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Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's remarks and answers to questions during the meeting with members of the Association of European Businesses in Russia, Moscow, October 5, 2020

60-76 minutes

Mr Vanderplaetse,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Colleagues,

Thank you for the opportunity to address once again the members of the Association of European Businesses in the Russian Federation. First of all, I would like to congratulate you on the 25th anniversary of your association. We appreciate your efforts to promote our economic, investment and trade ties, laying a solid foundation for building good relations between us and the countries you represent.

Here at the Foreign Ministry we value opportunities for dialogue with European entrepreneurs aimed at pushing forward a pragmatic, politics-free and mutually beneficial agenda. At the end of the day, these efforts are designed to improve the wellbeing of

the people in Russia and in your countries. Holding regular meetings in this format has become a good tradition, testifying to our mutual commitment to keeping this dialogue going.

Since our previous meeting last year, in fact more than a year ago, the overall global environment has not become any easier, seriously affecting business activity. For many years now, the problems of international terrorism, drug trafficking and organised crime have been escalating around the world. Regional conflicts continue unabated and their number is growing. Recently, the coronavirus infection emerged as a new and a very serious challenge for all of humanity. It would not be an exaggeration to say that it changed the lives of billions of people overnight. Today, no one can say with certainty when the pandemic will end. I will not elaborate here on how the interruption of global supply chains affects global trade. Unemployment is on the rise in many countries. All this weighs on the global economy, which will have to go through a lengthy and probably challenging recovery.

Speaking broadly, in the global context, the pandemic has yet again highlighted what we have long been talking about, that all countries without exception are interconnected, regardless of their geography, size and the level of economic development. All of them have been affected. This is how the pandemic has shown again that cross-border issues cannot be disregarded in this globalised world.

We believed that the conclusion was obvious, that the common tasks and challenges should bring all of us together based on the universally recognised norms of international law. Regrettably, this has not happened so far. Quite to the contrary, some of our Western colleagues led by the United States have tried to take

advantage of the novel coronavirus crisis to promote their narrow interests even more energetically and to settle scores with their geopolitical rivals. The appeals by UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres and High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet to suspend the illegitimate unilateral sanctions at least during the pandemic, primarily to allow the delivery of medicines and medical equipment as well as the necessary financial transactions, have fallen on deaf ears. Likewise, they have paid no heed to the initiative, put forth by President Vladimir Putin at the online G20 meeting, for setting up green corridors free from trade wars and sanctions to supply medications, food, equipment and technologies. This attitude to unifying initiatives is seriously poisoning the atmosphere of international cooperation and increasing the lack of mutual trust, damaging not only ordinary people, who have been affected first of all, but also the business circles. You know this better than anyone.

These alarming trends have also affected Russia-EU relations. There are hardly any positive achievements to speak about. Since 2014, when the European Union flagrantly violated its own pledge to guarantee the agreement between President Viktor Yanukovich and the opposition, it has not just accepted the coup but has actually been encouraging those who seized power in Ukraine illegally and in violation of the Constitution. In particular, the EU has turned a blind eye to the fact that the coup plotters' policy is based on Russophobia, and that they threatened to oust Russians from Crimea and tried to browbeat the Russian-speaking regions which refused to recognise the coup and said they wanted to sort out the situation. They were denounced as terrorists, even though they had not attacked anyone, and the army and Ukrainian

security forces were sent to fight them. As I said, they have been designated terrorists for refusing to recognise the coup.

Since then, the EU, probably becoming aware of its negative role in these processes but still trying to shift the blame onto someone else. Since 2014, it has ruined the multilevel architecture of interaction between Brussels and Moscow, from summit meetings to over two dozen sectoral dialogues. The programme of four common spaces has been abandoned. To this very day, the normalisation of our relations is being artificially conditioned on the implementation of the Minsk agreements. Moreover, they say openly that it is the Russian Federation that must do this.

Meanwhile, our Ukrainian colleagues have announced once again through their leaders, as you probably know, that the Minsk agreements should be preserved as the basis of the EU and US sanctions against Russia. This is their logic.

Of course, we will insist on the implementation of the Minsk Package of Measures, which has been approved by the UN Security Council, but we will not do this because we want the EU to lift its sanctions. We will do this above all in the interests of the fraternal Ukrainian people, who are suffering from what has been recently going on in Kiev and other parts of their country.

Restrictions are still retained on Russian economic operators' access to external financial markets. European producers, too, continue to sustain multi-billion losses. The other day, we became aware that Sweden has taken yet another discriminatory step. A Swedish company, Quintus Technologies AB, has refused to supply spare parts for GAZ Group's industrial press, under an absolutely far-fetched pretext. Allegedly, the equipment is of a military nature and has a dual purpose. This is absolutely artificial

logic. This press has been in use since 2009, and never before, including the entire period of crisis in our relations after the coup in Ukraine, have the Swedish regulators entertained any doubts. Judging by all appearances, this is by far not the last example, where the wish to curry favour with those who lay down the West's geopolitical line prevails over commonsense and own interests. Of course, this will also affect Swedish businesses that cooperate with the GAZ Group and the company's employees.

Regrettably, we have to state that the EU agencies continue their shortsighted policies. In particular, this refers to the EU member countries that have proclaimed themselves "frontline" states. Their mood is also "frontline" and they pursue "frontline" policies. Let me note that in July, the EU set into motion, under an absolutely far-fetched pretext, its 2019 framework for unilateral sanctions against violations of certain "rules" in the cyberspace, which rules have not yet been coordinated on a universal basis. Invented last year, this generic regime, as they decided, should be "test-driven" in practice over Russian citizens. Without providing any real evidence, they have accused them of launching a cyber attack against the headquarters of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) in The Hague. Created in 2019, this regime is not the only one of its kind. The EU has spawned, also within its "inner circle," yet another generic regime punishing violations in the field of employment of toxic chemicals, or, to put it in a nutshell, the use of prohibited types of chemicals that are chemical weapons. It is intended to be used in specific situations. I have no doubt that they will be attempting to apply this regime to the situation involving Alexey Navalny. Moreover, there is no need to "test-drive" or discuss the facts for this on a universal basis either.

