

Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's interview with the RBC media holding on current international issues, Moscow, May 15, 2020

Question: The coronavirus pandemic has already closed many countries. Do you think the world will be again as open and mobile as it was before the pandemic?

Sergey Lavrov: Many discussions are being held on this issue today. Indeed, many COVID-19 response measures are being taken at random because nobody knows for sure how to effectively counter this infection. Decisions are made in response to immediate epidemiological challenges. These measures are seriously restricting the usual life of states, societies, every individual and every family.

We couldn't even imagine that we would need a special pass to leave our homes, our flats. But experts are assuring us that these measures are helping curb the spread of the pandemic. Many countries have shut entry and exit. We have also taken such decisions. Exceptions are made for Russian citizens and their families who happened to be abroad and want to return home, foreign diplomats and those who provide cargo shipments by ground, air, railway and vehicle transport. But foreign travel is banned for the majority of people. This is not just our idea. The majority of states are doing the same.

Now these restrictions will be gradually lifted depending on the developments in various countries. In all countries that have announced such an easing of restrictions, the governments and epidemiological authorities intend to monitor the situation in order to adjust their policy if need be. But there is a consensus opinion that full-scale recovery of global economic and cultural ties, as well as simply people-to-people contacts, will take a long time.

The overwhelming majority of analysts agree that even when all threats of the pandemic are eliminated, vaccines are approved and universal vaccination is introduced, we will have to live with this infection like with other biological diseases for which vaccines have long been available. That said, as you know, there are forecasts that the infection will stay with us for a long time: a second wave and annual outbreaks are likely. Most experts believe that an absolutely open system of interaction that existed before the pandemic will no longer exist, and that defensive medical measures will be taken, in particular, in transport.

You know how airports are going to start operating. Much is being said today about plans to ensure biological safety inside aircraft, trains, cars and restaurants. I don't think very tough precautions will be considered appropriate, but nonetheless I don't expect the freedom we had before. Measures will be based on conclusions from the current situation.

Question: You mentioned precautions. Do you think Russia is interested in retaining greater control over its citizens abroad after the quarantines are lifted? Maybe through introducing exit visas? This is being discussed even on social media networks.

Sergey Lavrov: I don't know who is talking about this. If people yearn for the Soviet Union, it's probably their right. I don't see any need and have not heard of any plans like this among those who might somehow be engaged in adopting relevant decisions.

Question: Do you have any misgivings that the epidemiological situation might be used as an excuse by unfriendly countries to ban Russian citizens from entering these countries?

Sergey Lavrov: We already have enough examples of unfriendly steps being taken against Russians for no reason. I cannot foresee what else our Western partners will come up with. They already know how to invent sanctions out of the blue, as has happened repeatedly: for example, in connection with the poisoning in Salisbury (the so-called Skripal case) or the Malaysia Airlines plane crash.

But they never provide hard evidence. They proclaim “highly likely,” and then sanctions are imposed. So, I really hope that a sense of proportion and common sense will prevail in the West, as well as the need to follow international law in any of its actions, which requires credible evidence and clear facts to support any accusations, in court or in international agencies. We have not seen this approach from the West with respect to the groundless charges against us so far.

Are we expecting any new unfriendly moves? I hope not. But, I assure you, we are ready for any developments.

Question: When can Russia begin to open its borders with its CIS neighbours? Will statements from the leaders of the CIS countries about a victory over the coronavirus be enough? Can Russia just believe these statements? We have already had a bit of conflict, for example, with the Republic of Belarus.

Sergey Lavrov: I am not the one to answer this question, but rather the state agencies that are responsible under the law for the sanitary-epidemiological and biological safety of our country, and for public health in general. In my opinion, these are obvious things for any person who understands how a state works, Russia or any country. Everything that is done to combat the coronavirus is subordinated to the main task – to ensure the safety of the population, the state, including from epidemiological threats. These decisions are made by interdepartmental agencies under the Government and the State Council of Russia: the Emergency Response Centre and the Coordination Council. The Russian Foreign Ministry is among the members, but it is solely responsible for issues within its competence. They are secondary to the strategy chosen for coronavirus response and for a smooth, painless exit from the current restrictive measures.

