conference about Russia's basic approaches and priorities.

Update on Syria

The Constitutional Committee was launched in Geneva on October 30. It was preceded by a meeting of the three Astana guarantor countries at the level of foreign ministers of Russia, Iran and Turkey. We

consider the creation and launch of the Constitutional Committee, with decisive support from the Astana format, an absolute achievement, primarily of the Syrian people. Yet we are aware that the convocation of the committee is unlikely to result in a sweeping resolution to existing problems. However, it will make it possible for the Syrian sides – the government and the opposition as well as civic society representatives – to sit down at the negotiating table for the first time in the years of the crisis to determine the future of their country, which is particularly important amid remaining tensions in Syria.

Regarding the situation “on the ground,” the most complicated developments are on the territories outside Syrian government control on the eastern bank of the Euphrates, in the Idlib de-escalation zone and in the US-occupied area around Al Tanf.

The situation in the northeast of Syria was taken under control thanks to the signing of the Russia-Turkey Memorandum in Sochi on October 22. Under the agreements, Russian military police, together with the Turks, began patrolling the 10-kilometer security zone along the Syrian-Turkish border. Syrian government troops were deployed in some designated sections of the border. Also, the Syrian Democratic Forces and Kurdish self-defence groups with heavy weapons were withdrawn to 30 kilometres from the border.

Meanwhile, Washington’s illegal and unlawful actions give rise to many questions. We offer regular updates on the situation. Now I would like to say that the current international community cannot help but ask questions when a civilised nation, that incessantly claims its allegiance to democratic values and international law in international relations, starts pumping oil from the deposits in the northeast of Syria (this is, after all, a sovereign state), while using the pretext of fighting ISIS to cover up its criminal activities. Let me remind you that ISIS, according to the allies, was totally crushed back in March. The US’ position doesn’t hold water. In violation of their own sanctions, the Americans are smuggling oil from Syria valued at over \$30 million a month, and are set to stay there for the foreseeable future.

Militants in the Idlib de-escalation zone continue shelling government troops. In October, there were around 600 such attacks. The region has long become a hotbed of international terrorism. Russia remains committed to the September 17, 2018 Sochi Memorandum, however, this cannot be used as a pretext to protect terrorists who have been recognised as such by the UN Security Council. In this context we have a sharply negative view of the attempts made by some Western nations to whitewash the Hayat Tahrir Al Sham alliance in Idlib, which is on the terrorist lists of the UNSC and most countries, and present it as armed opposition, either moderate or extreme. Such approaches are unacceptable since they run contrary to the common goals and principles of international counter-terror cooperation.

The overall situation in Syria is normalising despite the difficulties “on the ground.” The country is gradually returning to a peaceful life, no matter how much the opposite is wanted by some. We realise that there are still followers of the idea that things in Syria should be different from what is going on now. On October 26-29, Damascus hosted Syria Petro international energy exhibition attended by

oil and gas companies from Russia, Belarus, Kuwait, China, Egypt and the UAE. A number of bilateral documents, respective agreements and contracts were signed following the event.

I would like to stress again in this connection the importance of comprehensive humanitarian assistance for Syria without discrimination, politicisation and pre-conditions. We consider the restoration of social infrastructure to be a priority which has special significance in the context of maintaining the process of a voluntary, safe and dignified return of the Syrians to their permanent places of residence. Over 450,000 refugees and over 1.3 million internally displaced persons have already returned to their places of residence since July 2018.

US funding the White Helmets pseudo-humanitarian organisation

We are disappointed by the US decision to disburse another tranche in the amount of \$4.5 million to cover the White Helmets' needs, as well as Washington's call to other countries to join this effort to support Syrian pseudo-humanitarian workers.

Russia has on many occasions presented evidence not only through bilateral channels, but also publicly, of the stable ties between the White Helmets and terrorist groups, as well as crimes committed by these pseudo-humanitarian workers and their participation in staged chemical attacks. This information has been confirmed by investigations conducted by Russian and foreign independent experts of good standing. Foreign experts and journalists were the first to note the White Helmets' criminal activities. It is true that there were not so many of them, and their voice drowned in the mainstream rhetoric, which claimed that the White Helmets were helping save the region and, in particular, Syria. One way or another, the first materials and serious research into this subject came from Western journalists. They directly told us several years ago that, unfortunately, their information is blocked in the Western media space. Information about the White Helmets' criminal activities has been confirmed by many sources. However, Washington and, clearly, at its suggestion, many other Western capitals, still prefer to defiantly ignore the facts and pretend to not see that the White Helmets have completely discredited themselves.

The White Helmets' current activities are concentrated in Idlib province and are carried out in cooperation with Hayat Tahrir al-Sham and other terrorist groups. According to the reports that the Syrian government regularly makes available to the UN, the White Helmets in conjunction with the terrorists are preparing more chemical provocations in Syria in order to undermine the peace process in that country.

The US government thinks it can spend US taxpayer money on these pseudo-rescuers, once again unequivocally demonstrating the lack of a constructive approach and real interest in resolving the Syria crisis and helping the country return to peaceful life. It would make more sense to use this money for direct humanitarian aid and rebuild hospitals and schools and purchase medical equipment rather than sponsor an organisation that engages in unseemly and illegal activities.

This decision has a particularly cynical tone to it given the fact that it was published on the same day that Russia and Turkey were agreeing in Sochi on measures designed to end the bloodshed in northeastern Syria and to carry on the efforts to achieve a political resolution to the conflict.

We believe that the financing of the White Helmets who are affiliated with terrorist groups is another manifestation of Washington's double standards in counter-terrorism activities. We are pointing out the untenable nature of these irresponsible steps that border on aiding terrorism.

Briefings by Director of the Russian NGO Foundation for the Study of Democracy Maxim Grigoriev on the humanitarian situation in the Syrian camps of internally displaced persons

The director of the Russian Foundation for the Study of Democracy, Maxim Grigoriev, presented his new report on the actual situation in the camps for internally displaced persons (IDPs) located in Syria at the UN headquarters in New York on October 24 and in Washington on October 25. He regularly supplies the international community with information on the crimes committed by the White Helmets.