Our French colleagues, again unilaterally, have established the so-called “partnership against impunity for the use of chemical weapons,” a structure outside of the UN or any universal and generally approved international legal framework. But a narrow circle of soul-mates will establish so called “facts,” whereupon a unilaterally created EU organisation intended to punish those who are allegedly guilty of violations will approve sanctions, based on these unilaterally established “facts.” All of this is sad and makes one think that our Western colleagues’ talk of the need for everyone to respect the rules-based order is not just a figure of speech or a synonym of the need to respect international law, but a conscious policy to substitute unilateral and illegitimate actions for the universal international legal framework that requires a consensus of all states in order to approve relevant conventions.

We are interested in establishing the truth regarding Alexey Navalny. That said, this is an outrageous situation that is unfolding following the exact same scenario as in the so-called Skripal case, when accusations were made without presenting any evidence. As you are aware, Russia’s Prosecutor-General’s Office sent requests under the 1959 European Convention for Mutual Assistance in Criminal Matters to the relevant agencies in Germany, France and Sweden, where the required tests were allegedly carried out. Under the protocols to this convention they were asked to share information on the results of these tests. We were told that no action will be taken under this convention, which in itself is a violation, and that the results were handed over to the OPCW. They told us to wait for this organisation to release the results of its tests. However, the OPCW informed us that they continue investigating this matter and the samples they collected (it is

unclear who collected them and when). We were told that once they are finished, they will communicate the results to Germany, since the request came from there, leaving it to Germany to decide whether to share this information with us. This is a travesty of common sense, and I believe that everyone understands this, including our Western colleagues who deny our requests that are based on a binding international convention. It seems that their Russophobic fervour is so strong that it prevents them from exercising good judgement.

We regret that trade and economic cooperation is becoming increasingly politicised. I have just cited some examples. Trade and economy have always been viewed as a safety net in relations among nations. Nowadays though, things seem to have shifted into a somewhat different phase. I remember so well that in 2014 German businesses called on the European Union and its agencies not to place politics above the economy in its approach to Ukrainian affairs. At the time it was German Chancellor Angela Merkel who said that there are cases when politics must be above economics. This is regrettable.

We are now witnessing another example. The European Commission has drafted a report with a long title: Report on Significant Distortions in the Economy of the Russian Federation for the Purpose of Trade Defence Investigations. You probably understand what this is all about. The document is clearly biased and can lead to new restrictions on the access of Russian goods to the EU market. You know that this will definitely prompt us to reply. In particular, this report presents regulatory measures that are totally legitimate, including in energy, transport and labour resources, as distortions in the Russian economy. We also have

questions regarding another EU initiative. I am referring to the key element of the European Green Deal, the so-called carbon border adjustment mechanism. Brussels said that it will be enacted not later than on January 1, 2023 in one form or another. For now, we are looking into what this initiative actually means. We do hope that this mechanism would not contradict the World Trade Organisation (WTO) norms and will not lead to “trade protectionism on climate issues.” We would like to avoid having to take retaliatory measures. I believe now is not the time for trade wars, even in the current politicised environment.

I will not elaborate too much on the games with Nord Stream 2. It all started quite a few years ago when the EU retrospectively amended the gas directive within its Third Energy Package just to make it harder to carry out this project. This ran counter to all legal norms and established practices approved by all countries. It was with great difficulty that compromises were found. This did not prevent things from going awry afterwards. When the end of the project was on the horizon, a new factor emerged in the form of the heavy hand of the United States that stated its open and unscrupulous intention to derail this project for Russia and the Europeans in order to force the US LNG on the Europeans. They are frantically creating LNG capabilities. Washington claims that these measures are designed to support US producers. This is a gloves-off approach free from any ethical boundaries. They do not seem to be concerned with the fact that higher costs for buying expensive gas will undermine the competitiveness of entire European manufacturing sectors. In fact, this suits the US.

Politicised energy cooperation is yet another blow at the foundations of what we call European security. Energy is the area

of cooperation dating back over 50 years. We recently marked the anniversary with our Austrian colleagues. Energy was always left outside any forms of confrontation during the Cold War. Our joint energy programme and cooperation have survived the dissolution of some states and the formation of others; they have always served the long-term interests of all European nations, including the Russian Federation.

Protectionism and other barriers and restrictions will only aggravate the economic situation, which is already complicated. By the way, we noted that the BusinessEurope Confederation of European Business recently published recommendations aimed at protecting European businesses amidst sanctions-related restrictions. The document directly states that the weaponisation of the sanctions policy to pursue economic interests is unacceptable. It may seem obvious but as things go nowadays, it takes a lot of courage to say something as obvious as this.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The Russian leadership is implementing measures to support the public and businesses in the face of COVID-19 related problems. We are doing everything we can, considering certain minimum requirements of the epidemiological authorities, to help return foreign workers to Russia, which you are well aware of. You have made respective requests and requests continue to come in. We will continue to process them promptly. We expect that, according to the forecasts made in Russia and foreign capitals (including multilateral institutions), the depth of the economic decline in our country will not be as significant as in many other countries, including the eurozone.

Our potential for countering infectious diseases is becoming increasingly more effective. We have learned a lot while taking practical measures to fight this challenge. Relying on our past experience in countering various pandemics, we managed to develop a series of test systems to diagnose the coronavirus and launch the production of drugs to treat it efficiently. As you know, we registered the Sputnik V vaccine. Registration of one or two more vaccines developed by the Vector Research Centre is being finalised. We support sharing experience in this area and cooperating with all interested countries because it is important for overcoming the consequences of our common emergency once and for all. As you know, speaking at the 75th session of the UN General Assembly via videoconference, President Vladimir Putin proposed an initiative of holding a high-level online conference involving the states interested in cooperation on developing coronavirus vaccines. We hope to receive a constructive response to this important proposal.