Question: Regarding the situation with the Financial Times and The New York Times. As we see it, and Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova said something similar yesterday, they could be stripped of their accreditation unless they retract their stories (*Note: Maria Zakharova basically said the opposite – “This is not our way: stripping accreditation, deporting journalists or any other repressive measures”*). We had a similar situation with Belarus. What is the difference between this case and that of Channel One in Belarus? Why such a harsh reaction to allegations that official Russian statistics might not be absolutely correct?

Sergey Lavrov: I have heard of no suggestion or expectation that they will be stripped of their accreditation unless they respond. We have not discussed this with Maria Zakharova. I do not believe that either of us would suggest this.

As to the essence of the question, it should be dealt with basically by the Federal Service for Supervision of Communications, Information Technology and Mass Media (Roskomnadzor). Under the Russian law On [Information, Information Technologies and the Protection of Information](#), Roskomnadzor has taken relevant legal actions. Let's wait for a response.

I am essentially against ostracising journalists but they definitely should bear responsibility for their reports. You know what measures have been taken against the RT channel in London by Ofcom, their version of our Roskomnadzor, for covering events in Syria exclusively from the Russian viewpoint. RT's requests to provide any materials showing the outlet's bias in covering the developments in Syria were left unanswered. But the channel was fined 200,000 pounds.

I think the issue of information reliability deserves special attention and a universal approach. Today the situation is like this. The Group of Friends on the Safety of Journalists was established at UNESCO some time ago. Suddenly they set up some sort of movement which declares itself to be the creator of traditions and the keeper of standards of freedom of the press. I don't think this is quite right. Journalists can and should set up associations and promote certain concepts, but it is a bit too much when they claim to be possessors of the ultimate truth and that everyone should follow these standards. The same is true of France's initiative to consider issues of freedom of cyberspace and information reliability within some movement set up outside universal structures.

There are problems of course. Accusations based on "highly likely" arguments now haunt many newsworthy events, whether it's the Skripal case, the Malaysia Airlines crash, Brexit, or the Catalonia referendum. We were accused of interference in all these processes and of organising some of them. Now in Prague: "A Russian diplomat carried deadly poison in his suitcase." The secret services knew about it but they let him in. Any authority who knows of someone carrying deadly poison and lets him enter their country should be in prison. Where is the poison now, according to the Czech special services? I don't know.

Another case in point from the same "highly likely" category. Suddenly, the Bundestag announced that five years ago the German special services discovered, while conducting an investigation, that a hacker attack had been launched against the Bundestag and against German Chancellor Angela Merkel's personal email. This was allegedly done by Russians. Five years have passed, and we have not been given a single concrete fact. Let's look across the Atlantic. In 2013, Edward Snowden published classified documents from the US National Security Agency. They absolutely and unequivocally showed that this agency wiretapped, through its representatives in Germany, Angela Merkel among others. This fact was established and acknowledged by the German authorities. The head of the NSA office in Germany was deported. A year later, the Office of the German Federal Public Prosecutor announced that the case was closed since the charges could not be proved in court. There are facts but they are impossible to prove. In Russia's case there are no facts but everything is "proved" very easily. This is the problem with the information space when it comes to facts.

Regarding the coronavirus statistics. I assure you that the Russian authorities are less interested in hiding the truth than anyone. This is no joke, it is a matter of people's lives. I think it is inadmissible to play with them just as it is inadmissible to use the situation to slander a certain country. Bloomberg, which picked up the Financial Times and The New York Times stories wrote in their headline that there is no answer as to "why the coronavirus hasn't killed more Russians." We are now in a situation where journalists working for the media are trying to use even the most serious and tragic events for geopolitical games. They want to please someone and to infuriate someone else. But one needs to be very careful in terms of abiding by the law and the code of journalism ethics.

Question: Do you know exactly how many Russian nationals are still waiting to return to their home country? When do you expect to bring this work to an end?

Sergey Lavrov: Since the beginning of this pandemic, we have secured the return of over 250,000 people to Russia. According to our estimates, about 30,000 are still waiting to come back to Russia.

Twice as many people have registered with the Government Services website, however, the verification that we constantly carry out jointly with the Interior Ministry and the Communications Ministry shows that the majority of those who have registered do not plan to return to Russia. These are people living abroad who decided to register just in case.

