

## Vladimir Putin's annual news conference • President of Russia

**President of Russia Vladimir Putin:** Good afternoon,

We are holding our traditional end-of-year meeting to summarise the year's results, to see what we have achieved and what we could not achieve and why.

I will refrain from lengthy opening remarks. As I see, there are many people who would like to ask their questions, and during today's discussion, today's meeting, I will try to use these questions to talk more about what is happening in our country and how.

Thank you for your keen interest in such meetings. Let us begin.

Please.

**Presidential Press Secretary Dmitry Peskov:** Thank you, Mr President.

Traditionally we give priority to the 'veterans' of the Kremlin pool of journalists, who have covered the President's work for many years. I will continue this tradition.

Valery Sanfirov, Mayak. Please, pass the microphone.

**Valery Sanfirov:** Hello, Mr President. Valery Sanfirov, Mayak radio station.

Initially, I had a different question, but I changed my mind when I heard today's weather forecast: there will be no snow until the end of December. And I wondered where you would tape your New Year address to the nation.

My question is not about the New Year tree but about climate change. Everyone is talking about it, but it looks as if nobody knows what to do about it. What are the risks? How can climate change damage Russia?

One more thing: Russia has joined the Paris Agreement this year, if I am not mistaken (the Government has adopted a resolution to this effect). Under the agreement, Russia must reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 25–30 percent by 2030.

However, you said at the recent VTB Russia Calling! forum that we would reduce the emissions by as much as 60 percent by that deadline. I wonder if you have made your first mistake or if you have something special in mind.

Thank you.

**Vladimir Putin:** You have trapped me, you really have.

Indeed, Russia has joined the Paris Agreement. In fact, we announced our intention to do this much earlier, but this year we have formalised our decision by adopting a Government resolution. It does mention the reduction of 25–30 percent compared to the base year 1990. This is what all countries, including EU member states, do,

they compare their reductions to 1990 or use it as the base year.

But if... How can I get out of your trap? If we take [the base figure] as 100 percent and subtract 30 percent from it, the remaining figure will be 70 percent, and bearing in mind the absorption capacity of our forests, the ultimate figure will be 60 percent of the base figure. Let us assume that this is what I had in mind. This is my first argument.

Second, Russia is not the world's largest polluter. The biggest polluter according to the UN – many other organisations made such calculations, but according to the UN, the biggest polluters are the United States and China (16 percent of emissions each), the EU (11 percent), Russia (6 percent) and India (5 percent).

As you know, the Paris Agreement pursues efforts to limit the increase in global temperature to 1.5 percent. I do not know whether we will be able to achieve this together or not, because nobody really knows the causes of climate change, at least global climate change.

We know that in the history of the Earth there have been periods of warming and cooling, and this might depend on the global processes in the Universe. A small tilt of the Earth's axis and its orbit around the Sun can lead to and have already led to very serious climate changes on the Earth, which had dramatic consequences – good or bad, they were still dramatic.

And it is happening again now. It is very difficult, if not impossible, to work out exactly how humankind affects climate change. But we cannot stay idle either, I agree with my colleagues. We should make our best efforts to prevent dramatic changes in the climate.

As for our country, this process is very crucial for us. The temperature in Russia is rising 2.5 times faster than the planet's average. As you know, Russia is a northern country, and 70 percent of our territory is located in the north latitudes. Some of our cities were built north of the Arctic Circle, on the permafrost. If it begins to thaw, you can imagine what consequences it would have. It would be a disaster.

In addition, it is getting warmer in some places, for instance, here in Moscow we are now setting temperature records, but this might lead to desertification in certain areas, and we will be directly affected by it.

Climate change also means an increase in the number of various natural disasters such as wildfires, floods and so on. This also concerns us. Therefore, we are continuing to be proactive in our efforts to minimise the impact of these changes.

**Dmitry Peskov:** Let us continue. The regions. “Kamchatka has not asked a question for 15 years.” Okay, I see you.

Kamchatka.

**Anastasia Ostrovskaya:** Good afternoon, Mr President, Mr Peskov, colleagues,

It is true, Kamchatka has not been given the floor for over ten years. As you know, the residents of Kamchatka have to buy a plane ticket to get to the mainland. Unfortunately, not everyone can afford it. Yes, there is a wonderful flat fare programme by Aeroflot, a presidential programme to subsidise tickets for young

people, pensioners and large families. But these tickets are snapped up in an instant. Not everyone can buy them. And Aeroflot said recently that it will probably abandon the flat fare tickets. It will mean that many Kamchatka residents will be trapped in their peninsula.

How do you think this problem could be solved?

And another short sub-question. Mr President, it has been a long time since you paid an official visit to Kamchatka. Is that because the tickets are too expensive?

**Vladimir Putin:** No, it is not because tickets to Kamchatka are too expensive, I belong to one of the groups you mentioned, you see. *(Laughter in the audience.)* But no, the reason is that it just hasn't worked out so far.

There are many pressing issues in the region. But my trips are not called official visits. I make official visits to foreign countries. To Kamchatka, it is a working trip. It does not mean that Government or I simply forget about the region. We are constantly working with it. It is a very important region in terms of the economy, social sphere and defence, because as you know, it hosts one of the bases of our strategic subsurface launch platforms. Therefore, we are always paying attention to Kamchatka.

As for the tickets, no one is going to take away the flat air fares. Aeroflot is simply exaggerating, trying to squeeze money from the Government for these flights. We will keep these programmes in place. Moreover, this programme is being expanded to other regions, beyond the Far East. We will keep doing this too.

But in general, what should we aim for? We need to see the growth of people's incomes, which – we will talk about this later – are growing very slowly, and also to reduce carriage costs. This is how we should also reduce railway ticket prices. But these programmes will stay in place as long as there are no radical changes in the situation.

I assure you, Aeroflot itself has some reserves. We discuss this matter with the Transport Minister, the Deputy Prime Minister who supervises this area, and the Aeroflot management.

**Viktor Smirnov:** Rubbish from St Petersburg is swamping the Leningrad Region.

**Dmitry Peskov:** Let's ... act as we have agreed.

**Vladimir Putin:** We will talk about St Petersburg, rubbish and other burning problems ...

**Dmitry Peskov:** If we start shouting now... You do not respect all the others.

**Vladimir Putin:** Here is what we will do. I will answer your question by way of exception. Agreed? But please, do not do this again or else we will have an Oriental bazaar and no dialogue.

Let us talk about rubbish.

**Viktor Smirnov:** Viktor Smirnov, 47news. We write about the Leningrad Region.

As you know, the so-called rubbish reform has been launched in Russia, in all regions

except Moscow, Sevastopol and St Petersburg, which have been given a respite until 2022. That is, they will be able to start when they are ready.

Speaking about St Petersburg and the surrounding Leningrad Region, the reform has begun in the region, and now rubbish from St Petersburg is being moved to the region. The regional authorities are working on it, but their work has not been coordinated. St Petersburg and the Leningrad Region depend on each other in this regard; logistics has been disrupted, and it is unclear which vehicles go there.

People in the region wonder why rubbish heaps, clearly brought from the city, are growing near their houses, and why so many vehicles are doing this stealthily. It all seems legal – on the outside. Can the city authorities be encouraged legislatively to hurry up?

**Vladimir Putin:** This can be done, but this is not the problem. What we need to do is talk directly with the people. People must know what rubbish is brought in and from where, on what grounds and what will happen to it next. Just look at it, we...

Sit down, please.

**Viktor Smirnov:** I have a request.

**Vladimir Putin:** A request? I have not answered your question yet, but yes, go ahead with your request.

**Viktor Smirnov:** Thank you. Can I ask for a 10-minute interview afterwards, while you walk to your car?

**Vladimir Putin:** This is possible. But you have not listened to my answer. It is too soon to thank me. As for an interview after the news conference, will it be this year or next year? We have not decided this yet, but yes, this is possible, in principle.

Getting back to rubbish, it is public knowledge that we produce 70 million tonnes of household waste a year. Seventy million! Can you imagine that? Incredible.

The Soviet Union and Russia did not have a rubbish recycling industry. We are creating it from scratch. The basic decisions have been made, overall: we have created a federal operator and over 200 regional operators, as well as a territorial planning scheme with regard to rubbish.

What is really lacking, as I see it, is direct communication with the people. We must tell them what we plan to do and how we will do it, where the recycling plants will be built and where rubbish will be stored until they are built.

Of course, we should completely get rid of all grey schemes and crime. Simple order should be restored. I will take advantage of your question – people are certainly outraged at a tariff increase. There was never a separate tariff for household waste, but now it appeared and immediately grew many times. This should be explained.

In order to explain these figures, it should be transparent and clear who pays and what for. In rural areas, the waste removal tariff grew many times, but in fact, waste was never removed there, it was just thrown away in a neighbouring forest. But this is also a violation.

Then, rubbish needs to be taken somewhere – and this also requires payment. It should be transparent, so that people understand what they are paying for – this is the main problem, I think.

By the way, there may be a similar situation in Leningrad and in the Leningrad Region. Why is waste transported from St Petersburg to the Leningrad Region? Well, okay, let us remove it somewhere closer to the Arctic Ocean, and then the tariff will increase once again by 10 times.

After all, the Leningrad Region and the city of St Petersburg, former Leningrad, are a single economic region. During the Soviet era, it was managed, in fact, by one body – by the Communist Party's regional committee.

Now that we have such a separation, this single area but at the same time two Russian regions certainly have slightly different interests. But so that people...

By the way, many people from the Leningrad Region, as well as from the Moscow Region, work in St Petersburg, and they generate this waste there, in St Petersburg. This is the point, and then it is removed to where they live, basically. The whole process should be transparent, and it seems to me that the situation can and must change.

But, among other things, we need to develop the industry in terms of building the facilities. They are already under construction. The number of waste processing plants should be increased. And we must explain to the people what kind of facilities they are, how they will work, what the damage will be and whether there will be damage to the environment and whether they will create any problems for the people who will live next to these facilities.

Indeed, in cities around the world, for example, in Tokyo, waste processing plants are located directly in the city. But they do not emit smoke, they do not stink, excuse my language, they do not affect people's lives or destroy the environment. If we use the latest technology, and this is exactly what we are going to do, then no problems will arise.

But we should do everything as agreed, and this requires public control and public organisations. I have already spoken with the leadership of the Russian Popular Front and I ask them once again to pay special attention to this issue. If we address this problem all together, we will resolve it.

**Dmitry Peskov:** Let us continue. I see a journalist from TV Centre. I recall we sort of neglected this channel in the past years. Please, take the floor.

**Matvei Shestakov:** Hello. I am Matvei Shestakov from TV Centre TV company.

The media often make the accusation that the real sector of the economy is currently based exclusively on the achievements of the Soviet era: plants and major roads were built in Soviet times, and the deposits were developed in the Soviet period. What is your response to these critics and what has been done in the past ten years? What roads, plants, maybe airports have been built? I know there is a relevant programme. Thank you.

**Vladimir Putin:** Criticism is not always a bad thing; it makes us contemplate the issue in question.

As for the opinion that we are using Soviet achievements, we cannot neglect the legacy of the thousand-year-old Russian state, including its Soviet period. This is obvious. In the Soviet times, many things were done which we can be proud of and are proud of: Victory in the Great Patriotic War, the breakthrough in space exploration, and much more. We should be thankful to our ancestors, our fathers and grandfathers, who created such a huge and powerful state during the Soviet period.

As for today, I want to say just a few words to those who believe that nothing has changed.

First, 75 percent of the production capacity in the processing industry has been created since 2000. The average age of machinery and equipment in the processing industry is 12 years. Do you see what this means? It shows what has been done in recent decades.

But it is much more than that. You mentioned airports. Three new airports and 45 runways have been built. Speaking of transport in general, there are 12 new railway stations; dozens of railway stations have undergone modernisation, in-depth modernisation. The number of federal motorways has been doubled. Doubled! I believe there were some 39,000 kilometres of roads [percent – *ed. note*], and now there are more than 80,000 kilometres.

Agriculture is, of course, an excellent example. As you know, and there are many people from the older generation here who remember this well, the Soviet Union always was a purchaser of grain. We were among the largest importers of grain, wheat. Let me remind you that today Russia is the largest exporter of wheat to the global market. We are number one. We are ahead of both the United States and Canada.

They have bigger production, but they consume more, and we produce so much that we hold the first place in the wheat export to the international market. The agricultural growth is 46 percent.

Our exports have multiplied (I think they grew 2.6-fold). We sold \$24 billion worth of agricultural products, including not just grain, which is the main source of foreign income in agriculture, but also livestock production, including poultry, pork and so on.

In total, all the ports of the Soviet Union transhipped (there were transhipping capacities) 600 million tonnes per year. Do you know how much Russia does now? 1.1 billion. All of this has been created over the recent decades.

Now to the mineral assets you have mentioned. There are about 600 new deposits, including 57 we plan to open this year. About 600 new deposits. And we can say the same for almost every industry. I am not even talking about such modern industries as nuclear energy, with eight blocks launched recently. I think there were 16 over the entire Soviet era. By the way, this gives us a big advantage in fighting climate change, because thanks to this, as well as hydropower and gas, we have the greenest energy structure in the world.

There are brand new spheres of energy as well, such as liquefied natural gas. Entire international-class complexes have been established, both in the Far East and the Arctic. A generation breakthrough has taken place in hydropower, a real

breakthrough.

This is why those who believe we only use the old resources and capacities we inherited from the previous generations are mistaken.

**Dmitry Peskov:** Let's move to that side of the aisle. Interregional media, URA.RU. Give them a microphone, please.

**Anton Olshannikov:** URA.RU news agency. Mr President, my name is Anton Olshannikov.

I have a question about negative developments in medicine, as they are still relevant. The fact is that it may take up to a month to get a doctor's appointment in the regions, and doctors' salaries can be so low that doctors are quitting en masse. However, a head doctor may be paid hundreds of thousands of rubles a month, whereas, for example, a surgeon, gets about 50,000, if that.

You have held several meetings on primary care and healthcare in general this year. You said that the reforms should be carried out quickly and be meaningful. In this regard, I want to understand why the system remains at a standstill. The fact is that the reform is cosmetic, and there are no ground-breaking solutions that could make a difference. You got personally involved in dealing with this issue. I want to understand why. Perhaps, you think the country needs a different healthcare management model? Or does the state need to find resources to support what is available?

**Vladimir Putin:** First, it is best to let the model just be. It is evolving at a satisfactory pace, but there certainly are problems.

You mentioned one of them, salaries, but healthcare employees' salaries are even higher than the salaries in other social spheres. Overall, the numbers outlined in the 2012 executive orders correspond to the planned salary benchmarks. Frankly, I cannot disagree with you, as these are average numbers as well.

You have just said that while head doctors may be earning high wages, rank-and-file doctors, even surgeons, are paid much less. This is one of those problems that we need to tackle. As far as pay levels are concerned, we need to look at the specific sector. After all, what are the approaches to getting things moving? There is no secret about it, and these solutions are quite simple. The first one is to simply increase Compulsory Health Insurance tariffs or change the way the tariffs are distributed within this system. Let me emphasise however that there is little that can be changed in terms of redistributing tariffs within the Compulsory Health Insurance system, since 70 percent of them already go towards salaries. If we change anything, there will be no money left for buying medicine or equipment.

What is the other option then? It consists of simply increasing the Compulsory Health Insurance tariffs. Can this be done? Yes, it can. However, at the end of the day it will be a burden for the entire economy, since all operators within it must pay for it, which will drive up prices and cause an overall increase in the rate of inflation. In such circumstances, any increase in salaries would be eaten up by inflation. So probably this is not the best option either.

But what can be done? Is there anything that can be done within the existing system? Of course, there is. Just look. First, as you have just said, a head doctor may have

a big salary, much higher than ordinary doctors. The first thing that should be done is to eliminate this unfair differentiation. This is my first point.

There is no doubt that the base salary rate must be changed. In the regions, it is currently in the range of 35 to 50 percent. We need to have a single national approach to paying out incentives, so that people earn a specific amount for the number of patients they receive, for the number of patients they visit at home, etc. At the same time, there should be no question of cutting bonuses that are given for special working conditions, such as working holidays, working at night, and so on. I believe that even just putting this right would produce a positive effect.

Of course, this will not be enough. Salaries in the social services sector must grow alongside the economy, especially and even primarily in the healthcare industry. I do agree with that.

**Dmitry Peskov:** Thank you. Let us proceed.

Let us talk about sports, Match TV, if this is what you want to ask.

**Olga Bogoslovskaya:** Good afternoon, Mr President. Olga Bogoslovskaya, Match TV. I am from a sports channel, and so my question will be about sports, or more precisely, the difficult situation with Russian sports.

On December 9, the WADA Executive Committee adopted an unprecedentedly harsh decision to ban Russian athletes from participating in all major sports events, which include the summer and winter Olympic and Paralympic games.

The reason for that decision was the discrepancy between the data provided by the Moscow laboratory and the data provided by WADA informers. The Russian Anti-Doping Agency's rights have been curtailed.

However, the sanctions have hit the innocent athletes especially hard. This brings me to my question: What should Russian athletes do in this situation, and how can Russian sports develop in this difficult situation?

**Vladimir Putin:** I will answer your question, but first I would like to say that I noticed that I did not answer the previous question in full.

I would like to say a few more words about the measures we plan to take in the field of primary medical care. We have agreed, after all, to increase healthcare allocations, in addition to what has been stipulated under the Healthcare project, by 550 billion rubles.

These funds will be used first of all to improve physical assets and to buy equipment and vehicles. We plan to improve or built 10,000 medical facilities and buy 37,000 vehicles and approximately 10,000 pieces of medical equipment. In this context, I hope that we will be able to implement all our plans very soon and that people will feel the change.

The second component, which is mostly stipulated under national projects, includes allocations to primary care, but the bulk of funds will be invested in fighting cancer. I hope we will see a positive result in this sphere as well.

We can report achievements in the field of cardiovascular diseases, where the figure is some 0.6 percent. The situation with tuberculosis has improved by 12 percent,



and child mortality has decreased considerably. We must continue working in the same manner in all of these spheres.

As for WADA and its decisions, I believe that they are not only unjust, but also defy common sense and are illegal. Why? Because as far as doping is concerned, decisions have already been taken against Russian athletes who had to compete in a neutral status at the previous Olympics. Now it is happening all over again. There has never been anything of this kind in any of the world's legal systems or in human history, and I hope nothing of this kind ever happens again. This is my first point.

Second, any sanctions must target specific, individual breaches. If someone was caught doing something illegal, sanctions are natural and fair. But if an overwhelming majority of Russian athletes are clean, how can they be sanctioned for someone else's actions?

We have very young female athletes competing in figure skating, they are practically little girls. What do they have to do with doping? Nothing whatsoever. But they can do quadruple jumps, which so far no one can, or almost no one can do in women's figure skating. This is how they make sure that these girls are kept off the ice. Can this be done? Yes, it can. But what for? Will this help international sports in any way? I do not think so.

