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Vladimir Putin's annual news conference

Team of the Official Website of the President of Russia

The news conference was broadcast live by Rossiya 1, Rossiya 24, Channel One, NTV and MIR television channels, as well as Mayak, Vesti FM and Radio Rossii radio stations. Public Television of Russia (OTR) and its site (<http://www.otr-online.ru/online/>) provided live sign language interpretation of the event.

Representatives of federal and foreign media worked at the World Trade Centre in Moscow. In addition, special platforms have been set up in all federal districts, where representatives of regional media could participate and ask their questions.

During the news conference the call centre continued to accept questions from individuals. Questions could be asked via the website <https://moskva-putinu.ru> or by using the Moskva-Putinu mobile app.

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President of Russia Vladimir Putin: Good afternoon.

My greetings to all of you, here in Novo-Ogaryovo, in the call centre and across the regions of the Russian Federation, in Moscow and St Petersburg.

Today we are holding the traditional news conference to wind up this year's results. Since COVID-19 prevented us from holding the Direct Line live, my colleagues have tried to merge these two events into a single one by introducing elements inspired by the Direct Line format into this news conference so that I can interact directly with people, hear what they have to say, what is going on in the country, and listen to their proposals on what more can be done in order to address matters in the best possible way and find effective solutions to the issues we face and deliver on our objectives.

Allow me to mention that over the past years it has become a good tradition for us to ensure that all the questions we get, and there are hundreds of thousands of them, are answered in one way or another. For that, I would like to thank my colleagues from the Presidential

Executive Office, the Government, but first and foremost from non-governmental organisations: the Civic Chamber and the Russian Popular Front, the volunteers who contacted the people who took part in previous Direct Lines, talked to them, discussed the challenges pinpointed by these people, and quite often succeeded in resolving various matters that people were concerned with, and which probably remain relevant to this day.

I very much hope that we will do the same this year. I would like to ask volunteers, the Russian Popular Front to continue this wonderful practice, very useful for the country.

For me, I would like to emphasise, such events are not formal; I highly value them. Even though I have a vast flow of information about what is happening in the country reaching me through various channels, still, there is nothing more valuable than direct communication with the people, with Russian citizens, there is nothing more valuable than hearing their opinions about their lives and concerns, and again, what we need to do in order to have a better life.

You know, I would rather finish my opening remarks here. It would be a good idea to start the Q&A without wasting any more time. I would like to give the floor to Mr Peskov, who is at the call centre now. He will continue to moderate our meeting.

Mr Peskov, please.

Presidential Press Secretary Dmitry Peskov: Good afternoon, Mr President. Hello everyone.

Vladimir Putin: Good afternoon.

Dmitry Peskov: We have our participants scattered widely across our vast country, and I suggest we start from the easternmost point.

Vladivostok, please.

Once again, I urge everyone to be brief and dynamic so that as many journalists as possible have time to ask their questions.

Please, Vladivostok, help me out, for a start.

Dmitry Kaistro: Good evening. It is evening here already.

So this is Vladivostok, the capital of the country's largest federal district, the Far East. There are 50 correspondents here, and you can see how active they are. Each of them has their own established audience and their own questions for the head of state.

I suggest we begin now. We seem to have people here who really have something to say.

Mr Peskov, would you choose who will go first?

Dmitry Peskov: Could you show me the audience, please? Did I see Magadan there?

Dmitry Kaistro: Yes, the young lady in blue.

Lyudmila Shcherbakova: Good afternoon.

Magadan State Television and Radio Company. My name is Lyudmila Shcherbakova.

First of all, I would like to greet you Mr President, and all the spectators and the audience on behalf of Russia's Far East and Magadan Region in particular.

I have the following question. We all know that this was a challenging year, to an extent that I can hardly find the right words to describe. Still, in your opinion, was this year all bad, or was there something positive as well?

Vladimir Putin: The year was... What do you mean by calling this a bad year? This is like the weather: is it good or bad? Weather is just the way it is. The same goes for the year: it had its ups and downs, as it always happens in life.

Of course, this year brought us a problem that is on everyone's lips, and is a matter of concern for all of us: the coronavirus pandemic. However, not only Russia, the entire world has been hit by this scourge. We are fully aware of this, since over 70 million people have already been infected by the coronavirus, according to WHO data. This problem has affected all aspects of our lives.

What is a pandemic? It means lockdowns, curbed production, declining passenger

and cargo traffic and all that goes with it. Unfortunately, it also means fewer jobs, and lower incomes. This has all become a reality.

At the same time, here is what I wanted to point out. First (and I will try to provide figures to back this up), despite the plethora of challenges we have been facing, and there has been plenty of problems, and we will discuss them today, since this is why we are here, the whole world has been submerged in this ocean of problems. Still, we can affirm in all confidence that we faced up to these problems with dignity and in some ways maybe even better than other countries of the world that have every right to be proud of their economies, social services and healthcare systems.

I have some prompts here (it is not my intention to delve deep into numbers since it sounds boring) to show you where we are right now. At this point in time, Russia's GDP has fallen by 3.6 percent, which is less than in the leading European, EU countries, and less than in the United States. In some EU countries GDP has so far dropped by as much as 9 percent (I think this is the case in Great Britain).

We have industrial production down 3 percent now – mainly due to oil, because we have made the OPEC Plus deal and began to cut production, and this affected our overall performance. But there is also good news (better in some areas, worse in others, but we do have some improvements): yesterday, my colleagues from the Government reported to me that processing industries (manufacturing) showed 1.1 percent growth in November. This gives us reason to hope that this trend will continue, that we will move forward in this direction.

Over the past few years, our agricultural industry has posted good figures, and now, at the moment, it is somewhere around up 1.8. The Minister said agriculture might not even show a decline for the year, but an increase of up to 2 percent. I hope this will be the case.

Our banking sector is in a very satisfactory condition, with profits estimated at about 1.3 trillion rubles for the year. This definitely testifies to the financial system's stability.

Real wages. I ask the country's citizens, try not to be angry with me because what I will say now might not correspond to how people feel in real life; nevertheless, I am going to cite an averaged figure, and it also needs to be taken into account. I hope real wages will grow by about 1.5 percent by the end of the year across Russia, although unfortunately, there will be a decline in real disposable incomes. Why is this happening? What does it mean? Where does this difference come from? This has to do with the declining incomes of individual

entrepreneurs, and the resulting changes. Overall, real incomes, unfortunately, will fall by around 3 percent.

Unemployment rate in Russian was 4.7 percent at the beginning of 2020; now, as you know, it has grown to 6.3 percent. We will certainly talk about this later.

