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## **Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's statement and answers to media questions at a joint news conference with Foreign Minister of Belarus Vladimir Makei following the joint session of the collegiums of the Russian and Belarusian Foreign Ministries, November 26, 2020**

Ladies and gentlemen,

We have held a joint session of the collegiums of the Russian Foreign Ministry and the Belarusian Foreign Ministry. By tradition, it took place in a confidential and truly friendly atmosphere.

Using this opportunity, I would like to thank again our Belarusian friends for their traditional hospitality and excellent organisation of work. We highly value these annual meetings in the format of members of the collegiums and other representatives of the two ministries' top management. They allow us to discuss in detail the most urgent international issues that involve the interests of our countries and need to be addressed.

Despite the complicated epidemiological situation, we managed to meet offline and talk face to face. We had four items on our agenda: relations of our countries with the European Union, participation in UN peacekeeping missions (in part, in the context of the prospects of the CSTO's involvement in the UN peacekeeping activities), cooperation in the EAEU on forming the Greater Eurasian Partnership and ways of ensuring international information security.

We achieved specific agreements on all of these issues. They are reflected in a resolution that we signed in addition to the plan of consultations between our foreign ministries in 2021. We also spoke about broader cooperation in international organisations, including the CIS, CSTO, EAEU, UN and OSCE.

We and our Belarusian colleagues had to state that unfortunately our US-led Western partners continue persistently promoting their narrow selfish interests in a bid to preserve their hegemony in the world arena. They are using the concept of the "rules-based" world

order, setting it directly against universal, commonly recognised standards of international law, including the UN Charter.

We are concerned about the attempts by the Western countries to establish control over international organisations, up to and including privatisation of their secretariats. When this fails, they try to replace collective work in universal formats with private get-togethers where all those who agree with the Western policy make decisions that are later presented as multilateral and binding. It is hardly possible to make us follow these rules. The overwhelming majority of countries are firmly committed to the old, tried-and-tested principle – respect for international law, primarily the UN Charter.

We noted numerous facts of crude interference by the US and those who follow in its wake (I am referring to some European capitals) in the internal affairs of sovereign states. The dirty methods of colour revolutions continue to be used. These include manipulation of public opinion, instigation and support of overtly anti-government forces and contribution to their radicalisation. We are seeing how these methods are being applied to the Republic of Belarus. We spoke about this in detail today both with Foreign Minister Vladimir Makei and President of Belarus Alexander Lukashenko, who received us before this meeting.

We were informed in great detail about the current developments in Belarus. We are not indifferent to them. The Republic of Belarus is our ally and strategic partner and also a fraternal nation. We are interested in a calm and stable situation in that country. This will be facilitated by the Constitutional reform that was launched by the Belarusian leadership as a major transformation of the political, economic and legal systems.

We believe the Belarusian people are wise and always act in a balanced manner. They are capable of resolving their problems without any outside prompting or obtrusive proposals on unwanted mediation. It is obvious that attempts to jeopardise normalisation are being made. There are many examples of this: a desire to radicalise the protesters, encouraging people to engage in subversion and high treason, which are made, in part, from abroad.

Today we again reviewed in detail the entire range of our ties and ways of protecting the interests of each of our countries, as well as the interests of the Union State of the Republic of Belarus and the Russian Federation.

I would like to emphasise again that we are content with our joint discussion. We will carry out everything we have agreed on today.

**Question (addressed to both ministers):** On November 18, 2020, your German

counterpart Heiko Maas accused the authorities of Belarus of violently suppressing peaceful protests. Having said this, he urged the Council of Europe to use its instruments for monitoring the situation even in those European countries that do not want to join the organisation. Could you comment on this, please?

**Sergey Lavrov (speaking after Vladimir Makei):** We took note of how Germany took over the Presidency of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe (CMCE). German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas first made a speech at a closed CMCE meeting and then held a news conference. His speech was unconventional for the presidency of this pan-European body because the main goal of the Council of Europe, which is recorded in its statute, is to promote greater unity of all European countries. By definition, the President, all the more so in the Council of Europe, must focus on enhancing unity in his future work rather than stir up confrontation.