The investigation, based on eyewitness surveys, provides evidence of the atrocities committed by Washington-controlled illegal armed groups in Rukban and highlights their responsibility for the rapid deterioration of the humanitarian situation in Syria. These reports helped foreign audiences learn information that indicates that ISIS militants have made a home in the camp, engage in rape and behaviour that is inappropriate and inconsistent with human moral standards in relation to women and children, and they also sell weapons to terrorists.

Unfortunately, Western capitals turn a blind eye to these violations of human rights and outright flirting with thugs. We highly appreciate the contribution of Russia's civil society in bringing an unbiased and responsible assessment of what is happening in Syria to the international public. This is not the ultimate truth, but the provision of first-hand materials directly from Syrian civil society, which the international community cannot afford to ignore.

Developments in Lebanon

We are following the internal political developments in friendly Lebanon closely. Mass protests in Beirut and other major Lebanese cities started on October 17. According to local media, up to 1.5 million people took part in the rallies.

We are satisfied to see the recent tensions easing. Street protests are subsiding. The army and the security forces followed the order of President of the Lebanese Republic Michel Aoun and took appropriate and effective actions to unblock the roads shut down by the protesters. Lebanese media say the number of protesters in Beirut is down to several dozen. Educational institutions and banks are

returning to normal operation.

On October 30, President Michel Aoun accepted Prime Minister Saad Hariri's resignation that he submitted the day before, which under Lebanese law dissolves the entire coalition government formed early this year. Meanwhile, all its members remain in office as acting ministers until a new cabinet is announced.

We regard these events as a domestic affair of Lebanon and its people. We hope the Lebanese will overcome this crisis and find correct solutions within the framework of their Constitution and legislation and in keeping with their political traditions on the basis of an inclusive dialogue, which would make it possible to maintain and enhance internal political stability and religious harmony. At the same time, we think it is extremely important for all external forces to respect the sovereignty and independence of Lebanon, which rules out any interference in the affairs of that Middle East country.

Update on Venezuela

The situation in Venezuela and around it remains uneasy and continues to develop dynamically. There are some achievements inside the country – the national dialogue roundtable discussions between the Government and the constructive opposition is making headway. Commissions on electoral and economic issues and on political parties have been established. We will not go into detail on their agenda, but I would like to note the open, public character of the ongoing negotiations and the willingness of the sides to involve other political forces from within Venezuela. We believe this format meets the key criteria of a sustainable settlement of the conflict: an exclusively peaceful settlement by the citizens of Venezuela based on domestic and international law and without destructive outside interference. The international community should merely facilitate the preservation of a positive atmosphere around the dialogue and refrain from excessive pressure and inappropriate comments so as not to ruin the emerging trust.

Meanwhile, the negative outside pressure and threats of scenarios based on force have not abated. Apparently, normalisation in Venezuela does not fit into the plans of Washington, the main actor in this area. As before, the White House continues to behave under the divide-and-rule principle based on doctrines that are inappropriate in the 21st century. On one hand, it initiated the invigoration of the Inter-American Treaty of Reciprocal Assistance (the Rio Treaty), declaring that it will not use force against Venezuela, but on the other hand, it is persistently trying to equip its neighbours with modern military equipment, referring to some Venezuelan threat. This was openly announced by the United States Southern Command.

The US mainstream media are making contradictory statements as regards Venezuela. Recently, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo declared that Chavistas are compelling Venezuelans to choose between food and freedom, that they are using food as a political weapon. It is ludicrous to hear this from a senior US official. I believe the people have not forgotten on whose instructions billions in

Venezuelan funds were de facto expropriated. Meanwhile, the Nicolas Maduro Government could have spent the money on social needs – medicines and food. Instead, these confiscated funds are used in corruption schemes by shady opposition dealers.

Let me recall that it was the US' unilateral economic sanctions, introduced to overthrow the lawfully elected government, that aggravated the humanitarian situation, stepped up migration and prevented the delivery of food to Venezuela and the treatment of seriously ill people. The consequences of this blockade are covered by the Western media with anti-Maduro headlines but the gist of what is going on is forgotten in the process. This is cynical and effective – first to create problems in the country and then blame them on an objectionable government. But we also know what this seemingly efficient results lead to.

As for the work of economic operators in Venezuela, the United States is using its classic policy of double standards. The US administration threatens Russian and European companies with secondary sanctions for cooperation with Venezuela's state-run oil company PDVSA. At the same time, Chevron and a number of other American companies had their permit for cooperation with PDVSA extended in October notwithstanding the sanctions. This is a new attempt to gain competitive advantage for one's own companies through administrative measures. If we saw this in a movie, we would think it was just a contrivance of the screenwriter and impossible in the 21st century, considering the existence of the media, the host of regulations and international organisations that should maintain a balance and ensure equal competition. But this is all taking place. This is not a movie. This is real life. It is apparently based on the might-is-right principle. Now we are seeing all of this in an example of the US' direct pressure and interference in internal affairs and the regional agenda of Latin America as a whole. This has nothing in common with the US-preached concept of a free market economy.

Russia will continue to resolutely demand at all international platforms that the United States adhere to the standards and principles of international law. It is time to give up irresponsible actions, the anti-Venezuelan sanctions and threats of using force. These actions directly contradict international law and lead to deplorable results.

Developments in Bolivia

General elections were held in Bolivia on October 20. According to the final vote count, published by the Supreme Electoral Court, the current president Evo Morales won. He received 47.08 percent of the vote, which is 10 percent higher than his closest opponent. According to the Bolivian Constitution, this is enough to win in the first round.

An entire range of heads of state (China, Venezuela, Cuba, Mexico and Palestine among others) has congratulated the Bolivian leader on his re-election. The participants in the 18th meeting of heads of state and government of the Non-Aligned Movement in Baku (October 25-26) made a special statement. We fully share their position.

We would like to note once again (earlier we expressed this in the October 25 commentary) that according to Article 7 of the Bolivian Constitution, the sovereignty of the country belongs to its people. By the way, this provision in almost any national constitution reflects the common concept of national sovereignty in the world. In this sense, we hope that foreign parties will refrain from evaluating the election process in Bolivia or speculating on the results, and from words and actions that could escalate protests and infringe public order.