Everything we do to support the economy, to support the affected industries, is aimed at maintaining employment. We have [unemployment at] 6.3 percent now, but I hope that over the next year, we will be able to bring it down to the earlier figures.

A positive trade balance can be considered a good indicator. It creates conditions for good macroeconomic development.

Our national debt had been at its lowest at \$70 billion, in dollar terms. It shrank by another 10 billion since. We borrow less in foreign markets, while regularly servicing all our loan obligations. Our international reserves have grown. At the beginning of this year, they amounted to 554.4 billion; now, as of December 4, they are already about 587.7 billion. The same holds true for the National Wealth Fund. In ruble terms, it was 7.7 trillion, now it is almost 13.5 trillion. This is significant growth.

There is something I need to draw your attention to. What is an obviously positive part of our economic growth? As much as 70 percent of the Russian federal budget comes from non-oil and gas revenues now. This means, well, we are not entirely off the so-called oil and gas needle, but we are starting to get away from it. Even if someone still likes to think of Russia as a petrol station, they no longer have real grounds for that. Even though the dependence is still strong enough, and we have to bear this in mind.

Finally, this outgoing year is also associated with major national events, such as the 75th anniversary of Victory in the Great Patriotic War. Despite all the difficulties caused by the pandemic, we nevertheless celebrated it properly, with the Victory Parade on Red Square; and the Immortal Regiment march also took place, albeit online. These are all positive aspects.

But most importantly, there is something else I definitely need to mention now, and I would like to thank the citizens of our country for it: even in the most difficult circumstances, we have once again reaffirmed what underlies the Russian identity – people rallying together in the face of a threat. We have seen it all, the work of volunteers, the work of doctors – we bow down before them again as a sign of deepest gratitude – the prevailing attitude

in society, people are ready to help and support their neighbours, those especially in need of help and support. That showed a nationwide unity – let alone the We Are Together volunteer campaign, which is just an external manifestation of the internal attitude in society – this, in my opinion, is something that determines our country and is a decisive factor. Once again, I would like to express my gratitude to everyone who took part in those major campaigns.

Thank you.

Dmitry Peskov: I would like to remind everyone that after asking your questions you should change the mike cover for a new one. After all, we must comply with the sanitary rules.

Let us proceed. The Kremlin pool, please, show us Novo-Ogaryovo.

We will give the floor to our largest holding, the VGTRK, Rossiya channel.

Alexei Petrov: Thank you. Alexei Petrov, Vesti news programme, Rossiya TV channel.

Mr President, face masks have become an unpleasant symbol of the times. It is obvious that the pandemic is the main event of the year. My question concerns the situation in the Russian healthcare system. How would you describe its state of readiness? How well has it responded and how well is it responding to the current challenges?

There is an important nuance here. Do you think the situation is being analysed? Are the shortcomings and drawbacks being considered? This includes the shortage and labelling of medications, something that has been spoken about many times, and our social activists have reported about this to you. What is the net result?

Another thing has to do with the primary care system reform. A lot of money has been invested in it. How will it proceed now in the light of the lessons of the pandemic?

Thank you.

Vladimir Putin: Regarding the readiness of our healthcare system. Of course, not a single healthcare system in the world was ready for the scale of the problem we faced. There are simply no such systems. We are analysing everything that is taking place across

the world, and we see that there are no such systems. But there are examples of how the pandemic response was organised in Russia. Compared to other countries, although we do have a great number, an ocean of problems, some of which you have mentioned, but compared to what was happening in the world our healthcare system has proved to be more effective.

I will now talk about medicine shortages and other problems – it goes without saying that the problems are still there, and we can see them all. It is evident from the incoming questions, and I can hear it in your question, it suggests that not everything has been resolved. But look, when the pandemic was only just starting, when the very first signals came from our friends in the People's Republic of China that there was a problem, we reacted immediately at the border, and – I have already said this many times – it bought us time to get prepared, so that when it all hit us on a large scale, we were ready.

It bought us time, we began to quickly deploy the healthcare system proper, as well as other measures to prevent a pandemic, and we did not waste any of that time. The required number of beds for coronavirus patients was 95, we are counting in millions, and the availability was only 50 percent; now we have 125 – sorry, I meant thousands – 125,000, and now we have 177,000 deployed, even 277,000 – a total of 277,000 beds deployed in a fairly short time. During that time, we have built 40 coronavirus centres: 30 of them were built quickly by the Ministry of Defence, and 10 by the regions. Overall, we will have 40, as the last one should be completed in the final days of 2020. This shows our ability to quickly respond to a problem.

Yesterday, when I was inspecting equipment, I spoke to a young woman working as a volunteer: at the time the pandemic began, we had very few doctors or specialists – 8,300, and now, there are 150,000 doctors working with this infection, and total medical staff numbers are more than half a million, some 520,000–530,000, I think.

What happened? We were able to quickly convert some of the medical institutions available for dealing with COVID and set up a retraining system for medical personnel. We introduced bonuses for people working in the 'red zones' in order to support our doctors, also 10,000 for senior students of medical universities, and 7,000 each for college students, as you know. We quickly expanded the production of personal protective equipment and suits, and disinfectants to sanitise premises. In some cases, the expansion was dramatic: for example, with the facemasks everyone is sick and tired of by now, we increased production 20 times, and this rarely happens.

Our healthcare system and state governance system in this area have shown that they can

quickly mobilise resources, and they have done this. Incidentally, the required amount of medications has doubled. It is true that some regions have problems – I am aware of this and have just received information from the call centre based on what people say. There is a shortage of medications at hospitals, not to mention pharmacies, and free medications are not provided – I will say a few words about this as well. But these are not the same problems that we faced at the beginning. These problems have to do with logistics and purchase and delivery delays, but on the whole our industry has responded well enough.

At the beginning of the pandemic we did not know what we were facing, how to identify or test the disease, what treatment to use, and whether there would ever be an antidote, that is, a vaccine against it.

Just look now: we have moved forward a great deal in all of these areas. Russia is one of the world's top three countries for COVID testing, and the WHO believes that mass testing is a way to deal with the problems created by the spreading infection. Take medications: we are now producing domestic medications in the necessary amount. And lastly, vaccination: Russia is the first country in the world to create and produce a vaccine, or vaccines created at the Gamaleya National Research Centre and at the Novosibirsk-based Vektor Centre. These are good vaccines, as I have said on numerous occasions, safe and effective: their efficacy rate is over 95 percent, approaching 96 or 97 percent, according to experts, and not a single case of serious side effects has been reported.

