

[mid.ru](https://www.mid.ru)

Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's interview with RTVI television, Moscow, September 17, 2020

40-51 minutes

Question: I'll start with the hottest topic, Belarus. President of the Republic of Belarus Alexander Lukashenko visited Bocharov Ruchei. Both sides have officially recognised that change within the Union State is underway. This begs the question: What is this about? A common currency, common army and common market? What will it be like?

Sergey Lavrov: It will be the way our countries decide. Work is underway. It relies on the 1999 Union Treaty. We understand that over 20 years have passed since then. That is why, a couple of years ago, upon the decision of the two presidents, the governments of the Russian Federation and the Republic of Belarus began to work on identifying the agreed-upon steps that would make our integration fit current circumstances. Recently, at a meeting with Russian journalists, President Lukashenko said that the situation had, of course, changed and we must agree on ways to deepen integration from today's perspective.

The presidential election has taken place in Belarus. The situation there is tense, because the opposition, backed by some of our Western colleagues, is trying to challenge the election outcome,

but I'm convinced that the situation will soon get back to normal, and the work to promote integration processes will resume.

Everything that is written in the Union Treaty is now being analysed. Both sides have to come to a common opinion about whether a particular provision of the Union Treaty is still relevant, or needs to be revised. There are 31 roadmaps, and each one focuses on a specific section of the Union Treaty. So, there's clearly a commitment to continue the reform, a fact that was confirmed by the presidents during a recent telephone conversation. This is further corroborated by the presidents' meeting in Sochi.

I would not want that country's neighbours, and our neighbours for that matter, including Lithuania, for example, to try to impose their will on the Belarusian people and, in fact, to manage the processes in which the opposition is unwittingly doing what's expected of it. I have talked several times about Svetlana Tikhanovskaya's situation. Clearly, someone is putting words in her mouth. She is now in the capital of Lithuania, which, like our Polish colleagues, is strongly demanding a change of power in Belarus. You are aware that Lithuania declared Ms Tikhanovskaya the leader of the Republic of Belarus, and Alexander Lukashenko was declared an illegitimate president.

Ms Tikhanovskaya has made statements that give rise to many questions. She said she was concerned that Russia and Belarus have close relations. The other day, she called on the security and law-enforcement forces to side with the law. In her mind, this is a direct invitation to breach the oath of office and, by and large, to commit high treason. This is probably a criminal offense. So, those who provide her with a framework for her activities and tell her

what to say and what issues to raise should, of course, realise that they may be held accountable for that.

Question: Commenting on the upcoming meeting of the presidents of Russia and Belarus in Sochi, Tikhanovskaya said: “Whatever they agree on, these agreements will be illegitimate, because the new state and the new leader will revise them.” How can one work under such circumstances?

Sergey Lavrov: She was also saying something like that when Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin went to Belarus to meet with President Lukashenko and Prime Minister Golovchenko. She was saying it then. Back then, the opposition was concerned about any more or less close ties between our countries. This is despite the fact that early on during the crisis they claimed that they in no way engaged in anti-Russia activities and wanted to be friends with the Russian people. However, everyone could have seen the policy paper posted on Tikhanovskaya’s website during the few hours it was there. The opposition leaders removed it after realising they had made a mistake sharing their goals and objectives with the public. These goals and objectives included withdrawal from the CSTO, the EAEU and other integration associations that include Russia, and drifting towards the EU and NATO, as well as the consistent banning of the Russian language and the Belarusianisation of all aspects of life.

We are not against the Belarusian language, but when they take a cue from Ukraine, and when the state language is used to ban a language spoken by the overwhelming majority of the population, this already constitutes a hostile act and, in the case of Ukraine, an act that violates its constitution. If a similar proposal is introduced into the Belarusian legal field, it will violate the Constitution of

Belarus, not to mention numerous conventions on the rights of ethnic and language minorities, and much more.

I would like those who are rabidly turning the Belarusian opposition against Russia to realise their share of responsibility, and the opposition themselves, including Svetlana Tikhanovskaya and others – to find the courage to resist such rude and blatant manipulation.