There are about 30,000 people who really want to get back to Russia. This is a large group, if you know how many people on average an aircraft can carry. This requires serious effort, and by now we have largely learnt to address this task. However, extraordinary situations still occur, although they are far fewer. We cooperate with the Emergency Response Centre, the Communications Ministry, the Interior Ministry, the Federal Agency for Aviation, Aeroflot and our other airlines. There is good coordination at the official and personal levels that helps us deal with the questions of the moment. The decision taken by Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin has helped us a lot. About a month ago, in addition to the criteria which were developed as part of the algorithm to determine who has the priority right to return home and which were used to make up the lists of passengers, Russian ambassadors abroad were allowed to include on them people from the so-called humanitarian lists. These are people who for some reason do not meet all the criteria set at the Emergency Response Centre but have ended up in a predicament that requires prompt intervention.

This work is far from complete, as 30,000 is quite a large group of people. But we already have experience, and there is every reason to believe that now our response to uncommon situations is much more effective.

Question: Do you think Russian citizens should change their attitude to foreign travel? Should they be more responsible in this regard and consider it a privilege?

Sergey Lavrov: This is not a privilege but a constitutional right.

Question: Is foreign travel a serious issue?

Sergey Lavrov: I think a tourist trip at home is a serious issue. For instance, I like adventure holidays – rafting down mountain rivers. A trip to Lake Baikal or some place in the Far East like Kamchatka requires serious preparations. That said, in this case you are in your home country. But extreme situations can also happen abroad, and in ordinary resorts, not just an adventure journey. Do you remember the horrible tsunami in Southeast Asia several years ago? Everyone fled from Thailand when 12- metre high waves swept hotels and villages from the face of the Earth. In the meantime, charter flights were taking more Russian tourists to Thailand. This was followed by a difficult evacuation. But this was one country and a specific group of people. When this has to be done all over the world, it's a completely different story.

In preparing to go abroad, every person must make his or her own decision. Probably, it is worth paying for insurance when buying a tour, but this is not mandatory today. I believe the tourism industry will make its own conclusions following this situation. We will be ready to take part in this.

But there is no reason to talk about a ban on foreign travel.

Question: Let's finish the tourism questions and move on to bigger foreign policy issues. On which side is Russia and why in the conflict between the US and China

over possible contradictory data on the emergence and spread of the coronavirus?

Sergey Lavrov: We are on the side of justice and common sense. Justice implies that it is wrong to accuse someone of something without the facts. I have given examples of the attitude of our Western partners who base their accusations on the declaration “highly likely,” which is how they accuse us of many things. I think the same applies to any situation where a country is being blamed for serious actions that affect lives but no facts are given. This attitude cannot be taken lightly.

A few words of common sense. This is not a time to be crying “stop thief!” and pointing fingers, it’s a time to cooperate and to develop a vaccine as soon as possible. Institutions in Europe, China, Russia, the US and many other countries are working on this. A kind of “prestigious race” is taking place – who will be the first? There are already manifestations of “national egotism” where the competition for being the first with a vaccine is not entirely scrupulous. There is information that the US has bought Sanofi, a French company, in the hope that it will be the first to develop the vaccine and that the US will get it. However, there are proposals from France and other European countries (which we share) that any positive result in this regard must be instantly made available internationally and the vaccine must be accessible to all. This is common sense without any selfish aspirations or attempts to derive a political benefit from this tragic situation.

I would like to recall that it was in late December that we learned from our Chinese colleagues about what was happening there (when they became convinced that this was really an epidemic). In January, specialists were already talking about it, in part, under the aegis of the World Health Organisation (WHO). In February WHO experts visited Wuhan. By the way, there was a Russian specialist in this delegation. So, it is at least inappropriate to say that the Chinese were concealing information from the WHO, or that the WHO did not know some things, or that it knew about the coronavirus but held back information. Needless to say, nobody could imagine the developments that led to this pandemic but it’s an unprecedented situation. Doctors were acting under conditions where the experience gained from other pandemics was not enough. This pandemic proved to be much more serious.