Among other things, as I already said at the news conference in Paris, this decision by WADA runs counter to the Olympic Charter. A national team cannot and should not compete under a neutral flag when there are no claims against its Olympic Committee. This is what the Charter says. If WADA does not have any claims against the Russian Olympic Committee at this time, this means that the national team can compete under the Russian flag. Go after specific people, and of course we will be there to assist you in these efforts. We are doing everything to make our sport clean.

By the way, RUSADA was created in close contact with our WADA colleagues. We even selected its executive team based on their recommendations. I think that everything I said suggests that this decision was politically tainted, as sad as it sounds.

**Dmitry Peskov:** Let's go to the middle [sector], to the federal media. I can see Channel One, pass on the microphone, please.

**Konstantin Panyushkin:** Thank you.

Good afternoon, Mr President. Konstantin Panyushkin, Channel One.

First of all, I would like to thank you on behalf of the Channel One journalists and perhaps many others for what you said at the news conference in Paris. After the news conference – we did a little eavesdropping when you were talking with Chancellor Merkel and President Macron, explaining, as far as we understood, problems concerning journalists' work in Ukraine. Perhaps one day, thanks to the work in the Normandy Format, we will be able to work there confidently and calmly like Ukrainian journalists work in Russia, who, by the way, should also be here today.

So I have a question about Ukraine. After Paris, after everything your summit partners have said in the two weeks since then, and I mean Ukraine above all, do you think there is any point holding another meeting in four months, as you agreed?

And what do you think are the Normandy Format's prospects in general?

Also, do you think the Minsk Agreements and the Steinmeier Formula will survive the next four months or survive at all in the future? What do you think is the best-case scenario for the future of Donbass?

In addition, journalists were looking forward to your meeting with Zelensky and Russian-Ukrainian talks. What are the current prospects of a settlement in Russian-Ukrainian relations? Are there any problems or breakthroughs due to the change of administration?

And the last question, if I may. President Zelensky talked about you right there, in Paris. What do you think about President Vladimir Zelensky? Thank you.

**Vladimir Putin:** Let's begin with the last one. I always try to avoid such questions. I do not believe it is correct for me to answer them and to state my opinion of my colleagues. Perhaps you have noted that I don't even describe former leaders who left their offices.

Let's discuss historical figures. We can do this. I do not have the heart to talk about people who are in office today. Everybody has both positive and negative sides. But when people take such offices, this means they have passed through a serious selection process, so they are at least not ordinary people.

As for the Normandy format, the Minsk Agreements and so on, there is nothing more important than the Minsk Agreements. Of course, I was worried by the statement made by President Zelensky after he left Paris to the effect that they could be revised. If we revise the Minsk Agreements, the settlement process will hit a dead end, because the main element of the Minsk Agreements is a law on the special status of Donbass, which must be formalised in the Ukrainian Constitution. It has been extended for a year, but not permanently, although we keep saying – not only do I, but the other Normandy format leaders say so as well – that the law must be of unlimited duration and that its formula must be incorporated in the Constitution. However, it appears that neither the previous nor the current Ukrainian leadership wants this. But there is no way around it. This is the first point.

Second, there must be a direct dialogue with Donbass. There is none so far. It has been announced that amendments concerning decentralisation will be made. This is good. But is this meant to replace the Minsk Agreements? Or the law on the special status of Donbass? Can you imagine that? Yes. But the Minsk Agreements say that any actions that concern Donbass must be coordinated with Donbass. This initiative has not been coordinated with it. This, of course, is alarming.

As for the next meeting, for example, in April, it will only be relevant if we see positive change. Has there been any positive change? Yes, it is an objective fact. First, the law on the special status has been extended, and hence the basis for a settlement has not been destroyed. Second, troops have pulled back in several vital areas, although our Ukrainian partners are against disengagement along the entire contact line. I believe that they are making a mistake, but this is their position. That was my second point.

The number of artillery attacks has decreased, which is another achievement, although regrettably, they have not stopped altogether. There are positive things and there are alarming things. All this should be discussed. Overall, it is desirable to continue meetings in the Normandy format.

By the way, you mentioned our Ukrainian colleagues. Shall we give them the floor?  
Are any of them with us today?

**Dmitry Peskov:** Please let our traditional guest have the microphone.

**Roman Tsymbalyuk:** Good afternoon, my name is Roman Tsymbalyuk, and I represent the Ukrainian UNIAN news agency.

**Vladimir Putin:** Good afternoon.

**Roman Tsymbalyuk:** Indeed, we, and I personally, have no problem doing our work in Russia. Perhaps, if the Ukrainian tanks were in Kuban, you would have slightly different thoughts about us.

**Vladimir Putin:** Are you talking about the 72 or the 34 model? *(Laughter.)*

**Roman Tsymbalyuk:** T-64 is our staple combat tank made in Kharkov.

**Vladimir Putin:** T-64 is a Soviet tank as well.

**Roman Tsymbalyuk:** You also mentioned you are originally from the Soviet Union.

**Vladimir Putin:** Okay.

**Roman Tsymbalyuk:** As a follow-up to the Minsk talks, could you give the date of your decision to disband the occupation administrations in Lugansk and Donetsk? You refer to them as republics, but they are not mentioned in the Minsk Agreements.

Also, if I may, will there be a gas war? It appears that you are not about to give us back the \$3 billion awarded to us by the arbitration court. You are talking about cheap gas, but we know that Russia's cheap gas is the most expensive thing for Ukraine.

Thank you.

**Vladimir Putin:** So, disbanding administrative bodies and gas. What else?

**Roman Tsymbalyuk:** Three billion.

**Vladimir Putin:** Three billion.

Here is my first point regarding the Minsk Agreements and disbanding, as you said, administrative bodies in the unrecognised republics.

Former president Petro Poroshenko who represented Ukraine at the Minsk talks, which were followed by the Minsk Agreements, insisted on having this document signed by the leaders of these two unrecognised republics. They just grabbed me by the throat, all three of them, and representatives of these unrecognised republics refused to sign. I am giving you, so to speak, the inside facts about our talks in Minsk. However, we managed to persuade them, and they signed the document. Thus, Ukraine itself recognised the existence of these authorities. This is the first part of the Ballet de la Merlaison, so to say.

The second part is that the elections were held there, and the people cast their votes. This, I believe, is a very democratic way of organising government bodies.

Third, the Minsk Agreements themselves outline explicitly the rights of these republics, and what they are entitled to claim. Everything is spelled out there about the language, the local police, and so on.

The next aspect has to do with what it is all about, and I am getting to the controversial part. I will not hide anything, and there is no need to do it. People in both Russia and Ukraine must know what these agreements are about.

There is a clause about withdrawing mercenaries and foreign troops and closing the border. Under the Minsk Agreements, the process of closing the border is to begin on the second day after an election takes place, and to be completed only after an inclusive political settlement is achieved, including amendments to the Ukrainian Constitution and these republics acquiring the rights as set forth in the Minsk Agreements. As soon as this is done, the border can be completely sealed.

Finally, let me respond to the question about the withdrawal of foreign troops. There are no foreign troops there. Yes, there are local militias, local self-defence forces staffed with local residents. I get questions all the time: Where did they get tanks or heavy artillery? Look, conflicts and hostilities of all kinds are unfolding in many hotspots around the world, involving tanks, artillery, etc. Where do they get them? Probably from those government agencies that sympathise with them. But let me emphasise that these weapons are theirs, not foreign.

As for the mercenaries, I have just said in Paris that there are French and Germans fighting there on both sides. We must address this issue of mercenaries, but they are not the bedrock of these armed groups.

You know what the main problem is? I will be completely honest with you. The most important problem is that there is a lack of willingness to resolve this question through dialogue with the people. We have yet to see any willingness to move in this direction, instead of trying to create favourable conditions for resolving the problem by force using tanks, artillery and air power. I said: air power was used. And the current President of Ukraine replied: What air power? He did not even remember or did not know this. But they did use air power, you see?

As soon as we, or rather the Ukrainian leadership, abandon what I believe to be a completely misguided approach to resolving this problem and move into dialogue mode, this is when there will be a path towards a solution. It is stated in the agreements that they need to restore economic and other infrastructure, but instead they just cut off this part of the country from the Ukrainian territory by imposing a blockade. Was Moscow the one who imposed this blockade? The Kiev authorities were the ones who did it.

However, we are seeing some positive shifts in this sphere, at least I hope we do. As you already know, there are some changes for the better there. At least there are crossing points, and the demining effort is underway. This is not enough. A lot has to be done to improve the lives of the people who live there. But it can be done.

If we proceed from this premise and focus on finding common ground and promoting dialogue, the problem will be resolved. If attempts to strangle them by force continue, I do not think that it can be done. There is a saying that people in Donbass never yield under pressure. It definitely has a ruffian and aggressive side to it, but this is how people feel deep inside. People who live there have a sense of pride, so this problem is unlikely to be resolved by force.

The gas war. You mentioned three billion. Let me point out that part of our reserve money from the Russian National Welfare Fund is invested in Ukrainian bonds: \$3 billion, exactly. There is a court ruling from London on this, but it is not fulfilled.

Speaking about gas relations, it is a complicated and sensitive issue. We want to solve this problem. As someone who has a degree in law, I believe that this ruling of the Arbitration Institute of the Stockholm Chamber of Commerce is not legal but more likely political. Here's one of the grounds for this ruling (everyone here will find it strange, too, but it is interesting): "...due to the difficult economic situation in Ukraine." That is nonsense. But it is written there. They should have refrained from writing such a phrase.

Well, we have the court decision, it is true, and we must proceed from this. We will proceed from this and look for a solution that would suit everyone, including Ukraine, while preserving transit through Ukraine, despite the construction of new facilities, such as Nord Stream 1, Nord Stream 2, and TurkStream. The question is what the volume of transit and contract duration will be.

Let me also note that we are not going to sign any contract to stop transit later. No, we are interested in this, we want to do this; it is a good route.

By the way, the Ukrainian route to Europe is longer than via the Baltic Sea. It is longer and more expensive for us. But it is a good and well-known route to Central and Southern Europe, and we are ready to preserve it. We would also be ready to provide Ukraine with a gas discount of 20–25 percent, as I have already mentioned, by the way. It can be done.

This would also mean decreasing costs for the end consumer instead of increasing them as you are planning now. Starting from January 1, 2020, all the discounts will be cancelled, as far as I know, and the average gas price will be \$300 for all categories of consumers, including individuals.

I think we will come to an agreement. By the way, we are already making headway. We will try to make Ukraine happy with the agreement, too. We do not want escalations in the energy sector that can be used to affect the situation in Ukraine.

We are interested in Ukraine getting the resource properly, so that our consumers in Europe are calm about us having normal relations with our neighbours and that everything goes as planned.

**Dmitry Peskov:** Let us go to that sector. Omsk has the floor. I believe we have not given the floor to Omsk yet. I see a lady standing.

**Remark from the audience.**

**Dmitry Peskov:** I thought we agreed to respect each other. Thank you.

Omsk, go ahead.

**Olga Korobova:** Good afternoon. Olga Korobova, editor-in-chief, Argumenty i Fakty v Omske.

Mr President, my question concerns not only Omsk but probably the whole of the Trans-Ural area.

**Vladimir Putin:** Can you raise your hand, please? I do not see you. Thank you.

**Olga Korobova:** I have a question about demography and migration. It is a question about everything, that is, the social situation in the Trans-Urals.

**Vladimir Putin:** If it is a question about everything, it will be the last question today.

**Olga Korobova:** First of all, I would like to thank you for launching the Far Eastern Hectare and Far Eastern Mortgage projects. But people are also leaving Siberia for oversized Moscow and St Petersburg. It would be wonderful if such measures, in particular a mortgage project, were adopted for our region as well so that young, smart and talented people aged 30–45 would not leave but take out mortgages.

Has this possibility been discussed for Siberia, the Trans-Urals and, more precisely, Omsk?

**Vladimir Putin:** We have indeed adopted several such measures for the Far East, where the population is declining much more rapidly than in any other part or region of Russia.

Many people have taken advantage of the Far Eastern Hectare project. We have adjusted it so that it is available not only to locals but also to people from any other part of Russia who want to settle in the Far East. This land is being used for several purposes: housing, agriculture and other forms of business, including tourism. But we also see some drawbacks to this project, first of all the fact that these land plots are not always attractive because of their infrastructure, or rather, they lack roads, electricity and other infrastructure. Therefore, we must first of all implement these projects and plans in full in the Far East before turning to other regions.

As for the Trans-Urals, I assure you that we see what is happening there. We will revise our demographic projects to include the Trans-Urals. I am referring to assistance for households with children, primarily those that have a third baby.

As for other support measures, including a 2 percent mortgage rate, all this is possible, of course. But first we need to analyse progress in the Far East, calculate how much this will cost us, see how many people request such assistance, and review our budget expenditures before calmly taking any decisions on what to do next.

**Dmitry Peskov:** Let's have a question from the centre.

Andrei Kolesnikov, one of the patriarchs of Russian journalism. As usual, he holds his hand up with great modesty, but he has been working with the President for many years.

**Andrei Kolesnikov:** Good afternoon. Andrei Kolesnikov, Kommersant newspaper.

Mr President, I have two questions on the recent meeting of the Council for Civil Society and Human Rights. You spoke out about Vladimir Ulyanov as never before. You even brought up his nicknames, such as “Old Man” and “Lenin.”

**Vladimir Putin:** A pseudonym.

**Andrei Kolesnikov:** You said nicknames.

**Vladimir Putin:** As a matter of fact, it is all one and the same.

**Andrei Kolesnikov:** Party nicknames.

You accused him of breaking down a 1,000-year-old state. When you were saying this, your facial expression was close to rage, it seemed to me. Will anything come out of your comment? What would be a logical follow-up to these words? Removing Lenin's body from the Mausoleum, at long last?

And the second question. At the same meeting, you had a debate with Alexander Sokurov on the title of the Hero of Russia, regarding Ramzan Kadyrov's case. At that point your facial expression simply showed tolerance. Would you like to say something in this regard?

Thank you.

**Vladimir Putin:** I prefer not to raise subjects of this kind, but since Mr Sokurov did, I had to respond, so now it seems that I have to set it out in more detail.

Regarding Lenin and his role in our history, and what I think about it, I believe that he was a revolutionary rather than a statesman.

When I talked about the 1,000-year history of our state, it was strictly centralised and unitary, as we all know. But what did Vladimir Lenin propose? He went even further than a federation and proposed a system that can be described as a confederation. It was his decision to tie ethnic groups to specific territories, so that they obtained the right to secede from the Soviet Union.

What happened was that a strictly centralised state was turned into a de facto confederation with the right of secession and with ethnic groups attached to specific territories. But these territories were divided in such a way that they did not always correspond and still do not correspond to where various ethnic groups traditionally lived. This is how cracks emerged that still linger in the relations between the former Soviet republics, and even within the Russian Federation. There are two thousand cracks of this kind, and letting them out of sight for even a second can have grave consequences. This is the first point I wanted to make.

By the way, Stalin was against such organisation. He even wrote an article on autonomy, but, eventually, adopted Lenin's formula. The upshot? Just now, our colleague from Ukraine and I spoke about our relations. Back when the Soviet Union was created, original Russian territories that never had anything to do with Ukraine (the entire Black Sea region and Russia's western lands) were transferred to Ukraine under a strange pretext of "increasing the percentage of the proletariat in Ukraine," because Ukraine was a rural territory populated by petty-bourgeois-minded peasants, who were subjected to dispossession across the country. This was a somewhat odd decision. Nevertheless, it took place. We are now dealing with Vladimir Lenin's legacy of state building.

What did they do? They tied the country's future to their own party, and this tenet went from one Constitution to another. It was the main political force. As soon as the party started to crumble, the country followed. That is what I meant. I stick to this point of view to this day.

As you are aware, I worked in intelligence for a long time. It was an integral part

of a much politicised organisation, the KGB, and I had my own ideas about our leaders and so on. But I know better today, and I understand that there are geopolitical considerations in addition to ideology. They were completely ignored during the creation of the Soviet Union. All this was much politicised at the time. To reiterate, the party began to fall apart, and that was the end of it – the country followed. This had to be prevented. This was a mistake. An absolute, cardinal and fundamental mistake in state building.

Now, with regard to the body. This is beside the point. I believe this subject should not be touched at all, at least as long as there are people, lots of them, who associate their lives and destinies, and certain achievements of the past, the Soviet years, with it. One way or another, the Soviet Union is certainly connected with Vladimir Lenin, the leader of the world proletariat. So, why delve deep into that? We just need to move forward and grow. That is all.

As for Kadyrov's Hero of Russia title, you know I already spoke about it and I want to say it again. When I first met his father, the first President of the Chechen Republic, he came to me himself. He did not come to surrender, he came to build relations with Russia. It was before the active combat operation started in Chechnya and in the Caucasus. And he told me then, "We thought that we would be better off with other Islamic countries, but we realised that we were wrong because they tried to bend us to their will." All those extremist, half-terrorist groups. He said, "We do not want it. I understand now that we will be better off with Russia. Russia has never had any issues with our religion or our everyday customs." And so on. It was his choice. You know his fate. He died at the hands of terrorists. What did he die for? For Chechnya, the Chechen people, and for Russia. It was his decision. I still cannot forgive myself for letting him go home for the holidays, because he was in my office and I asked him to stay, but he said that he needed to be at home. And then he was killed in an explosion.

The current president, his son, is still exposed to danger every day. In addition, he personally takes part in various combat operations. The Federal Security Service Director was reporting to me once on the elimination of a terrorist group, and I suggested that his guys should be awarded state decorations. And he said, "It was not us." I asked him who it was, and he said that it was Kadyrov and his men. I said, "I forbade him to do it!" But he is unstoppable, he is always out there in the field. So I always present such titles as Hero of Russia for a reason.

Look at what Grozny looks like now. Look at the photos taken several years ago featuring Minutka Square: Grozny looked like Stalingrad after the Battle of Stalingrad. Exactly like that. And look how it has changed.

Actually, we could present Kadyrov with the Hero of Labour title as well, but he is still young, he can wait. But the situation has really turned around there. So this is the answer to that part of your question.

**Dmitry Peskov:** By the way, I saw a journalist from Chechnya. Would you like to add anything? Central sector. Raise your hand, please, so that we can see you. Please, identify yourself and speak as concisely as possible.

**Alkhazur Kerimov:** Good afternoon, Mr President.

**Vladimir Putin:** Good afternoon.



**Alkhazur Kerimov:** Alkhazur Kerimov, Grozny TV.

It was very gratifying to me to hear you speak so warmly about the first president of the Chechen Republic and about our current leader. First of all, I would like to say that the Chechen Republic is developing rapidly in all spheres.

This became possible thanks to your decisions and all-round assistance and help. The people can see this, which is why your confidence rating in the republic is the highest throughout Russia. People in Chechnya love and respect you, and they look forward to your visit. Now, my question.