Question: If we are talking about manipulation, we certainly understand that it has many faces and reflects on the international attitude towards Russia. Internationally, what are the risks for us of supporting Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko? Don't you think 26 years is enough? Maybe he has really served for too long?

Sergey Lavrov: The President of the Republic of Belarus, Alexander Lukashenko, did say it might have been “too long.” I believe he has proposed a very productive idea – constitutional reform. He talked about this even before the election, and has reiterated the proposal more than once since then. President of Russia Vladimir Putin supports this attitude. As the Belarusian leader said, after constitutional reform, he will be ready to announce early parliamentary and presidential elections. This proposal provides a framework where a national dialogue will be entirely possible. But it is important that representatives of all groups of Belarusian society to be involved in a constitutional reform process. This would ensure that any reform is completely legitimate and understandable for all citizens. Now a few specific proposals are needed concerning when, where and in what form this process can begin. I hope that this will be done, because President Alexander Lukashenko has repeatedly reaffirmed carrying out this initiative.

Question: Since we started talking about the international attitude towards Russia, let's go over to our other partner – the United States. The elections in the US will take place very soon. We are actively discussing this in Russia. When asked whether Russia was getting ready for the elections in the US at the Paris forum last year, you replied: "Don't worry, we'll resolve this problem." Now that the US elections are around the corner, I would like to ask you whether you've resolved it.

Sergey Lavrov: Speaking seriously, of course we, like any other normal country that is concerned about its interests and international security, are closely following the progress of the election campaign in the US. There are many surprising things in it. Naturally, we see how important the Russian issue is in this electoral process. The Democrats are doing all they can to prove that Russia will exploit its hacker potential and play up to Donald Trump. We are already being accused of promoting the idea that the Democrats will abuse the mail-in voting option thereby prejudicing the unbiased nature of voting. I would like to note at this point that mail-in voting has become a target of consistent attacks on behalf of President Trump himself. Russia has nothing to do with this at all.

A week-long mail-in voting is an interesting subject in comparing election systems in different countries. We have introduced three-day voting for governors and legislative assembly deputies in some regions. You can see the strong criticism it is subjected to, inside Russia as well. When the early voting in the US lasts for weeks, if not months, it is considered a model of democracy. I don't see any criticism in this respect. In principle, we have long proposed analysing election systems in the OSCE with a view to comparing

best practices and reviewing obviously obsolete arrangements. There have been instances in the US when, due to its cumbersome and discriminatory election system, a nominee who received the majority of votes could lose because in a national presidential election the voting is done through the Electoral College process rather than directly by the people. There have been quite a few cases like that. I once told former US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice in reply to her grievances about our electoral system: "But look at your problem. Maybe you should try to correct this discriminatory voting system?" She replied that it is discriminatory but they are used to it and this is their problem, so I shouldn't bother.

When the United States accuses us of interference in some area of its public, political or government life, we suggest discussing it to establish who is actually doing what. Since they don't present any facts, we simply recite their Congressional acts. In 2014, they adopted an act on supporting Ukraine, which directly instructed the Department of State to spend \$20 million a year on support for Russian NGOs. We asked whether this didn't amount to interference. We were told by the US National Security Council that in reality they support democracy because we are wreaking chaos and pursuing authoritative and dictatorial trends abroad when we interfere in domestic affairs whereas they bring democracy and prosperity. This idea is deeply rooted in American mentality. The American elite has always considered its country and nation exceptional and has not been shy to admit it.

I won't comment on the US election. This is US law and the US election system. Any comments I make will be again interpreted as an attempt to interfere in their domestic affairs. I will only say one

thing that President Vladimir Putin has expressed many times, notably, that we will respect any outcome of these elections and the will of the American people.

We realise that there will be no major changes in our relations either with the Democrats or with the Republicans, as representatives of both parties loudly declare. However, there is hope that common sense will prevail and no matter who becomes President, the new US Government and administration will realise the need to cooperate with us in resolving very serious global problems on which the international situation depends.

Question: You mentioned an example where voters can choose one president and the Electoral College process, another. I even have that cover of Time magazine with Hillary Clinton and congratulations, released during the election. It is a fairly well-known story, when they ran this edition and then had to cancel it.