Thankfully, our foreign colleagues have changed their attitude towards us and are ready to collaborate in the areas where it is not working out for them. The Anglo-Swedish AstraZeneca is ready to work with us, and is in the process of signing a corresponding agreement. This is very good; I am really glad when top-notch specialists – this is a large and good company with a global reputation – join forces, including with their Russian partners. I have no doubt that this will have a very good result not just for our citizens, but for the world as a whole.

Everything I have said just now shows that although there are quite a few problems, our healthcare system has responded appropriately to the threats our citizens faced.

Turning to the question on primary healthcare, it is true, of course, that we had to channel the necessary resources into what I have just mentioned, fighting the coronavirus, helping doctors, volunteers, students, etc., and acquiring the required manufacturing capability as soon as possible. We have postponed the effort to upgrade primary healthcare, without

forgetting about it or placing it on the back burner. Instead of launching this undertaking on July 1, we will begin on January 1, and all the resources that were to be spent on this programme will be engaged within the timeframe set out in the programme. This is 500 billion rubles from the federal budget and another 50 billion from regional budgets. Over the next three years or so, some 300 billion rubles will have been made available and used.

We have started improving some aspects of primary healthcare. This includes buying motor vehicles, for example. We need these vehicles right now, as I can see from the questions we have been receiving, but this is also part of the programme to develop primary healthcare.

Since we are on this topic, I would like to say that ensuring that all people enjoy access to medical services is what the efforts to develop primary healthcare are all about. I know that there are many issues here that need to be resolved without delay. This will be our priority. Of course, this is also about personnel training, infrastructure, etc.

As for your question on how to respond to challenges that arose in the course of the fight against the pandemic and have yet to be resolved, of course, we are looking into these issues. In this context, let me reiterate that our event today is essential since it provides us with massive feedback from all regions across the country, giving us a picture of what is being done in specific regions of the Russian Federation, and allowing us to respond to these developments and fine-tune our actions.

We can draw the obvious conclusion that we need to move towards building a better sanitary and epidemiological service and reforming it. We need to understand how many specialised hospital beds we need and in what regions, and how many specialists are required. This programme is ready by all accounts, and we will make it a reality.

Dmitry Peskov: Let's move on. Ura.Ru.

Anton Olshannikov: Good afternoon, Mr President.

My name is Anton Olshannikov, from the Ura.Ru news agency.

The epidemic is a problem indeed, but life goes on, and in this regard, I have this compound question about life, concerning elections, the big campaign we are going to have next year.

How do you think this upcoming political campaign will differ from the last one? What will the political landscape be like in the country?

The second part of my question is about the old mainstream opposition parties. Isn't it time for them to make way for young parties, and do these young parties even have a chance, given how they have shown themselves at the municipal elections?

And the last part of my question is about external interference. It is obviously quite possible, especially since this campaign is so important. How do you intend to block this interference?

Thank you.

Vladimir Putin: As for the 2021 parliamentary elections, there will be a few differences, of course, mainly because we have adopted amendments to the Constitution – this is my first point. This means that the parliament now has more powers in a number of areas, including in forming the Government of the Russian Federation. You know, I would like to repeat this again, the State Duma now in fact makes the final decision not only regarding the Prime Minister, but also on cabinet ministers and deputy prime ministers.

The President must sign the personnel decisions adopted by parliament. And this – I do not think everyone has fully realised this yet – this greatly augments the importance of the deputy corps' work, of their responsibility to the country, including for the work of the Government. This link between parliament and the Government is extremely important, I think. This is the first point.

Second, about the new parties and whether the old political heavyweights should cede their places to them. This is not for the new parties or for the political heavyweights, that is, the traditional parties, but for our citizens, the voters to decide. They will decide at the elections which parties to support. But does our political system, which continues developing, offer an opportunity for more political forces and parties to participate in the general election campaigns? Yes, it does. I think, no, I am sure that next year up to 16 parties will be taking part in the elections without collecting signatures, as far as I am aware. This is because in accordance with our legislation they have won seats in several Russian regions and therefore have the right to try their hand on the national political stage.

I wish them every success, but I would like to repeat that it is for the voters to decide whom

to elect. I would like to note in this connection that the traditional parties are well known and have been represented in parliament for many years. It should be said that different, sometimes widely different views are expressed in parliament, where heated debates are held on a number of priority matters facing the country. At the same time, nearly all these parties act patriotically in the interests of the nation while offering their own solutions to the problems the country is facing. Approaches and ways to address problems may differ, but the goal of all our traditional political parties is the same – the welfare and development of the country.

Dmitry Peskov: Let us move from Moscow to Siberia now. Novosibirsk, you have an opportunity to ask your question.

Anton Vernitsky: Mr President, you have mentioned Novosibirsk as a centre where one of our vaccines has been created. Allow me to take Mr Peskov's place now and act as a moderator. Can I choose who will ask the question? The thing is that I have seen a poster with the word "vaccine" on it. Go ahead, please, but first introduce yourself.

Lyudmila Keibol: Lyudmila Keibol, Altai Territory.

Mr President, I would like to ask if you have been vaccinated. What do you think about compulsory vaccination if there are not enough pilot vaccine doses in the regions? The epidemiological situation is quite complicated in Altai Territory.

And one more question: will we have enough vaccine doses in Russia if we help out other countries?

Thank you.

Vladimir Putin: Look here. I urge everyone to pay close attention to specialists' recommendations. I see, Lyudmila, that you have put on a mask. This is great. And you have gloves as well.

Specialists are telling us that the vaccines that are now coming into civil circulation are designed for people in a certain age group. So vaccines have not yet reached people like me. Let me repeat that I am a law-abiding person in this sense, I follow the recommendations of our specialists, therefore I have not been vaccinated yet. But I will do it as soon as it becomes possible. This is the first point.

Now the second one: I hear from specialists that it is necessary to have an interval between, say a flu shot and the coronavirus vaccine. Some of them say it should be two weeks whereas others insist it should be at least four weeks. I am referring to the coronavirus vaccine.

The third point is about the need for a large-scale or universal vaccination campaign. I think it must be done. It is not only Russian virologists who say this but also their colleagues practically throughout the world. Mass vaccination is one of the few ways of dealing with all pandemic-related issues. It is this vaccination that will create nationwide, community immunity. And let me repeat once again: our vaccine is effective and safe. Therefore, I do not see any reasons for rejecting it.

Finally, the next issue that is related to aid to other countries, as you put it. First of all, as I have always said and will say it again because I want all people in this country to hear me, our task is to carry out vaccination inside the Russian Federation. There are some issues in this respect.