There has been much talk about building a road to Georgia via Chechnya. This would settle many strategic problems and unclog the alternative route, which is especially busy in winter, when cars stand for days in traffic jams.

The head of Chechnya raised this issue and commented on it many times, because building one more road would help increase trade and boost our economic progress through a rapid development of tourism in the region. What do you think about this initiative? How can it benefit the economies of Russia and Georgia? Do you support it?

One more thing. Some time ago the head of Chechnya proposed building a high-speed railway line from Krasnodar to Grozny and connecting it to the existing Moscow-Adler high-speed road. This would greatly increase the accessibility of the republics involved. What do you think about this project? Can we count on its implementation?

**Vladimir Putin:** I would like to say that there are several infrastructure projects for southern Russia, including Chechnya. We are working on them or considering them. Some of them are at a more advanced stage than others. I would not like to go into detail now, but I know about these plans.

We have recently discussed this in the Government; there are several options for connecting Chechnya with Krasnodar and the Black Sea coast. We will do this when the time comes. For now, we do not have any concrete or calibrated plans, but I agree that this is a rational idea.

What was the first part of your question about?

**Alkhazur Kerimov:** The road to Georgia.

**Vladimir Putin:** Yes, Georgia. Indeed, there are problems with communication with Georgia, especially in winter when there is a lot of snow. We are aware of this. What you mentioned is a good idea, but it is not on the Transport Ministry's plans at the moment. Although, I repeat, we know about it and it is a viable project. Yes, it would be reasonable to implement it.

**Dmitry Peskov:** Let's move over here. Dimitri Simes. Channel One, I guess?

**Dimitri Simes:** Bolshaya Igra, Channel One.

**Dmitry Peskov:** Please give him a microphone.

**Dimitri Simes:** Mr President, two days ago the US Congress passed bills on sanctions against Russia by such an overwhelming majority that it makes it difficult for President Trump to veto the bill.

And, as you probably know, the House of Representatives passed articles of impeachment yesterday. This is the context in which he has to make foreign policy decisions, and more specifically, those in relation to Russia.

In this situation, do you think you – and Russia – have any opportunity to try to maintain or strengthen dialogue with the United States before the end of Trump's presidency? What can you do to enhance strategic stability, and more specifically, to extend the New START?

**Vladimir Putin:** As for the chances to continue our dialogue until the end of Trump's presidency, you do sound like it is actually ending. I am not so sure about that. The decision still needs to pass through the Senate, where the Republicans, as far as I know, have the majority, and they are unlikely to want to remove the representative of their party from power for something I, personally, see as far-fetched.

This is just another move in that country's domestic political campaigning, where one party that lost the election, the Democratic Party, is trying to achieve results they want through other means, such as charging Trump with conspiracy related to Russia. When it turned out there was no conspiracy, there was no longer a sufficient reason to impeach. Now they have invented pressure on Ukraine. I do not know what this is all about. But your Congresspeople certainly know better.

As for the decisions that were made with respect to Russia, they are being made by people who hardly have any responsibility for these decisions. These are not executive authorities, but representative authorities, and their job is to pass laws. They are making such decisions regarding Russia.

This will certainly affect the level of interstate relations. We are aware of their general approach – the United States will work with us in areas where they have an interest and profit, while at the same time restraining Russia with decisions like this. Knowing this, we too will mirror their steps, we will do just that. I am not saying this is a good thing. These are very unfriendly acts in relation to Russia.

They want to help Ukraine keep its transits. As I have just told a colleague from Ukraine, we also want to keep transits. In any case, this is what we are interested in, and this is what we will do. If they wanted to help, they should have given them money. How come they do not give any money to Ukraine? This would have enabled them to provide subsidies.

You see, they give almost nothing, only guarantees for future loans. But this is not actual money, so the support they are getting is not real. At the same time, the IMF, where the United States rules, demands that all energy subsidies be cancelled, including for natural gas. This will once again drive consumer prices up.

Others in the West, I mean, the EU, want round timber to be exported to Europe. If they do so, very soon, there will be nothing left of the Carpathian mountains, with only bare rock remaining. It could seem that they are supporting the current Ukrainian regime and its leaders, but at the same time I believe that they are seriously hurting it.

Now they are asking Ukraine to start selling land. Land is sacred for Ukrainians, and I can understand this, since these are "golden" soils. Of course, the opposition was instantly all over this issue and is now attacking Zelensky on the domestic policy

front.

They blame us for some actions towards Ukraine and pretend to be willing to help, but in reality what they want is to have Russia support the Ukrainian budget. Go ahead and give them the money, help Ukraine, grant it subsidised loans with lengthy repayment periods. But there is nothing of the kind.

Still, we are interested in expanding and maintaining relations with the United States and will move in this direction regardless of who is in the White House or who controls the two chambers of Congress.

Do we see any potential in this? I think so. You have mentioned global security, including the New START, as one of the foundations of our relations. We put forward our proposals, as I have already said, and will repeat: we stand ready until the end of the year to extend the existing New START as is.

They can send it to us by post, or we can sign it and send it to Washington so that their senior officials, including the President, sign it, if they are ready to do so. So far we have not received a reply to any of our proposals. Without the New START there will be nothing left in the world to contain the arms race. I believe that there is nothing good about it.

**Dmitry Peskov:** MIR TV channel, you have the floor.

**Elina Dashkuyeva:** Thank you, Mr Peskov.

Good afternoon, Mr President, I am Elina Dashkuyeva from the MIR Interstate Television and Radio Broadcasting Company.

At the Ashgabat meeting of the CIS Heads of State Council you spoke about the celebration of the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Victory in the Great Patriotic War, and you said that this victory concerns every citizen of the Soviet Union. You invited CIS leaders to come here to take part in the commemorative events, and also agreed to hold joint events to mark this date.

Mr President, do you regret that the joint column of the victors will not include servicemen from some former Soviet republics, including Ukraine and Georgia?

Thank you.

**Vladimir Putin:** I regret that there is no Soviet Union anymore. As for their participation in the parade, it is their choice. But if someone misses the event due to some interstate relations, I think they will make a big mistake. Because it will mean that they do not show respect for the people who fought and gave their lives for the independence of their Motherland.

There is one thing I would like to draw attention to. Nazi Germany had these documents that said that part of the Slavic people should be used as workers, but the majority should be sent beyond the Urals, to the northern territories. What did they count on? On our extinction. So that fight, it was not just about preserving our statehood, but about preserving the East Slavic ethnic group, both Russians and Ukrainians. This is what it was about.

When I hear someone say that maybe it would have been better to abandon

Leningrad to the enemy and so on, I want to say, are you out of your mind? You would not be alive today if they had done that. This is what it is all about. And, of course, the presence at the Moscow parade of the descendants of those who saved our statehood and independence, and who preserved our peoples, is a symbolic and important gesture, I think. We will be happy to see everyone who accepts our invitation.

By the way, Minsk wants to ask a question. Excuse me, Dmitry, I see a 'Minsk, Belarus' poster there.

Go ahead, please.

**Remark:** Can we ask a question about Iran?

**Vladimir Putin:** Yes, in a moment, please.

**Maria Nagibina:** Hello, Mr President.

Maria Nagibina, Ministry of Ideas TV channel.

I have a question for you that follows up on the topic of the Soviet Union.

Millions of people suffered from Gorbachev's illegal actions in 1991. So here is the question: how about looking at what happened in 1991 from a legal perspective? This could make resolving questions regarding territorial integrity, including with Belarus, easier.

I also have a second question. Last year you talked about the Constitution of the Russian Federation and its Article 13, paragraph 2, which bans ideology. You said that this should be a matter of public debate. As we all know, there is a massive drive by community activists across the country to collect signatures, and 200,000 have already been collected and handed over to the Federation Council, State Duma and other government institutions. Do you think that this question was sufficiently debated by Russian society?

**Vladimir Putin:** Regarding a legal assessment of what Gorbachev or anyone else did, I do not know. I do not understand how this relates to territorial integrity. We have resolved all the questions we had, and all the documents are signed. I do not quite understand what a legal evaluation of these actions has to do with it. This is my first point.

Second, regarding the Constitution and what it says on ideology, I have already said that the Soviet Constitution had a very pronounced ideological component, and the only ideology that guided it was the ideology of the Communist Party. It is clear however what came out of it, as I have already said. Among other things, it served as one of the triggers that led a unified state to break down. Without a party, it started to crumble, and the country followed.

However, I believe that in today's democratic society there can be only one ideology: patriotism in a broad, positive sense of the word. It should not be driven by politics, but rather designed to strengthen the inner foundations of the Russian state.

**Dmitry Peskov:** Let's continue. It looks like we left out federal news agencies. I see ITAR-TASS on the right. Please remain seated. Let's show some respect for each other. This is a news conference after all.

**Remark:** I have a question about the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Victory.

**Dmitry Peskov:** Sit down, please.

**Remark:** All right.

**Dmitry Peskov:** Thank you very much.

**Veronika Ichetkina:** May I? Thank you.

Mr President, last year the news conference opened with a question from TASS about national projects. My question today is also about national projects, especially since this year our agency became an operator of a special website dedicated to this subject.

Here is my question. National projects have been implemented for almost a year now, and more and more experts from the regions are saying that the national projects' goals are overly high and need to be revised.

Do you think we can say that national projects are stalling? Do you think the national projects' goals should be revised? Or maybe it would make sense to develop additional measures to stimulate this work? Such as to establish additional personal responsibility of regional leaders for implementing national projects in terms of goals or deadlines? Or maybe decentralisation can help, such as expanding the powers of regional authorities, or municipal authorities, including redistribution of taxes, so that they have more money in their budgets and use it to more vigorously participate in national projects on the ground?

Thank you.

**Vladimir Putin:** First, I believe there is no need to revise anything fundamentally.

Second, personal responsibility has been introduced, but it can certainly be strengthened and detailed.

Third, national projects are, of course, a major undertaking, and we have not had anything like that before, we have not worked with such tools before, they simply did not exist. There were state programmes, but they are different. National projects pursue goals, and specific resources have been allocated to achieve these goals, and personal responsibility has been introduced and is being used. We should continue to move along these lines.

Are they stalling or not? Of course, mechanisms and the legislative framework should have been created from the get-go. I even got anxious at some point thinking about how this would continue to move forward. Look, we consider 26 goals achieved and 12 not achieved out of 38 goals planned for this year. With regard to an important area such as relocating residents from dilapidated housing, we went beyond meeting the target figure for the current year and exceeded it threefold. So, overall, the situation is under control. Of course, we need to look at what is happening in real life, analyse it, and, of course, some things will need to be adjusted. But on the whole, there is no need to revise anything.

**Dmitry Peskov:** Let's continue. Federal agencies now.

I see Interfax. Pass the microphone to Interfax, please.

**Ksenia Golovanova:** Good afternoon, Mr President. Ksenia Golovanova, Interfax.

This year abounded in high-profile cases that caused public outcry. Members of the HRC talked to you about some of them at a meeting last week, and you did not comment on one of them, the case of Ivan Golunov.

During the Direct Line, you described this case, this situation with Golunov, as lawlessness and said that those responsible should be found. However, no one responsible has been found, the case file has been classified, and an investigation is underway with regard to unidentified persons.

It seems to me that the Golunov case is a reflection of something that is typical for our law enforcement system; something, everyone has probably dealt with, unfortunately – complete impunity and the we-don't-betray-our-own principle.

I have two questions in this regard. Don't you not think that maybe it is time to somehow reshuffle and purge our law enforcement bodies again. And can you guarantee that the Golunov case will eventually lead to a conviction, and will not be soft-pedalled? Thank you.

**Vladimir Putin:** Earlier today I was thinking how I began my career as a security agent. When I joined, service veterans were still there, and some would hide in their offices when one old man would enter the building.

Who was that person? He served in 1936–1937. What did he do? That was a time of “purges” in law enforcement agencies, including security agencies. One could come to work in the morning, unsuspectingly, not knowing anything, but a criminal case had been initiated against them, and by the evening, their family was given the body just after they were executed. And that old man that everyone ran from was the one who carried out those sentences.

So, as far as “purges” are concerned, we have been through this, it happened in our not-so-distant history, and we had better avoid any further purges here.

The fact that we need to improve the system of law enforcement bodies' work, to control what is happening there – I also mean public control – is completely obvious. All law enforcement agencies have their own security services, and those are working quite efficiently.

The we-don't-betray-our-own phrase is just wrong. Because, indeed, probably, there may be cases where the chiefs want to cover up for someone, the immediate superiors, I mean. But, again, their own security services are effective. And a significant number of criminal cases – there are many cases brought against law enforcement officials – are based on the findings of their own security services.

As for the Golunov case (is this the name – Golunov?), indeed, it was decided to classify these materials, because the investigation raises questions related to the organisation of active search measures, and this is restricted information. But this does not mean the investigation is not proceeding as it should. I would like to inform you that five people have been suspended from the relevant services of the Interior Ministry. They have been fired from Interior Ministry bodies, and criminal cases have been initiated against them. The investigation is being conducted by the Investigative Committee, not the Interior Ministry.

**Dmitry Peskov:** RIA Novosti, on the right, please, go ahead.

**Yelena Glushakova:** Yelena Glushakova, RIA Novosti.

Since you mentioned that you are a lawyer, the first part of my question relates to legal matters, Mr President. My question will be on the Constitution. In your opinion, could it be that the time has come to amend the Constitution? These questions surface every now and then, and have recently been discussed. If the time has come, what part could be changed? Are you satisfied with the amendments that were introduced ten years ago to change some articles in our Constitution?

The second part of my question is about politics, and relates to the political system our country has. Within a few days, it will be 20 years since you came to the helm. Is there a need, in your opinion, to make changes, like maybe reassigning powers between the parliament, the government or even the president?

And my final question, if you allow me. Do we have competition in Russian politics, in your opinion?

Thank you.

**Vladimir Putin:** Regarding the Constitution, this is a live tool that has to keep up with the evolution of society. However, it is my belief that we do not have to change the Constitution, I mean adopt a new one, especially since it sets forth some fundamental principles that we have yet to fully achieve. This refers to its first chapter. I believe this part to be sacrosanct.

All the other provisions can be amended in one way or another. I am aware of the ongoing debates on this subject; I see them and hear them. I understand the logic behind what others propose. This is related to possibly expanding the powers of parliament and changing to some extent the powers of the president and the government. But all this has to be well prepared, result from a meaningful debate within society, and be carried out with extreme caution.

Regarding the past amendments, as far as I know, they were related to the number of terms. What could be done in this respect? We could take out the mention of “consecutive” terms. We have this provision, and yours truly served for two consecutive terms, then left this office and had the constitutional right to once again become president, because this did not interfere with the “two consecutive terms” limit. Some political observers and civil society activists have voiced misgivings over this provision. We can probably remove it.

There are some other questions, but they are more about preferences rather than necessity.

I can once again mention the powers of parliament. I do understand political parties, especially those represented in parliament, that believe that we have reached a level in the development of parliamentarism in Russia when parliament could take on additional functions and assume greater responsibility. All we need is to give this idea serious thought.

As for competition in politics, 54 parties are registered in Russia, and four of them I believe are about to be dissolved. Still, 50 parties is a good number, and 12 of them operate at the federal level. I believe that this meets the standard for political

competition.

**Dmitry Peskov:** We have not yet given the floor to the organisers of the broadcast of this conference – Rossiya-1. Give the microphone to the right sector. Raise your hand and stand up, please, Rossiya-1, now I see you. Go ahead, please.

**Alexander Khristenko:** Good afternoon.

Alexander Khristenko, Rossiya TV channel, VGTRK.

Mr President, our National Welfare Fund is growing, there...

**Vladimir Putin:** Thank God.

**Alexander Khristenko:** There are trillions there, and more is expected next year. But our financial officials always argue, including in this room not so long ago, whether it is better to save or to spend? Do you think that more should be spent, including in order to spur economic growth? And in connection with this, another question: why are we so afraid of inflation?

Thank you.

**Vladimir Putin:** I will start with the end of your question. We are not afraid of inflation, but we believe that it is necessary to target and reduce it, because rising inflation means declining real incomes. We already have issues here that require additional attention, to say the least. So why do we need inflation?

It means price increases, but we do not want price increases. This is one of the fundamental macroeconomic conditions for economic growth. Inflationary expectations undermine the investment process, that is the point. But we have good performance here.

Russia is certainly one of the leaders among emerging markets regarding the state of its financial and budgetary system. According to the latest data, this year's inflation is 3.25 percent; this is a very good indicator for us, and at the beginning of next year it may well come down to 3 percent.

As for the reserve funds and the National Welfare Fund. Yes, it really has almost tripled this year. This is a very good indicator.

To spend or not to spend was your other question. Look, 20 percent of the National Welfare Fund has already made its way to the economy via a variety of tools, including through VEB. Of this 20 percent, 8 percent was spent directly to fund major infrastructure projects, such as the Central Ring Road in Moscow.

Rolling stock is being purchased for Russian Railways, which is good for transport, keeping jobs and developing transport engineering. Finally, the money was used to improve rail traffic on the Baikal-Amur Mainline and the Trans-Siberian Railway. I am aware of the miners' concern about a bottleneck there, but the situation would be really bad if it weren't for the money already invested in eliminating bottlenecks on the Baikal-Amur and Trans-Siberian railways.

Indeed, we are witnessing changes in the coal market, in Europe for example, and we need to ensure the development of the east, so we will go ahead and do this, possibly using the National Welfare Fund.



Last, we made a decision to freeze spending from the National Welfare Fund to allow it to grow to 7 percent of GDP. As a matter of fact, we are already there at 7.3 percent. Technically, this money will only reach the accounts in the summer of 2020, and we will then be able to use it more actively.

Notably, and most importantly, these funds have a higher purpose, to ensure national currency stability, which the fund is effectively doing. It is to a certain extent our safety bag.

As you may be aware, we honoured almost all of our social commitments in 2008 amid the serious international crisis and spent funds from accumulated reserves despite the sharp drop in federal budget revenue. We were able to accomplish this thanks to these reserve funds. Spending money left and right like a farmer sowing seeds oblivious to what could happen if energy prices fall is the easiest thing. But we will not do this, and will instead use the funds in accordance with the decisions adopted earlier.

**Dmitry Peskov:** Let's move this way. Here is Yaroslavl, our colleagues from Yaroslavl. Stand up, please. Please, pass on the microphone there, on the left.

**Arseny Kondratyev:** Good afternoon, Mr President. Arseny Kondratyev, Yaroslavia State Television and Broadcasting Company, Yaroslavl Region.

My question continues Match TV's topic about WADA, but it is not about sports – it's about the development of the regions. Now that our athletes have been banned from participating in international competitions, other big events are under question, and Yaroslavl was the proposed venue for the 2022 Volleyball World Championship.

For Yaroslavl as well as other cities it is a unique opportunity to build new sports facilities and to develop transport and tourism infrastructure. Will we and other cities lose this opportunity now?