At the same time, we note that the Bolivian authorities expressed a willingness to grant all interested international observers a chance to audit the election protocols. We regard this as a manifestation of goodwill, evidence of transparency and the openness of the election process. We believe that the reaction of the various political forces, in Bolivia and outside Bolivia, to La Paz's invitation to participate in the audit shows who really is interested in clearing the remaining questions and those who, on the contrary, are only searching for a pretext to increase domestic political tensions.

Relations between our countries are friendly and constructive. We believe that we will continue to strengthen our productive cooperation in the trade, economic, scientific, technical, cultural and other fields through our joint efforts to ensure the welfare of the Russian and Bolivian people.

Update on unrest in Chile

Anti-government protests have been taking place in Chile recently due to a number of domestic problems that the country is facing. We are watching the efforts to normalise the situation with concern and sympathy.

We fully understand the reasons for the Chilean leadership's difficult decision to cancel important international events in the country: the APEC summit and the 25th session of the UN Climate Change Conference.

Of course, this is the internal affair of this Latin American country, with which we have long and friendly relations. We hope for them to promptly restore public order and overcome the crisis by civilised means and in compliance with the law.

We would like to stress once again that no one must doubt that we are interested in a politically and economically stable Latin America. We are developing mutually beneficial cooperation based on mutual respect and non-interference in the domestic affairs of all the states on the continent, in compliance with the UN Charter and international law.

Developments around Konstantin Yaroshenko

We would like to draw attention, once again, to the developments around Russian national Konstantin Yaroshenko. In 2010, he was abducted from Liberia by US Drug Enforcement Administration officers

and then sentenced to 20 years in prison in the United States.

A week ago, on October 24, Washington sent another refusal in response to our request to transfer Yaroshenko to Russia to serve a sentence under the 1983 Council of Europe Convention on the Transfer of Sentenced Persons. To justify the decision, Washington again used an excuse regarding the “gravity of the crime committed.”

But there was no real crime. The charges were based solely on the testimony of undercover agents who claimed that they had agreed with him to transport narcotic drugs to the United States in a hotel bar, even though he could barely speak English at the time.

The US authorities completely ignore our arguments and concerns, first, regarding Yaroshenko’s health, which deteriorated because of the American representatives who are responsible for his stay in prison. Even during the first interrogations, when our compatriot categorically refused to admit guilt, his teeth were knocked out. In addition, he suffers from a number of serious chronic diseases, but does not receive proper medical assistance. Given all aspects of personal data, I cannot tell you everything that has happened to our citizen in a US prison. But, believe me, it is only possible for him to receive medical assistance after sending a huge amount of paperwork and many phone calls. This is not about medical assistance that can be postponed or is not necessary. We are talking about emergency medical care that must be provided to a person in this condition. Without the painstaking work of lawyers and diplomats, Yaroshenko could not get this help for years. Difficult conditions in the Connecticut prison, where food, clothing and medical provisions are prohibited and where there are significant restrictions on visitation, have also badly affected his physical condition.

This is not about a person who threatened somebody or caused damage. We are talking about a person who was surrounded by undercover agents, whose words provided the grounds for the charges.

It is completely obvious that what is happening to this Russian national cannot be considered other than a gross violation of the fundamental international legal and humanitarian standards. First, they kidnapped a foreign national in a third country, then they fabricated a criminal case, and then they gave him a huge sentence only because he refused to admit guilt, and now they have tortured him for almost ten years in prison.

We demand that the US finally stop this bullying and send Konstantin Yaroshenko home.

You know that we protect the rights of Russian citizens who are in a difficult or tragic situation abroad and we provide support to them. Konstantin Yaroshenko is not the only Russian citizen in a US prison who has been treated in this way by the Americans. We support all the other Russian citizens in a similar situation, as you know.

Investigation into the attack on Russian citizen Mikhail Krasnoshchyokov, a UN mission member in Kosovo

We would like to comment on the incident concerning Russian citizen Mikhail Krasnoshchyokov, a staff member of the UN Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK), which took place on May 28. Russia's Permanent Representative to the UN Vassily Nebenzya put forth the details of that incident in his remarks at the UN Security Council yesterday. We did the same six months ago in May. The so-called Kosovo police, acting within the framework of a so-called special operation, forcefully dragged the UN member from his company car, banging his head against the front door, striking him, using special equipment and handcuffing him. The Kosovars confiscated his diplomat's ID and UN mission member's driving licence and smashed his mobile phone. Krasnoshchyokov sustained a brain concussion and a complex fracture of the jaw, as well as many other injuries.

These actions by the Kosovo special forces demonstrated, first, their disregard for international law, including the immunity of UN staff members against arrest, detainment and any other harm. Kosovo's explanations sound strange and unconvincing and are easily refuted, including by the available video of the May 28 incident.

It has been established that the goal of the Kosovo police was to prevent the UN staff member, who was acting in strict compliance with UN Security Council Resolution 1244, from carrying out his duties. They totally disregarded his UN immunity, although the Russian citizen presented his UN ID and identified himself in English and his car also had UN markings. Therefore, they had no right to arrest or detain him.

The Russian Investigative Committee is continuing its investigations into this incident. Its preliminary conclusions coincide with the results of the internal UN investigation by a special commission.

The UN commission has not found any proof for the charges of illegal activities brought against the two UNMIK staff members. It has confirmed that the two officials were carrying out their duties when they were detained. The commission also has proof of excessive use of force by the Kosovo police. The police officers also detained and drove the UNMIK car without UN authorisation.

The commission concluded that these actions were unacceptable and that those responsible must be called to account. The criminal proceedings against the UNMIK staff members must be closed, and the status, privileges and immunity of UN personnel must be strictly respected. The so-called Kosovo authorities must investigate the police actions during the May 28 incident and bring the culprits to account. The Kosovo institutions must take measures to prevent such incidents in the future.

This example of life in Kosovo is proof of the immaturity of the Kosovar authorities. We consider it completely inappropriate to propose admitting Kosovo to international organisations, including Interpol, as is being discussed. We demand that the incident be investigated and those guilty be called to account. The Russian delegation at the UN Security Council has prepared and forwarded to the other UNSC member countries a draft statement by the UNSC President condemning this crime against UN personnel.