What are they? The vaccine itself and its components are good. But we are still short of the hardware, the equipment for producing the amount of the vaccine we need. I believe 70 million people have already got flu shots. This is large-scale vaccination all over the country. This is what we must also do to counter COVID-19. But to produce this vaccine, we need corresponding plants, companies and equipment. We will build them. I assume that all plans in this respect will be carried out. Next year, in the very beginning, we will already have millions of vaccine doses and we will keep increasing its production on and on.

With regard to cooperation with other countries, since we need time in order to boost the technological capabilities of our enterprises to produce the vaccine, nothing is preventing us from producing the components of this vaccine in other countries, which will invest their own money into expanding their production capacities and purchasing the corresponding equipment. This is what I am talking about. In no way does this interfere with vaccinating the public in Russia. On the contrary, it will even improve the final quality of the product, since increasingly it will be mass produced.

Anton Vernitsky: Mr President, let us continue the tradition Mr Peskov started here. (*Addressing Lyudmila Keibol.*) We would like to present you with a microphone windscreen. The fact is that you used the microphone without wearing a mask. Now you have it, so go ahead and use it.

Vladimir Putin: You are a perfectionist, I would say. But never mind.

Dmitry Peskov: Let us visit the call centre.

Nailya Asker-Zade: The call centre has received many pandemic-related questions, as well as questions about the doctors' work during this challenging period. These questions were handled by a medical worker and volunteer Alevtina Kiselyova. She worked five months as a general practitioner at an outpatient clinic and saw COVID-19 patients.

Good afternoon, Alevtina,

Tell us what Russia's citizens are complaining about.

Alevtina Kiselyova: Good afternoon,

We received many complaints about serious problems, including testing, getting a home visit by a doctor, and a lack of medications in both pharmacies and hospitals. At times, people waited over a week for an ambulance to arrive.

I also handled messages from the "red zone" doctors, which I would like to focus on.

Doctors from the town of Kola, Murmansk Region, and the town of Kachkanar, Sverdlovsk Region, have not once been paid a bonus for working with COVID-19 patients. The last time the bonus was paid to the military hospital personnel in Nizhny Novgorod and the doctors at an infectious disease hospital in the city of Tver was September.

We have received many requests from those who are risking their lives just as doctors but do not receive any additional payments for this. These are the support personnel – lift operators, cleaning staff and canteen workers. They are working in the risk zone, and the operation of the "red zone" would be impossible without them. I feel sorry for those who are at the forefront of the war against the pandemic but do not feel appreciated.

Mr President, we have a large number of questions regarding this, and we can give them to you so that you would issue instructions on dealing with every one of them. Mr President, is it possible to settle this problem?

Vladimir Putin: Thank you. Alevtina, was it you I talked with yesterday?

Alevtina Kiseleva: Yes, I talked with you yesterday.

Vladimir Putin: I see.

I have a question from the call centre, possibly from you, from the Ryazan Region: “We live in a small town, and we never have access to medications, free medications. Why do coronavirus patients have to pay for their medications? They said that confirmed cases would receive free medications, but we do not. Everyone I know is buying their own medications. Where is the money?” I would like to know this too. It is from Vladimir Korshunov, Ryazan Region.

Alevtina, this is what I would like to tell you and all those who have sent in their questions, including Mr Korshunov. We have indeed allocated 10 billion rubles to the regions for a prompt response to arising problems connected with the purchase of PPE and the preparation of medical centres and facilities for dealing with COVID. We have also allocated 5 billion rubles, or even slightly more, for the provision of free medications to those who receive treatment at home.

As for the Ryazan Region, I know for sure that all the approved allocations have been transferred from the federal budget to the region. It is not clear why these medications are not provided to the people; we will definitely look into the matter. Here is the procedure for receiving free medications: notify your outpatient clinic, which should confirm the diagnosis and provide the necessary medications.

Alevtina, we will systematise the complaints that you received, and respond to other similar complaints and requests. To reiterate, we gave 10 billion to the regions for institutions and personal protective equipment, and 5 billion to help people directly. Of course, we will investigate where this money went. All the money from the federal budget was made available to the regions. Some governors – I am in constant contact with all of them – are reporting back to me that the money is being disbursed. There may be, of course, isolated irregularities, I hope that this is the case. Judging by the number of complaints, though, these are not isolated instances, but a widespread problem. We will definitely take a closer look at it.

Alevtina Kiselyova: Thank you very much.

Dmitry Peskov: Let us go back to the World Trade Centre.

Introduce yourself, please.

Pyotr Marchenko: MIC *Izvestia*, REN TV channel.

Good afternoon, Mr President,

Thank you for the vaccine. Above all, thanks go to the researchers. However, talk about fighting the pandemic has overshadowed the issue of the origin of that scourge. The debate continues until now, with the United States accusing China, and China accusing the United States of the virus being man-made or non-man-made. What do we know about it? Perhaps you ordered the special services to get on it and find out the source of the problem?

Vladimir Putin: There are many rumours regarding its origin. I do not feel like discussing this in front of the entire country and the whole world, especially since we do not have any evidence to back up these accusations. I think we need to join our efforts in combating the problem rather than look for the culprits. Cooperation will be the right thing to do. This is my first point.

Secondly, some of our Western partners never stop emphasising that they adhere to humanistic principles in their domestic and foreign policies. So, we should think about how to help the people in particularly difficult circumstances and lift trade restrictions and sanctions for the countries and areas of cooperation that are critical for overcoming the pandemic fallout. Perhaps restrictions on supplying medications, medical equipment and doctor training should be lifted in the first place. This is what everyone should be thinking about rather than looking for the culprits.

I have to note that, fortunately, we are developing cooperation with many countries, including the People's Republic of China, at the level of specialists, regional heads and at the federal level.

As for the tasks assigned to the special services: there are many various tasks, of course, but I believe this is not the right place to discuss how these tasks are fulfilled.

One of the earlier questions was about possible interference in our elections. I am sorry, I did not respond to it, but not because I do not want to answer it. I just thought there are other issues that are more important, and focused on them. But this is a general question. Of course, they will try to interfere, they always do, and not only in our elections, but almost all over the world. This is global policy. Just like there are bases all over the world, there is

interference on a worldwide scale. We know about it and are getting ready for it. But we will be able to efficiently block it only if the overwhelming majority of our citizens understand that a) it is interference, b) we must counteract it, and c) it is unacceptable and we must determine our destiny ourselves.

It is very important that our society feels this. Therefore, the sentiments of internet bloggers, the sentiments of the media and their intention to protect themselves is a crucial thing, the protection of our sovereignty. At the same time, of course, we are open to cooperation with our partners and international observers.