**Vladimir Putin:** I do not think so, because WADA did not prohibit the hosting of these events; let's read this more closely: they recommend international federations not to host events. Let's just say, the UEFA European Championship is still happening.

Recently I have had a meeting with the head of this organisation, who said directly: "The tickets are sold out." Who will return them? WADA is not going to reimburse the tickets; this is nonsense. I think that the volleyball championship you mentioned will also take place.

You know, I think that we should calmly wait for the decisions, including the decisions by the Court of Arbitration for Sports, and then we will see where we are. However, Russian athletes have been preparing for all the competitions and will continue to do so. They are brilliant, and they will impress us with their victories many times.

**Dmitry Peskov:** I can see our largest state newspaper, Rossiyskaya Gazeta. Please. Stand up, please, so everyone can see you. Wait, where are they? One moment, I just saw Rossiyskaya Gazeta...

**Vladimir Putin:** While he is choosing...

**Dmitry Peskov:** Just a moment, please. Here we go.

**Vladimir Putin:** While he is choosing, let's have question from CCTV. Go ahead, please.

**Sun Yao:** Good afternoon, Mr President.

I am a correspondent of China's CCTV media corporation. I have two questions.

The first question is about Chinese-Russian relations. This year marks 70 years since the establishment of diplomatic relations between our countries. We can say that our bilateral ties have entered a new era. And my question is this: which results of our partnership do you see as the most significant, and what future cooperation potential do you see between our countries?

The other question is about international affairs. The global situation today is full of uncertainty and instability. Obviously, some countries pursue a policy to maintain a unipolar world and protectionism, undermining the foundations of international law and free trade, while China and Russia are both supporters of a multipolar world. So what steps do you think China and Russia could take to support the original principles of a multipolar system and free trade, and how could they effectively respond to external challenges?

Thank you.

**Vladimir Putin:** The most important thing that we have achieved in recent years, between Russia and the People's Republic of China... The most important thing is not even the figures I will cite in a moment, or the industries in which we cooperate – the most important achievement is the unprecedented level of trust that has developed between our countries.

This is what forms the basis for our accomplishments in the economy (our bilateral trade has topped 100 billion, and we will certainly attain even 200 billion, we will reach that mark), and for our successful high-tech projects – in space exploration, the aircraft industry, and transport in general, and in many other areas.

Russian-Chinese cooperation is undoubtedly a major factor of international stability, including the strengthening of international law and the creation of a multipolar world.

As a matter of fact, it has already been created; a unipolar world no longer exists. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, there was an illusion that this system was possible and that it would last for a long time, but it was only an illusion. I always said so. The most recent events have indicated just that. When you say 'some countries,' you, first of all, mean the United States. The world's multipolarity is a derivative of economic relations.

After World War II, the US share in world GDP was 50 percent. And now China's share is higher than the US's share, I may be mistaken, but China is ahead of the United States in its share of global GDP. And also in many other indicators. In terms of purchasing power parity, the Chinese economy has become larger than the American one.

This inevitably leads to changes in many other areas. And apart from that, the world

simply cannot have a unipolar structure, with a single centre that governs the entire international community.

The role of our interaction with China is very important here. We will continue to strengthen our multilateral strategic ties. I am sure that this will benefit the people of China and the Russian Federation alike.

**Dmitry Peskov:** Rossiyskaya Gazeta, take the floor, please.

**Remark:** The Urals!

**Vladimir Putin:** Wait, wait.

**Remark:** Mr President, the Urals!

**Vladimir Putin:** One moment, keep it down, please. Come to the meeting then.

**Remark:** Please give money for schools and the metro.

**Vladimir Putin:** Alright, I understand.

**Kira Latukhina:** Kira Latukhina, Rossiyskaya Gazeta.

I would like to return to the issue of our Victory in the Great Patriotic War. Next year we will celebrate the anniversary – the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary, the Year of Memory and Glory. But at the same time, in September this year, the European Parliament adopted a resolution stating that Nazism and fascism are equated with the Soviet regime, having timed it with the anniversary of the outbreak of World War II. They are calling it totalitarianism and suggesting introducing a new international holiday to celebrate the day of heroes of the fight against totalitarianism on May 25. What do you think about it? What is your opinion?

**Vladimir Putin:** There is nothing good about totalitarianism, it is worthy of condemnation, without any doubt.

I know about the European Parliament's decision. I consider it absolutely unacceptable and wrong, because you can condemn Stalinism and totalitarianism as a whole, and in some ways these will be well-deserved reproaches. Our people were the biggest victims of totalitarianism. We condemned it and the personality cult and so on.

But to equate the Soviet Union or to put the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany on one level is incredible cynicism. This means that people do not know history; they cannot read or write. Let them read the documents of that time, let them see how the so-called Munich Agreement was signed in 1938, when the heads of the leading countries – France, Great Britain – signed an agreement with Hitler on the partition of Czechoslovakia.

How did Poland behave in this situation, which, as one diplomat wrote at the time, “did everything possible to participate in the partition of Czechoslovakia?” How did the Soviet Union behave then, proposing to all participants in international life to create a united anti-Nazi front?

And how, by not creating it, they were really trying to push Hitler to aggression to the East, not realising then that Nazi Germany was interested not in Polish-

German relations, but in expanding their living space to the East, that is, war against the Soviet Union.

You see, I mean to write an article about this event. I will definitely have it published because I asked my colleagues to select archive materials for me. When I read some of them, everything becomes clear: everything in the process of appeasing Hitler is sorted out by year, month, and almost by day.

Stalin did not stain himself with direct contact with Hitler whereas the French and British leaders met with him and signed some documents. Yes the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact and the secret protocols to it were signed.

Is it good or bad? I draw your attention to this – it is crucial – that the Soviet Union was the last country in Europe to sign a non-aggression pact with Germany. All the others had signed it earlier. And what was the Soviet Union supposed to do? Face it alone?

Yes, they say there were secret protocols, the division of Poland. Poland itself joined in dividing Czechoslovakia. It entered two regions – Tesin and another one. And that's it. Poland took them over. They in fact gave an ultimatum and set up an entire group for the aggression. But it was not needed because Czechoslovakia surrendered under pressure and gave those territories away. But the Poles did the same.

By the way, yes, Soviet troops entered Poland under the protocols. I draw your attention to the following circumstance: the troops did enter but only after the Polish government lost control over their armed forces and over the developments in Poland while the government itself was somewhere near the Polish-Romanian border. There was no one to talk to about it. Do you see this?

Moreover, we talk about the heroic defenders of the Brest Fortress. Nazi troops captured Brest-Litovsk and then just abandoned it, and the Red Army moved in. Do you understand this or not? This is what I want to ask all those who adopt such resolutions in the European Parliament.

That means the Red Army did not invade those territories in Poland. German troops entered them and then left, and after that the Soviet troops entered. Does this mean anything? So I will definitely let you know about that. By the way, we are holding a CIS format meeting tomorrow, and I want to show my CIS colleagues some of our archival documents. Anyone interested is welcome to come and listen.

**Dmitry Peskov:** You know, I saw the upper part of the central sector: Irkutsk.

**Yekaterina Machavariani:** Yekaterina Machavariani, the Krasnaya Liniya TV channel.

Mr President, my question is not about Irkutsk, but about former Irkutsk Region Governor Sergei Levchenko, whose resignation you recently accepted.

Our correspondents have been in the region, in particular, in Tulun, since August, and they see a slightly different picture than the one shown by the federal media. And the figures achieved by Sergei Levchenko speak for themselves.

He is the only governor who managed to double the budget over three years

and increase the speed of social housing construction six-fold and of the region's economic development by six percent, which is higher than the world average.

Speaking about relief efforts following the floods, even your Plenipotentiary Envoy to the Siberian Federal District Sergei Menyailo praised their speed: today 98 percent of the victims have received either housing or housing certificates. There are only 46 people at the temporary housing centre, and almost all of them have housing certificates.

My question is why you accepted the resignation of such an effective governor? Is Tulun the real reason or is there something else? Thank you.

**Vladimir Putin:** Listen, if you are hinting at his membership of the Communist Party, let me assure you that this has nothing to do with it. There are representatives of the Communist Party and other parties, including the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia, who won the elections and work as governors in other regions, too. This does not matter to me. The main thing is that the governor's work is effective.

You have mentioned some figures. But I have different figures, which say that there are still many problems in Irkutsk. This is the first point.

Second, I cannot say that Governor Levchenko was bad at what he did. No. But the situation there was too difficult to work slowly, and the elections were approaching. I did not accept these resignations straight away; I looked into them. You said that everyone has housing. Is that really so? Winter has come. This is the second point.

Third, you may have noted what people said when I was there. Including "Send us different people." I took my time and watched how the situation was developing.

So there are many problems there. You know, I do not want to throw stones at someone who has already left. Of course, he was working hard, especially in the beginning. But these conditions require a specialist who can work on the tasks that need addressing.

I believe the person we have chosen, a deputy emergencies minister, will resolve this challenge, especially with the support of the federal centre, which is allocating a lot of money for this.

**Dmitry Peskov:** We have undeservingly overlooked RBK.

RBK, please.

**Polina Khimshashvili:** Good afternoon. Polina Khimshashvili, RBK.

You mentioned your meeting tomorrow: you will meet with the President of Belarus. Tell me please, what do you think the Union State should be like? What should be shared in politics and in the economy? What specifically does Alexander Lukashenko dislike in your proposals? And if Belarus insists that gas prices should be the same as in Russia, does this mean that with the gas issue we can have a single state and in other issues we cannot?

And another question on the same subject. Many people are focusing on the year 2024 and think that hypothetically you will be able to head the Union State.

And, as a follow-up to my colleague's question about Ivan Golunov: maybe you have been told who ordered the planting of drugs on him? Thank you.

**Vladimir Putin:** So far I do not have any information on who ordered that, just to answer this part of your question.

As for our relations with Belarus and energy resource prices: first, I think the decisions made to form the Union State were correct. The Russian and Belarussian peoples are, in my opinion, the same as the Ukrainian and Russian peoples; it is almost the same thing in terms of ethnicity and our history and spirituality. This is why I am very happy that we have such rapprochement with Belarus.

And we have achieved certain goals here, especially in the social area. However, the decisions taken on the creation of the Union State, the majority of the basic decisions have yet to be implemented. About 90 percent of each issue have not been done yet. Please read what is written there, this is not a classified document; there is almost nothing there.

A lot has been done already within the framework of the Eurasian Economic Union, and in some respects economic integration in the EAEU is more comprehensive than in the Union State. This is why I, and Alexander Lukashenko, decided to return to this and see what should be done to expedite the development of the Union State.

We have taken the relevant decisions in the EAEU on energy resources: to fulfil certain decisions, including establishing a common energy market and on oil and gas issues, by 2024. Indeed, we sell everything to Belarus duty free. This is the first thing.

Secondly, with regard to our energy exports, including gas to Europe and Belarus. Firstly, Belarus pays the lowest prices that are even possible for our foreign partners. Let me remind you that they pay \$127 per 1,000 cubic metres. We sell to Europe for \$200. So Gazprom's profitability from sales to Europe and Belarus differs – do you know by how much? Four times. In Russia, the weighted average price of gas is \$70 per 1,000 cubic metres – \$70 is the weighted average, with \$75 for industry and \$62 for retail consumers.

Furthermore, the longer the distance from the production sites, the more we subsidise this price. Smolensk is located in a zone where subsidies are the highest. Smolensk consumes approximately 2 billion. We sell 20 billion to Belarus. And if we subsidise the entire Belarusian economy, it means that we, Russia, are subsidising a primary energy carrier such as natural gas for a whole country. But this, you see, sounds like a very strange idea. That Russia should subsidise another country as much as its most subsidised region – Smolensk. This would be just strange.

Is this even possible or not? It is. But what do we need for this? To do this, we would need general rules such as laws, including taxation laws, laws on the subsidy policy, and on support of certain industries through budgets of different levels. To do this, we would also need common supranational bodies – control and issuance bodies. Common rules should be applied in the field of antitrust policy, and maybe a common body would be needed. This is a huge job, and it can be done and realised only if there is political will and interest on both sides. Incidentally, we have such an interest. We are discussing this with our Belarusian partners, and we are making significant progress on that. But how far we will go is not yet clear. So it would be a mistake, on our part, to jump the gun and begin to subsidise Belarus. We are not ready to do

so, given the unresolved issues in building this Union.

As you know, we also sell oil duty free, which entails a large shortfall for the Russian budget. We are now reconfiguring our tax system in this field, and gradually increasing the severance tax (mineral extraction tax) simultaneously reducing the export customs duties. Due to these changes, Belarus is indeed losing the premium it had from the zero customs duties and the subsequent export of oil products. This is our domestic policy.

This has nothing to do with Belarus. It depends on a number of other circumstances – the Government of the Russian Federation, the Ministry of Finance, and the Ministry of Energy consider it better for us to regulate the industry differently, in a different way, bearing in mind our budget losses arising from the activities of economic operators within the country. But we understand all these problems, and are conducting a dialogue with our colleagues and we will continue doing so.

Allow me to remind you that we support our Belarusian friends through so many channels. Belarus has received about \$7 billion or so in loans alone, as far as I know. And we will continue to do this. But all this should be done through dialogue, and we are ready for this dialogue, and we are ready to open our market further. You know that Russia accounts for almost 90 percent of all agricultural exports from Belarus. And so on and so forth. This is just routine work; in fact, we are working very smoothly, doing balanced work in this area.

I repeat once again, we are close to agreement on some matters; on others, agreements have not been reached yet. We will continue working.

**Dmitry Peskov:** Let us move away from our European borders. I see Magadan over there. Go ahead, Magadan. Please stand up and introduce yourself.

*(Remark from the audience.)*

**Vladimir Putin:** Thank you very much.

**Dmitry Peskov:** Thank you. And now Magadan, please.

**Olga Burlya:** Good afternoon, I am Olga Burlya, Kolyma Plus regional TV company, Magadan. Thank you from Kolyma residents, Mr President, for your support for the Far East and care for the Magadan Region, in particular.

Let me go back to the Far East mortgage. Our colleagues from Omsk may have it, too, whereas the programme has already been launched in the Far Eastern Federal District, we already have the first borrowers. It is an excellent initiative with an attractive interest rate of two percent.

But could it happen that the banks start toughening the conditions and requirements for such unprofitable and inconvenient clients? We already know that problems can arise when using the maternity capital to make mortgage payments. Families with children are refused mortgages by large banks.

What are the guarantees for potential participants in such state-support programmes? Thank you.

**Vladimir Putin:** Banks do not refuse to use maternity capital for resolving mortgage issues. It is just that the procedures for receiving the money are too

complicated and create problems for people. You are absolutely right here. The situation undoubtedly must change. We have to cut the number of days needed to transfer the maternity capital as the down payment or as a mortgage payment and so on.

In general, such decisions are being made now, the number of days will be halved. But, as some of my colleagues think, this is also not enough. What do we need to do here? We have to expand the use of the so-called electronic turnover so that the relations between the bank's client and the Pension Fund, which channels the maternity capital, and respective developers should not involve a person. Thus a person can just submit an application, and the banks will immediately take matters up with the Pension Fund regarding how much money and when they will receive. In this case, it can be done within one day, and we can and must do it. We discussed it quite recently with my colleagues, and we will do that.

Concerning the two percent mortgage interest rate for the Far East. Why should banks refuse? We subsidise that from the federal budget. This interest rate will not bring any losses to them; on the contrary, it is a state guarantee. So I do not expect any problems here. However, we will be monitoring the practice, the implementation of these measures.

**Dmitry Peskov:** Here are our colleagues from the foreign media. Introduce yourself, please.

**Christian Esch:** Good afternoon, Mr President!

My name is Christian Esch, I head Spiegel magazine's Moscow office.

I have a question that concerns a matter that worries and annoys Germany, the murder of a citizen of Georgia of Chechen ethnicity, Zelimkhan Khangoshvili. The information coming from Moscow and Berlin is decidedly different.

Therefore, I wanted to ask you, first, about the killer. Germany says it did not receive proper information from Russia. It turned out that this person was identical to a person who had already been in prison in Russia. So there must be information about him.

The second question concerns the murder victim. You mentioned in Paris at a news conference following the Normandy meeting that Russia repeatedly asked for the extradition of this person. The German foreign minister recently confirmed that there have been no requests neither from Russia's Interior Ministry nor through other channels. So who is right, you or him?

**Vladimir Putin:** Both of us, because these issues have been discussed at the special services level more than once. Indeed, there was no official request from the prosecutor's office, because our authorities believed that doing so would be pointless, since they received a negative answer.

Once again, I will repeat what I said at the news conference in Paris. He was an absolute bloody killer. He killed 98 people, just think about that, 98 people in the Caucasus in one day. Many countries declare national mourning with many fewer deaths. He participated in bombings in the Moscow Metro. And the list of his crimes goes on. Indeed, we have repeatedly raised this issue at the special services level.



With regard to cooperation, I believe the main thing we should understand about this is that cooperation should be full and it should be a two-way street.

In Syria, we are witnessing developments in the camps and prisons where ISIS militants are held. Natives of Central Asia account for most of the foreigners there, followed by Russia. But there are many immigrants from Western Europe as well, including France and the Federal Republic of Germany.

We see that the people you just mentioned – terrorists and murderers – walk freely around European capitals. As far as I know, he was killed in central Berlin. Picture such a person strolling down the streets of a European capital. Would you like the prisoners from these camps to come to you? Will you also let them walk freely around your cities?

To avoid this, we must establish joint and highly effective work. This is what we are calling for. We hope it will be like that eventually. This does not mean that such work does not exist. It does. But its scope and nature are still insufficient.

Incidentally, at some point, we warned the Americans about the Tsarnaev brothers, or whatever their name is. We told them directly. First, we asked to extradite them, as well, and then told the Americans that they were a threat. They ignored us. The brothers then committed a notorious terrorist attack during the Boston marathon, and people died. Do you see my point? And you have bandits like that walking around Berlin.

**Dmitry Peskov:** Introduce yourself, please.

**Svetlana Drobysheva:** Svetlana Drobysheva, Editor-in-Chief of the *School, Gymnasium, Lyceum* magazine and author and former employee of *Ogonyok*, *Rossiyskaya Gazeta* under the name Seregina, and even *Pravda*. I have worked everywhere, even in *Tribuna*. I have taken off my glasses, because I had lost the hope that I would get the floor.

Mr President, first of all, I would like to present to you a copy of the October 2000 edition of *Ogonyok* magazine, with my address to you. It is titled *Where is the Monument to the Teacher?* It is for the public and for you as the newly elected President.

First, thank you for your quick response. The monument was erected in the capital of Dagestan; my mother was an innovative teacher who gave 49 years of her life to teaching. I would like to be brief, but I have two questions about the war, for Victory Day.