Sergey Lavrov: Even the President of France sent a telegramme, but then they immediately recalled it.

And these people are now claiming that Alexander Lukashenko is an illegitimate president.

Question: You mentioned NGOs. These people believe that NGOs in the Russian Federation support democratic institutions, although it is no secret to anyone who has at least a basic understanding of foreign and domestic policy that those NGOs act exclusively as institutions that destabilise the situation in the country.

Sergey Lavrov: Not all of them.

Question: Can you tell us more about this?

Sergey Lavrov: We have adopted a series of laws – on public

associations, on non-profit organisations, on measures to protect people from human rights violations. There is a set of laws that regulate the activities of non-government organisations on our territory, both Russian and foreign ones.

Concepts have been introduced like “foreign agent,” a practice we borrowed from “the world’s most successful democracy” – the United States. They argue that we borrowed a practice from 1938 when the United States introduced the foreign agent concept to prevent Nazi ideology from infiltrating from Germany. But whatever the reason they had to create the concept – “foreign agent” – the Americans are still effectively using it, including in relation to our organisations and citizens, to Chinese citizens, to the media.

In our law, foreign agent status, whatever they say about it, does not prevent an organisation from operating on the territory of the Russian Federation. It just needs to disclose its funding sources and be transparent about the resources it receives. And even that, only if it is engaged in political activities. Initially, we introduced a requirement for these organisations that receive funding from abroad and are involved in political projects to initiate the disclosure process. But most of them didn’t want to comply with the law, so it was modified. Now this is done by the Russian Ministry of Justice.

Question: Do you think that NGOs are still soft power?

Sergey Lavrov: Of course. In Russia we have about 220,000 NGOs, out of which 180 have the status of a foreign agent. It’s a drop in the ocean. These are probably the organisations, funded from abroad, that are more active than others in promoting in our public space ideas that far from always correspond to Russian

legislation.

There is also the notion of undesirable organisations. They are banned from working in the Russian Federation. But there are only about 30 of them, no more.

Question: Speaking about our soft power, what is our concept? What do we offer the world? What do you think the world should love us for? What is Russia's soft power policy all about?

Sergey Lavrov: We want everything that has been created by nations and civilisations to be respected. We believe nobody should impose any orders on anyone, so that nothing like what has now happened in Hollywood takes place on a global scale. We think nobody should encroach on the right of each nation to have its historical traditions and moral roots. And we see attempts to encroach upon them.

If soft power is supposed to promote one's own culture, language and traditions, in exchange for knowledge about the life of other nations and civilisations, then this is the approach that the Russian Federation supports in every way.

The Americans define the term "soft power" as an attempt to influence the hearts and minds of others politically. Their goal is not to promote their culture and language, but to change the mood of the political class with a view to subsequent regime change. They are doing this on a daily basis and don't even conceal it. They say everywhere that their mission is to bring peace and democracy to all other countries.

Question: Almost any TV series out there shows the US president sitting in the Oval Office saying he's the leader of the free world.

Sergey Lavrov: Not just TV series. Barack Obama has repeatedly stated that America is an exceptional nation and should be seen as an example by the rest of the world. My colleague Mike Pompeo recently said in the Czech Republic that they shouldn't let the Russians into the nuclear power industry and should take the Russians off the list of companies that bid for these projects. It was about the same in Hungary. He then went to Africa and was quite vocal when he told the African countries not to do business with the Russians or the Chinese, because they are trading with the African countries for selfish reasons, whereas the US is establishing economic cooperation with them so they can prosper. This is a quote. It is articulated in a very straightforward manner, much the same way they run their propaganda on television in an unsophisticated broken language that the man in the street can relate to. So, brainwashing is what America's soft power is known for.

Question: Not a single former Soviet republic has so far benefited from American soft power.

Sergey Lavrov: Not only former Soviet republics. Take a look at any other region where the Americans have effected a regime change.

Question: Libya, Syria. We stood for Syria.