It is no secret that at the CMCE meeting prior to that news conference, Heiko Maas presented his programme for the next sixth months in a politicised vein and unacceptable tone, in a crude, undiplomatic manner. He made a number of Russophobic statements. He had grievances not only as regards the Republic of Belarus but also made groundless Russophobic accusations in respect of Crimea, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Transnistria and southeastern Ukraine. His opinion on the Nagorno-Karabakh agreement also sounded rather strange.

At the news conference Mr Maas urged everyone "to respect the rules-based order." Our Western colleagues are not going to respect international law as a matter of principle. He did say that the principles of the Council of Europe must be imposed by using relevant instruments, including on those countries that are not members of the Council of Europe. I consider this absolutely unacceptable.

It is indeed strange that of all countries it is Germany that has recently decided to act as a driver of aggressive approaches to the countries that are not NATO or EU members.

Those who are objective and pay attention to double standards will note that neither Mr Maas, nor other Western representatives or UN human rights agencies have said a word about rather serious incidents in France and Germany. There were protests by yellow vests in France, demonstrations against COVID restrictions in Germany and some other countries, and protests against a ban on abortions in Poland. They were dispersed in a very tough manner.

International agencies, including the Office of the UN Human Rights Commissioner,

stayed silent. Human rights champions in France covered the yellow vests protests in a completely different manner than they cover events in Russia and Belarus. Only in the beginning did they cautiously urge the sides to overcome their differences. But later the yellow vests began to encounter a tough police response. In the estimate of French human rights activists, almost 15,000 rubber bullets were shot at the protesters; 2,500 people were wounded and 12,000 detained, including 2,000 who were sentenced, in part, to real prison terms. But nobody speaks about this. This is considered normal because these are their compatriots. It is necessary to get rid of this attitude, especially for those who head the Council of Europe.

About a month ago, Council of Europe Secretary General Marija Pejcinovic Buric asked us in Moscow about our assessments of the events in the Republic of Belarus. She received our answers and inquired whether the Council of Europe can contribute to normalisation there in some way. We promised to convey her wish to those concerned. She emphasised that this will be possible only if the Republic of Belarus makes this request itself. But as you can see, the German Presidency has different plans in this respect. This is regrettable.

We will try to compel the Council of Europe, all the more so under the German Presidency, not to forget about the issues that the West is trying to hush up in many different ways. This applies to discrimination against Russian speakers in the Baltic states, the disgraceful lack of citizenship, and the so-called reforms in the field of education and language in Ukraine that are aimed only against the Russian language, as distinct from the languages of other national minorities because they are EU languages. We will not accept the efforts of the Council of Europe (or some of its members) to hush up the facts of the purposeful harassment of the Russian media, not to mention the glorification of Nazism. The German Presidency must remember all this and must not divert the Council of Europe to the discussion of issues that are more comfortable for the West and justify its positions, while ignoring the problems that have become chronic for our Western colleagues.

**Question:** What are the prospects for concluding new strategic stability treaties with the United States once the new administration is in office? Last year, President Trump mentioned a new trilateral document involving Russia, the United States and China. What will happen now?

**Sergey Lavrov:** This is a long-standing matter. True, the Trump administration was consumed (I can't come up with any other word) by a desire to involve the People's Republic of China in disarmament talks. Initially, they talked about the need to include the PRC in the START Treaty which is still in force, although this is impossible by definition. Then, they proposed creating a new treaty and not renewing the current one, because it's

outdated and bilateral, whereas they would like to take a step towards multilateral disarmament and arms control. Their position was erratic. As a result, they came up with a proposal to extend the treaty for another year, but on the condition that we recount each other's warheads and put in overseers at the defence plants' checkpoints. Counting warheads and ignoring carriers and innovative technologies that directly affect strategic stability is a frivolous and unprofessional approach.

Earlier this year, we made proposals to our US colleagues about structuring our future dialogue on arms control and non-proliferation. They stood their ground and insisted on warheads alone. They have long been interested in Russian tactical nuclear weapons, hence their interest in warheads at the expense of everything else. We say we will be ready to discuss non-strategic nuclear weapons, including warheads, when the Americans withdraw their tactical weapons from other countries. In Europe, these weapons are deployed in five NATO countries. Also, NATO structures conduct training in handling nuclear weapons for military personnel from non-nuclear countries in flagrant violation of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT).