**Dmitry Peskov:** Let us show consideration for our colleagues. Go ahead, please.

**Svetlana Drobysheva:** Yes, well, if I may, I will ask for your help to present my gift and ask all the questions I have.

I would like to ask you to pardon the person who erected this monument back in 2006. It is called Monument to a Russian Teacher, and it is 25 metres high. The man is Said Amirov, he is in prison now. According to numerous data, he was falsely accused. This is the first amnesty.

I have a second name here; it is the former head of Fryazino.

There are two questions regarding the spring of 1945. Perhaps we will touch upon May 9, the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Victory, and what awaits us.

First, I want to ask you, Mr President, to award the status of the Hero of Russia to Sofya Arakcheyeva, a scout of the Znamensky squad who was tortured to death in Orel Region in February 1942. I believe Sergei Mironov asked you about this.

Secondly, to immortalise her memory in films, music and television. Newspapers wrote about this a lot, thank you all. Thanks to Potomsky, former Governor of Orel Region, who erected a monument to Sofya Arakcheyeva in Orel Region.

If possible, I would like to ask for five or seven passes to the Victory Parade for those who collected signatures, such as teacher Israilov and Deputy Governor of Tambov Region: all the signatures were collected in 2013 for you.

And my second question. I will not take much time...

**Dmitry Peskov:** You know, I am sorry, but you have already done this.

**Svetlana Drobysheva:** Thank you. I am sorry.

**Dmitry Peskov:** Respect you colleagues. Thank you.

**Vladimir Putin:** Speaking about the Heroes of Russia, I have to look into this; I do not have the materials at the moment. I will ask my colleagues to take your materials and look into the archives.

As for a pardon for Amirov, yes, I receive a lot of requests and I will look into this. But there is a court ruling, and his crimes were proven during the trial; in any case, there is no doubt. The pardon is a different thing, which is done on different grounds. I know about this and we will think about it.

**Svetlana Drobysheva:** *(without microphone.)*

**Vladimir Putin:** Do you want a dialogue or my answer? Let us see. Give us the materials, please.

As for your request about the Parade, please tell us who you want to bring and it will be our pleasure to work on this.

**Dmitry Peskov:** Good. Thank you.

We have Channel Five; I think I saw them here. Where is Channel Five? Raise your hand, please. No need to shout. Left side, Mr President, Channel Five, St Petersburg.

**Yevgeny Gusev:** Good afternoon, Mr President.

My name is Yevgeny Gusev. I represent the *Izvestia* multimedia information centre and Channel Five.

My question concerns sanctions and political pressure from the European Union. Here is one telling fact. Latvia recently banned several Russian channels, including Channel Five. The situation is very unpleasant. To be honest, our colleagues in Estonia are involved in a conflict now, and in other countries as well.

The situation has not improved of late, if anything, it has worsened. We can see this in the attitude towards Russia in the European Union. Do you think it can change for the better, especially since we all understand that these sanctions are pointless? And how much does this pressure affect Russia, and what impact will it have in the future?

Thank you.

**Vladimir Putin:** We have repeatedly discussed this topic. There are various assessments of the consequences of these sanctions for all participants in this unpleasant process, but they all boil down to the same thing. For the European Union, the losses amount to some of 50 billion euros. I do not remember exactly, but I believe the World Bank estimated around \$50 billion; for Germany, I believe, the losses amount to about 75 billion a month or so.

These are major losses. This is not just about money, some abstract sums. This is about jobs, the loss of markets, including the Russian market. Other participants in international economic relations are coming to our market.

We actually support a full normalisation, especially since none of that really works effectively. Indeed, this policy causes us problems, but there are benefits, too, and they are also obvious. One of them is the development of agriculture, a leap in development: 24 billion in export revenue – this is simply unbelievable! No one would have believed this a few years ago. We spent a lot of money, trillions if we add up all sources, on import substitution, but we used it well. Just look at the result.

For example, Russia has never had its own helicopter engine industry. We have one now. We have built facilities, including the plant in St Petersburg – above all in St Petersburg. We did not make ship engines; there was simply no such industry in Russia. It is a whole separate industry now. We have it now, a next-generation industry, operating effectively. We have launched an entire industry, with its science base, school, and production. In the field of defence, we have made great strides. There is still work to do, but the breakthrough is very noticeable, obvious even.

Therefore, it would be better, of course, to eliminate politically motivated restrictions in economic activities. They result in huge damage to world trade and the global economy. There are analyses of this. Say, the US imposes restrictions on China – in reality they are also actually sanctions – this affects the overall world economy, and world trade levels promptly drop.

If this continues, trade will continue dropping. But there seems to be some progress, thank God, in their relations. We can also be harmed by this, because it affects us, it affects the demand for our major export commodities, etc.

So there is nothing good about this. But our economy – I can say this with full responsibility – has been able to adapt to external shock, while our national currency has actually become much more stable even with possible fuel price fluctuations. In this respect, our economy and our national currency are somewhat “detached” from world oil markets.

The defence industry. Go ahead, young lady, with what you have on the defence industry.

**Lidia Novoseltseva:** Good afternoon, Mr President.

My name is Lidia Novoseltseva, I am from Rostov Region.

Defence industry companies have been successfully operating in our region since Soviet times. The latest advances in military science and in the defence industry are quite capable of technological breakthroughs. Can you tell us if there are measures under consideration...

I am sorry, I am very nervous.

**Vladimir Putin:** It is OK.

**Lidia Novoseltseva:** Are there additional short-term measures under consideration for the support and development of defence industry competitiveness?

And a wish, if I may. Next year is full of anniversaries, including the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Great Victory, and the 450<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Cossacks' allegiance to the Russian state. The city of Novocherkassk in Rostov Region will host the World Cossack Congress. You have always supported Rostov Region and the Cossacks. We would like to invite you to the event.

Thank you.

**Vladimir Putin:** Thank you for the invitation. This is very interesting. I will look into my schedule.

Regarding the defence industry and the developments there, first, the key is that we have not only maintained it but it is also progressing at a very fast and strong pace with the latest scientific and technological developments.

The first thing we did in this area was upgrade the manufacturing base. We allocated huge funds, I think it was 3 trillion rubles, to upgrade this industry. And we actually created cutting-edge weapons systems on this base using new design. We accomplished this expeditiously and consistently. And we have achieved positive results, as life and experience show.

One of the key issues now is the debt burden in the defence industry. I am not going to scare you with the numbers, but they are significant. It is a matter of billions of rubles. The Government, the Central Bank, all the shareholders in the process, including the defence industry companies and the government officials in charge, are now working to untangle this knot. There are feasible market solutions. I will not get ahead of myself.

Just a few days ago, I had another meeting with my colleagues on this issue, and I instructed them to draft the final version of the solution within a week. These are big issues for the people working in the defence industry, and for the overall economy, because the defence industry is to a certain degree a hi-tech industry driver. We will continue to develop it.

**Dmitry Peskov:** In the middle – Gazeta.Ru. The first row. Please, pass the microphone.

**Margarita Gerasyukova:** Good afternoon, Mr President.

I am Margarita Gerasyukova, from Gazeta.Ru.

This past May you said if anyone can establish a monopoly in artificial intelligence – the results will be clear – that person would rule the world. Can you describe Russia's position today in the race for the development of artificial intelligence technologies? Where are we now – are we competitive or are we catching up? And in which future or maybe already achieved projects can the average Russian see the application of artificial intelligence technology?

Thank you.

**Vladimir Putin:** The average person can already see applications in banking, for example. Sberbank is active in applying digital technologies in its customer relations and it has a practical application.

In general, we have serious competitive advantages here too. I mean an advanced mathematics school and everything related to it: digital technologies based on mathematics. We have just discussed, your colleague asked and I answered, the use of maternal capital. If we develop these technologies, we will have fewer technical problems like this.

The modern concept of artificial intelligence is still being developed. There are several definitions of artificial intelligence and the highest is a spontaneously developing, so-called “thinking” intelligence.

We have made progress in some areas, and in some, we have not done enough. But there are some obvious things: apart from banking, there are, say, unmanned aircraft and autonomous vehicles. Our Yandex and KAMAZ vehicles have already logged over a million kilometers.

Yes, so far this is being done on a limited basis; yes, so far it is not being applied comprehensively in everyday life. However, these are the first steps, without which development is simply not possible. These are technologies that can be used in almost every area of manufacturing and life.

We believe, and I continue to believe that the most important question for our long-term development is the question of national security and the survival of the Russian state in general. This is because the capabilities of artificial intelligence will influence both defence and the pace of economic development.

We have drawn up a programme and created a special pool of potentially interested investors and participants in this process. Each has received an assignment, each knows what to do. There is a national project in this area and the resources for it have been allocated. Therefore, this is one of the most important of our development areas. I am not even talking about the obvious things related to the quality of manufacturing and labour productivity.

This is especially important for us, given our huge territory and relatively small population – 146 million; if we do not move in this direction, we will not be able even to guard our territory properly. This is the point. These are absolutely substantive things. This is one of the key areas of our development.

**Dmitry Peskov:** Perhaps let us get back to the foreign media. Turkey, Anadolu Agency, please.

**Ali Cura:** Thank you. Ali Jura, Anadolu Agency.

Russia has stressed many times that it supports the legitimate government, in particular, in Syria and other countries where a crisis situation remains. There is also a crisis in Libya. There is a legitimate government recognised by the international community there. The Western media say that Russia supports the so-called Libyan National Army, that Russian mercenaries support them.

Would you comment on this? Will you discuss this with President Erdogan, including the Syrian topic? What else will you discuss? Thank you.

**Vladimir Putin:** Do you believe what is written in the Western media? Read what they write about Turkey and you will change your mind.

Seriously speaking, of course, we are aware of the situation. We know that various countries have relations with both sides in the conflict, and the levels of relations are different.

Russia actually maintains contacts with al-Sarraj's government and stays in touch with Marshal Haftar. We have a constant dialogue with our partners, including those in Turkey, Europe, and other countries. We understand that this is a very acute issue.

You also know very well who drove the country to this state. Russia was against using military force in Libya, and the UN Security Council Resolution on this prohibited former President of Libya Muammar al-Gaddafi from using the aviation against the opposition, which was armed, by the way. Instead, the Western coalition started using its air force against Libya, perverting the UN Security Council Resolution. As a result of this, a prospering country whose quality of life was close to some European standards is now in ruins, in chaos, torn by an unending civil war. It is very difficult to determine who is right and who is wrong.

In fact, the Russian authorities are in touch with al-Sarraj and Haftar, as I have said. We think that the best solution for all the parties to the conflict would be one that would allow them to end the hostilities and come to an agreement on who, how and on what terms will run the country. I believe that Libya is interested in this.

This is what we will definitely discuss with our partners in Europe. I have just talked about this in a telephone conversation with the German chancellor and the President of France. President Erdogan and I have also discussed this. A Turkish delegation will arrive in Moscow in the next few days for a working visit, and their agenda will include this issue. I hope we will find solutions that will be accepted by Libya and the Libyan people, and I hope that together with Special Representative of the Secretary-General Ghassan Salame we will find the final solution.

**Dmitry Peskov:** PRIME Agency, they have the smallest sign.

**Maria Balyuk:** Maria Balyuk, PRIME Agency.

Mr President, my question is: why does the state change the pension system rules every several years, and why has it been freezing the pension contributions of citizens for several years? Maybe it is worth consolidating long-term rules that will not change anymore and that will support citizens' trust in the pension system? And is it true that a new pension reform is coming?

**Vladimir Putin:** As for the pension system, all the decisions have been made and written into law, and no changes will be made there. No new pension reform is

being developed or even discussed in the Government, the Executive Office or anywhere.

Certain proposals of the Finance Ministry in this area apply only to [pension] savings, which in fact can be considered investments. We are simply speaking about their protection.

**Dmitry Peskov:** You know, we have not yet given the floor to NTV. He has almost lost hope. You do not have to introduce yourself.

**Vladimir Kondratyev:** Thank you.

Mr President, I have a question on domestic policy. The demographic situation, as we know, was complicated this year, as well as last year, but this year we see a record negative result. This is connected, of course, primarily with the 1990s, with the low birth rate. But is it now necessary to make up for the population decline with an influx of immigrants from the former Soviet republics, especially from the southern republics? This does not please a significant part of Russians.

And how will the current Demography national project help here? Or maybe the state has other effective measures, for example, simplifying or, perhaps, easing legislation on granting citizenship to Russian-speaking compatriots?

**Vladimir Putin:** In my opinion, much more can be done concerning migration.

There are only two approaches (in the world and in general) to solving the demographic problem in the world. They are an increase in the birth rate, natural population growth, and immigration. In Canada, for example, a whole ministry deals with immigration, if I am not mistaken. But what do they do? They do not just accept everyone; they accept people of a certain age, with a certain health status and level of education. In fact, we also need to approach migration in this way.

Of course, it is easier for people who know and respect Russian culture and who speak Russian to adapt to the situation in Russia. This is why it is easier, for example, for Belarusians, Ukrainians and Moldovans, because it is simpler for them. And the locals take it easier. There are 3 million Ukrainians living in Russia, and almost the same number came after the tragic events in Donbass.

It is more difficult to adapt for those who come, for example, from Central Asia. What can we do? We have to introduce our education systems, open Russian language courses, Russian schools and university branches, so that those who come here feel more comfortable and do not irritate the locals, which can happen when they see disrespect for our culture and history. This is not only true for those who come from Central Asia but also for domestic migrants, for example, from the North Caucasus.

We were talking about Chechnya or any other republic, Daghestan, for example. Some people behave in a way they never would at home. This can be irritating, but it does not mean we should ban people from moving around. The economy requires an influx of immigrants, and the lack of qualified people in the labour market is an objective factor that holds the economy back today.

We must do this smartly, systematically. It is simply necessary that the people in the Russian regions work there, so that people who move from one Russian region to another feel comfortable and at the same time respect local traditions, laws

and rules. I believe this can be done and must be done, if approached systematically.

**Dmitry Peskov:** We have been working for two and a half hours now.

Let us give Crimea a chance to ask a question. Please stand up. Stand up and raise your hand. No, not you. Yes, you, young lady, please, go ahead.

**Irina Ivanchenko:** Mr President,

First, Crimeans are expecting to see you next week in Crimea, where, we hear, you will be opening a railway across the Crimean Bridge.

**Vladimir Putin:** That is right.

**Irina Ivanchenko:** My question is about ill children. I am one of those Russians who start their mornings by sending out text messages collecting money for sick children's treatments. I cannot sit back and watch the televised reports, they tear up my heart and soul, and it is impossible to live and breathe after watching them.

Please tell me whether it is possible to have Russian children treated and rehabilitated free of charge, without any preliminary conditions or benefits? Thank you.

**Vladimir Putin:** First of all, you are aware that healthcare is free in our country, just like education. There are segments covered by privately owned healthcare institutions. Therefore, we are talking about the need for significant changes in primary care, since people should be able to receive medical assistance free of charge. This applies to everyone, including children, especially children. This is what happens in the vast majority of cases. By the way, I already mentioned that we had significantly reduced child mortality. This is one way to resolve demographic problems.

I will get back to your question, as I have something to add to my answer.

You mentioned 1999. Look what happened then. I have already mentioned it many times, and the demographers are well aware of it. We had two major demographic troughs. It is a horrible thing to say, but the total birth rate stood at 1.1 in 1943–1944 and 1999, as if there was a war, the same rate. A major decline, indeed. We are now haunted by this. Every 20 years, a thin generation of those born in these years enters adulthood, the childbearing age, but by definition, there are few of them, both men and women.

Men do not give birth to children, women do. Therefore, I want to share the latest data with you. The number of women aged 20 to 29 has decreased by 4.5 million over the past few years. These are objective numbers. What we need to do is strive to ensure that the birth rate increases through second and third births, etc. We must create proper conditions for people with children, as their lives are not easy.

If there are more questions on this, I am ready to answer them. We have planned a system of measures to support families with the first child, and maternity capital – we have extended the legitimate uses of maternity capital – and made changes to the entitlement criteria for receiving child benefits. Before, it was one and a half minimum subsistence baskets per family member to be entitled to the benefit; now we have expanded to two minimum wages. This will dramatically increase the number



of recipients of this benefit. And there is a package of benefits. But still, we are looking at what else can be done. As you know, we have made a decision on mortgages. If a third child is born, the state immediately gives 450,000 rubles so the family can apply for a mortgage.

We added some regions that previously were not included in this support for families with children, in the Urals and Siberia (answering questions from our colleagues from Siberia). Now, there too, people can receive additional support.

I know this is not enough; we need to generally increase living standards, on the whole, to achieve growth in wages and people's real incomes. The general sentiment, family planning and broader planning horizons will depend on the economy.

Of course, we need to make sure that children are treated with special concern, and we are trying to do just that. With medicines, for example, we have separated children's pharmaceuticals into a special category (which was not the case before). But this is far from the only thing we have done.

As for charitable activities such as crowdfunding calls on our leading channels, projects to help specific children – these calls and projects cannot be prohibited. Helping even one or two children matters. If this saves at least one life – it is great, and God will bless you when you appear before Him; it will be good. Yet, these activities change little in the bigger picture. What needs to be done is to improve children's healthcare and bring it to a higher level; this is true.

**Dmitry Peskov:** I see Life News over there.

**Vladimir Putin:** Hold on. *Domestic violence*. Do you want to ask about the law?

**Dmitry Peskov:** Go ahead. The third row in the centre.

**Elina Zhgutova:** Good afternoon. Mr President, Mr Peskov and the world watching us now.

It turns out that we do not have any problems more pressing today than domestic violence. The Federation Council drafted a law it posted on its official site.

And the Federation Council got more messages from citizens than it gets in one year. The Russian Orthodox Church is opposed to the draft law, but families with many children sign along. The LGBT community, feminist organisations and even the sex workers' trade union are collecting signatures to support this law.

You said now that our demographics, the demography curve went into a tailspin ...

**Vladimir Putin:** It is not a tailspin, but a predicted decline, an obvious trend.

**Elina Zhgutova:** We nevertheless say that we must somehow resolve demographic issues. However, this law contains provisions that allow officials to enter any family. That is, there is a certain number of scoundrels and sadists, but forgive me, we are being fed deliberately overblown numbers. I personally on behalf of my news agency sent an enquiry to the Interior Ministry's Main Information and Analysis Centre and I was given the numbers that are totally at odds with what we are being fed by that infamous Anna Centre which is one of the main ...

**Vladimir Putin:** Your question.

**Elina Zhgutova:** Your opinion. Have you read the text and do you think it will be the last nail in the coffin of our demographics? It actually contains provisions for total control over the family.

The question is, what is your opinion? Have you read the draft law because it is the biggest... A poll conducted by the Federation Council shows that the majority of the 11,000 people polled are against it whereas VTSIOM states that 70 percent of citizens support it. However, the latter poll does not imply that the respondents read the draft law whereas the Federation Council poll presupposes it. People do not breed in captivity, we all know that.