Sergey Lavrov: Iraq, Libya. They tried in Syria, but failed. I hope things will be different there. There's not a single country where the Americans changed the regime and declared victory for democracy, like George W. Bush did on the deck of an aircraft carrier in Iraq in May 2003, which is prosperous now. He said democracy had won in Iraq. It would be interesting to know what

the former US President thinks about the situation in Iraq today. But no one will, probably, go back to this, because the days when presidents honestly admitted their mistakes are gone.

Question: Here I am listening to you and wondering how many people care about this? Why is it that no one understands this? Is this politics that is too far away from ordinary people who are nevertheless behind it? Take Georgia or Ukraine. People are worse off now than before, and despite this, this policy continues.

Will the Minsk agreements ever be implemented? Will the situation in southeastern Ukraine ever be settled?

Returning to what we talked about. How independent is Ukraine in its foreign policy?

Sergey Lavrov: I don't think that under the current Ukrainian government, just like under the previous president, we will see any progress in the implementation of the Minsk agreements, if only because President Zelensky himself is saying so publicly, as does Deputy Prime Minister Reznikov who is in charge of the Ukrainian settlement in the Contact Group. Foreign Minister of Ukraine Kuleba is also saying this. They say there's a need for the Minsk agreements and they cannot be broken, because these agreements (and accusing Russia of non-compliance) are the foundation of the EU and the US policy in seeking to maintain the sanctions on Russia. Nevertheless, such a distorted interpretation of the essence of the Minsk agreements, or rather an attempt to blame everything on Russia, although Russia is never mentioned there, has stuck in the minds of our European colleagues, including France and Germany, who, being co-sponsors of the Minsk agreements along with us, the Ukrainians and Donbass, cannot but

realise that the Ukrainians are simply distorting their responsibilities, trying to distance themselves from them and impose a different interpretation of the Minsk agreements. But even in this scenario, the above individuals and former Ukrainian President Kravchuk, who now heads the Ukrainian delegation to the Contact Group as part of the Minsk process, claim that the Minsk agreements in their present form are impracticable and must be revised, turned upside down. Also, Donbass must submit to the Ukrainian government and army before even thinking about conducting reforms in this part of Ukraine.

This fully contradicts the sequence of events outlined in the Minsk agreements whereby restoring Ukrainian armed forces' control on the border with Russia is possible only after an amnesty, agreeing on the special status of these territories, making this status part of the Ukrainian Constitution and holding elections there. Now they propose giving back the part of Donbass that "rebelled" against the anti-constitutional coup to those who declared these people terrorists and launched an "anti-terrorist operation" against them, which they later renamed a Joint Forces Operation (but this does not change the idea behind it), and whom they still consider terrorists. Although everyone remembers perfectly well that in 2014 no one from Donbass or other parts of Ukraine that rejected the anti-constitutional coup attacked the putschists and the areas that immediately fell under the control of the politicians behind the coup. On the contrary, Alexander Turchinov, Arseniy Yatsenyuk and others like them attacked these areas. The guilt of the people living there was solely in them saying, "You committed a crime against the state, we do not want to follow your rules, let us figure out our own future and see what you will do next." There's not a

single example that would corroborate the fact that they engaged in terrorism. It was the Ukrainian state that engaged in terrorism on their territory, in particular, when they killed [Head of the Donetsk People's Republic] Alexander Zakharchenko and a number of field commanders in Donbass. So, I am not optimistic about this.

Question: So, we are looking at a dead end?

Sergey Lavrov: You know, we still have an undeniable argument which is the text of the Minsk Agreements approved by the UN Security Council.

Question: But they tried to revise it?

Sergey Lavrov: No, they are just making statements to that effect. When they gather for a Contact Group meeting in Minsk, they do their best to look constructive. The most recent meeting ran into the Ukrainian delegation's attempts to pretend that nothing had happened. They recently passed a law on local elections which will be held in a couple of months. It says that elections in what are now called the Donetsk and Lugansk people's republics will be held only after the Ukrainian army takes control of the entire border and those who "committed criminal offenses" are arrested and brought to justice even though the Minsk agreements provide for amnesty without exemptions.

Question: When I'm asked about Crimea I recall the referendum. I was there at a closed meeting in Davos that was attended by fairly well respected analysts from the US. They claimed with absolute confidence that Crimea was being occupied. I reminded them about the referendum. I was under the impression that these people either didn't want to see or didn't know how people lived there, that they have made their choice. Returning to the previous

question, I think that nobody is interested in the opinion of the people.