2020 UN General Assembly First Committee and UN Disarmament Commission sessions in Vienna or

Geneva

Considering the media response to the US authorities' refusal to grant visas to some members of the Russian delegation assigned to work at the UN General Assembly, we are constantly receiving questions regarding progress in this issue and decisions that are being taken by the United Nations. In this context I would like to share some additional materials on this matter and comment on the reasons and motives that prompted us to propose holding the 2020 UN General Assembly First Committee and UN Disarmament Commission (UNDC) sessions outside the United States.

The problem with Washington not issuing entry visas to delegation members expecting to participate in events at the UN Headquarters in New York did not just emerge today or yesterday or in September. Like many other countries, we have been dealing with this problem for several years, although it has never been as acute or blatant.

But this year the situation has simply gone downhill. The United States refused to issue visas for attending the General Assembly sessions to 18 Russian representatives, which is almost half of the delegation, including those who were to accompany Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov during the UN General Assembly high-level meetings on September 24-28. There is a general misconception that the session takes place between late September and early October – as a result, the number of people travelling to the United States only for a week raises questions with US authorities. I would like to explain something that diplomats know very well about the UN schedule but perhaps the general public is not so well informed about. The UN General Assembly session is actually running all year, with a one-week break. The session does not end a week after its opening. The high-level week is a political and economic discussion attended by heads of state and government. What happens after that is the routine work of the UN General Assembly, meetings of committees, and delegation and expert visits. The session rounds off a year later with the opening of the next session.

The whole visa situation is a direct consequence of Washington's course towards politicising the UN platforms and pressuring the unwanted. Naturally, the fact that a number of key experts on the Russian delegation for the UN General Assembly (not only Foreign Ministry employees but also representatives of other ministries and agencies) were not granted visas had a highly negative impact on the delegation's work in the main committees of the General Assembly. The reputation of the United Nations also suffered a severe blow. This is hampering the constructive work aimed at finding mutually acceptable solutions to pressing international problems.

This visa-related discrimination by the US authorities has not only affected Russia (which is very important to understand) but also dozens of other countries whose opinions, apparently, do not sit well with the political establishment in Washington, which has the opportunity to use this kind of leverage. Therefore, the US officials are thrashing the UN Charter forgetting about their obligations under the 1947 agreement with the United Nations.

The fact that the head and members of the Russian delegation for the UN Disarmament Commission (UNDC) session were denied US visas sabotaged the entire session, which happened for the first time

in the history of international relations. Thus, the United States in no uncertain terms demonstrated its actual attitude to the priority issues of arms control, disarmament and non-proliferation.

Despite our multiple appeals to our American colleagues, the UN Secretariat and Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, no progress has been made in this situation. Unfortunately, we have to conclude that the UN Secretariat is reluctant to get involved in resolving this issue. Although it is a major misconception to think that, even if the problem is not solved now, it will not inflate and transform into something even more outrageous and affect more countries. Of course, all this further undermines the United Nations' authority – and the organisation is already going through a rough stretch.

Therefore, while neither the United States nor the UN Secretariat is capable of remedying this absolutely unhealthy state of affairs, we proposed the only constructive approach – and solution. Namely, we proposed that the UN member states decide to hold the 2020 UN General Assembly First Committee and UNDC sessions outside the United States. In our opinion, it would be more logical and easier to hold these events at the Vienna or Geneva UN Office, which have the necessary infrastructure. We believe that this decision will defuse tensions and ensure full-fledged participation of all the delegations in order to focus on the substance of work and on searching for mutually acceptable ways to strengthen international security, without the distraction to logistics matters. Otherwise the First Committee and UNDC sessions in 2020 risk being cancelled.

We have reasons to count on the broad support of our proposals, despite the fact that Washington, as I understand, together with its allies, has started an aggressive campaign against this initiative. We will see what will prevail, the constructive attitude and actual aspiration to resolve the urgent issues of the international arms control agenda or the fear of threats from the United States.

International Day to End Impunity for Crimes against Journalists

On November 2, the international community marks International Day to End Impunity for Crimes against Journalists.

The Russian Federation devotes special attention to guaranteeing the safety of journalists and to the matter of ending impunity for crimes against them. Everything possible is being done to bring those guilty of hampering the professional activity of media workers to account, and the authorities monitor crimes against journalists. Russia collaborates on these matters with such international organisations as the OSCE and UNESCO. We are convinced that violations of journalists' rights, all the more so threats of physical violence and the use of such violence against media workers during their professional activity are unacceptable and must be exhaustively punishable by the law.

In this connection, the situation with the safety of media workers in Ukraine continues to give rise to serious concern. This is not because we are talking about a state that neighbours on Russia but, first of all, because this implies the safety of Russian citizens and Russian journalists. They are still subjected

to physical violence, we regularly record attacks on Russian correspondents by the Armed Forces of Ukraine in southeastern Ukraine. The authorities have so far failed to make any headway in investigating the murders of journalists Anatoly Klyan, Anton Voloshin, Igor Kornelyuk, Andrei Stenin, Andrea Rocchelli, Oles Buzina, Sergei Dolgov, Vyacheslav Veremy, Pavel Sheremet and many others.

We are urging specialised international organisations and human rights NGOs to give a tougher response and to resolutely condemn all forms of pressure by the Ukrainian authorities on media outlets, including the elimination of those regarded as undesirable journalists.

We very much hope that this absolute mayhem - please forgive me for this literary-artistic metaphor - that has been ruling supreme in Ukraine over the past few years and which is simply hushed up by the Kiev regime, will become history and will be remembered as something terrible, but that this situation will not continue to develop.

I have listed enough cases for them to serve as an example of what must be prevented in the future. Of course, this will become a subject for discussion in Moscow at a forthcoming conference by the Office of the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media Harlem Désir.