I think WHO experts must be supported and encouraged in every way rather than accused without grounds. This is especially true since the overwhelming majority of WHO Secretariat employees come from the countries that are the strongest critics of the WHO. They are demanding a drastic reform of the organisation, everything short of closing it down. Representatives of the US, France, Italy, Ireland, Spain, Australia, Portugal and Britain amount to over 30 percent of the WHO specialists, that is, people who deal professionally with epidemics and healthcare in general. The majority of Western countries have many more specialists there than they are entitled to by their quota. Out of about 2,100 specialists, one third come from Western countries. Italy, Canada and Australia have about 60 employees each. China has fewer than 40 and Russia has 20. Even if China or any other non-Western country had a malicious plan to use the WHO for its narrow interests, how can 40 people do this if they are confronted by over 700 specialists from Western countries, which are united by allied commitments in NATO and the European Union? I believe it is important to focus now on helping the experts and professionals to develop a vaccine instead of trying to derive some geopolitical, electoral or other advantages.

Question: When the pandemic is over and the vaccine is created, will Russia support the idea of investigating how everything began and why this happened? Or are there no grounds for this based on what you have said?

Sergey Lavrov: I have already talked about this. I would not call this an investigation but the need to understand what exactly caused the coronavirus. Most experts agree that it is of natural origin. But, of course, it is necessary to find out how this natural process began and how the virus started to spread between people. Scientists are working on this. Their findings will be key in order to develop a remedy to this threat and to try as hard as possible to insure against similar threats in the future, not to say “I was right, and the virus emerged at this market, so we have to impose sanctions against this country.”

Question: President of France Emmanuel Macron suggested to his colleagues at the UN Security Council holding a meeting via videoconference and discussing the developments around the coronavirus. Why hasn't this meeting happened yet?

Sergey Lavrov: I don't know. It was President Emmanuel Macron's initiative. His explanation was that the UN Security Council permanent members needed to raise their voice among other members of the international community, calling on them to unite and show solidarity in countering the coronavirus, helping everyone in need and providing medical assistance, including to develop the vaccine. We supported this. By this time, the UN General Assembly had adopted a resolution in this context. The G20 had adopted statements, which Russia was involved in preparing. The G-77 (a group of developing countries) and China also put out a statement, which we supported. President of France Emmanuel Macron suggested that the five UN Security Council permanent members should also speak about this. We agreed to do so if it was acceptable for all the council members. Everyone agreed that the meeting had to be held via videoconference with the final document drafted in advance. We saw all the versions of the final document. We completely accept the latest draft. Several other members have counterproposals that have not been agreed upon yet. We are ready to hold this conference at any moment.

Question: You said Russia also expects to hold a face-to-face meeting of the leaders of the UN Security Council's five permanent members. The meeting was proposed by President of Russia Vladimir Putin. When he first made the proposal, it was compared to the Yalta Conference, that is, a meeting that might establish a new international order. Is this meeting still needed amid the coronavirus pandemic?

Sergey Lavrov: We do not just expect to hold this meeting, we will hold it. This initiative was promptly supported by China, France, then by US President Donald Trump and later by the British Prime Minister. You remember that President of Russia Vladimir Putin put forward the idea in January of this year. He emphasised that the agenda should be carefully worked out. We are now doing it. All the Security Council permanent members share an understanding that the agenda must encompass key problems of today's world, primarily from the perspective of strategic stability and global security. This is due to the fact that the five permanent members of the Security Council, under the UN Charter, bear a special responsibility for maintaining international peace and security. We would like to propose that the five leaders consider in a succinct and interconnected manner all the topics that fall within this competence. This meeting is needed even more during the coronavirus pandemic. The coronavirus infection, apart from what we spoke about earlier in our conversation (meaning its effect on everyday life and the organisation of international relations), also revealed problems that require a more systemic review and that relate to how states, their associations, international communities and the international order as a whole will cope with this challenge. It will have an impact, obviously, in security, as well as in the military-political, economic, environmental and humanitarian areas. But humanitarian and economic issues are not among the UN Security Council's

responsibilities. I don't think it would be appropriate for the five leaders to encroach on the area of competence of the UN General Assembly and other bodies with universal membership. But military, political and security issues must be discussed. Our partners – France, the US, the UK and China – reaffirm in each conversation and at all levels that the initiative remains significant and is becoming even more so in the current conditions. As soon as the epidemiological situation allows, we will consider the logistical issues of preparing for this forum, whereas now we are dealing with its substantive content remotely.