I think there is no such transparency anywhere else in the world. In some US states, you know, there are over a dozen states where it is prohibited for any foreign observers to attend the elections. We are nothing like that. On the contrary, we are open, we will work, and observers inside the country are working actively, including public organisations, the Civic Chamber, and others, and they are allowed to take part as observers. There are more opportunities for political parties and the media to observe the political processes inside the country, as it was before. We will definitely boost this activity to make our citizens confident that the elections are open and transparent and that their results should be respected.

Dmitry Peskov: We will stay at the World Trade Centre. Alexander Gamov, one of the most prominent members of the presidential pool, go ahead, please.

Alexander Gamov: Mr President, first, thank you very much for holding this countrywide gathering, I almost called it a Union-wide one, since it is so great for us to come together at this time and get an opportunity to tell you the truth.

In general, you know that the coronavirus has dealt a heavy blow to the standard of living of many people. I come from the regions, and I get a lot of phone calls from there with people saying that they find it extremely difficult to get by, worse than ever before: poverty is on the rise, and poor people are getting even poorer, with unemployment, the falling ruble, growing prices and higher mortality. Also, I wanted to tell you that prices have been gradually increasing since about September or August. Why did it take until December to start talking about it? A minister would not sweat until cornered by the President, it seems.

Could you tell us, please, whether there is a programme for resolving the issue with growing prices within a week, as you have said? Does the President or the Government have a programme to help Russia in the coming weeks?

Thank you very much. I represent the Komsomolskaya Pravda website, radio station and newspaper. Alexander Gamov.

Vladimir Putin: As I have said at the outset, this is a challenging situation. When I said that the pandemic caused the shutdown of several manufacturers, rising unemployment and a decline in disposable incomes, these were not empty words, and not something that can be overlooked. This means that we see and understand what is going on.

You said that things have never been as hard as they are today. This is not so. In 2000, 29 percent of the population lived below the poverty line. Almost one third of the country earned less than the subsistence level. One person out of three lived below the poverty line earning less than the subsistence level.

In 2017, we had 12.3 percent of the population below the poverty line. Unfortunately, today this level increased to 13.5 percent, due to all these problems. Of course, 20 million people is still too many.

You asked me whether there is a plan. Of course, there is a plan. Reducing the number of people below the poverty line is one of our key priorities. Let me elaborate on this subject.

First, here is the plan: by 2030, we need to bring down the share of the population living in poverty from the current 13.5 percent to 6.5 percent. Having 6.5 percent of the population earning less than the subsistence level is still not good, but we need to be realistic. This is a far-reaching, but feasible goal. This is the first point I wanted to make.

Now about prices. It is true that some prices are growing for objective reasons, for example, because the cost of their component parts has increased due to changes in the exchange rate. This is inevitable. Some products are only assembled in Russia, and we are now paying more for a large share of component parts, which have become more expensive because the ruble has slumped a bit.

But when the price hike is not related to objective reasons, this provokes a painful reaction. This is what made me angry, frankly speaking. For example, although we had a record large harvest this year, the largest harvest in the past six years – it will be 131 million tonnes and possibly even 134 million tonnes this year, yet bread and pasta prices are growing. How is that? Why? This is the first thing I wanted to say.

Second, sugar. I was told in the past that we should do something about cane sugar so as to support our own producers. We did so, in a number of ways, but not because we wanted to create a shortage on the domestic market. The minister has told me that we produce enough sugar for domestic consumption. But how can it be enough if sugar prices have soared by 75 percent?

Or take sunflower oil: prices have grown by 17 percent. Is there a shortage of sunflower seeds? No. There is also plenty of that. Why did it happen then? Because prices have grown on the global market, and so our producers increased exports and started adjusting domestic prices to global ones, which is absolutely unacceptable.

This is why we had such a tough discussion. The Government has responded. The main thing now is not to go too far with disciplinary action. This should have been done before with market measures; we should have adjusted the import duty, and this would have solved the problem. These are well known instruments, but they should be used on time. I hope we will do this now.

Contracts have been signed or will be signed – I think they have already been signed – between producers and retail chains: producers will bring down their prices to a certain level, and the retail chains should do the same for basic foods.

Of course, prices need to be monitored, and we will certainly do this. I hope to see the required changes within days, or weeks at the most.

Now about what can and must be done and what we are doing to help the people in this difficult period.

To begin with, we have substantially increased unemployment benefits since the unemployment rate has grown from 4.7 percent to 6.3 percent. This is common knowledge.

But the most difficult situation is taking shape in families with children, and we have created a whole programme to support families with children: from zero to 1.5 years, from 1.5 to three years and from three to seven years old. We have introduced an allowance for toddlers from zero to 1.5 years, and the rules are as follows: if every family member receives less than two subsistence minimums (at first, it was 1.5, but later we expanded this programme and now it covers more people), such families are entitled to receive one child subsistence minimum for every child. As for children from 1.5 to three years of age, if

their parents' incomes are below these levels, they can receive the same payments but from the maternity capital: we have given them the right to receive these funds from the maternity capital. And, finally, for children aged between three and seven years we have introduced the following rule: if the income of each family member is below the subsistence minimum, they will start getting half of the subsistence minimum per each child. However, we decided from the very start to analyse this situation and see how it will affect the incomes of families. If not all families reach one subsistence minimum per member, starting January 1, that is, in two weeks from now, we will be already paying them one subsistence minimum for every child.

These are, so to speak, urgent measures to support Russian families. I did not mention lump sum payments for all children under 16.

And then there is support for the labour market. We will probably talk about it later on, and I will speak about it separately, so as not to drag out the answer to your question. However, this is certainly one of the key issues, therefore I allow myself to devote more time to it.

But the main point, of course, is that we need to develop the economy, reach the national development goals and implement national projects that contain these goals, create new jobs, raise the economy to a new level meeting the latest requirements, as well as develop artificial intelligence, digitisation and modern production lines that would allow people to have interesting jobs and receive decent incomes. The entire package of our measures envisaged by the national projects is aimed at reaching these goals.

Dmitry Peskov: Let's not forget about the regions.

Yekaterinburg, please. We have not had any questions from Yekaterinburg yet.

Olga Armyakova: Colleagues, good afternoon. This is Yekaterinburg, the capital of the Urals.

We are broadcasting from the office of the presidential envoy, where journalists from all over the Ural Federal District have gathered. Accreditation has been approved for 70 journalists, but only 69 are present now. We learned why just a minute ago. Colleagues, I must share this with you: a journalist from a local news agency could not come to the news conference because she had a son yesterday. I think that is a good reason, and that you, Mr President, will accept it. As for the others, you can see that they are all

ready to leap into action, to ask their questions.