**Vladimir Putin:** They do not breed in captivity, that is true.

**Elina Zhgutova:** I called it juvenile justice for adults.

**Vladimir Putin:** They do breed in captivity— babies are born in prison and in correctional facilities. But it does not matter. So you want my opinion, don't you?

I have not read the draft law but Valentina Matviyenko briefed me in detail. What do I think about this matter? I have mixed feelings. One cannot be forced to love, first and foremost.

In the past people turned to their trade unions or party committees and demanded that these organisations bring order to families, rein in a spouse, mostly men, of course. But I am not aware if all that had any positive effect. But what I resolutely oppose is any violence, including in families, and of course, against children and women.

This is not just a sign of a very low level of general culture when a stronger person starts pushing for their rights with fists and crude physical violence. There is nothing good in it. Actually, a number of felonies and misdemeanours can be prosecuted by applying the existing legislative provisions, including hooliganism, battery and grave bodily harm. All that is provided for in the current legislation.

But indeed, you are right in saying that the overwhelming majority, over 70 percent of people support this law. I really do not understand if they support this law or they are opposed to violence.

**Elina Zhgutova:** Of course, exactly.

**Vladimir Putin:** I am also opposed to violence, just like those 70 plus percent of our citizens. Do we need this law? Let us discuss it reasonably, in public; it must go through this sort of a check. We must understand what is written in each of its articles, try to predict the results that would emerge after the adoption and application of the law, and then take the final decision.

**Dmitry Peskov:** Life News, the right side of the section.

**Alexander Yunashev:** Mr President, good afternoon.

On December 31, half the country, those who do not work shifts, do not work anyway but only pretend to be working. Perhaps it is time to make this a day off, for example,

instead of a workday on Saturday? We will have time to prepare for the holiday, and our wives will thank you, perhaps like your future wife. A year ago, you said that you are a good man and will marry sometime. And you are a good man.

**Vladimir Putin:** You know, it would be better if your wives thank you. It will strengthen your family. Family is part of society.

Regarding a day off on December 31, I think this is of course logical. I completely agree with your reasoning. This is obvious. But I am not sure this should be done right now, impulsively, on the eve of the New Year.

Some employers have already announced that December 31 is not a workday. In fact, I cannot but welcome this, if they find it possible. Can we switch some non-work days for December 31? It is possible. We need to analyse everything and see if it affects the people who work in their gardens so we do not take an additional day away from them in May, when everyone is at their dachas. This can be solved as a matter of course. We will think about it.

**Dmitry Peskov:** Let us hear from RT. We have forgotten about them.

**Ilya Petrenko:** Mr President, Mr Peskov, colleagues,

Hello to everyone. I am Ilya Petrenko from RT. Thank you for this chance to ask a question.

RT has a new social project, which is called *Not Face to Face*, where my colleagues help solve topical problems in Russia. I can say that recently we have had a lot of stories related to the crisis and the lack of vital medicines.

The Health Ministry cannot agree with the purchasers on pricing, but it tries to reassure people saying that there are analogues, that everything is fine. However, we are really into these stories, and it turns out that not everything is fine; the analogues are often not of the same quality and people desperately search for medicines on the internet. This problem exists with various medicines; I can name two, Prednisolone and Frisium.

By the way, regarding Frisium, it looks like the problem has been dealt with in a hands-on manner. However, this medicine still has problems with registration. Another medicine – Fortum – is next in line. Problems are cropping up with this as well, and the list goes on.

**Vladimir Putin:** We do not need an endless list. The New Year is fast approaching.

**Ilya Petrenko:** Maybe this is good because, as you know, when people hear you, they begin to deal with problems quickly after the news conference as they are haunted by your menacing look. But this is not the most important thing; most importantly, we need a system-wide solution. Here is my question. Do you have a system-wide solution to this problem?

Thank you.

**Vladimir Putin:** The government has come up with a number of solutions, which are being implemented. One of them, which they themselves believe is very important, is about registering new prices for medicines during an auction. This change should be implemented soon. This decision has already been made.

I mentioned children's medicines, and children's prescription drugs have been put on that list for the first time as well.

With regard to rare orphan diseases that require a high degree of subsidising, they are the most expensive, and some of them are purchased through official channels and some are not. But, of course, we should not deprive people of the opportunity to use these medicines, and they need to be registered.

We must not forget about developing our own pharmaceutical industry. Notably, the Soviet Union was buying medicines in large quantities mainly from Eastern Europe, the so-called countries of the people's democracy. We are currently developing our own pharmaceutical industry.

We are now exporting our medicines to 90 countries, which is unprecedented. Since we are exporting them, this means their quality is recognised as world-class, otherwise nobody would be buying them. I may be mistaken, but last year we sold over 700 million (780 actually, I think) of our medicines abroad.

There are things that need to be approached delicately. People get used to certain medicines, including foreign ones, and we must keep this in mind and let people use them. The Ministry of Healthcare has certain proposals, and I think they will be implemented soon. I mentioned some of them.

**Dmitry Peskov:** I can see a sign saying Ufa. Please stand up, show yourself. Give them the microphone.

**Azat Gizzatullin:** Good afternoon, Mr President.

Azat Gizzatullin, Bashinform News from Ufa, Bashkortostan.

This year the republic began to actively fight alcoholism. In particular, the sale of alcohol was restricted on some days, such as last school day and September 1.

Today our parliament adopted a law that restricts the sale of alcohol during the upcoming New Year holidays. Recently a survey was taken that showed that two thirds (about 10,000 people) support these restrictive measures.

There is another change: we are actively fighting those who sell illegally produced alcohol, and people can receive a reward for information on such sellers.

My question is that perhaps other effective measures are needed to fight this evil, alcoholism, in addition to the many restrictive measures we have? This year, thanks to these measures, the republic managed to save almost 100 lives. This might seem like a small number, but these are people who were not poisoned by alcohol.

Perhaps you think other measures are necessary in addition to these restrictions?

Thank you.

**Vladimir Putin:** Such measures are being taken. Look, there has been in the past years and still is an anti-alcohol campaign underway. People do not even see it.

Recently I met with representatives from the German business community in Sochi; perhaps you saw this. It is noteworthy that, counting pure alcohol, Russians drink less than Germans. This is the result of the anti-alcohol campaign. According

to World Health Organisation data, this is one reason that life expectancy in Russia is growing, and we have reached 73.4 years, which is higher than last year, and of course this is a notable achievement socially. This is because people drink less alcohol among other things.

Are any administrative restrictions necessary, like in the mid-1980s? This would not hurt, but we should proceed cautiously. Probably we should work on other areas, explain and give an opportunity to choose between different types of alcohol, with an emphasis on products with low alcohol content; I mean wine instead of hard liquor, for example. By the way, winemaking in Russia is developing quite impressively and effectively. This is why we have something to work with here without using further legal restrictions.

The main thing is we have results.

**Dmitry Peskov:** The left section please. I saw Vedomosti. Where is Vedomosti? Raise your hand please.

**Svetlana Bocharova:** Thank you very much.

Good afternoon, Mr President.

The newspaper Vedomosti, Svetlana Bocharova, correspondent.

You have repeatedly said that the state must stay with the freedom of the internet principle and provide ample opportunity for the exchange of information. Do you personally think our state still supports this principle, or are we moving towards some kind of sovereign internet?

And the second question. If you think the internet is still free in Russia, what can you say to the many users who are now afraid to be labelled foreign agents under the new law?

**Vladimir Putin:** A free internet and a sovereign internet are two concepts that are not mutually exclusive. The law you spoke about has only one goal: to prevent the negative consequences of Russia's possible disconnection from the global network, which is largely governed from abroad. This is what it is about.

Herein lies our sovereignty – that we have our own resources we can always keep operating, so the internet is not cut off from us. The point of this law is just that. Therefore, no, there are no restrictions, and we are not moving towards suspending internet access and we will not do that.

Regarding individuals who may be recognised as foreign agents. I recently spoke at a meeting with human rights activists, and I would like to repeat – we did not invent the term “foreign agent.” This law has been in force in the US since the 1930s – it was adopted in 1938 or in 1939 (1938, if I remember correctly) and it works perfectly.

Recall a recent case where it was applied to an individual: our citizen Maria Butina – an individual – was arrested, and locked in jail without any reason. What kind of agent is she? Nothing of the kind is being done here. Not even close!

They put this woman in prison, and even threatened her with a longer prison term. Come on! There, this foreign agent, or whatever it is, is punished with a good prison

term of up to five years. And we have only administrative penalties.

As for individuals, this is what is at stake. When the law was enacted because of organisations receiving money from abroad that were essentially engaged in domestic politics, every state – I want to emphasise this – makes an effort to limit foreign interference in domestic affairs. Therefore, our law is aimed precisely at that.

If you receive money from abroad, from foreign sources, in order to carry out domestic political activity, then just say so: as you know, he who pays the piper calls the tune. This is folk wisdom.

If you receive money from abroad, it is not unreasonable to assume that you are taking orders from those who pay you. But you are still welcome; we do not ban the organisation. In Russia there is no law prohibiting the receipt of money from abroad even for domestic political activity. But you have to at least declare it so that people know about it.

As for individuals. Law enforcement practice shows that, a) there are things to pay attention to and improve to avoid a broad interpretation. This is the most important thing. Because anything can be called political and domestic political activity: environmental work and work in clearly humanitarian areas, including in the healthcare sector. This cannot be allowed, and law enforcement practice needs to be improved. And if the law is written so that it allows this, it also needs to be improved.

But what did those bodies that were engaged in control over this type of activity face? When an organisation begins to fall under the criteria of a foreign agent, what did they start doing? An individual receives financing from abroad and then transfers the money to a legal entity, and it turns out that this legal entity, an organisation, generally does not receive any money from abroad. But the original source is understood – a foreign one. This is the only thing this is about.

**Dmitry Peskov:** We have not yet covered REN TV. REN TV, go ahead, please.

**Andrei Dobrov:** *Izvestia* Multimedia Information Centre, REN TV, Andrei Dobrov.

Mr President, a very simple question, and a very short one too. You were close, but for some reason no one has actually asked over all this time. It is about increasing people's welfare. When will this actually happen? I would really like to know. We have been talking about this, in general, for a long time. It would be great to finally see an increase.

Thank you.

**Vladimir Putin:** I have the latest data on all the main indicators. I understand what you are asking. Indeed, in recent years, we have seen a decrease in people's real incomes, and this is not good. This is one of the problems that we must certainly resolve, but we must resolve it through higher labour productivity and GDP growth – this is completely obvious.

This is where we should channel our efforts, because everything else, including the distribution of money from our reserve funds or anything like that will lead nowhere, and the money will quickly run out. And if the situation in external markets, including oil, changes, then the source will run out. Therefore, we need to address

fundamental issues of economic development and raise the level of wages on this basis.

The wage level has actually grown a little over the past year. Real incomes are also growing slightly. We have seen this in the third quarter. But this is not enough, of course.

Again, we need to work more on this. We have a lot of questions about salaries in education, and in healthcare. I just spoke about healthcare in detail – what steps I think need to be taken there first. We will certainly work on this, on everything that I have just mentioned.

**Dmitry Peskov:** Let us take a question from this side. Let Yamal ask their question.

**Alisa Yarovskaya:** Thank you.

My name is Alisa Yarovskaya, and *Yamal Region* is our television channel. You know, scientists say that one advantage of global warming is that the Northern Sea Route is expanding. It passes Yamal. This is why the port of Sabetta is developing now.

**Vladimir Putin:** It does not pass Yamal but runs through our territorial waters.

**Alisa Yarovskaya:** I agree.

The corresponding surface infrastructure is developing, including a railway line. But the bridge across the River Ob has not been mentioned often lately, and it is very important for us.

Our Governor, Dmitry Artyukhov, is doing everything possible for the project to be implemented, but we hear less and less about it and want to ask if the heavy “federal artillery” could get involved in this.

**Vladimir Putin:** You know, the development of transport infrastructure is set by plan. The governors, the Russian Government and the Transport Ministry all come to me with such proposals.

It would hardly be viable to just take one project out of the general context. Of course, the bridge you mentioned is an important infrastructure project, because it contributes to the development of that region.

The railway leading to the ports along the Northern Sea Route, as you have said, is very important for us. This must be synchronised with the volume of shipment along this route, and the infrastructure must develop accordingly. We understand and consider this.

**Dmitry Peskov:** Here is a seasoned journalist, Alexander Gamov.

**Alexander Gamov:** Thank you very much.

Alexander Gamov, *Komsomolskaya Pravda* website, radio and newspaper.

Mr Putin, you said you were writing an article on international affairs for Victory Day. Can we count on printing it? You can give it to *Komsomolskaya Pravda* and we will print it. We have a large circulation.

**Vladimir Putin:** Yes, of course.

**Alexander Gamov:** Good, thank you very much. I will take you up on that.

Here is my question. Someone already mentioned here that you became Acting President on December 31, 1999, and spent two decades on the post of President. I do not think there will be a separate news conference dedicated to this.

**Vladimir Putin:** No, you are mistaken; I was Prime Minister for four years.

**Alexander Gamov:** Prior to that, on August 9.

**Vladimir Putin:** No, why? You left out the period when I headed the Government.

**Alexander Gamov:** Do you want to subtract this period?

**Vladimir Putin:** The head of state and the head of government are different positions and different responsibilities.

**Alexander Gamov:** I meant that 20 years ago you were appointed Acting President.

**Vladimir Putin:** And?

**Alexander Gamov:** Can you share with us the most positive and the most negative moments in your life as President? This is my first question.

The second question is that sooner or later, we will have to come up with a so-called power transition formula. Could you make us part of it, so that we do not run into a surprise?

**Vladimir Putin:** You could be one of the candidates. Of course. Why not?

**Alexander Gamov:** Who can it be, in your opinion? How can all this happen? You are unlikely to want to change the Constitution, and we do not want to let you go.

My last question is that you mentioned the notion of a historical figure. Can Vladimir Putin already be called a historical figure?

Thank you.

**Vladimir Putin:** It is up to the next generations to give an answer to that question. I do not think that we, contemporaries, especially I personally, should be answering this question. In the future, the people will evaluate what has been done for the country, and maybe something has not been done. I think that public opinion is the best measure here. It will give the evaluation in the future.

With regard to the most outstanding and difficult events, I already mentioned them: the most difficult are the major terrorist attacks in Beslan (I will never forget that) and Dubrovka.

And the most striking, the most significant ones... We have been talking a lot about the need to raise the real incomes of the population, however, we have not completely solved the issue of poverty. I think we had the lowest level in 2014 – 11.3 percent of the total population, of the country's citizens.



The number has grown a little since then; the figures are not so noticeable but there are real people behind them. So this is the most important issue we have to resolve.

But overall, I want to say that in general if we look at what the country was like back in the early 2000s and what it is now – these are almost two different countries. I am not even talking about security issues.

Truth be told, we must call things by their names: until 2006 there were combat hostilities – combat! – in the Caucasus with the use of tanks, aircraft and other heavy equipment. Do you understand? This is why I reacted so emotionally to the question at the meeting with human rights activists when a famous film director – whom I love and respect a lot – said, why do we not rewrite everything from the start.

You remember what I answered. We rewrote everything once in 1917, and we probably remember the lyrics – “*We will destroy this world of violence down to the foundations, and then we will build our new world, he who was nothing will become everything.*” And at present we are trying to identify the names of those who believed this, at the Butovo range and other sites of mass shootings. This is a very dangerous road.

That is why we now have internal stability and confidence that the country will keep progressing in this stable manner. This is probably the main thing. The economy has changed radically. Yes, we do have many unresolved issues in the economy, very many, and the key one is increasing labour productivity and on this base increasing the economic growth rate.

Yet this is incomparable to what we had. We now have one of the lowest foreign debts in the world. And how much was it then? Inflation stands at 3.25. In the 1990s, it was 200 to 300 percent. Can you imagine? We have forgotten what it was like. This is a totally different economy.

This foundation will let us resolve issues of ensuring our security. Take the Armed Forces, what have they become now? And let us recall the public sentiment when officers had their caps swept off in public transport. Have we forgotten that too? But this is what we had, and quite recently too.

And then it turned out that the state cannot be without the armed forces. And I believe we are all proud of the level of our Armed Forces. They have become one of the world's most hi-tech forces.

All this combined, in my view, is not my achievement alone but our common achievement. Because what the Russian people and other peoples of the Russian Federation went through from the 1990s to early 2000s can be called a feat in itself.

**Dmitry Peskov:** Now our Japanese colleagues, *Kyodo Tsushin*. Here they are. Go ahead, please.

**Hirofumi Sugizaki:** Thank you, Mr Peskov.

Good afternoon, Mr Putin. Hirofumi Sugizaki from *Kyodo Tsushin* Japanese news agency.

My question to you is not about the islands, but about your attitude, about your vision, your view of nuclear war. You mentioned that the US is reluctant, at least

for now, to extend START-3. When this treaty expires, there will be nothing to deter us from a new arms race and, possibly, an upcoming nuclear war.

What do you think?

**Vladimir Putin:** Curse the tongue that says it. An 'upcoming nuclear war.' What are you saying?

**Hirofumi Sugizaki:** But nowadays we are seriously concerned, although we are well aware that you are trying hard to at least maintain the status quo, urging the United States to keep up the moratorium and so on. However, you often warn of a mirror response. This sounds very scary to me. I think that trying to win a nuclear war is unacceptable and morally undue. What do you think about this?

I understand that armies do need to periodically modernise their equipment and weapons, but still there is the concept of sufficiently reasonable. This concept should help maintain a strategic balance. I think that probably, someday, in the near future, you will come forth with a comprehensive peace initiative. Maybe you are considering an opportunity to do this from Hiroshima?

Please, as I represent Japan, I will never be forgiven if I do not ask you about it. Recently, our peace treaty talks came to a standstill. One of the reasons for this is Russia's concern about the Security Treaty between the US and Japan. You have repeatedly spoken out on this subject, so I will not repeat or go into any detail. Recently, because the INF Treaty (Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty) has expired, this has affected our relations because you have repeatedly said that the United States and Japan are discussing the possibility of deploying such missiles in Japan. On the other hand, you told us in Sochi that you are helping China to develop a unique early warning system. So we get the impression that Russia and China already have if not a military alliance, very close allied relations in the military technical field, as you put it. Please tell me if a block confrontation is already emerging with Northeast Asia – with Japan, the US and South Korea on the one hand, and Russia and China on the other.

And in this current situation, is it possible for us – Japan and Russia – to find a compromise for mutual understanding, for mutual trust, so that we could sign a peace treaty in the future? Thank you very much.

**Vladimir Putin:** As for military cooperation between Japan and the United States, you have right now practically answered this question yourself. We are not the ones who said that the United States was in negotiations with Japan over the deployment of its medium-range missiles. This news was reported by Japanese and American sources. How can we possibly fail to ignore this, including in the context of the islands issue? Are there any guarantees that tomorrow new American offensive weapon systems will not be deployed on these islands? Where are these guarantees? There is no way we could fail to discuss this subject. It seems to me that elementary formal logic suggests this.