Sergey Lavrov: No, honest politicians still exist. Many politicians, including European ones, were in Crimea during the referendum. They were there not under the umbrella of some international organisation but on their own because the OSCE and other international agencies were controlled by our Western colleagues. Even if we had addressed them, the procedure for coordinating the monitoring would have never ended.

Question: Just as in Belarus. As I see it, they were also invited but nobody came.

Sergey Lavrov: The OSCE refused to send representatives there. Now that the OSCE is offering its services as a mediator, I completely understand Mr Lukashenko who says the OSCE lost its chance. It could have sent observers and gained a first-hand impression of what was happening there, and how the election was held. They arrogantly disregarded the invitation. We know that the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) is practically wholly controlled by NATO. We have repeatedly proposed that our nominees work there but they have not been approved. This contradicts the principles of the OSCE. We will continue to seek a fairer approach to the admission of members to the organisation, but I don't have much hope for this. Former OSCE Secretary General Thomas Greminger made an effort with this for the past three years but not everything depended on him – there is a large bloc of EU and NATO countries that enjoy a mathematical majority and try to dictate their own rules. But this is a separate issue.

Returning to Crimea, I have read a lot about this; let me give you two examples. One concerns my relations with former US Secretary of State John Kerry. In April 2014, we met in Geneva: me, John Kerry, EU High Representative Catherine Ashton and then Acting Foreign Minister of Ukraine Andrey Deshchitsa. We compiled a one page document that was approved unanimously. It read that we, the representatives of Russia, the US and the EU welcomed the commitments of the Ukrainian authorities to carry out decentralisation of the country with the participation of all the regions of Ukraine. This took place after the Crimean referendum. Later, the Americans, the EU and of course Ukraine “forgot” about this document. John Kerry told me at this meeting that everyone understood that Crimea was Russian, that the people wanted to return, but that we held the referendum so quickly that it didn't fit into the accepted standards of such events. He asked me to talk to President Vladimir Putin, organise one more referendum, announce it in advance and invite international observers. He said he would support their visit there, that the result would be the same but that we would be keeping up appearances. I asked him why put on such shows if they understand that this was the expression of the will of the people.

The second example concerns the recent statements by the EU and the European Parliament to the effect that “the occupation” of Crimea is a crude violation of the world arrangement established after the victory in World War II. But if this criterion is used to determine where Crimea belongs, when the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic joined the UN after WWII in 1945, Crimea did not belong to it. Crimea was part of the USSR. Later, Nikita Khrushchev took an illegal action, which contradicted Soviet law,

and this led to them having it. But we all understood that this was a domestic political game as regards a Soviet republic that was the home to Khrushchev and many of his associates.

Question: You have been Foreign Minister for 16 years now. This century's major foreign policy challenges fell on your term in office. We faced sanctions, and we adapted to them and coped with them. Germany said it obtained Alexey Navalny's test results. France and Sweden have confirmed the presence of Novichok in them. Reportedly, we are now in for more sanctions. Do you think the Navalny case can trigger new sanctions against Russia?

Sergey Lavrov: I agree with our political analysts who are convinced that if it were not for Navalny, they would have come up with something else in order to impose more sanctions.

With regard to this situation, I think our Western partners have simply gone beyond decency and reason. In essence, they are now demanding that we "confess." They are asking us: Don't you believe what the German specialists from the Bundeswehr are saying? How is that possible? Their findings have been confirmed by the French and the Swedes. You don't believe them, either?

It's a puzzling situation given that our Prosecutor General's Office filed an inquiry about legal assistance on August 27 and hasn't received an answer yet. Nobody knows where the inquiry has been for more than a week now. We were told it was at the German Foreign Ministry. The German Foreign Ministry did not forward the request to the Ministry of Justice, which was our Prosecutor General Office's ultimate addressee. Then, they said that it had been transferred to the Berlin Prosecutor's Office, but they would not tell us anything without the consent of the family. They are

urging us to launch a criminal investigation.