Before concluding my opening remarks, I would just like to say a few more words about the main subject on our agenda today: as we have already seen more than once, economic interdependence can be both a boon and a bane. I don't really think that anything good will come out of this if the EU continues to see its partners as some "appendages" of the Eurocentric world. The world that was based on the central role of Europe has become history, not regrettably or happily but objectively. The drivers of economic growth and political influence are now in the East. The new polycentric reality calls for new approaches in politics and the economy. The "leader-follower" relationship is no longer tenable. What we need now is respect for the fundamental principle of

equality.

Nowadays we must help the global economy through this difficult period and ensure its consistent post-COVID development. This goal should unite all of us, because this is about the welfare of all nations. We call for finding new growth points in order to overcome the global recession. It is crucial in this respect to combine the potentials of the various integration initiatives that are being implemented throughout Eurasia. This is the objective of President Putin's initiative on the Greater Eurasian Partnership based on the universal principles of international law and transparency and open to all countries of our huge common continent without exception. You are aware that we are actively promoting dialogue on this subject within the framework of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), as well as in relations with ASEAN nations. While doing so, we point out that we would like all countries of our common continent to join this process, both members of regional associations and the unaligned countries. This means that the EU countries could also take a look at this initiative with regard to their own interests, the interests of European businesses, including the possibility of easy access to the rapidly growing markets and new transit routes within the framework of this project. We have a starting point for launching this work in earnest. I am referring to the contacts created at the technical level between the European Commission and the Eurasian Economic Commission. We would like these contacts to break out of the restrictions of technical and regulatory issues. We would like our discussions to move over to a political level and to acquire a political vision of the development of Eurasia, which will become a global economic driver – there is no

doubt about this.

We firmly believe that it is in our common interests to prevent the appearance of undesirable dividing lines in the new economic spheres created by the new technological paradigm. Energy and industry are becoming ever greener and all spheres of human activity, including the work of economic operators, are being digitalised. It is our strong conviction that this calls for combining efforts rather than trying to play zero sum games again, as was the case in the past. We are ready for cooperation on the broadest possible basis.

Thank you. I am now ready for the interactive part of our meeting.

Question: There is a saying in my native German language that smart people give way in a dispute. What steps would Russia be ready to make in this regard? What opportunities do you see for giving an impetus to this process and putting it back on a more constructive trajectory? What mechanisms and measures do you see for shielding small islands of cooperation from the collateral damage caused by geopolitical rivalry?

Sergey Lavrov: As far as I can see, the way you used this German saying (smart people giving way in a dispute) suggests that you are certain that the West will never give way.

I also see this in the way many of the ongoing developments are unfolding. In particular, this refers to the complaints we hear. Russia invariably owes something regardless of the international matter, be it Syria, Libya or Belarus. The same goes for Alexey Navalny, any cyber affairs and poisonings. But no evidence is presented. Moreover, when we question their claims and findings, in this case I am referring to the Bundeswehr laboratory, or to the

Porton Down laboratory in the Skripal case, they see this as an insult. But no evidence was presented. Our German colleagues are now telling us that this is our problem and that the poisoning took place on Russian territory, so they don't know anything. Go ahead and open a criminal case, but we will not give you anything, they tell us.

By the way, I remember a rather gruesome episode in our relations with Germany when there was a problem in 2016 with Yelizaveta Fesenko, a Russian underage girl. She disappeared and the search continued for quite a long time. She later resurfaced and said that she had been raped. It turned out that she had not been raped but Germany still opened a criminal case on child sexual abuse charges. One of the defendants received a suspended sentence. But when we tried to become involved to help the girl (apart from a German citizenship she also is a citizen of the Russian Federation) and asked our German colleagues to explain what happened, we faced an outpouring of resentment, including a statement by then German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier, who said that Russia should not interfere in Germany's domestic affairs or use this incident for propaganda purposes. This is a similar case. Something happened to a Russian national on German territory. When we asked to explain what had happened they told us that it's not our business and asked us not to interfere in their domestic affairs. When now we asked our German colleagues to share their findings after analysing Alexey Navalny's test samples, they referred us to the OPCW. The OPCW referred us to Germany, arguing that it was Germany that filed the request, while Russia should have had the same findings as Berlin. However, the doctors in Omsk passed on to the Germans the

results of all the tests they ran and everything they did. When the Germans came to transport Alexey Navalny to Germany, they signed papers confirming that they received all the information. Moreover, Alexey Navalny's spouse signed a document assuming responsibility for all the consequences of his transfer to Germany, since our doctors were not convinced that this was safe. It is true that they did not find any traces of weapon-grade toxic substances. They honestly said so. Let me draw your attention to the fact that the Charite clinic did not find any toxic agents from the so-called Novichok group in Navalny's samples either. It was the Bundeswehr clinic that made these findings. We still do not know whether the French and the Swedes collected the samples themselves or the Germans simply passed on these samples to them. The fact that our partners are trying to keep this secret, muddying the waters, is a matter of serious concern for us. We want to get to the truth and will pursue this objective. I don't know what to do with this. Now we are being accused of the developments in the Central African Republic, and they are trying to pin the blame for something that happened in Mozambique on us as well. We stand accused of everything no matter where it occurs.

When US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, his deputies and other members of the US administration travel around the world, they openly call on their partners during news conferences in Africa, Greece or elsewhere to stop cooperating with Russia and China. These statements are being made officially and unceremoniously, for everyone to hear. It is difficult for me to say now what concessions we can make when it comes to this situation.

As your board chairman has already mentioned, it is good that the

ties with the EU are being revived. Yes, they are indeed being revived, but only in specific areas, such as Syria, Libya and Africa – we have recently held such consultations. However, we do not see a systemic approach to our relations on the global and hugely important political plane.