In turn, we would like to note that the Russian Federation strictly adheres to the principle of transparency and openness in its media space. It ensures the unimpeded work of foreign and Russian journalists on its territory and actively collaborates with specialised international organisations on media matters. We would like to recall that we voluntarily send annual reports to UNESCO on investigations into crimes against journalists. We regularly cooperate with the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media Harlem Désir, we draw his attention to violations of journalists' rights in the OSCE region, and we regularly provide detailed answers to cases regarding violations of journalists' rights and threats to their safety on Russian territory. We do this as a goodwill gesture. On the whole, we facilitate stronger international standards in the area of journalists' safety. We will continue this work in the future.

We expect that the matter of journalists' safety will become the subject of a serious expert discussion during the November 6 event in Moscow that I have mentioned. I would like to note once again that this implies the Conference on Freedom of the Media and Safety of Journalists in the Russian Federation and in the OSCE region: Challenges and Opportunities in the Digital Age under the auspices of the Office of the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media and with the support of the Foreign Ministry. Our experts, correspondents, including war correspondents, who boast unique experience, as we are told at the Office of the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media, have also been invited to attend and to take part in a full-fledged discussion.

Visa support agencies and errors in e-visa applications for trips to certain regions of the Russian Federation

Recently there have been several reports, not only in the media but also on social networks, as well as

inquiries from the public on applying for e-visas to visit certain Russian regions. We are carefully monitoring the situation with e-visas. There have been reports of various travel agency websites and questionable agents that offer visa support services, including profiting from Russian e-visa application services. The cost of these services ranges from €15 to €40. One can find other quotes as well. Nobody is disputing foreign nationals' right to spend money as they see fit, including on paperwork. However, as a reminder, e-visas for visiting selected Russian regions are free and can only be obtained via the Russian Foreign Ministry's special website, *evisa.kdmid.ru*. It only takes one visit to the website to find this section. E-visa applicants do not have to provide invitations, hotel booking confirmations or any other documents proving the purpose of their travel to the Russian Federation.

All e-visa applications are processed within 4 calendar days. So, any promises by 'intermediaries' to expedite the process and obtain an "express visa," including for an additional fee, are unsubstantiated. Moreover, there is no guarantee that an agent completing an e-visa application on behalf of somebody else will not make errors in their personal data, which may result in the applicant being denied entry at the Russian border.

It should also be remembered that neither an e-visa nor a paper visa guarantees entry to the Russian Federation. The decision on whether or not a foreign national is admitted to the country is made at the port of entry, which is generally in line with international practice.

There have also been reports in the media on the difficulties visitors face when crossing the Russian border, as well as on the deportation of foreign nationals from Russia due to errors in their e-visas, and duration of stay violations, etc. We are analysing all these reports. The analysis indicates one common circumstance, which is simply lack of attention and disregard for e-visa application guidelines (which are clear) that are an integral part of the application process. The guidelines contain very detailed explanations with examples of how to correctly fill out one's first and last names, including how to use characters of national alphabets and how to enter other personal data. A major part of the guidelines describes how to correctly determine one's period of stay and exit dates in order to prevent administrative charges for violating Russian immigration law.

The guidelines are not simply step-by-step but as thorough as possible. Applicants should remember that e-visas are granted based on applications submitted by applicants themselves rather than by a mediator. The entire travel experience and whether a trip to Russia happens in the first place largely depend on the accuracy of the visa application.

Moreover, there is a website for the Consular Department and the department's social media account where applicants can ask questions and receive prompt answers. Our consular departments and consulates at foreign missions operate all over the world and applicants can address questions to them.

It should be noted that the online visa processing system is being constantly improved, in order to offer the most comfortable entry procedure for foreign nationals travelling to Russia on e-visas, as well as to minimise incidents caused by errors in visa applications, subject to Russian border crossing law.

We maintain regular contact with all the government bodies, ministries and agencies in Russia that are responsible for or involved in border control. The system is being improved. We analyse a large amount of data and make sure to quickly respond to any issues or problems that, unfortunately, may be caused by the circumstances described above.

Red Army soldiers' graves vandalised in Czech Republic

We just cannot but react to the acts of vandalism at Red Army servicemen's burial places in a number of European countries although this piece of information will sound especially out of place, bizarre and outrageous in this museum on the land of Volgograd (*i.e. Museum-panorama Battle of Stalingrad*).

We strongly condemn the ever more recurrent acts of vandalism against monuments at the cemeteries of Red Army servicemen in the Czech Republic.

New outrageous acts were carried out recently in Ostrava and Brno, the Czech regions where people traditionally showed their respect for the memory of fallen Soviet soldiers, who together with their brothers in arms from the 1st Czechoslovak Army Corps sacrificed their lives for the liberation of Czechoslovakia from the Nazis.

We want to emphasise that the municipal authorities promptly responded to those unlawful acts and gave them an appropriate legal and historical assessment. The monuments are being restored to proper condition. We expect all necessary measures will be taken to prevent such appalling acts in future.

Meanwhile, we have the feeling that such vandalism in the Moravian-Silesian Region did not happen by chance. It looks like someone is eager to sow the artificially cultivated seeds of war against monuments, possibly all over the country.

New acts of vandalism against Soviet soldiers' monuments in Estonia and Latvia

We are greatly concerned about the continuing insults in Estonia and Latvia to the memory of Soviet servicemen, who liberated many, including Baltic peoples, from Nazi slavery.

An act shocking by its cynicism was performed in the Lääne-Nigula district of Estonia under the pretext of expanding the local school grounds. A burial place of Soviet soldiers who died during WWII was completely demolished with the use of construction machinery. What the Nazis failed to do, the current allegedly most civilised world community managed to do in the centre of Europe. As we can see in practice, the community, which has written a huge number of agreements, memorandums and declarations in defence of human rights, has nothing to do with human rights. As a result of those barbaric actions the location of 26 soldiers' remains are still unknown.

This is the year 2019. This is Europe. This is not just Europe, but the notorious European Union that is endlessly declaring and stating something about historical memory, human rights, truth, freedom, democracy, etc.

Vandals wrote “occupiers” on the monument to Soviet soldiers-liberators in the Victory Park in Riga, Latvia. The inscription was later wiped off by volunteers from local Russian-speaking organisations.