We have our own laws, and we cannot take someone's word for it to open a criminal case. Certain procedures must be followed. A pre-investigation probe initiated immediately after this incident to consider the circumstances of the case is part of this procedure.

Some of our Western colleagues wrote that, as the German doctors discovered, it was "a sheer miracle" that Mr Navalny survived. Allegedly, it was the notorious Novichok, but he survived thanks to "lucky circumstances." What kind of lucky circumstances are we talking about? First, the pilot immediately landed the plane; second, an ambulance was already waiting on the airfield; and third, the doctors immediately started to provide help. This absolutely impeccable behaviour of the pilots, doctors and ambulance crew is presented as "lucky circumstances." That is, they even deny the possibility that we are acting as we should. This sits deep in the minds of those who make up such stories.

Returning to the pre-investigation probe, everyone is fixated on a criminal case. If we had opened a criminal case right away (we do not have legal grounds to do so yet, and that is why the Prosecutor General's Office requested legal assistance from Germany on August 27), what would have been done when it happened? They would have interviewed the pilot, the passengers and the doctors. They would have found out what the doctors discovered when Navalny was taken to the Omsk hospital, and what medications were used. They would have interviewed the people who communicated with him. All of that was done. They interviewed the five individuals who accompanied him and participated in the events preceding Navalny boarding the plane; they interviewed the passengers who were waiting for a flight to Moscow in Tomsk and

sat at the same bar; they found out what they ordered and what he drank. The sixth person, a woman who accompanied him, has fled, as you know. They say she was the one who gave the bottle to the German lab. All this has been done. Even if all of that was referred to as a “criminal case,” we couldn’t have done more.

Our Western partners are looking down on us as if we have no right to question what they are saying or their professionalism. If this is the case, it means that they dare to question the professionalism of our doctors and investigators. Unfortunately, this position is reminiscent of other times. Arrogance and a sense of infallibility have already been observed in Europe, and that led to very regrettable consequences.

Question: How would you describe this policy of confrontation? When did it start (I mean during your term of office)? It’s simply so stable at the moment that there seems no chance that something might change in the future.

Sergey Lavrov: President of Russia Vladimir Putin has repeatedly spoken on this topic. I think that the onset of this policy, this era of constant pressure on Russia began with the end of a period that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union, a time when the West believed it had Russia there in its pocket – it ended, full stop. Unfortunately, the West does not seem to be able to wrap its head around this, to accept that there is no alternative to Russia's independent actions, both domestically and on the international arena. This is why, unfortunately, this agony continues by inertia. Having bad ties with any country have never given us any pleasure. We do not like making such statements in which we sharply criticise the position of the West. We always try to find

compromises, but there are situations where it is hard not to come face to face with one another directly or to avoid frank assessments of what our Western friends are up to.

I have read what our respected political scientists write who are well known in the West. And I can say this idea is starting to surface ever stronger and more often – it is time we stop measuring our actions with the yardsticks that the West offers us and to stop trying to please the West at all costs. These are very serious people and they are making a serious point. The fact that the West is prodding us to this way of thinking, willingly or unwillingly, is obvious to me. Most likely, this is being done involuntarily. But it is a big mistake to think that Russia will play by Western rules in any case – as big a mistake as like approaching China with the same yardstick.

Question: Then I really have to ask you. We are going through digitalisation. I think when you started your diplomatic career, you could not even have imagined that some post on Twitter could affect the political situation in a country. Yet – I can see your smile – we are living in a completely different world. Film stars can become presidents; Twitter, Instagram, or Facebook can become drivers of political campaigns – that happened more than once – and those campaigns can be successful. We are going through digitalisation, and because of this, many unexpected people appear in international politics – unexpected for you, at least. How do you think Russia's foreign policy will change in this context? Are we ready for social media to be impacting our internal affairs? Is the Chinese scenario possible in Russia, with most Western social media blocked to avoid their influence on the internal affairs in that country?

Sergey Lavrov: Social media are already exerting great influence on our affairs. This is the reality in the entire post-Soviet space and developing countries. The West, primarily the United States, is vigorously using social media to promote their preferred agenda in just about any state. This necessitates a new approach to ensuring the national security. We have been doing this for a long time already.