High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell is a good friend of mine. We spoke with him earlier this year on the sidelines of the Munich Security Conference. In June, we talked for two hours via videoconference. We discussed all topics in great detail. There is a common understanding that we need to review the situation, at least so as to see if the EU policy based on sanctions is really effective. This is for the EU to do. In our opinion, it is a flawed policy. Sanctions damage both those against whom they are applied and those who apply them. You are aware that we are trying to abandon all forms of cooperation that can strengthen our dependence on Europe, including in the fields of technology and agricultural goods. I believe that we have achieved good results with this. We are probably doing this because we are no longer sure that our European partners will honour their commitments. I have cited the example of Nord Stream 2. It would seem that the EU's Legal Service has long analysed this project and concluded that it is good and does not contradict any EU norms. Nevertheless, the question has been reopened and the rules have been changed. Is this how reliable partners act? Moreover, this is being done contrary to the fact that companies from the five respected "old" EU members were fully interested, and continue to be interested, in the Nord Stream 2 project. But politics has prevailed over business.

Of course, selective dialogue is underway on some specific matters, as you mentioned. We are not abandoning it. But we can see that the EU has been trying to preserve the five guiding principles and only to modernise them (and they are based on the fact that the normalisation of EU's relations with Russia is conditioned by the implementation of the Minsk agreements by Russia, not by Ukraine). While these futile discussions are underway in the EU and the very aggressive and loud Russophobic minority is preventing any efforts to reassess relations with Russia, very serious analytical processes are gathering momentum in Germany. As far as we know (this information is based on German media reports), experts close to the German Government are developing what they describe as "a new Eastern policy," which actually amounts to removing the remaining positive parts on our agenda. Their main arguments, as cited by the press, are that strategic partnership is a thing of the past; that the Partnership for Modernisation, which used to be a symbol of our cooperation with Germany and subsequently with the EU as a whole, has not materialised; and that Russia refused to become an ally for the EU and NATO and hence became their opponent when it comes to fundamental political and ideological aspects of the new international order. I have already said that our Western friends want the new international order to be based on rules rather than international law, and on rules invented in a narrow circle of confederates.

As for selective cooperation, the circles close to the Government who are formulating a new agenda say that such cooperation will be possible only after Russians mend their ways. Amid mental stagnation in Brussels, these processes are gathering momentum

first of all in Germany. Geopolitical analysts have probably seen that Germany is becoming the lead player in ensuring a strong and lasting anti-Russia charge in all processes underway in the EU.

We have seen this before. The first sanctions were adopted after an absolutely transparent referendum was held in Crimea and nobody questioned their outcome – US representatives told me so immediately after the referendum. Nobody doubted then, and nobody doubts now, that it was a sincere desire of the Crimean residents. But as soon as this happened, we were told in a quite superior manner that Russia should know that there would be no “business as usual.” We replied that yes, there will be no “business as usual.” You yourself have ruined your standing and reputation when you were spit in the face – excuse my French – by those who terminated the agreement guaranteed by France, Germany and Poland. We know very well that there will be no “business as usual,” but we are nevertheless ready to look for spheres of constructive interaction. But take a look at the current situation. Just a small but telling example regarding Nord Stream 2: the Swedish authorities have cancelled their companies’ permit for cooperation with GAZ. There are more examples of this kind too. The question now is not that there will be no “business as usual,” but that there may be no reliable basis for doing business with Europe in the long term and we cannot be sure that our European partners will honour their commitments. I am not talking about companies. They want to do business, but it is the politicians who are ruling over business now. This is the problem. As I have already said, there is no lack of goodwill or desire to develop normal relations on our part. Just read President Putin’s message of greetings to Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier and

Federal Chancellor Angela Merkel on Germany's reunification. It clearly says everything. But goodwill cannot be unilateral. It is said that he who is smarter and stronger should take the first step. We probably have grounds to believe that our partners are strong and smart. I really do hope that they think about us in the same way. If there is goodwill on both sides, we can turn the tide. But we do not see any reciprocity so far.

Question: We have noticed these concerns regarding the recent trends that you mentioned, and the articles claiming that the partnership has come to an end. We share these concerns. As an association, we agree that it takes two to tango.

Sergey Lavrov: These days, some prefer breakdancing and you don't need a partner.

Question: Let's hope that partner dancing will not go out of style. As an association, we adhere to the principle of independence. We communicate both with Brussels, by voicing our concerns with the current situation, and with officials in Russia. I was very happy to hear your greetings on our anniversary. This year we marked 25 years. We planned to organise a conference using the motto "Russia and Europe in the world of tomorrow: looking back on the past to move towards the future." How do you see Russia and Europe in the world of tomorrow? What are the most promising areas for continuing the cooperation that has not always been easy but has undoubtedly been productive over these 25 years? What are the key areas for you?

Sergey Lavrov: We spoke about this at length today. If we talk about specific areas, these include, of course, the digital economy, the green economy and everything related to the new types of

energy (the Russian-Italian-French thermonuclear reactor project). We have many hi-tech projects with Germany. There is mutual interest. But, again, the political course pursued right now, mainly by the United States, is aimed at preventing any mutually beneficial, promising and competitive economic projects in Europe to be carried out without the American involvement – be it Russia or China. This has been stated openly. Politics is the art of the possible but perhaps, in the current circumstances, the economy is also the art of the possible. As long as the leaders of your countries are capable of protecting the core interests of European businesses, as long as they can protect your competitiveness and as long as they can withstand this pressure.

But, of course, besides the economy, we are deeply concerned about the military and political situation. It is not improving in Europe and, on the contrary, it is becoming more disturbing. By the way, there have been many reports, analysis pieces and articles recently marking the anniversary of the German reunification. Russian television filmed a two-hour documentary, *The Wall*, which came to a rather sad conclusion: the Berlin Wall was never destroyed; it simply became virtual and moved to the East very close to the Russian border, despite all the promises and assurances. I will not comment on this film right now. I hope you watched it. If you did not, I recommend it because you will understand a lot about the current conditions for the Russia-Europe relations, how the Russian leadership and Russian people remember the times when – and we all know this very well – Russia played the decisive role in the German reunification, by making a huge sacrifice. I am not exaggerating. The withdrawal of our troops was conducted in absolutely cruel and inhumane

conditions. We know the real (financial) cost Germany paid for this. We also know that, not that our Western colleagues tried to persuade the Soviet leaders against it but they asked whether they [the Soviet leaders] had thought carefully and whether everybody needed a united Germany. You know the outcome. I find the manner used by some representatives of the German leadership in communication with the Russian Federation not only unacceptable but fully indicative of the fact that the era everybody considered a historic victory of Germans and Russians and eventually the victory of the entire Europe is now completely forgotten. This is unfortunate. I really hope that this anomaly goes away. It cannot reflect the Germans' true attitude towards Russia. Speaking of which, in a recent public opinion poll, half of the German people across the Federal Republic of Germany, including Western Germany, expressed a positive attitude towards the Russian people. I think the number of people in our country supporting cooperation with Germans will not be less than that. Our historic victory is in overcoming all phobias and focusing on the constructive process in the interests of our nations. Of course, it would be a crime to lose it.