Mr Peskov, what will we do? Will you choose the questions yourself?

Dmitry Peskov: Can you show me the room?

Olga Armyakova: Yes, of course.

Dmitry Peskov: Show me the room, please.

Right there, in the front row, with the "Waste" poster. Let's have your question.

Olga Armyakova: The front row, please, go ahead.

You can remove the face mask, and don't forget to introduce yourself. And then ask your question.

Olga Balabanova: Good afternoon, Mr President. Olga Balabanova from Magnitogorsky Metall newspaper, Magnitogorsk.

I have an environmental question, about waste management reform. As everyone is aware, it was officially launched in January 2019, but in fact it began long before that, five years ago. At any rate, a concession agreement was signed and a project was drafted in my city in 2015, but it came to a halt at the government expert review level. It looks as if they have started building [the recycling plant] now.

Why is the reform, which is vitally important for the whole country, dragging on in all regions, and what can be done about this?

Vladimir Putin: I do not think it is dragging on, this reform. There are many problems with organising production but the reform itself is proceeding.

There are several large objectives.

First, we must create a new industry, full-cycle production, when waste is not taken to landfills but recycled for use in other sectors. This is the first objective.

Second, we must ensure proper waste sorting so that by 2030 waste can be separated into different groups for subsequent recycling.

Currently, one of the tasks for the organisers of all this work is to ensure that manufacturers and packaging companies carry more responsibility so that the burden of waste disposal could shift from customers to packaging producers.

Overall, this is a practice typical almost everywhere in the world, and we will adhere to this very practice. For example, in car manufacturing, we charge a recycling fee. It works in our country and in the rest of the world. The same needs to be done in these areas.

I assure you that the Government is dealing with this, as are regional authorities. And they will continue to work on this, no question about that. We allocate substantial resources for these efforts, and there is a solid plan. This money will not be reassigned to any other purpose, and this work will be completed according to plan.

Since you are from Magnitogorsk, you know, one of the questions I have here has to do with Magnitogorsk and atmospheric emissions. The person asking the question wrote about what is happening in Magnitogorsk in relation to atmospheric emissions. Frankly speaking, I was a bit surprised because I know that over the past few years, the Magnitogorsk Iron and Steel Works has invested significant resources into upgrading its production facilities with the specific intention of reducing emissions and, according to the reports I received, the emissions have indeed decreased. And then I read this.

Olga, what do you think? What is happening in Magnitogorsk in terms of atmospheric emissions?

Olga Balabanova: Perhaps, as a patriot (I work for a newspaper associated with this plant), I believe that if waste treatment facilities were built, it is not a window you can open or close, as one of my friends says. It is an entire complex of facilities. My fellow residents may tear me to pieces for my words, but I think that many people take the fog they can see over the left riverbank for smog. In fact, the tank was separated from the plant with a closed circuit system. The water there is warm and does not freeze, which often produces fog. People look at it from the right bank and think that they see smog over the left bank. There are other production facilities in the city, such as a poultry factory, that may produce the smell that people often notice. But I do not think that the situation is as critical as they like to inflate it on social media.

Vladimir Putin: Right, but this inquiry did not come from social media but from a specific person in Magnitogorsk. It is not social media.

Olga Balabanova: We read about this on social media as well. Perhaps there is a problem, but the plant is dealing with it, and I do not think these are just idle promises.

Vladimir Putin: I asked because I know that the plant has invested heavily in reducing emissions, much more than other metallurgical production centres. And in fact emissions have gone down, when measuring in tonnes. So, this came as a surprise to me. It seems that this matter does deserve some attention in general.

Speaking about the environment, we are working on deploying a network of sensors across the country where polluters are especially active. Metallurgical production centres will be first on the list, and the system will be paid for by the companies themselves. I believe we will act accordingly in Magnitogorsk, and we will closely monitor, probably in a more objective manner what is happening there.

Thank you very much.

You know, there was a question earlier, if I may interrupt our presenters, on teachers' salaries. "A top-category teacher in a rural area working 18 hours, which is full-time employment for a teacher, earns the same salary as a cleaning lady at the same school" – this is what Sergei Stepanchenko wrote us. This is a burning issue. This is why I picked it from this folder with many similar questions.

Do you see what has happened here? I will tell you what happened and what needs to be done.

Why did this happen? We took a decision that the minimum wage cannot be below the subsistence level, which led to an increase in salaries. This led to what you mentioned in your letter: the minimum wage cannot be less than the subsistence level, so the minimum wage went up, and a cleaning lady no longer earns less than minimum wage. She now has a higher salary. This had to be accompanied by an increase in salaries for other categories, but it was not done due to budget constraints. But the government will have to do this regardless. For this reason I would like to draw the Government's attention to the fact that this state of affairs is far from normal.

Dmitry Peskov: Let us go back to the World Trade Centre. We gave the floor to the most

seasoned journalist here, now I want to give the floor to an aspiring journalist. I saw Sergei Shnurov there. Please give him the microphone.

Sergei Shnurov: Good afternoon, Mr President,

Sergei Shnurov, RTVI international channel.

I will leave the high-profile questions about Navalny to my colleagues, I will be nicer this time. Since I work for an international channel, my question is as follows: why did Russian hackers not help Trump get reelected? Have they all gone to the Silicon Valley already? No one is left behind, as you like to say. What kind of job can Trump count on now? Will you provide him with shelter if he asks for political asylum, like Snowden? This was an open-ended question coming from the channel.

Now, a question from me: how can an ordinary Russian, someone representing the majority of the population in our country, describe this life without using profane language?

Vladimir Putin: I will start with the final part of your question. Just go back to the classics of Soviet cinema. Remember, when you have a radiator section land on your foot, you should say, "you dirty so-and-so?" instead of using curse words. Russian is rich enough to let anyone get his or her message across clearly and intelligibly, without resorting to the strong language you referred to.

I want to thank you for not using it now, as you sometimes do, as I understand, from stage, addressing large audiences. Thank you very much for being courteous today.

Why did Russian hackers not help Trump get reelected? I believe that this is not so much a question as a provocation. Russian hackers did not help the incumbent president of the United States to get elected the first time around and did not interfere in the domestic affairs of that great power. This is nothing but speculation and an excuse to degrade relations between Russia and the United States. This is an excuse to not recognise the incumbent US president's legitimacy for domestic US considerations. In this sense, Russia-US relations have become hostage to domestic politics in the United States.

I believe that, primarily, this is bad for the United States, but it is up to them, let them do as they please. We believe that the president-elect will figure out what is going on. He is a seasoned politician both in domestic and foreign affairs. We look forward to the new

administration resolving at least some of the existing problems.