Obviously, these occurrences are the long-term and well-directed policy course of Riga and Tallinn towards the falsification of history and the struggle against the so-called Soviet occupation legacy. And now the Latvian Saeima is contemplating renaming the monument in Riga and placing nearby some plate “reflecting the historical context.” It is not difficult to guess what kind of “truth” the Latvian MPs who put forward this initiative want to convey to their citizens. The parliamentarians do not even conceal that their “purpose is to dismantle the monument, if not physically, then psychologically.”

We are insisting on a thorough investigation into the new acts of vandalism in Latvia and Estonia as well as on exhaustive measures to hold those guilty liable. The Russian Embassies in Tallinn and Riga have already filed the relevant requests with the authorities.

Estonia, as a future nonpermanent member of the UN Security Council, is especially responsible for observing international humanitarian law, including the Geneva Conventions of 1949 and the Protocol additional thereto of 1977. They concern the victims of international armed conflicts even after the conflict has ended. These regulations also contain the rules of respect for military graves.

Persistent campaign against Rossiya Segodnya in the Baltic countries

We would like to note the flagrant discrimination against the Russian media in the Baltic countries, which is beginning to turn into real bullying, not just a campaign, involving calumny, fabricated news and financial and economic pressure.

On October 25, a Lithuanian news website, Ekspertai, published an article titled “Swedbank accusing Russia of money laundering and financing terrorism.” This article is a classic example of planted disinformation: a headline jumping out at you but with no evidence, just some baffling link about a Lithuanian who allegedly received a letter from Swedbank exposing the agency. Although the Lithuanian website failed to confirm this information directly with the bank, it still published the article that directly damages the business reputation of another media outlet.

Moreover, on October 30, the website repeated the same allegations against Rossiya Segodnya in an article on Denmark’s reluctance to follow Lithuania’s call to prevent the construction of Nord Stream 2.

At the same time, Swedbank, one of the largest banks in the Baltic countries, has been taking steps to restrict the activities of the Russian media in the Baltic countries for the last several weeks, by refusing money transfers to their employees, contractors and partners.

Of course, this is not just coincidence, but clear proof that a large campaign is underway in the Baltic countries to place restrictions on the Russian media and discredit them before the public. This is not just about double standards going against certain efforts. This contradicts the government's and, accordingly, the media's responsibilities to comply with the standards of the OSCE and other international institutions, including the standards of information behaviour, the double-checking of information, the prevention of deliberate defamation and the publication of disinformation and fake news. We have said many times that Riga is pursuing a policy against the Russian media, but now the joint efforts of the financial sector and the media are used in addition to sending journalists away and blocking Russian-language news websites.

This practice is unacceptable, because it violates all international norms on freedom of speech. This is also a topic for the upcoming conference in Moscow.

Monument to Fyodor Martens in St Petersburg unveiled after renovation

While in one part of Europe a fight is going on against monuments, which are either torn down or vandalised, in another part of Europe monuments are put up or renovated and subsequently unveiled. On October 23, a ceremony was held at Lutheran Volkov Cemetery to unveil, after renovation, the monument to Fyodor Martens (1845-1909), a Russian diplomat and legal expert in international affairs.

The event was timed to coincide with the 110th anniversary of the scholar's death. The Foreign Ministry Representative Office in St Petersburg provided the support needed to hold the event. In attendance were the heads of the Consulates-General of Hungary, South Korea, Spain, Latvia, Lithuania and Slovakia, as well as a representative of the Estonian Foreign Ministry.

Fyodor Martens was one of the world's most widely known specialists in international law. This is a very good example of history not being divided into "us" and "them." We do not push aside those who feel they are involved in this process or are associated with this historical figure. We have no problem with this. Fyodor Martens took part in establishing several rules of law, which are still in effect. He is one of the organisers of The Hague Conventions of 1899 and 1907, which were convened on Russian Tsar Nicholas II's initiative. These conventions, which are referred to as peace conferences, made an invaluable contribution to shaping the modern international law system.

I would like to draw the attention of those who are less familiar with the topic to the Martens Clause – specialists in international law know what it is about. Read articles – there are plenty of them on the internet – to learn more about it, because the Martens Clause is still regarded as the cornerstone of international humanitarian law. It is written into several fundamental international conventions, in particular, into the 1899 Convention with Respect to the Laws and Customs of War on Land; the 1977 Additional Protocol to the 1949 Geneva Conventions relating to the protection of war victims; and the 1980 Convention on the Prohibition of Certain Conventional Weapons, which the UN International

Court of Justice referred to in the second half of the 1990s.

To make it short, under this clause, in cases not covered by effective international humanitarian law, the parties to armed conflicts must be, primarily, guided by the principles of humanity and the dictates of public conscience, as well as common sense. I would like to remind you that this clause was proposed by Fyodor Martens at the end of not the 20th century but the 19th century. Even today it sounds so progressive.

Promoting Russian cinema in the Czech Republic

On September 27– October 20, the second New Russian Film festival of modern Russian cinema was held in the Czech Republic. Like last year, it was initiated by the Russian Embassy in the Czech Republic. The festival was organised together with Essential Communication, a Czech news agency, with the support of the representative office of the Federal Agency for the Commonwealth of Independent States Affairs, Compatriots Living Abroad, and International Humanitarian Cooperation (Rossotrudnichestvo) in the Czech Republic. For the second year in a row, it was held under the patronage of Czech President Milos Zeman.

The festival took place in five Czech cities. The programme included over 40 action films, documentaries and cartoons that gave a broad overview of Russia and its cultural and historical heritage.

The Travelling Around Russia programme was a separate section of the 2019 festival, where a meeting with the world-renowned traveller Fyodor Konyukhov and his colleague Leonid Kruglov – a traveller, ethnographer, film director and member of the Russian Geographic Society – drew much interest.

After the festival, the Czech Ministry of Culture proposed organising a joint screening of Soviet/Russian and Czech/Czechoslovakian films dedicated to World War II to mark the 75th anniversary of the victory over the Nazis.

2019 Geographical Dictation international educational event

On October 27, an international educational event, Geographical Dictation, took place in Russia and abroad.

The event has been held since 2015 at the initiative of President of Russia Vladimir Putin by the Russian Geographical Society with the support of Rossotrudnichestvo and its foreign offices in order to promote geographic knowledge and raise interest in Russia's geography.