Could we still be looking for a solution? We could. And we are doing this jointly with the current Japanese authorities. We have good trust-based relations with them and we are discussing all this in detail and honestly. Have we found a solution? Not yet. But, most importantly, I also spoke about this, we want to find one. This can be any solution. As I already mentioned some time ago, and my Japanese friends liked it, this should be a *hikiwake* – a draw – which is a term used in judo.

Is it possible to find a solution that the public will agree with? We have been looking for it for 70 years and have not found it yet. But we are ready to move further in this direction.

As for alliances, we do not have a military alliance with China and we do not plan to create one. But we see that East Asia is seeking to forge a military alliance, as well as some other countries, you have just named them all – the United States, Japan and South Korea – and we believe this to be counter-productive, as this does not bode well.

We are developing cooperation with China in the field of defence technology, among other things. Today, China is also a high-technology country but there are certain projects that take up a great deal of time to implement. I believe China is capable of creating a missile early warning radar system on its own but, with our help, it will do this faster. This system will add new quality to the defence capability of our strategic partner.

But this is not an offensive weapons system. You named it correctly and I was really surprised when you did so – surprised to hear you refer to it correctly. This is a missile early warning radar system, which means the system works when you are being attacked. It is true that this is a purely defensive system and so far, only the United States and Russia have systems like this. I would like to repeat that this system does not encourage aggression and is intended to protect one's own territory.

Let us ask another of your colleagues – from the BBC. They are so fond of us, we really should give them the floor. I am eagerly anticipating your question. Please, go ahead.

**Steve Rosenberg:** I am Steve Rosenberg from BBC News.

Mr President, Boris Johnson said different things about you. At one time, he called you a merciless tyrant. He even compared you with Dobby from a Harry Potter book. What do you think of him? What is your impression of him? How do you think relations between our countries – the UK and Russia – will change after Brexit?

Now that people in the UK are waiting for the parliamentary report on Russia's alleged interference in political processes in the country to be released, we hope, maybe, you will tell us all about it. Has Russia interfered or is it interfering in UK policy? Thank you.

**Vladimir Putin:** Regarding statements by different politicians in various countries about Russia and about myself as the head of state, you see, I have long got used to having a certain attitude towards them. What kind of attitude is it? I know where my country's interests lie. And whatever anyone might say to me, it has absolutely no relevance compared to the fundamental tasks Russia is interested in solving.  
(*Applause.*)

Nevertheless, we see, understand, hear and factor this in in our work. But I would like to make a small remark. It is one matter when a person speaks as he is striving for a position of power, and a different matter when he speaks being vested with that power. He has on his shoulders a responsibility for his country, the economy and so forth.

I think that with account of Brexit, which you mentioned, Great Britain is interested

in developing economic ties with us. This view is also expressed by UK businesspeople who work in Russia and whom we consider to be our friends, not just partners but friends. Because they are investors who come, invest money in our economy and create jobs. We appreciate it and do everything to support them so that they can feel at home here.

Are there any other areas of common interest? There are. Quite recently we discussed with some European colleagues the possibility of engaging Britain in solving and discussing issues on the international agenda that have been voiced here too. I will not list them again. And Britain is interested in having a more active part in resolving them, including with Russia.

Regarding interference or non-interference. We keep on hearing numerous assessments of the developments in Russia from official bodies of power in different countries, including the UK. You yourself spoke about that now. Is that interference or not? You express your position on what is going on in our country. We reserve the right to behave similarly with regard to you. If you think it is interference, keep thinking it. But I do not believe it has anything to do with interference.

Concerning what is happening now. We can congratulate Mr Johnson as he is ultimately the winner. He had a better grasp of the sentiments in British society than his rivals, and that is why he won. I understand he is set to pursue all his plans regarding Brexit.

**Dmitry Peskov:** There was a question about agriculture here at the very top. Raise your hand, please. Go ahead.

**Vladimir Putin:** Siberia.

**Marina Sevostyanova:** Good afternoon, Mr President. Agriculture.

**Vladimir Putin:** Where are you?

**Marina Sevostyanova:** I am here, in the centre. *Svetich* Agrarian Media Holding. My name is Marina Sevostyanova. We have been participating in the news conference since 2007 and we always try to ask questions related to our sector, agriculture. In 2007, we were the first to bring over a poster with our name. As you see, the tradition took on.

Our question is the following. The readers of our magazine *Niva Rossii* and the newspaper *Agrozhizn* are concerned about the issues of support for upgrading the fleet of farm equipment.

Which priorities can you name? For example, the 1432 Programme is about subsidies for machine builders, federal leasing and cheap loans. Will financing be added? Is it possible to keep in place the instruments in this area for the next few years, since they are quite effective anyway? Thank you.

**Vladimir Putin:** I will not enumerate all these instruments because you spoke so confidently about this, which may mean that you know all of them. I believe we should use leasing more actively. It is a flexible instrument that allows our farmers to work on the domestic market and to promote their products abroad.

There are certain benefits, including within the framework of these instruments, such

as the protection of our producers on the market, especially when it comes to purchasing under national programmes. We will definitely preserve these instruments.

Some of our EAEU partners aspire to become part of these state-subsidised acquisition programmes. In fact, this is partly taking place, but we nevertheless believe that domestic producers must have certain advantages. You know already about these advantages. Russian producers stand to gain even if prices go up a notch.

Some sectors use the 'odd man out' rule – I will not waste time trying to explain it; I believe it is clear to everyone. In other words, all these programmes, come what may, will definitely continue; none of them will be curtailed. In terms of support, the biggest allocations go to agriculture, including agricultural engineering.

**Dmitry Peskov:** Mr President, it has been three and a half hours.

**Vladimir Putin:** I can see over there “Siberia Is Suffocating.”

**Yekaterina Nadolskaya:** Good afternoon, Mr President. Yekaterina Nadolskaya, *Russia News*. I am from Siberia, but I live in St Petersburg now. First of all, I would like to thank you for the Universiade. It was unbelievable, our athletes are the best. Even despite the ill-wishers throwing mud at us, we have proved that we are the very best.

However, I would like to say a few words about life after the Universiade. As you know, Krasnoyarsk Territory is top of the list when it comes to air pollution.

**Vladimir Putin:** The city of Krasnoyarsk, not Krasnoyarsk Territory.

**Yekaterina Nadolskaya:** Yes, Krasnoyarsk, but the people of Krasnoyarsk Territory are not breathing easily either. They were suffocating from smoke from the forest fires last summer, but they are also choking due to toxic smog all year round. You probably felt it when you visited the Universiade.

**Vladimir Putin:** Yes, I did.

**Yekaterina Nadolskaya:** You are aware then that many factories are located within city limits in Krasnoyarsk. People hold demonstrations to point out that they are suffocating, many die – a third cancer centre is being built in Krasnoyarsk, yet the authorities do not seem to see the problem. Will any measures be taken to prevent a repetition of last summer's inferno?

Since I live in St Petersburg, I would like to ask you about the Botkin Hospital. Dmitry Medvedev said recently that doctors should not have to practice in a barn. What is the Botkin Hospital, which is situated in the city centre and which the authorities have been promising to repair for several years now, if not a barn? Here are some pictures: broken glass, mice and cockroaches. And the doctors who are trying to help people there are paid 25,000–30,000 rubles. The authorities have promised to reconstruct the hospital, but nothing is being done. There is no infrastructure, only swans made of old car tires. And this is in the centre of the city. Foreigners love to take photos against these swans. Can anything be done to change this? We are talking about the centre of St Petersburg. Thank you.

**Vladimir Putin:** I know that the situation there is not good, dismal even. I do not

know about the specific renovation plans for the Botkin Hospital. It is one of the oldest medical institutions in the city, I am well aware of this. I will definitely talk to the Governor about it. But I do not know whether the Botkin Hospital is included in one of our projects that we talked about today, as a primary care institution, or as part of the development of healthcare as a whole under the National Project. But I assure you, I will certainly discuss the situation with the Governor.

In addition to this hospital, St Petersburg has other world-class medical centres like, for example, the Almazov Centre. But this does not mean that, while respecting those who work at the Almazov centre, we can neglect those institutions where the situation is less favourable. I will definitely talk to my colleagues about it, I promise you. This is the first point.

The second concerns the environmental situation in Siberia and several other regions. Yes, indeed, the situation there is far from perfect.

As for the wildfires, we have indeed had a lot this year. What is worse, they occur in such places, I have to say, where it is very difficult to fight them: to begin with, it is an over 600-kilometre flight. Do you see what we have to deal with? It is a vast country. But the smoke emanates from there, and with the wind blowing in the direction of big cities, it easily reaches the cities, and it is hard to do anything about it.

Unfortunately, as a rule, all these fires are provoked by human activity; they are the result of illegal logging or even legal activities, where people believe they need to dispose of some industrial waste this way. Even in everyday life, people often burn grass, leaves, and so on. We need to work more often and more purposefully with people on this subject to prevent such situations.

We also need to improve the forest protection system, and we will do it now. We will partly transfer these responsibilities to the federal level, including, first of all, air-based forest protection, control and forest management – these functions will be returned to the federal level.

Incidentally, although forests take up a large area in Russia in per hectare terms, we are not the champions in this respect, ranking third after Canada and the United States. This does not mean we are doing so well – the problem is still there, but I mean it is typical for many countries, Russia included. Last year, we finally curbed some of the last wildfires in December, but in February, they flared up in other places – we have to do it non-stop, unfortunately, and this problem also has to do with climate change, among other factors. I spoke about this at the beginning of our meeting.

As regards environmental problems, you know that we are implementing – we have adopted a law on introducing modern technologies, something called BAT – the best available technology. At the first stage, 300 enterprises that have the greatest negative impact on the environment are required to adopt appropriate renovation programmes. This work is ongoing; 12 companies have had their programmes approved. Their effort has been recognised as meeting the requirements. I know this is not enough. The remaining companies of those 300, with the biggest emissions, will continue working on it.

Dedicated programmes were adopted for the twelve cities that face the most appalling conditions, including Krasnoyarsk. In these locations, industrialists will have

to defend their development plans. The heads of the corresponding regions are also expected to play a role in this process.

There should be a plan of this kind for Krasnoyarsk as well. Let me assure you that we are keeping this matter on our radars, and we will work hard on it. This will be one of the national priorities in the near future.

**Dmitry Peskov:** I suggest that we turn to Tatarstan. You have recently visited this republic.

**Vladimir Putin:** Let us have a question on veterans.

**Dmitry Peskov:** A question on veterans and then Tatarstan.

**Sergei Komkov:** Mr Putin,

We are now preparing to mark the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Victory. As you are well aware, this is a major celebration.

**Dmitry Peskov:** May I ask you to please introduce yourself?

**Sergei Komkov:** Sergei Komkov, Editor-in-Chief of the newspaper *President*, and also President of the National Education Foundation, and your authorised representative during the 2000 election campaign.

I have just returned from Krasnodar Territory where our newspaper carried out a journalistic investigation on the situation regarding veterans of the Great Patriotic War, including disabled war veterans. We unearthed horrendous facts about the conditions these veterans live in in Krasnodar Territory in general and specifically in Sochi.

Sochi built special retirement homes for veterans to mark the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Victory. Today, these buildings have turned into slums or poorhouses. Veterans live there as if they were homeless, and the buildings are falling apart. Today, the city authorities are not only neglecting these properties, but also use them to their advantage. They earn money by housing outsiders there, which means that they operate a profitable business, while the veterans are suffering.

They came to the *President* newspaper's editorial office and complained about their lives. At the same time, the city administration in Sochi is demolishing buildings that are well-built and in good condition, simply destroying them, while developers and investors in the city are saying, "We are ready to provide veterans with marvellous, well-equipped flats in these buildings, including disabled war veterans, while it would make more sense demolishing the slums in order to make room for new housing."

In doing so, the city authorities in Sochi are referring to your instructions. I told locals who came to see me at my Editorial Office as Editor-in-Chief that I would never believe that the President of Russia could issue an instruction that would be at odds with the Constitution, defy common sense and run counter to the interests of veterans, including disabled war veterans. I think that you would agree with me.

I believe that it is high time that order be restored and high-handed officials in Sochi and Krasnodar Territory in general be brought to their senses.

Second, Mikhail Shchetinin's unique school has been closed down and is about to be liquidated in Krasnodar Territory. You supported this institution back in 2010 when you issued an instruction to this effect. This is one of the best schools Russia has in terms of teaching patriotic values to the new generation of Russians. This school was part of the UNESCO Associated Schools Network.

This school is being destroyed by officials from Krasnodar Territory's Education Ministry, with support from the federal Education Ministry. They literally hounded Mikhail Shchetinin to death. He passed away on November 10, and now they are destroying his school. Russian Federation Human Rights Commissioner Tatyana Moskalkova and all the human rights activists have become involved in this process.

**Dmitry Peskov:** Would you be so kind, your question, please?

**Sergei Komkov:** My question is simple. Is it not high time we put an end to all the outrages perpetrated by Krasnodar officials and put things right over there. For our part, we, as journalists, will monitor this process. The results of our journalistic investigation have been submitted to the Prosecutor General's Office and the investigative agencies. And we will send them to you so that relevant measures are taken.

Mr Putin, I think we must put things right and do whatever we can for our veterans and those who educate our future rising generations, future patriots of our country, so that they do not suffer from outrages committed by officials, whom you rightly described at the 19<sup>th</sup> Congress of the United Russia party as certain elements, who should be got rid of at the right time. Thank you.

**Vladimir Putin:** Outrages, if they occur somewhere, must be eliminated, and not only in Krasnodar Territory, but wherever they occur, everywhere.

As for the veterans' homes you have mentioned, I certainly know nothing about it. I do not interfere in city development projects, even in such big and interesting cities as Sochi. I simply know nothing about this. This is why you were right in saying that I am ignorant of this matter.

At the same time, I will make a point of talking about it with Venyamin Kondratyev, the Governor of Krasnodar Territory, and I will discuss the school with him as well – what is happening there. It is, of course, the first time I hear about it, too.

Well, as for cutting short outrages in Sochi, I think this is quite possible and must be done as soon as possible, if there are any violations, especially with regard to veterans and especially ahead of the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Victory. We have replaced the mayor there quite recently and an entirely new person has stepped in. We will certainly instruct him based on your materials, thank you very much for this.

There is a woman sitting quietly over there, "Building Bridges."

**Sergei Komkov:** Mr Putin, do you remember when you were running for President, you published an article titled "In the First Person?" Later I wrote a book titled *In the Third Person. Notes by the President's Authorised Representative*. I would like to give it to you.

**Vladimir Putin:** Thank you very much. They will take it now.



Please, what bridges are you building? Please, pass on the microphone.

**Olga Fedorova:** Good afternoon.

Samara State Television and Radio Company. My name is Olga Fedorova.

It is common knowledge that rivers divide, while bridges make us closer. A project to build a bridge across the Volga near Klimovka in Samara Region has been launched quite recently. You have supported this project. The bridge is being built from Klimovka on one side to Togliatti, on the other. We understand what this means for Samara. It is part of the Europe-Western China international transport corridor. In general, how will this project influence interstate cooperation?

Thank you.

**Vladimir Putin:** It will influence it in the best possible way, because, despite growing trade with China, despite the fact that we have the biggest volume of trade with our fraternal – in the direct sense of the word – republics of the former USSR and now independent states, infrastructure development is clearly inadequate.

I have already commented on this: we have, regrettably, fallen behind our friends in Kazakhstan. They have built their stretch of the road to China. We must do our part of the job. And we will certainly do it, including with regard to the bridge you have mentioned.

The “Heroes of Byelorussia” are over there. Let us go back to this, especially since we have just talked about the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Victory. Go ahead, please.

**Ivan Afanasyev:** Good afternoon, Mr President.

Thank you very much for the opportunity to ask this question. First of all, I would like to thank you...

**Dmitry Peskov:** Could you introduce yourself, please?

**Ivan Afanasyev:** Ivan Afanasyev, I represent *Selmashevets* from Gomel, Belarus.

**Dmitry Peskov:** What is your media outlet?

**Ivan Afanasyev:** *Selmashevets* is what the newspaper is called, it is affiliated with the *Gomselmash* holding company, which hopes to continue its work on the Russian market. I believe there will be enough work for both our friends from Rostov and for Gomselmash.

**Vladimir Putin:** Incidentally, our friends, Belarusian producers, sell a lot of their equipment on the Russian market, and Rostselmash is unable to sell even one piece of farming machinery on the Belarusian market.

**Ivan Afanasyev:** Mr President, there is a universal solution that has not been made public yet. My father headed the Gomselmash production association for 15 years, from 1972 until 1987. And today's Gomselmash, as you know it, is the result of his work. If you do not mind, we will send this proposal to the executive offices of the Belarusian and Russian Presidents.

**Vladimir Putin:** Please, send it to them and to us.

**Ivan Afanasyev:** But, first of all, allow me to thank you for your history-making decision of February 2018, when you signed an executive order on awarding the Order of Zhukov to Major General Alexander Lizyukov, Commander of the 5<sup>th</sup> Tank Army, who is my grandfather. Thank you very much for this.

**Vladimir Putin:** Congratulations on your grandfather, you have good genes.

**Ivan Afanasyev:** Thank you, Mr President.

**Vladimir Putin:** Is that all?

**Ivan Afanasyev:** I have not finished yet.

**Vladimir Putin:** Let the colleague say, please.

**Ivan Afanasyev:** Mr President, first of all, allow me to invite you to the city of Gomel, where a monument to Alexander Lizyukov and his two brothers was unveiled this year. This is the result of citizens' diplomacy. We create these monuments when monuments are being desecrated outside Belarus and Russia, and when false heroes are being placed on the pedestal.

I know that you must visit Belarus, which probably sustained the greatest casualties during World War II in percentage to the population. And I strongly hope that you and Alexander Lukashenko will find time to pay tribute to the heroes of Gomel, those three brothers who gave their lives.

And here is another related question dealing with this matter. The public in Gomel Region and Voronezh Region have suggested holding a regional meeting of the leaders of those regions in the Russian Federation and the Republic of Belarus, where the heroic Gomel residents fought.

The administration of Gomel Region supported this idea and initiative. The leaders of Moscow, St Petersburg, Smolensk and Novgorod Region made this proposal prior to unveiling the monument.

We will voice this initiative once again, but if you support it, I believe that it will become highly probable that this initiative will be implemented next year, when we will mark Alexander Lizyukov's 120<sup>th</sup> birthday in March. We ask you to support this initiative. This is the first thing.

Second, allow me to present to you a book on Alexander Lizyukov. It will remind you of the person whom you brought back from historical oblivion. You have restored tremendous historical justice and reinstated this name in the great history of the Great Victory.

**Vladimir Putin:** Thank you. Let me have the book, please. Thank you for the book and for your initiative. We will certainly consider it.