As for regulating social media, everyone does it. You know that the digital giants in the United States have been repeatedly caught introducing censorship, primarily against us, China or other countries they dislike, shutting off information that comes from these places.

The internet is regulated by companies based in the United States, everyone knows that. In fact, this situation has long made the overwhelming majority of countries want to do something about it, considering the global nature of the internet and social media, to make sure that the management processes are approved at a global level, become transparent and understandable. The International Telecommunication Union, a specialised UN agency, has been out there for years. Russia and a group of other co-sponsoring countries are promoting the need to regulate the internet in such a way that everyone understands how it works and what principles govern it, in this International Union. Now we can see how Mark Zuckerberg and other heads of large IT companies are invited to the Congress and lectured there and asked to explain what they are going to do. We can see this. But a situation where it will be understandable for everyone else and, most importantly, where everyone is happy with it, still seems far away.

For many years, we have been promoting at the UN General

Assembly an initiative to agree on the rules of responsible behaviour of states in the sphere of international information security. This initiative has already led to set up several working groups, which have completed their mandate with reports. The last such report was reviewed last year and another resolution was adopted. This time, it was not a narrow group of government experts, but a group that includes all UN member states. It was planning to meet, but things slowed down due to the coronavirus. The rules for responsible conduct in cyberspace are pending review by this group. These rules were approved by the SCO, meaning they already reflect a fairly large part of the world's population.

Our other initiative is not about the use of cyberspace for undermining someone's security; it is about fighting crimes (pedophilia, pornography, theft) in cyberspace. This topic is being considered by another UNGA committee. We are preparing a draft convention that will oblige all states to suppress criminal activities in cyberspace.

Question: Do you think that the Foreign Ministry is active on this front? Would you like to be more proactive in the digital dialogue? After all, we are still bound by ethics, and have yet to understand whether we can cross the line or not. Elon Musk feels free to make any statements no matter how ironic and makes headlines around the world, even though anything he says has a direct bearing on his market cap. This is a shift in the ethics of behaviour. Do you think that this is normal? Is this how it should be? Or maybe people still need to behave professionally?

Sergey Lavrov: A diplomat can always use irony and a healthy dose of cynicism. In this sense, there is no contradiction here.

However, this does not mean that while making ironic remarks on the surrounding developments or comments every once in a while (witty or not so witty), you do not have to work on resolving legal matters related to internet governance. This is what we are doing.

The Foreign Ministry has been at the source of these processes. We have been closely coordinating our efforts on this front with the Security Council Office, and the Ministry of Digital Development, Communications and Mass Media and other organisations.

Russian delegations taking part in talks include representatives from various agencies. Apart from multilateral platforms such as the International Telecommunication Union, the UN General Assembly and the OSCE, we are working on this subject in bilateral relations with our key partners.

We are most interested in working with our Western partners, since we have an understanding on these issues with countries that share similar views. The Americans and Europeans evade these talks under various pretexts. There seemed to be an opening in 2012 and 2013, but after the government coup in Ukraine, they used it as a pretext to freeze this process. Today, there are some signs that the United States and France are beginning to revive these contacts, but our partners have been insufficiently active. What we want is professional dialogue so that they can raise all their concerns and accusations and back them with specific facts. We stand ready to answer all the concerns our partners may have, and will not fail to voice the concerns we have. We have many of them.

During the recent visit by German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas to Russia, I handed him a list containing dozens of incidents we have identified: attacks against our resources, with 70 percent of them

targeting state resources of the Russian Federation, and originating on German territory. He promised to provide an answer, but more than a month after our meeting we have not seen it so far.

Question: Let me ask you about another important initiative by the Foreign Ministry. You decided to amend regulations enabling people to be repatriated from abroad for free, and you proposed subjecting the repatriation guarantee to the reimbursement of its cost to the budget. Could you tell us, please, is this so expensive for the state to foot this bill?