With regard to the People's Republic of China, President Putin has repeatedly stated that we have nothing against it, but the decision is up to the PRC. China has officially and publicly stated on several occasions that it is not going to join the talks with Russia and the United States, since its nuclear arsenal is an order of magnitude smaller than the corresponding arsenals of Moscow and Washington. We respect this position. If and when the Americans persuade China to join multilateral talks, we will have no objection to that. We will be willing to participate in them if the PRC agrees to this of its own accord. But we are not going to persuade Beijing to do so just at the whim of the Americans. But if and when a multilateral format in disarmament and arms control talks is created, we will push for France and the United Kingdom to join it as well.

When we told the Americans about this, they told us that these countries are their allies and they vouch for them. Precisely because they are allies of the United States, we would like to see them at the negotiating table, if the talks become multilateral. Washington's absolutely hostile doctrine towards Russia cannot but raise questions about the motives of the US allies, whether in Europe or Asia. When they enter into a military alliance with a country that declares us a hostile state, we must draw our own conclusions regarding these allies.

I don't see how we can seriously discuss anything related to the continuation of the arms control process with the Trump administration. We do not know yet what kind of administration will move into the White House or what kind of policy it will conduct. The voting results have not yet been announced officially, but there's already an understanding

that the change-of-command process is underway. Let's wait and see what kind of assessments will eventually form in the minds of those who will shape the US strategic stability policy after January 21, 2021.

**Question (addressed to both ministers):** Popular protests have been growing around the world for various reasons, including political ones. The law enforcement reaction is the same everywhere, going as far as the use of force and special equipment. At the same time, such events in Belarus are receiving heightened attention from foreign politicians. What do you think is the reason?

**Sergey Lavrov:** I have already cited examples of protests being suppressed in France. Those drastic figures are rarely revealed to the general public. Human rights agencies in the UN system, as well as numerous human rights rapporteurs are trying their best to avoid any topics that are uncomfortable for Western representatives.

Speaking of the protests in Paris, there is a huge wave of protest against the global security bill, which includes a ban on photographing, filming or otherwise identifying law enforcement officers. I can imagine the kind of racket a bill like that would have sparked if it were proposed in Russia or Belarus. The French public and human rights groups are concerned, yet we can see no reaction from international bodies. The police used water cannons and noise grenades during rallies against the bill. The protesters, too, provoked the police, using stones and sticks. One police officer was injured. And yet, I repeat, this does not prevent the West from lecturing anyone who is not their ally.

Voting processes in Russia and Belarus have been scrutinised through a magnifying glass. When a similar story happens in the United States, it is declared "normal, it's democracy, and everything is just fine." Though, even respected and influential think tanks in the United States openly write about "the problems with the US electoral system." To put it mildly, that system does not fully comply with the principles of democracy or the rule of law. They write these things themselves, but our international partners prefer to ignore them and concentrate on the countries whose "regimes" they find undesirable.

When UN rapporteurs, the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, describe violent clashes in Western capitals, they urge everyone to find a solution through dialogue. When they criticise us or Belarus, they demand a change of the system. This difference is visible to the naked eye. We have long lost any illusions about what kind of standards the West is promoting and how they use double standards. We will fight, and will defend our position at the UN bodies, where these issues should be considered. We will not allow the vices that the Western community is demonstrating to be forgotten.

**Question (addressed to both ministers):** How can you comment on Pavel Latushko's last interview, where he spoke about the possibility of unofficial contacts with Moscow?

**Sergey Lavrov:** Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman Maria Zakharova has just shown me part of that interview. Not only did he mention the possibility of unofficial contacts with Moscow – he said such contacts were underway and were coordinated. He shamelessly declared he could not cite any names, but mentioned “contacts at a sufficiently high level.” He speculated whether I will be allowed to tell my Belarusian friends about it. I will answer briefly: this is a blatant lie, and it once again says something about those trying to make some kind of career with foreign handouts.