In 2017, the dictation became an international event and now gathers both Russian compatriots living abroad and foreigners all over the world. Last year, it took place in 97 countries. China and Belarus

had the most venues.

This year, the dictation questions were given in Russian and English.

Over the four years, more than 900,000 people took part in the dictation.

9th International Forum The Arctic: Today and the Future

On December 5–7, St Petersburg will host the 9th International Forum The Arctic: Today and the Future, which is organised annually by the Association of Polar Explorers interregional public organisation headed by Special Presidential Representative for International Cooperation in the Arctic and Antarctic Artur Chilingarov.

The forum has proven to be a reputable platform for discussing topical issues related to the development of the Arctic. Representatives of more than 20 foreign countries are expected to attend.

The two-day programme includes over 30 business events in various areas, such as the Arctic's resource potential, transport, telecommunications, innovations and technology, the environment, science, education and personnel training, international cooperation, security in the Arctic, economic mechanisms for the development of the region, and support for indigenous peoples.

An exhibition of promising projects for the socioeconomic development of the Arctic and relevant technology will also be held at the forum.

Launch of the Foreign Ministry's official website in Portuguese

Right now, at this very moment, we are launching online the Portuguese version of the Foreign Ministry's official website from Volgograd. The ministry has a fully- fledged website up and running. We continue to promote and expand access to the information on the website. Starting today, everyone will be able to follow the ministry's activities, Russian foreign policy and our participation in international affairs in Portuguese.

I can tell you a secret: the idea was proposed by the Russian Embassy in Portugal, by Russian Ambassador to Portugal Mikhail Kamynin, who was head of the Information and Press Department and has been actively promoting our information work and bringing public attention to information about Russian foreign policy during all these years. This was his initiative, which we have supported and implemented.

We regard this as an opportunity to promote Russia's position on the entire range of international relations in the Portuguese-speaking information field and to further develop digital diplomacy.

We believe this area of our foreign policy is very important, and we hope that the Portuguese version of the website will play a positive role in its development.

Let me note that the ministry's website is available in seven foreign languages: English, German, French, Spanish, Chinese, Arabic and now Portuguese.

Excerpts from answers to questions:

Question: What can you tell us about a statement by Dunja Mijatovic, the current Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, in which she criticises Ukraine and Latvia's policy on Russian speakers?

Maria Zakharova: We noted the comment published by Ms Mijatovic on her internet page on October 29. The heading speaks for itself: "Language policies should accommodate diversity, protect minority rights and defuse tensions."

She writes, with good reason, about the systematic harassment of language minorities in Ukraine and Latvia, something we have talked about for years. The policy pursued by Kiev and Riga is based on overt discrimination. This runs counter not only to the principles of international law but also to the commitments of these countries under the Council of Europe conventions they ratified, including the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages.

In this article Ms Mijatovic again had to express concern over the law adopted by Kiev in a rush without any public discussions. This is the law on ensuring the use of Ukrainian as the national language. Ms Mijatovic also expressed concern about the sad consequences of this for numerous language minorities in Ukraine. However, only those who have no idea of history or geography can call a minority the Russian-speaking population in Ukraine.

We have repeatedly drawn the international community's attention to the real motives behind this law – coercive total Ukrainisation, which is conducted by methods that contradict Ukraine's international legal commitments. We have also emphasised that this law is in conflict with international legal standards in general, the Ukrainian constitution and the Minsk Agreements that unequivocally stipulate the right to language self-determination. We hope the Council of Europe Venice Commission will respond with an appropriate legal assessment of this law.

Regrettably, there are confirmations of the apprehensions that Riga wants to make Latvian the only language for instruction in state schools and that 2018's Latvian education reform destroyed the system of bilingual instruction that had existed since 2004. The most surprising is that this system and the opportunity for people of different generations to use two languages has not had any negative effect on Latvia or the region as a whole. The problems in the region are due to different reasons. A bilingual system only enriches people, gives them an additional opportunity to use their potential and improve their position with an absence of language barriers and borders. It is absolutely incomprehensible how this could suddenly turn into a problem.

We are convinced that this issue should be in the focus of close attention of the relevant agencies.

Along with Ms Mijatovic, we are concerned about Ukraine and Latvia's efforts to create special conditions for the teaching of the languages of the EU countries at the expense of the rights of other

language minorities. I think the worst problem is that people are not heard. Needless to say, there is law, there are conventions and politics but there are also actual people. When we talk about moving to greater democratisation (in the case of Ukraine, towards something related to democracy), we must always bear in mind that “democracy” means “the power of the people,” the representation of the people’s will. And here it transpires that people who are not at all a minority but are real figures in all areas of life – culture, the economy and finance – are simply not heard. Indicatively, the establishment that called for forcible Ukrainisation during all these years prefers to speak languages they are comfortable with. You remember the government sessions in Ukraine in 2014, which were attended by people from all over the world. They spoke languages with which they were comfortable. In other words, government members can speak any language at its sessions, with or without an interpreter and regardless of whether they are understood or not. Meanwhile, people that have been brought up in the bilingual system where Russian was a national language, have no rights at all – even the right to simply be heard.

Thus the authorities are intensifying their policy of segregation into the first and second class citizens. In fact, Russian speakers are subjected to dual discrimination.

Moreover, it is difficult to agree to Ms Mijatovic’s formula in which Russian speakers in Ukraine and Latvia are listed in a “language minority” category. Russian speakers that primarily suffer from discrimination are a substantial, state-forming part of the population of these countries.

Question: You have talked about monuments being demolished or defamed in European countries. In Volgograd, we have recorded growing activity by primarily German civic organisations that have recently started to come up with what could be describe as controversial initiatives. In particular, they suggest that a bust to Franz Josef Strauss, who was Defence Minister of the FRG after the Great Patriotic War [1941–1945], be put up at Volgograd airport; but, the man is known to have fought in the Battle of Stalingrad as an anti-aircraft gunner. Another initiative is holding an exhibition at the Rossoshki Memorial Cemetery that would highlight the biography of Field Marshal Friedrich Paulus. Romanian ambassadors visiting Volgograd say the graves of their heroes are being moved elsewhere. What is the position of the Foreign Ministry on this issue? How should we respond to initiatives by civic organizations like these?