Sergey Lavrov: Of course, these are substantial expenses. The resolution that provided for offering free assistance was adopted back in 2010, and was intended for citizens who find themselves in situations when their life is at risk. Imagine a Russian ambassador. Most of the people ask for help because they have lost money, their passport and so on. There are very few cases when an ambassador can actually say that a person is in a life-threatening situation and his or her life is in danger. How can an ambassador take a decision of this kind? As long as I remember, these cases can be counted on the fingers of my two hands since 2010, when an ambassador had to take responsibility and there were grounds for offering this assistance. We wanted to ensure that people can get help not only when facing an imminent danger (a dozen cases in ten years do not cost all that much). There were many more cases when our nationals found themselves in a difficult situation after losing money or passports. We decided to follow the practices used abroad. Specifically, this means that we provide fee-based assistance. In most cases, people travelling abroad can afford to reimburse the cost of a return ticket.

This practice is designed to prevent fraud, which remains an issue.

We had cases when people bought one-way tickets knowing that they will have to be repatriated.

Question: And with no return ticket, they go to the embassy?

Sergey Lavrov: Yes, after that they come to the embassy. For this reason, I believe that the system we developed is much more convenient and comprehensive for dealing with the situations Russians get into when travelling abroad, and when we have to step in to help them through our foreign missions.

Question: Mr Lavrov, thank you for your time. As a Georgian, I really have to ask this. Isn't it time to simplify the visa regime with Georgia? A second generation of Georgians has now grown up that has never seen Russia. What do you think?

Sergey Lavrov: Georgians can travel to Russia – they just need to apply for a visa. The list of grounds for obtaining a visa has been expanded. There are practically no restrictions on visiting Russia, after obtaining a visa in the Interests Section for the Russian Federation in Tbilisi or another Russian overseas agency.

As for visa-free travel, as you know, we were ready for this a year ago. We were actually a few steps away from being ready to announce it when that incident happened with the Russian Federal Assembly delegation to the International Interparliamentary Assembly on Orthodoxy, where they were invited in the first place, seated in their chairs, and then violence was almost used against them.

I am confident that our relations with Georgia will recover and improve. We can see new Georgian politicians who are interested in this. For now, there are just small parties in the ruling elites. But I believe our traditional historical closeness, and the mutual affinity

between our peoples will ultimately triumph. Provocateurs who are trying to prevent Georgia from resuming normal relations with Russia will be put to shame.

They are trying to use Georgia the same way as Ukraine. In Ukraine, the IMF plays a huge role. And the IMF recently decided that each tranche allocated to Ukraine would be short-term.

Question: Microcredits.

Sergey Lavrov: Microcredits and a short leash that can always be pulled a little.

They are trying to use Georgia the same way. We have no interest in seeing this situation continue. We did not start it and have never acted against the Georgian people. Everyone remembers the 2008 events, how American instructors arrived there and trained the Georgian army. The Americans were well aware of Mikheil Saakashvili's lack of restraint. He trampled on all agreements and issued a criminal order.

We are talking about taking their word for it. There were many cases when we took their word for it, but then it all boiled down to zilch. In 2003, Colin Powell, a test tube – that was an academic version. An attack on Iraq followed. Many years later, Tony Blair admitted that there had been no nuclear weapons in Iraq. There were many such stories. In 1999, the aggression against Yugoslavia was triggered by the OSCE representative in the Balkans, US diplomat William Walker, who visited the village of Racak, where they found thirty corpses, and declared it genocide of the Albanian population. A special investigation by the International Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia found they were military dressed in civilian clothes. But Mr Walker loudly declared it

was genocide. Washington immediately seized on the idea, and so did London and other capitals. NATO launched an aggression against Yugoslavia.

After the end of the five-day military operation to enforce peace, the European Union ordered a special report from a group of invited experts, including Swiss diplomat Heidi Tagliavini. She was later involved in the Minsk process, and then she was asked to lead a group of experts who investigated the outbreak of the military conflict in August 2008. The conclusion was unambiguous. All this happened on the orders of Mikheil Saakashvili, and as for his excuses that someone had provoked him, or someone had been waiting for him on the other side of the tunnel, this was just raving.

Georgians are a wise nation. They love life, perhaps the same way and the same facets that the peoples in the Russian Federation do. We will overcome the current abnormal situation and restore normal relations between our states and people.