Question: Could it be that you have already started drafting the final documents of that meeting?

Sergey Lavrov: As I said, we are working on the substantive content of that meeting, which requires further consultations with our partners.

Question: Victory Day is over, but historical disputes still continue. In a recent interview with RBC, Czech Foreign Minister Tomas Petricek said his taxpayers are paying him for building current and future relations with Russia not for historical disputes. He suggests they should be left to historians. Why isn't history left to historians in relations with the Czech Republic and Poland? You and your ministry have to make statements in this regard almost every day.

Sergey Lavrov: I would advise those who make such statements to look at the recent archives. In the past few years, we have emphasised many times the need to deal with practical policy and leave history to historians. It's good that after many years this idea has been accepted by those to whom it was addressed, although not by all.

This is how it should be for all those who defend justice and international law. But the problem is that our colleagues who suggest dealing with current policy rather than history see "current policy" as the promotion of ideas on rewriting history. They are suggesting approaches that are making null and void the results of World War II, the verdicts of the Nuremberg Trials and interstate agreements based on the results of WWII, including our agreements with the Czech Republic, Poland, and other European countries, including the former Warsaw Pact members that we are now discussing.

Our approach is based on the need to respect history that is fixed in international law. As for discourse about different historical events, it must be left for historians. We have quite a few commissions of historians that discussed these issues, for instance, joint commissions with Poland, Lithuania and Germany. The commission with Poland is cooperating with the Institute of History at the Russian Academy of Sciences. They are co-authors of textbooks. There are jointly written chapters on some episodes of our common history. On other episodes, Russian and Polish historians express their different views in the same publications.

If our partners interpret the appeal to leave history to historians as their right not to abide by international legal commitments stemming from the UN Charter, the decisions of the Nuremberg Trials or the 1993 agreements in the case of the Czech Republic (the Treaty on Friendly Relations and Cooperation), they are not going to succeed.

Speaking about the Czech Republic, after the revolting actions of the head of a Prague district council, Foreign Minister Tomas Petricek expressed willingness to start the consultations we proposed with a view to monitoring how the sides fulfil the 1993 treaty, including the requirement to preserve and make accessible military graves and memorials, which was signed and ratified by Moscow and Prague. In the case of the monument to Marshal Ivan Konev, this commitment

was crudely violated. We were given some childish explanations to the effect that the Czech government had nothing to do with this decision because the monument belonged to this particular district, that is, its head. I consider this explanation childish because the commitment to preserve this monument was a responsibility of the Czech Republic. Moreover, until recently we knew (and the Czech side has confirmed it) that this monument was in the register of the Czech Defence Ministry. And then, all of a sudden, after its demolition, they are telling us bashfully that this monument did not belong to them. I consider this unacceptable. I think that our Czech colleagues will have to give us very serious explanations at the forthcoming consultations and will tell us how they will rectify this situation. The commitment has not disappeared, and the monument must be restored.

Question: You have mentioned the archives. In his recent article, Permanent Representative of Russia to the European Union Vladimir Chizhov wrote about Dulles' Plan. Are their grounds to mention it in official documents, considering that its existence is a conspiracy theory?

Sergey Lavrov: The Russian Mission to the EU has already commented on this and thanked journalists for their attentiveness to the article written by our Permanent Representative Vladimir Chizhov. It explained that this figure was mentioned not in connection with a document for conspiracy purposes, but as a person that expressed the spirit of that time. We all know what plans our allies discussed immediately after the victory over Nazism. It is in this context that his name came up.

Question: You have mentioned that the final document of the meeting suggested by French President Emmanuel Macron for mapping out joint actions on countering the coronavirus infection is virtually ready. Can you describe in broad terms what it will be about, without revealing secrets of others?

Sergey Lavrov: I don't think you will find any surprises in this document. I won't specify its contents. But by and large, if you read the already published resolution of the UN General Assembly and the G20, you will get an impression about what is being done at this stage of the preparations for the French-proposed video conference of the UN Security Council permanent members.