I do not think Mr Trump will need to look for employment. Almost 50 percent of the people voted for him, if you count the number of registered voters, not electors. He relies on a fairly large base in the United States and, as far as I understand, is not going to leave his country's political scene.

Dmitry Peskov: Let us now turn to Novo-Ogaryovo and the Kremlin pool reporters, who are in the same room with the President.

LIFE, go ahead please.

Alexander Yunashev: Good afternoon, Mr President.

I will take the advice from the young reporter. A number of interesting investigative reports have been released lately, for example, about your daughter, your former son-in-law Shamalov and other people who are allegedly close to you. This week the Alexei Navalny investigation also came out. Could you tell us why a criminal investigation into his poisoning and who did it has not been launched until now?

Vladimir Putin. I see.

It is no surprise that these fake news stories emerge. It has always been this way and always will. There is a battle unfolding in the media space. Nothing new here. Do you remember the terrible developments in the Caucasus and efforts to fight international terrorism? How was yours truly portrayed by the international media and, unfortunately, in Russia as well? Remember how they portrayed me with fangs? I remember all this very well. Still, I have invariably proceeded from the premise that I need to be doing what I believe to be right for our country. When I do something, I do it not for the sake of pleasing someone abroad. This is the first part of my answer.

The second part has to do with my close ones. This report is impossible to read. I flipped through it, since it talks about me, it seems, but it is such a cut-and-paste job, with so many things piling up, that I was unable to finish reading it. What did I want to point out in this regard? The report keeps repeating "the president's son-in-law" over and over again. At the end, however, he is referred to as the former son-in-law. This is the first thing I wanted to say. Still, in the text they keep driving home the message that he is my son-in-law. So this goes for point one.

The second point is about “President Putin forbidding the elite to hold overseas assets.” There is no ban preventing the elite from holding assets abroad. Public servants cannot have financial assets abroad. This was the right thing to do. They cannot hold accounts or other financial assets abroad. The company in question is 100-percent private. The state does not own a single share in it.

The next question: who received shares in this company and how? It turns out that the company released a statement on this matter and what it thinks about these allegations. The company had a compensation scheme for its senior executives, and Mr Shamalov received stock just like all other senior executives. There are also other programmes for executives at a different level, and they received stock following a different scheme. Nothing special here.

But ultimately, in my opinion, the most important thing is this: just now, aspiring journalist Shnurov asked about our hackers. What is written in the beginning? Note that it says that an unknown, anonymous person is pursuing goals we do not understand and then, apparently, this anonymous person is tracked down. What do I mean? It is said that what happened is similar to the events in 2016 when outlawed Russian hackers associated with Russian military intelligence hacked US Democratic Party members' emails. Here is your anonymous person. I think we know who that is. Who called these hackers outlaws associated with Russian military intelligence? It was the US Department of State and US intelligence agencies, which are in fact the authors. At any rate, it is completely obvious that it was done upon their instructions. This is the first thing.

The second is that the reference to the insinuation that our hackers, as they believe, interfered with US domestic policy in 2016 means that the purpose of this is clear. The purpose is to take revenge and try to influence public opinion in our country in order to interfere, of course, with our domestic politics. This is absolutely obvious. It is absolutely obvious to me and, I think, it will also become clear to the majority of readers if they pay attention to the things I have just mentioned.

But to this end, I would like to emphasise the following:

One should be driven by... now I want to address those who ordered these publications, not those who actually wrote them. I know that if they get an assignment from intelligence services they have to write it. But those who order these kinds of articles, should not be driven by revenge or act on the assumption of alleged exceptionalism; instead, they should develop relations with their international partners based on mutual respect and the fundamental standards of international law. Then we will be able to achieve shared

success in the areas that are essential to all of us.

Now, with regard to the patient of a Berlin clinic. I have already mentioned it many times, and can repeat only certain things. Mr Peskov told me just yesterday about the latest speculations in this regard concerning our special service officers' data and so on. Listen, we are perfectly aware of what this is all about. It is about legalisation the first time around and now. This is not about an investigation. This is about legalising the materials from the US special services.

Do you really think we are unaware of the fact that they are tracking locations? Our special services understand this well and are aware of it. Officers of the FSB and other special services are aware of it and use telephones whenever they believe they should not be hiding their location, etc. But if this is so – and rest assured that this is so – it means that this patient of a Berlin clinic has the support of the special services, those of the United States in this particular case. And if this is the case, then it gets interesting and the special services should, of course, be looking after him. However, this does not mean at all that he must be poisoned. Who cares about him? If they really wanted to, they would have, most likely, carried it through. His wife addressed me, and I gave the green light to have him treated in Germany that very second.

There is one important thing that the general public is not paying attention to. It is a trick to attack the people at the top. Those who perform it thus propel themselves up to a certain level where they can say: see who I am talking to? I am a person of the same calibre, so treat me as a person of nationwide importance. It is a well-known trick that is used in political dealings around the world.

I think, though, that something else, not these tricks, should be used to gain people's respect and recognition. You need to prove your worth either by doing something important or by putting together a realistic programme with specific goals that can be implemented in a particular country, Russia, in this particular case.

I urge the opponents to the current government and all political forces in our country to be led not by personal ambitions, but by the interests of the people of the Russian Federation, and to come up with a positive agenda in order to overcome the challenges facing the country. And we have many of them.

Dmitry Peskov: Moving on to Rostov-on-Don.

Go ahead, please.

Aina Nikolayeva: Good afternoon, Mr President. Good afternoon, colleagues.

We are here at Don State Technical University. This is where the staff for the region's major manufacturers like Rostselmash is educated. But today we have people with a humanities bent, mostly my colleagues, journalists. If you allow me, I will not waste your time anymore and pass the microphone to them.

Sofia Brykanova: Good afternoon.

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to ask a question.

Mr President, I have what has become a traditional question for your news conferences, about Donbass. It is invariably relevant to our region.

Aina Nikolayeva: Please, introduce yourself.

Sofia Brykanova: I am sorry. Sofia Brykanova, Don-24 news agency.

I have the following question: what prospects do you see for settling the conflict in Donbass and what, in your opinion, does the future hold for Russian-Ukrainian relations?

Thank you.

Vladimir Putin: Regarding the future of Russian-Ukrainian relations, this largely depends on the Ukrainian government, rather than Ukraine itself, I would say. After all, all the preceding heads of state, just as the current one, Vladimir Zelensky, came to power with slogans on unifying the country, which, at the end of the day, included building a relationship with Russia. But they have not been able to deliver on this promise so far. In fact, on their way to power they garner support from a majority of the people and voters, but when they get there, they hesitate and start looking back at the extreme nationalist forces. I think they simply lack the political courage. And the process stalls.