Question: I would like to get back to the issue of highly skilled professionals returning to Russia. We are very grateful for the help we received from the Government of the Russian Federation and, in particular, from the Foreign Ministry. We know that the rules currently in place, the Government Directive No. 635-r of March 16, 2020, is greatly appreciated by our members because it opens a channel for returning highly skilled professionals. However, on the other hand, this process is still complicated and there are many unresolved matters. What are the prospects of relaxing the

border crossing regime, especially ahead of the New Year days off?

Sergey Lavrov: I have already spoken on this matter multiple times. The Foreign Ministry will play a secondary role there. Public health is the top priority. Therefore, the epidemiological and sanitary authorities are calling all the shots. We have an Emergency Response Centre headed by Deputy Prime Minister Tatyana Golikova, the Federal Supervision Service for Consumer Protection and Welfare, the Healthcare Ministry and the Federal Medical-Biological Agency. All these experts are working on the best measures to protect our citizens and our visitors from the danger of contracting the coronavirus.

It is in the interests of the Foreign Ministry to establish contacts as quickly as possible. As you are aware, the aviation authorities are also interested in this – as are the airline companies which are suffering losses and hoping to resume air services as quickly as possible. Once again, the decisions are up to the epidemiologists.

Question: I can see that Russia is trying to shut itself off from the rest of the world by demanding that production facilities be more localised. We invested about 2 billion and are one of the largest companies. Seventy percent of our products will not be considered Russia-made products in two years. I am urging you to do everything you can to make sure that Russia does not isolate itself from the rest of the world and cooperates with Western companies. Do not force us to resort to localisation which puts us at a disadvantage and which will seem rather strange after we invested 2 billion.

Sergey Lavrov: I agree with the idea that we should not destroy

the global forms of cooperation and build barriers. If we look at localisation as a barrier, this logic probably applies here. But again, we need to remember about the strategic goals set for our economy by President Vladimir Putin and the Government. To a great extent, they have to do with the events in our relations of the past six or seven years and with the fact whether the West demonstrated itself as reliable and capable of negotiating in relations with us.

When it comes to localisation, we are not alone. For example, India is rather actively pursuing its Make in India policy and I think it is much more demanding than the localisation policy in the Russian Federation. Overall, I understand your production-related concerns and assume that these issues should be raised with the Government Foreign Investment Advisory Council that is in charge of these matters.

Question: The Government of the Russian Federation adopted new rules that prevent us from investing for the next two years. We do not know whether we can invest in the future because in two years there will be no benefits in this for us.

Sergey Lavrov: The Foreign Ministry is interested in continuing pragmatic and mutually beneficial economic cooperation; therefore, let's agree that following this meeting, following our discussion, your chairman, the Director General, will send me a proposal outlining the steps which, in your opinion, would allow our cooperation to continue on a mutually beneficial basis.

I know that you cooperate with the GAZ Group. I meant exactly the same thing that you are talking about when I said that some small European countries are trying to run before the American hounds

because the seizures by the United States were once again extended. The Americans are thinking about themselves, too. Many American jobs depend on continuing this cooperation. Our Swedish neighbours decided that they will be more American than the Americans themselves.

Question: When we discuss relaxing the border crossing regime for highly skilled professionals, please do not forget about their family members because it is a major part of their lives here. I would like to ask you to consider this issue.

Sergey Lavrov: Of course, their comfort is important. We will make sure to support requests concerning their family members as well.

Question: We are witnessing the US administration purposefully dismantling the international relations system that took shape after World War II. How much have they managed to accomplish in this regard? Is this an irreversible process? What can we expect from the upcoming election?

Sergey Lavrov: As I mentioned earlier, the current international relations system is collapsing under the banner of the “rules-based world order.” It became part of the political vocabulary, or narrative, in modern parlance, about three to four years ago. We took note of it immediately. When we began to talk about this term which was proposed to be included in the declarations of international forums, we were told that “this is the same as international law.” When we proposed replacing this term with “respect for international law,” we were told, by hook or by crook, that “we need to use some fresh language.” And then everything that I was talking about came to the surface.

Two parallel processes are underway that are directly related to the erosion of the system that was created after World War II, which suited everyone, made it possible to avoid another world war and, as we all hoped, would be ridding itself of confrontational components after the Cold War ended. We have already talked about the Berlin Wall and everything that followed and what we are witnessing now.

There are two obvious areas where this system is being eroded. The first is the privatisation of the existing international organisations' secretariats. The Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), which is based on the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC), is a case in point. It was adopted unanimously (any convention can only be adopted unanimously) and is binding exclusively for the countries that have ratified this Convention, 193 in all. The OPCW is one of the most universal organisations. The Convention can only be amended by way of talks, and the language must be agreed upon by a consensus, after which the amendments are adopted and ratified. Under the convention, the OPCW Technical Secretariat (TC) has the competence to conduct a probe in response to an inquiry by any CWC member country. This should be done by an onsite visit by the experts to a location designated by the corresponding party to take samples that are then taken to certified labs. Then, a report is compiled which says whether a substance prohibited by the special lists attached to the CWC was found in these samples. That's all there is to it. The OPCW Secretariat began to grossly violate the Convention. For example, in Syria, they were making decisions and compiling reports without onsite visits. They just said that they managed to get samples from, say, Great Britain or

France (there was such an episode in Khan Shaykhun), since it was “unsafe” for them to go there. We insisted that, under the Convention, they must go there themselves. The answer was “it’s unsafe.” Then, we asked the British and the French, since they were able to obtain the samples in unsafe circumstances, to use their contacts to ensure the safety of the OPCW inspectors so that they comply with the convention. We were told there was nothing they could do, and it’s “classified.” The Syrian government was accused of airstrikes using bombs filled with toxic agents. This “classified” information was used to conclude that a poisonous agent was used in Khan Shaykhun. End of story. Nobody knows who took these samples, or who took them to which laboratory, because it’s “classified.”