Maria Zakharova: Any civic organisation activist coming to Russia from another country should remember that we have our own activists. Priority must be given to the consolidated opinion of local people. Of course, this issue is subject to discussion by the experts. But no one, even respected foreign experts, can have the final say on the issues relating to the erection of monuments or to making changes in expositions. We can listen to their opinion but, of course, it is for our country and for the residents of the city or region concerned to make the final decision. In making decisions like these, we should not be guided by just one consideration – the opinion of people living in the area or that of the local authorities. It is very important to have a consolidated public opinion, including historians, who can act as experts and provide or find the documents that might be required. We often see broad high-profile public discussions, which stray far from historical reality.

A platform for discussion can always be found. These are public councils, research institutes, museums, universities and academic institutions, which could serve as venues for special conferences to review such issues.

It seems to me that our country can provide singular examples of how, based on the efforts to remain true to historical memory and respect for our own historical reality, as well as for our heroes, and for the memory of ordinary people who were victims of wars, this can be maintained. Volgograd is one of the most remarkable examples of this.

Question: In the past few years, the Volgograd Region has been trying to assert itself as a centre of public and popular diplomacy. How effectively, in your opinion, are we accomplishing this task? To what extent is the Foreign Ministry prepared to assist us in this work? What are your personal opinion and impressions of our city? You have been here several times, and, maybe, you have noticed changes that have taken place in the city.

Maria Zakharova: If you don't mind, I will start with the second part of your question. Of course, I have noticed these changes. You have built some very good roads. Anyone who arrives in your city cannot help but notice this. This is great. I would say that you have reached for the sky, but actually your region has gained good ground.

Unfortunately, I haven't been able to see anything else yet, and this is not because I didn't notice some things but because I came to this briefing directly from the airport. But I will have several hours to tour the city after the briefing and the forum which has brought me here.

The first time I came to Volgograd, I was really impressed with Mamayev Kurgan. Of course, I remember seeing photos of this landmark in textbooks and albums when I was a schoolgirl. This always stays with us. But its scale really struck me. I did not expect to see anything like this. I am telling all my friends, including foreigners and Russian citizens, about it. I came here in spring, this past May, when everything was beginning to bloom, but I was amazed that this fantastically enormous and breath-taking structure was built immediately after the war, when the city was still bleeding, when its wounds were still fresh, when there was nothing here, but the monument had already been created. When we realise the scale of the monument, and when we comprehend the fact that it was created almost immediately after the war, that makes a huge impression.

I hope that I will be able to look around the city today and to see what has been achieved here. I have heard a lot, and now I would like to see it for myself.

You said that the city is becoming a central venue of popular diplomacy. I think this is wonderful. It is good for the city itself, for foreign visitors who come to the Russian heartland and who know Moscow and St Petersburg very well, but we would like them to visit Central Russia and to see our cities that have special significance for our history and for the formation of our nation and our state. For our part, we support your efforts.

Question: Grigory Karasin has recently resigned from his position at the Foreign Ministry and joined the Federation Council. In this connection, I would like to ask you about the future of the Russian-

Georgian dialogue in the Karasin-Abashidze format.

Maria Zakharova: This informal dialogue mechanism was launched in 2012. Over the past seven years, unofficial meetings in Prague between Grigory Karasin and Zurab Abashidze, the Georgian Prime Minister's Special Representative for Russia, played a very important role in facilitating the process of normalising bilateral relations. As you know, Moscow and Tbilisi do not have official diplomatic relations. At the same time, our two countries maintain cultural, humanitarian and economic contacts, people visit each other, and they would like to see each other more often.

Acting on instructions from the Russian leadership, Grigory Karasin will continue to take part in the work in this format. The 23rd Prague meeting is scheduled for late November. We will keep you informed.

Question: You are one of the diplomats who are active in the social media. What do you think about the role of the social media in diplomacy generally, and in Russian diplomacy in particular?

Maria Zakharova: You are right in saying that I am one of such diplomats. We have many diplomats, including among our leadership and primarily among ambassadors, consuls general and permanent representatives, who are active in the social media. Many of them are giving serious attention to this trend, opening personal accounts or supporting and boosting this dimension through the official accounts of our foreign missions.

We started doing this in 2011 and have accumulated considerable experience since then. We have a ramified network of accounts in the leading social media, including Western, Eastern, Asian and, of course, Russian. We have developed a certain system and mechanism. This led to the establishment of the Office of Digital Diplomacy. This is not our invention. In this case, we analysed and applied others' experience and now we are developing it. I believe that it is a very important field, because if there is a digital environment that unites all the professionals, the public and the media, and if it involves dialogue and can be used to deliver content, exchange opinions and hold discussions, and if new technologies are being used there, this is where we should be, and this is where we are.

Our briefing today is being broadcast not only by television channels, but also by the new forms of delivering content – it is being streamed in all the social media. We are online on Facebook. This reminds me: Hello, everyone who is watching us.

We post our digital content on Facebook, as well as in other social media. We post the video and text in full, and we also break it up into the key messages.

We regard this as a very important area of work, which allows us, first, to increase our audience and, second, to reach out to the public bypassing the media, explain our positions and conduct a direct dialogue. And third, this allows us to do it much faster, thanks to modern technology.

I remember that back in the past we had [technical] problems with the information support of Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's foreign visits, that is, we could only distribute press releases and comments via fax messages, and we couldn't even dream of sending sound or video files. Today we hold news conferences and briefings online.

Today I had a wonderful opportunity to come to Volgograd. But when I cannot go somewhere in person because the flight time is too long or if I have other events on my schedule, we go online. It does not depend on geography, for I travel to faraway cities as well. We sometimes go online for an audience in the Moscow Region, because we believe that this would be quicker and I can also take part in some other event. We organise online communication at our Press Centre, and these events are no different in terms of the intensity of discussions and passions. We really do this. It is an important sphere and we need to use it.

I look forward to the world forging ahead, because this sphere has reached a high level of development. What next? All countries are working on 5G now. I am sure there will also be other forms of ICT, new opportunities and higher rate of development. And we should develop and make use of them to the best of our ability.



Additional materials

Photos