That young woman over there, will you please stand up?

**Dmitry Peskov:** Please give the book to the colleague who handed you the microphone.

**Vladimir Putin:** Miss, take the microphone, please.

Wait a second, we will get to the Jews.

**Dmitry Peskov:** The young woman in a yellow top, just raise your hand and stand still, and someone will come over to you.

**Vladimir Putin:** Please, I am listening.

**Farida Jafarova:** Hello, Mr Putin.

I am very nervous. You probably noticed my poster “Yekaterinburg loves You!”

**Vladimir Putin:** Yes, I caught sight of it.

**Farida Jafarova:** We desperately need a metro system.

**Vladimir Putin:** Please, introduce yourself.

**Farida Jafarova:** My name is Farida Jafarova, FREEPRESSA, a web edition.

Mr Putin, we need a metro system really badly. Please help us to build one.

**Vladimir Putin:** Where?

**Farida Jafarova:** In Yekaterinburg!

Please help us to build a second metro line.

**Vladimir Putin:** Yekaterinburg is rapidly developing and emerging as an increasingly modern city. Of course, its infrastructure needs developing.

Some time ago now, it was decided that projects of this kind should be implemented based on regional capabilities and resources, but this is impossible. Therefore, these projects should be implemented jointly with the federal authorities and with federal support.

We were talking quite recently about similar plans to develop a metro system in Krasnoyarsk, where a metro system started to be built but subsequently the project was abandoned and frozen. As a first step, this must be done there, but I have no doubt that this type of transport will be of vital importance and popular in Yekaterinburg. What is really needed is to simply work with the authorities, the regional authorities, in the right manner. We will certainly do this.

It is hard to see. A question on women, please. You are next, all right? Settled.

**Marina Volynkina:** I am Marina Volynkina, from the Eurasian Women's Community.

Mr Putin, numerous women's fora have been held in Russia and elsewhere in recent years. These in effect show the world the huge, constructive, powerful female energy that really exists and is supported by the leaders of many countries, including our own country.

A female G20 has been established. Valentina Matviyenko has held two Eurasian Women's Forums. This is, of course, an astounding force, which shows that women are creating the economy and are implementing many striking social projects

and initiatives.

But primarily, of course, women are making peace; I mean they are establishing the communications that are highly needed for you, men, to find it easier and more comfortable to pursue economic, political and social policies.

My question to you, Mr Putin, is this. As a strategist, politician and an incredible man with an astonishing charisma, do you think that a woman could at some point assume the office of the President of Russia? If you do, what qualities should she possess?

Thank you very much.

**Vladimir Putin:** In terms of governance and responsibility for the country and its people, these requirements cannot be distinguished by some gender standards; the requirements are the same – competence, decency, and so on.

But women do introduce a certain feminine vibe into politics – less aggressive, I think. This will certainly be needed.

**Dmitry Peskov:** Mr Putin, do you know what suggestion I have? I saw a journalist from Estonia around here.

**Vladimir Putin:** Just a minute. I promised. Please bring the microphone over there.

**Dmitry Peskov:** Please fetch the mike to the centre.

**Vladimir Shakhidjanyan:** I can speak without a mike. Thank you.

**Vladimir Putin:** Good.

**Vladimir Shakhijanyan:** Good afternoon, Mr Putin.

My name is Vladimir Shakhijanyan.

**Vladimir Putin:** Good afternoon, Mr Shakhijanyan.

**Vladimir Shakhijanyan:** Half of this room are my pupils. Some of them were trained at the Moscow University's School of Journalism, where I taught for 35 years, some were even using my method to make children, population... There was a multi-million print-run of...

**Vladimir Putin:** Don't we all use the same method? (*Laughter*)

**Vladimir Shakhijanyan:** No, my book, *One Thousand and One Questions about This*, was published in a multi-million print-run. It is about culture, upbringing, that one child in a family is not enough, but two or three is fine.

**Vladimir Putin:** Wonderful.

**Vladimir Shakhijanyan:** I continue to receive many letters. I need your support.

And lastly, about my ten-finger typing programme called *SOLO: Touch Typing Tutor*. You spoke about labour efficiency and digitalisation. I am grateful to Mr Minnikhanov and Mr Gref. These two people have supported me and have introduced my programme in Tatarstan and at Sberbank.

Besides, I have three files of unbelievable cursory replies. As your namesake, Vladimir Mayakovsky, wrote, “I’d rip out bureaucracy’s guts.” I need your help, so that ministries and agencies, doctors, teachers, police officers and FSB staff take care of their eyes and learn touch typing – Mr Peskov knows about this programme, or at least he heard about it. This will improve labour efficiency five- or six-fold.

And lastly, I wrote a book, which is now available online, about giving up smoking. It is one of our biggest problems. We must fight smoking. Personally, I smoked for 55 years, but I quit 11 years ago. By the way, I was in Leningrad during the siege, I went to the Luch cinema in Baskov Lane, and I remember everything very well.

**Vladimir Putin:** It is no coincidence that he is talking about this. I used to go there too.

**Vladimir Shakhjanyan:** Of course.

**Vladimir Putin:** I lived nearby.

**Vladimir Shakhjanyan:** If we resolve the problem of tobacco smoking in the country, we will have fewer problems with cancer, pneumonia, blood and liver diseases, birth disorders, infertility and very many other problems, because smoking affects everything.

I tried Veronika Skvortsova. Mr Gref wrote to her asking her to meet with me.

**Vladimir Putin:** What did you try to do with Ms Skvortsova?

**Vladimir Shakhjanyan:** I tried to meet with her. You can see what I mean, which is nice. If you understand me, other people will probably understand me as well.

All the very best and thank you. Good luck and happiness.

**Vladimir Putin:** Thank you very much.

**Dmitry Peskov:** Let us go on. Mr President, I saw a journalist from Estonia here. Is he with us? Please, stand up. There was a journalist from Estonia. So, it is Sputnik. Sputnik is a media outlet that is being harassed in Estonia.

**Vladimir Putin:** Harassed? Really?

**Yelena Chernysheva:** Good afternoon.

Yes, Mr President, harassed. Two months ago, Sputnik Estonia became the target of an economic blockade. Citing sanctions, local banks prohibited all and any money transfers to the accounts of our staff and contractors, as well as to the tax department. The transfer of our taxes has been suspended, and the money cannot reach the addressee. Special services have talked with our leaseholder and forced him to terminate our lease contract.

And lastly, two days ago our personnel received letters from the police informing them that *Rossiia Segodnya* is on the sanctions list and that therefore all its personnel can be held criminally liable. We have been notified that sanctions will be applied to us, starting January 2, unless we terminate our employment contracts with *Rossiia Segodnya*.

I believe that this is unacceptable for a country that claims to be a democracy. I am asking you for help. What can the Russian state do for Russian journalists who are fighting against Western censorship? And, please, what is your assessment of the Estonian authorities' actions?

**Vladimir Putin:** Regrettably, there is not much we can do. I think that you are doing a great deal. The situation you have described cannot go unnoticed. When I hear about such events, I am at a loss what to think. Because while demonising us and accusing us of putting pressure on independent media outlets, they themselves are doing exactly what they are accusing us of doing. This is unbelievable cynicism.

Unfortunately, I have to tell you that acting on the state level and imposing restrictions and the like would be ineffective. All this would do is play into the hands of those who want to drive our countries and our peoples apart. We will not assist them in any way. As unpleasant as it may be, you have to find a way to work in countries that are afraid of your reporting, afraid of you and the truth that you deliver to your viewers and listeners. Otherwise, I do not see any reason for being afraid of your reporting or the influence you may have on the minds of the people.

Freedom of information is one of the fundamental freedoms in today's democratic world. Unfortunately, not everyone wants to operate within this paradigm, guided by other rules that they write themselves.

There is nothing we can do about it. The world is complex and diverse. As far as we are concerned, we will do everything to support you no matter where you are, but we will use the available methods that do not interfere with Russia's interstate relations.

We will see what else can be done here.

**Dmitry Peskov:** Mr Putin, we have been working for four hours now. I suggest that we have two more questions before we wrap up.

**Vladimir Putin:** Quiet please.

Let us have a question from the Land of Volunteers.

**Laura Miziyeva:** Hello,

The AZERROS multi-ethnic project. My name is Laura, and I represent the *My Yediny!* [We Stand United] news portal.

Mr Putin, in 2020 Russia will mark National Unity Day for the 15<sup>th</sup> time. On this day, we celebrate the many generations of our ancestors who made it possible for us to come together on this day. What we have today is the legacy of our wise ancestors who sacrificed their lives to this cause. It is thanks to their efforts that today's youth understands what it means to have a united country.

Mr Putin, thousands of people get a chance to attend a *My Yediny!* free concert titled on November 4 every year. It has been held for 15 years now. The kind words you said about our project at the Territory of Meanings forum was the most gratifying reward we could dream of. What could be better? Only your personal presence at the 15<sup>th</sup> annual concert we will have at the MTC-Arena next year. We also invite all the guests from this room to join us. You will see what the young people of Putin's generation are capable of.

Here is my question: Mr Putin, what do you think about youth initiatives of this kind?

And, I almost forgot to ask you how we can arrange your visit. Who should we talk to?

**Vladimir Putin:** Arrange what?

**Laura Miziyeva:** Your visit.

**Vladimir Putin:** The boss is here, you can talk to him.

We do support all initiatives of this kind and we will keep doing so. The volunteer movement is gaining momentum in Russia, with millions of people involved. This is simply incredible. As you well know, I have recently met with volunteers in Moscow. We will support this movement in every possible way, and in various areas. This includes veterans, helping veterans, sick children, ensuring that rights are respected in healthcare, construction and cleaning up territories.

For example, only recently, I think it was yesterday, we discussed this subject. Someone, I think it was the Russian Popular Front or some other organisation proposed cleaning up the banks of the Volga River. A million people showed up. They expected to have people in the tens of thousands, but almost a million came with 900,000 people cleaning up this territory. These are real efforts. We will definitely promote initiatives of this kind.

As for my schedule, you can ask him. Agreed?

There was a question on pensions, go ahead please.

**Yulia Izmaylova:** Good afternoon.

Yulia Izmailova, *Molodoi Leninets* newspaper, Penza.

Mr Putin, pensioners are worried: the federal law on pensions stipulates indexation of benefits ahead of the inflation level only until 2024. What will happen after that? Who could guarantee them further indexation? Would Russia have to raise the retirement age again?

**Vladimir Putin:** No. I have already said that no further increases in retirement age are planned or even discussed. As for the recent reform, it has not affected those people who are already retired in any way. The only way it had to do with them was the government's effort to increase their incomes – pensions – faster. For example, next year, pensions are to grow by 6.6 percent, and inflation, as I said, is 3.25, for now at least. This means pensions will be indexed by a margin that is twice the inflation rate. This to a certain extent fulfils our earlier promises to retired Russians. And pensions will continue to be indexed after the period that you mentioned.

**Dmitry Peskov:** There was Altai somewhere in the back. Altai, stand up, please, and raise your hand, you will be given the floor.

And no, we are not ignoring Daghestan.

**Emina Kudachina:** I have this question. Good afternoon, Mr Putin. I am so nervous, I am sorry. I was told yesterday that issues that could not be streamlined in 30 years get resolved in 30 seconds here.

This is the question I have. There is only one school in one city in the Altai Republic for ethnic Altai children, where they are taught their native Altai language properly. The school was founded exactly 30 years ago, but it is housed in a rented building. They promise all the time that they will build a school, its own building, but it has not been done yet.

So, my question is actually a request. Please help us with the Altai school construction. Thank you.

**Vladimir Putin:** Do you mean the Altai Republic?

**Emina Kudachina:** Yes.

**Vladimir Putin:** The Altai language is classified as one of the most ancient Turkic languages. In fact, it largely formed the basis for all other Turkic languages. Not even largely, but almost by 100 percent. And in general, I think, we should pay much more attention to the study of ethnic cultures, customs, and languages. So if your school is dilapidated, especially a school that teaches an ethnic language, it is certainly unacceptable.

You just told me, help us save and restore the school. I promise you we will do it.

**Dmitry Peskov:** This was the final question.

**Vladimir Putin:** Please give the floor to that young woman standing with the Family poster.

**Dmitry Peskov:** Please raise your hand, so that the staff would see you.

**Farida Rustamova:** Good afternoon.

Thank you for this chance to ask my question.

My name is Farida Rustamova, and I am a correspondent with the BBC Russian Service.

Here is my question. Four years ago, when my colleagues asked you about your relationship to your younger daughter, Yekaterina Tikhonova, you said that your children “do not engage in business or politics, just keep a low profile”. But the situation has changed since then, to say the least.

The company *Innopraktika*, headed by Yekaterina Tikhonova and established by a state budgetary institution of Lomonosov Moscow State University, earned 500 million rubles in 2018.

*Nomeko*, a company in which your older daughter Maria Vorontsova has a stake, is currently building one of the largest clinics in Leningrad Region using Sogaz funding.

Your old friends, managers of state companies, are helping these two women with their business operations. We can see that television channels have started showing them very often. Everyone knows them and what they look like today. This is an open secret.

Here is my question: Tell me, please, when will you admit that they are your children, and when will they open themselves to society, just like the children of other world



leaders?

**Vladimir Putin:** You have just spoken about business-linked matters and mentioned one woman and another. You probably did not say everything. You mentioned their personal corporate stakes and the volume of this business. You said nothing and merely stated a fact. But this is not enough. You should delve into the matter, and you will realise what their real business is, whether there is any such business, who owns what, and who helps whom.

The question about *Innopraktika* came up a long time ago. This is the initiative of the Rector of Lomonosov Moscow State University. To the best of my knowledge, as Chairman of the University's Board of Trustees, I can say that this is linked with a desire, an absolutely legal and correct desire of our higher education institutions to combine the capabilities of the national science and education system with the real needs of Russian producers and beneficiaries inside the Russian economy.

We often buy many goods abroad, including in the United Kingdom, goods that we can manufacture here. We should combine what can be generated here with the goods that our companies need while making certain purchases. In effect, *Innopraktika* and its entire activity deal with precisely this matter. This is the entire reason for establishing *Innopraktika*. It was Moscow State University that started all this.

They have many talented people who are ready to offer their innovations, but the Russian beneficiaries and business community need to find out about them, so that they would be able to take advantage of this. This is a link between science and education and the real economy. This is what they are doing. I strongly hope that they will succeed and achieve tangible results that all of us need.

Speaking of the second area, healthcare, as far as I know, their so-called share capital is now close to zero. But this is a highly interesting aspect linked with the use of cutting-edge medical technology at a time when the Russian population decreased by 260,000 in 2019. We consider these statistics to be unacceptable.

The Russian Federation prioritises everything linked with measures to reduce the mortality rate caused by external and domestic factors, and everything linked with the development of healthcare. I believe that we should only praise this work.

Over there, 'Ethnic Issue', go ahead, please.

**Dmitry Kutyavin:** Good afternoon, Mr Putin.

My name is Dmitry Kutyavin, editorial director of the First Russian ethnic TV channel. The channel was established at the initiative of the Presidential Council for Interethnic Relations to support interethnic communication.

My question is as follows. Almost seven years ago, you published an article, *Russia: Ethnic Matters*. In your opinion, has anything changed in ethnic matters over those seven years? What is your assessment of the current inter-ethnic relations in Russia? Are there problems in specific regions?

And a second question, if I may. A year ago, after your annual news conference, you issued instructions to support the First Russian ethnic TV channel, in terms of both content and methodology. We would like to ask you to continue, as a follow up – a lot

has been done over the year, and the Government is helping significantly, and our curators too – we would like to make more energetic forays into the regions so that they also get involved, and the regional leaders cooperate more with us. Could you help?

Thank you.

**Vladimir Putin:** You just said you were getting help. Is this support not enough?

Interethnic relations in Russia are among the most important issues. We have mentioned here today the tragic events of the late 1990s – early 2000s, an actual civil war with active military operations in the Chechen Republic. How many people suffered then? That was also the result of unfavourable developments in the field of interethnic relations.

We know that, apart from the Caucasus, people in other regions that are constituent entities of the Federation also have in their historic memory unfair decisions such as deportations, when they were forcibly moved to places such as the steppes of Kazakhstan in cattle cars. How many people died on the way?

They have not forgotten. And that was also the result of interethnic relations. This is something we must do everything in our power to avoid, anything that might lead us to similar tragedies. It is very important.

The future generations of Russian politicians must also know that public opinion will not allow us to make any decisions that would destroy interethnic harmony. This is my first point.

Secondly, we will certainly support all entities – the media and public organisations – whose activity is aimed at smoothing out any disputes or relieving possible interethnic tension.

As you know, life is complex and diverse. Russia, too, has a complex structure, with so many ethnic groups living here. No wonder we forget about some things. Now, we are having disputes with Ukraine. There is a Ukrainian identity. Who shaped that identity? Count Pototsky, a prominent academic, researcher and author who first mentioned Ukrainians as a separate ethnic group.

However, other Polish studies later separated them even further, even removed them from among the Slavic peoples. They believed, they claimed that Ukrainians were the descendants of some nomadic peoples. But this is all complete nonsense, and we must know the truth. We must understand that some elements of a real ethnic identity emerged at some stage, and we must respect that. We are doing so and will continue doing so, especially domestically.

A journalist just mentioned problems with a school in Altai. Unfortunately, we do have many problems with the native languages of the peoples of Russia, with their cultures and customs. What kind of problems? We pay too little attention to this. And every person who lives in Russia should feel that this is their home, and they do not have any other home.

Thank you very much. I would like to wish you a Happy New Year. We definitely need to wrap this up now, we have taken so long.

Thank you.

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**Anton Zhelnov:** Mr President, can I ask just one last question about Kotov, please?

**Vladimir Putin:** About what?

**Anton Zhelnov:** I would like to ask about the 'Moscow case', and to ask you to take note of the case of Konstantin Kotov, who has been given a four-year sentence under the 'Moscow case'. He did not violate any laws, yet he has been sentenced under the same article as Dadin.

**Vladimir Putin:** I spoke with human rights activists when we met...

**Anton Zhelnov:** They did not mention Kotov's case.

**Vladimir Putin:** Fine, I may look into it. I remember the name, Kotov.

Punishment for such violations is much harsher in many other countries. For example, unauthorised public actions, such as blocking the border, are punishable with up to 10 years in prison in some countries. Our sentences are much more lenient, although...

**Anton Zhelnov:** Mr Putin, he did not threaten anyone or throw anything at anyone, that is the problem. He simply took part in a demonstration.

**Vladimir Putin:** I am not talking about whether he threatened anyone or not. Maybe he did this many times before.

By the way, all legislation stipulates increased penalties for repeat offenders, with civil liability for first offenders and criminal punishment for repeat offenders.

Anyway, I will take a look at this.

**Anton Zhelnov:** Will you take a look at his case, please?

**Vladimir Putin:** Yes, I will. Thank you.