There are many questions. When we started asking them and stopped accepting such reports in the UN Security Council (only the UNSC can decide who is right and who is wrong under international law and the UN Charter), our Western colleagues at the OPCW convened an extraordinary session of all parties to the Convention. They put to the vote a proposal that, in addition to what is allowed for the OPCW Technical Secretariat under the Convention (to determine whether a prohibited poisonous agent was used or not), it should also be authorised to identify the perpetrators and to carry out the attribution. Less than half of the countries members of the convention voted in favour of the proposal. The rest voted against it or abstained. However, according to the rules of procedure, the decision was declared adopted. Thus, instead of an international law instrument, which any universal convention is, we got an instrument of the “rules-based order.” Of course, we will not be paying for the portion of the

Secretariat's activities that focuses on these purposes. China and a number of other countries are doing the same, but that doesn't make the problem disappear. This is an outright privatisation of the Secretariat, which can now be seen in the way the senior officials of this body (Western countries hold the posts of Director-General and his "right hand") react to our inquiries on many issues (Syria, Navalny, etc.). Concurrently, privatisation is carried out in less aggressive forms, when the Western employees of the respective secretariats conduct blatantly one-sided policies at the UN organisations.

The second area is about the propensity to move "inconvenient" matters outside the UN system. In my opening remarks, I mentioned that our French colleagues had created the International Partnership against Impunity for the Use of Chemical Weapons. We asked why we can't discuss this at the UN or the OPCW, which they are trying to manipulate. Why do this somewhere else? We were told that this is just a "group of like-minded people." Today, I spoke on the phone with my French colleague, Minister for Europe and Foreign Affairs Jean-Yves Le Drian, and asked him why they were not responding to a request filed by the General Prosecutor's Office of Russia regarding Alexey Navalny's tests. Mr Le Drian told me they were waiting for the OPCW to respond. The OPCW has not yet responded (today is October 5). However, already on September 24, our French colleagues initiated the distribution, among their closest partners at the very same organisation in The Hague, of a draft statement by the countries participating in the International Partnership against Impunity for the Use of Chemical Weapons. The draft of this statement is already saying that, as confirmed by the OPCW

Secretariat, Mr Navalny was poisoned with Novichok. The Secretariat has not confirmed or said anything. We have an official letter from the OPCW Director General Fernando Arias Gonzalez saying that the process is still underway.

This “privatisation,” as we call it, creates quite serious problems in other areas of the universal institutions’ work as well. Instead of once again provoking scandals at the conferences of the parties to the relevant universal conventions, they are now making decisions in a narrow circle of “like-minded people” and then present this as an example of multilateralism. This approach forms the basis of the Franco-German initiative for a new multilateralism, which they are promoting and which was proclaimed not so long ago. It was stated that the EU is an example of multilateralism. We asked again why multilateralism is being considered outside the framework of the UN multilateral organisation. There’s no answer, but we know it. There will be more cases like this. Along with this International Partnership against Impunity for the Use of Chemical Weapons, the French have created a similar partnership on the freedom of journalism and information in cyberspace.

Question: The impact of geopolitics on de-globalisation. Modern equipment has a very broad built-in functionality for data collection and transmission. At the same time, requirements for a mandatory local hosting are being tightened, in particular, with regard to data collection and transmission. Some forecasts say that by 2030, many countries will close their markets to each other. What do you think could promote the opening of a common economic space?

Sergey Lavrov: For 15 years, if not longer, we have been actively promoting the initiative (it has gained a large number of supporters now) to figure out how the internet should work so that everyone

feels comfortable. This question was raised at the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), an organisation dealing with all forms of information and communication technologies, and in the UN, where it was proposed to agree on the rules of responsible behaviour in the information landscape. It is about international information security. At the same time, we are promoting initiatives at the UN to combat crime in cyberspace. There is one part that relates to processes affecting national security, and the other is crime proper – drug trafficking, paedophilia, pornography, and so on. But things are moving with difficulty at the ITU. All these years of discussions have led us nowhere. The Americans do not seem interested in making this topic the subject of agreements. The discussion continues, but you know how the internet is governed, how it all works. It suits them. The Americans are actually pushing forward the idea that there is no need for any anti-cybercrime conventions or rules of conduct to ensure security in the information landscape. There is international law and it is applicable. This also reflects our Western partners' policy to declare cyberspace an arena of potential confrontation, including the possibility of hostilities (and the outer space for good measure).

As we have seen from hours of discussions with the Americans and other Westerners, they are reluctant to introduce new regulations and cite applicable international law because the West again wants to reserve some extra rights. I mentioned the partnership to protect freedom in cyberspace. If it is established that someone has violated "freedom in cyberspace," they will not have to prove anything to anyone, because international law is already in place. The Americans are primarily interested in Article

51 of the UN Charter (the right to self-defence and the possible use of weapons). They do not hide this and want to reserve the right to strike. More precisely, not reserve, but actually obtain the right to use military force in response to what they might consider an encroachment in cyberspace that affects their national interest. You can implicate just about anything there.

President of Russia Vladimir Putin proposed reopening the existing channels on cybersecurity issues. On October 2, Secretary of the Russian Security Council Nikolai Patrushev met with US President Trump's National Security Advisor Robert O'Brien, who said that so far, Washington has not seen any Russian interference attempts in the 2020 United States elections. Well, they kind of expected Moscow to interfere, but "Mr Patrushev assured them they won't." What the Russian Security Council Secretary proposed – we actually lived through all this many years ago with the Obama administration, and later it resumed with Donald Trump – was a proposal to sign a deal on non-interference in each other's affairs, including in cyberspace, concerning elections or other processes. The US does not want to, because they really interfere in our internal affairs. After Kiev events in 2014, they passed the Ukraine Freedom Support Act, which explicitly ordered the State Department to spend \$20 million a year to liaise with Russian civil society, to support certain "independent" and "non-governmental" organisations. You are certainly well aware of this. Indeed, a cutting-edge sphere like cyberspace and information and communication technologies in general, where progress is rapidly gaining momentum, is a field for competition. Look at what is happening with 5G networks now, how the Americans prohibit Europe and the rest of the world from

cooperating with China; look at how these policies affect the atmosphere of international relations. Consider artificial intelligence. I think competition will continue, as we are seeing a new industrial revolution – or rather, not an industrial, but a technological one.

If we consider the US policy line they are pursuing today, it is difficult to predict how and when it will end, whether it will even come to a close in our lifetime, because anything's possible. Who knows what will happen on this planet in 50-100 years. There are many people who believe the current US policy line is irrevocable, and from now on, they refuse to put up with it. The most interesting thing is that they actually achieve their goals in some cases. As we say, might is right. But it seems to me that the United States should and will try to pay more attention to its internal problems. I would say what we can see there now has very deep roots. There are many forecasts that any empire will reach a crisis at some point and become smaller and quieter. As Vladimir Vysotsky wrote, "it goes at random, all over the place, and downhill."

I am not trying to make any predictions about the US elections now; I do not want to be blamed again for supporting someone or not supporting someone else. Vladimir Putin has said many times that we will work with anyone they elect. We are watching the squabbles between Democrats and Republicans. No silver lining, of course. Destabilisation in the United States is unlikely to do any good to any of us. We are actually all interested in the United States being a responsible player in the international arena; but for that, they should at least have some internal stability, which is now being tested. We want them to be a responsible player, which means they should follow the rules, not those invented by them,

consistently rather than occasionally, and not change those rules at their whim or use loopholes (like we say, every law has a loophole). This is rules-based order. Unfortunately, the trend is quite steady – they have left the UNESCO, the UN Human Rights Council, and withdrawn from nearly all treaties; now the last one, the New START, is going to die. The conditions they set are absolutely unilateral and do not take into account either our interests or the experience of many decades, when arms control was enforced to everyone's satisfaction and was welcomed by all countries. I cannot rule out that the World Trade Organisation will be next. They are also complaining about it, as I understand it, and continue blocking the dispute resolution body, preventing the appointment of the necessary participants for a quorum.

This question causes everyone's concern, but I have no answer to give you. Some expound on how empires grow old and new ones emerge, like when you all play together as kids, and there is always the main bully in the sandbox who hits the younger ones. But later, when they grow up, they get even. This probably happens in different forms on a bigger scale, like centuries-long cycles.

Question: As you may be aware, Turkey and Libya have certain agreements regarding the Mediterranean Sea. We're amid an abnormal situation, where Turkey, a NATO member, has a run-in with Europe, where most countries are NATO members as well. Clearly, in addition to the economic interests, there are geopolitical and military reasons as well. What's your view about a potential increase in the number of clashes in this region and Russia's role?

Sergey Lavrov: Here, too, we need to look through the lens of geopolitical interests. The situation in Libya, Syria and a number of

other countries is far from being alright, but hydrocarbons are among the factors that clearly influence politics. At least what the Americans are doing with oil having illegally occupied the eastern coast of the Euphrates River in Syria and making a decision allowing their company to produce oil. Together with the Kurds, they are trying to “cobble up” a Kurdish autonomy, which will have quasi-state functions. It is well known that they are also trying to talk the Turks into not objecting to the idea of creating such autonomy, assuring them that the Americans will ensure the Kurds’ loyalty. Flirting with a country’s territorial integrity is a gross violation of international law. In this case, this applies not only to Syria, but also to the Kurdish problem, which can be so explosive that the current situation will appear much less serious. It affects a number of countries in the region. An invitation to separatism and its active promotion can end very badly. This is being done by a distant overseas country, but the countries of the region and Europe will have to deal with the consequences. We are not far away from there, either. So, we have come up with an initiative to develop a security concept in the Gulf with the participation of all Arab countries, Iran, the League of Arab States (LAS), the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), the UN Security Council permanent members, and the European Union.

The time has come when too many problems have piled up in and around the Gulf, including the Middle East and North Africa. We need to sit down and talk.

The Americans are also departing from international law and moving to the rules on which they want to establish the world order, I mean a Middle East settlement. They are turning the Arab Peace Initiative upside down, which proclaimed the creation of the

Palestinian state followed by the normalisation of relations between the Arab countries and Israel. Now, the process has reversed.

We welcome any agreements that normalise relations between the states, but we cannot agree to this being done to the detriment of the Palestinian people's interests which are enshrined in numerous consensus resolutions adopted by the Security Council and the UN General Assembly.

Question: More than a year ago now, President of Russia Vladimir Putin met with President of France Emmanuel Macron in Bregancon. How would you assess the results of that meeting? I know that recently in Lithuania, President Macron said he would continue cooperating with Russia because it is crucial for Europe. What do you have to say on this score?

Sergey Lavrov: In August 2019, Russian President Vladimir Putin and French President Emmanuel Macron had a very good and productive meeting in Bregancon. France is the only state whose government responded to Vladimir Putin's address circulated in autumn 2019, when it became known that the INF Treaty had finally "died." That long letter went to all NATO members and a number of other states, in which Vladimir Putin spelled out the history of the issue, explained how important the INF Treaty was, how its termination would increase the risks and wipe out any control over such missiles, and proposed to declare a voluntary moratorium. He said that Russia has already announced it and will not build or deploy any such missiles until such US-made systems are deployed in some part of the world. The President of Russia asked his NATO partners to consider the possibility of a counter moratorium without concluding any agreement – just pure

goodwill, similar to the previous nuclear test ban. Only a few of them even bothered to respond, usually “thank you and we’ll read it later.” Some just declined. French President Macron was the only one who actually wrote he was ready to discuss the proposal, and who noticed that we were not just proposing two counter-moratoriums in that letter – a Russia-NATO and a wider one – but we were ready to discuss specific ways to verify compliance. Western Europeans as well as our American colleagues said the “cunning” Russia was proposing a moratorium when it allegedly had such missiles in Kaliningrad. They believe our Iskander systems violate this Treaty, but never provided a single fact that proved it. If they say that an Iskander missile has been tested at a prohibited range, then obviously, they should have satellite images, but they never showed any, just as they have not shown any satellite images when it comes to the Malaysian Boeing shot down over Donbass. They have some pictures, but they just don’t show them to anyone. So Vladimir Putin proposed, if they have any such concerns, to discuss what verification measures we can agree upon to make everyone feel comfortable. The only one who responded to that was Emmanuel Macron.

Unlike our selective cooperation with EU’s Brussels on specific conflict matters, sporadically, from time to time, what we have with France is a stable dialogue, including the two-plus-two format with the foreign and defence ministers. In September 2019, our French colleagues were in Moscow. We also established cooperation in more than ten working groups on various strategic tracks. The working groups on combating terrorism and cybersecurity met recently – these topics should obviously be of interest to everyone, but the Americans and most other Westerners, including the

Germans, have shown little interest in cooperating on them, to put it mildly.

Emmanuel Macron also makes critical statements. We can hear those. We also have some questions for France. I have just mentioned some of the steps they are taking that undermine the legitimacy of universal organisations, attempts to isolate some issues to be addressed by a narrow circle of participants they find comfortable. But we are having a dialogue, whatever disagreements we might have cannot be a reason to refuse to discuss serious matters, and limit interaction to some selective, elective topics, as the European Union does.

Question: The international community failed to prevent two global catastrophes in the 20th century: the Holocaust and the Armenian Genocide. Today we are witnessing the escalation of a conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan in which Turkey has become involved. Do we have any mechanisms for preventing genocide in the 21st century?

Sergey Lavrov: We have the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (Genocide Convention), which is effective. Genocide has been denounced as a crime against humanity. There are different types and forms of genocide. What is happening today to the Russian language and Russian education in the Baltic countries (in Latvia and Estonia), in Ukraine and several other places clearly amounts to infringement on the fundamental rights of a very large group of people.

One of the topics we discussed with Josep Borrell was discrimination against Russian speakers, in particular, in Ukraine. We regularly raise the question of the Baltics with the EU. They

seem unable to do anything, and it even looks to me as if they are unwilling to do anything about it. They only speak in favour of naturalisation. The process is underway, they claim, adding that everything will be just fine, in time. Nothing good is taking place there though. And in Ukraine they adopted several laws on education and language, following which they have adopted amendments that stipulate exemptions for EU languages, which has placed the Russian language in conditions of double discrimination, even though the Ukrainian Constitution stipulates the protection of national minority rights. And it directly mentions Russians.

We have informed the EU that there are Hungarian, Bulgarian and Polish communities in Ukraine and called on them to join forces to protect the rights of the national minorities at the UN, the OSCE and the Council of Europe. We sense a trend in each of these countries to settle the problems of their national minorities in Ukraine unofficially, and they don't care what happens after that. I asked Josep Borrell if Brussels would support this policy.

Absolutely not, he replied, adding that they would equally protect all national minority languages and that the EU would never be content with exemptions for their minorities. But these exemptions have already been made. A law prohibiting primary school tuition in any language other than Ukrainian was to become effective as of September 1. A three-year exemption has been approved for the EU languages, but not for the Russian language. I asked Josep Borrell why this was so. He answered that they were working on this problem.

I don't think a repetition of genocide in its classical form is possible today, but regrettably, discrimination trends will be gathering

momentum. Speaking about Karabakh, we maintain contact with Armenia and Azerbaijan, as well as with Turkey and Iran as their neighbours. Today I had a telephone conversation with [French Minister for Europe and Foreign Affairs] Jean-Yves Le Drian, during which we also spoke about Karabakh. The presidents of the three co-chairs of the OSCE Minsk Group – Russia, France and the United States – have made a very strong statement. We are now preparing a statement of the three countries' foreign ministers. However, what we need is not only statements but practical moves that can be made to end the bloodshed and resume negotiations.

You have mentioned that Emmanuel Macron said in Vilnius that cooperation with Russia was crucial for finding solutions to problems. We fully share this view. He also met with Svetlana Tikhanovskaya there; she has met with a number of high-ranking officials from EU countries.

This has jogged my memory regarding a situation, I think it was in 2017, when Jean-Marc Ayrault held the post of foreign minister. In March 2017, Marine Le Pen came to Russia at the invitation of our parliament. She met with President Putin. Mr Ayrault criticised that meeting between the President of Russia and the leader of a large French party. He interpreted it as “an attempt to interfere in the election process.” “We would like to understand if this is so. France is not interfering in Russia's internal affairs, and we hope that Russia will not interfere in our affairs either,” he said. This is how he commented on President Putin's meeting with the leader of a French political party who had been invited to visit Russia by our parliament. Now look at the [Western] reaction to what is taking place in Vilnius and other places. This is double standards.

Question: First of all, I would like to point out the importance of [foreign] professionals returning to Russia so that they can resume their operations here. As for our exports to Russia, we would like to say that we account for 25 percent of them, and we would like to continue to increase our share. We can see great potential here, in particular, when it comes to raw materials. We should start with renewable materials and discuss recycling. We also need to coordinate certification issues and think about improving the furniture industry in Russia so as to be able to export more IKEA products from Russia.

Sergey Lavrov: I hope your products will not be designated as military or dual-purpose items, as was the case with Sweden's Quintus Technologies, and that you will continue to supply us with affordable, solid and reliable furniture.