This is what is happening right now, more or less. Thank goodness, when we met in Paris within the Normandy Format, we agreed on ending hostilities. This is holding, which is a major achievement. An exchange of detainees has taken place.

However, there has been no progress in removing economic and social restrictions. In fact, nothing has been done to advance a political settlement. Moreover, officials in Kiev have said time and again that they do not intend to abide by the Minsk agreements and have suggested revising their key provisions.

I would like to draw your attention to the fact that the Minsk agreements have been confirmed by a UN Security Council resolution, which means that they are international law. As such, they cannot be subject to unilateral revision. They have to respect the other side that signed the agreements, namely Donbass representatives.

For these reasons, I believe a settlement is inevitable. It will happen sooner or later. The question is when. Let me reiterate that this largely depends on the current Ukrainian government.

Russia will keep supporting Donbass as it has been. We will even increase our support. This includes supporting manufacturing, resolving social and infrastructural issues, etc. We will calmly proceed in this direction. Make no mistake, we understand the complicated situation in Donbass. Again, we will remain proactively involved not only on the humanitarian front, but also through direct cooperation.

Dmitry Peskov: Now let's take a question from Nizhny Novgorod. Nizhny Novgorod, please.

Yevgeny Khvan: Good afternoon, Mr President, Mr Peskov.

This is Nizhny Novgorod, the capital of the Volga Federal District. We have more than 70 journalists in our studio today. Of course, I can see everybody holding colourful posters. But allow me, as moderator, to choose a question based on the format of this news conference. Mr Peskov, will you allow me or will you choose yourself?

Dmitry Peskov: Of course, go ahead.

Yevgeny Khvan: Please, colleague with the poster saying "Online." Since this is an online conference; don't forget to introduce yourself.

Oleg Kashtanov: Good afternoon, Mr President.

Oleg Kashtanov. Izvestia Mordovii, Saransk.

My question is about online education. This is a widely discussed matter. Last spring, our schools and universities had to switch to distance learning. I would like to know your opinion: do you think our higher education system and our schools tackled this challenge successfully? And could you be very specific? Because people are asking if this online education system is here to stay. And in this difficult time, could it be that the quality of education is declining? And, as a result, are graduates less qualified?

Vladimir Putin: Oleg, look, there should be a distinction between online education in schools and online education in colleges and universities. We have 39,900 schools in the country and only 2 percent are teaching online while a small part are using a mixed format and a major part are operating as normal. As for universities, all of them were asked to consider switching to remote classes.

Regarding schools, I have plenty of notes here on their preparedness and technical capability to administer online learning, and I will talk about this in more detail later when I answer the written questions. But, of course, there are problems. There are problems with hardware because many people don't have computer equipment. There are also problems with internet access and even access to phones. These difficulties exist, especially in small towns.

What are we going to do? In 2021, all schools in the Russian Federation will be provided with access to high-speed internet. Some schools already have the internet, but in 2021, all schools must have it. This is the first thing.

As for higher education, we have allocated support for universities twice this year, in July and in the autumn, with financial resources to support remote activity. And they are supposed to expand their capabilities in online learning, as independent economic entities, with the government support I just mentioned. This support has been provided twice this year.

Now, on the quality of education. Of course, the online format will never replace a direct face-to-face interaction between students and teachers. At any rate, it will not happen for a long time. I think I do not need to go into detail as everybody understands what I mean. Nevertheless, an online format of education will be used; it exists and, of course, will be developed further both at schools and at universities.

You know, just yesterday I spoke to some colleagues of mine. What can we project for the future? For example, it is not always possible for an expert in a very specific area to be present in several places at once, at several schools. Besides, this expert may be busy with his or her own research. But he or she can teach online. And we should certainly use this opportunity.

The Sirius educational centre in Sochi, which is known around the country, is using it. Many other educational centres, universities and schools are using it as well. This will need to be done in the future as well. People want it, it has become a part of our life, and we need not be afraid of it.

However, these capabilities should not be overstated, either. Mass online education is not here for the rest of our lives, not forever.

Now, with regard to quality.

I think that your real question – I believe you do have a sort of covert question – I said that e-learning will never replace in-person contact. Probably, the quality... In some respects, there is an upside where you can listen to internationally renowned scholars, but in some respects, the quality may suffer. Therefore, a mixed system would be best.

There is another aspect, a sensitive one. I am aware that it is important for the students who, in some cases, even go to court complaining that they paid for in-person training, and online classes cannot provide the same quality. I know what they mean and, to a certain extent, I share this view. But there is another side to the coin. If a teacher, a professor or an assistant professor delivers lectures for a certain number of hours, offline or online, he or she gives them anyway, why should they be paid less? You see, this is a big question.

If we look at the cost structure of a higher education institution, about 70 percent of it is wages. Therefore, higher education institutions have almost no “extra fat” that they could use to reduce online tuition fees. Otherwise, we would have to close some higher education institutions. Some experts believe there are too many of them, especially in the capital cities, so they need to merge. This question has long been raised by higher and secondary education specialists.

I am taking a very careful approach to this matter now: nothing should be overstated here, and you should not get ahead of yourself, either. However, if a university can afford

to tweak its finances, then, probably, they can reduce tuition where training is provided mostly online. The state, as I have said, provided financial support twice this year. We are prepared to continue to do so in the future relying on the actual state of affairs in higher and secondary education.

Thank you.

Dmitry Peskov: Tula. The camera in Tula is pointing at a young lady holding a sign that reads "I'm pregnant."

Young lady, go ahead and ask your question.

Alexandra Bezukladova: Good afternoon, Mr President.

Alexandra Bezukladova, Moskovsky Komsomolets in Ryazan.

Mr President, we always hear that this official is corrupt, that one does not do a good job. Still, there are many positive examples around the country with officials ready to sacrifice to serve the interests of our country. In fact, my question is on one of such officials.

On October 7 (your birthday) there was a fire at a military post in the Ryazan region where 46,000 tonnes of ammunition exploded. The fire swept through nearby communities, and people there were in hell, which is not an exaggeration with the shrapnel and shells flying around and fires everywhere. Many locals were simply unable to leave their homes and apartments on their own and needed help, and a local official saved seven people. At first, he saved two elderly people, getting a blast injury in the process, and later he returned to save a mother and her two kids, eight and five months old, as well as two more seniors. And all that was happening with shells flying around.

Mr President, people from our region have collected signatures under a petition to award the title of Hero of the Russian Federation to this man. His name is Igor Grekov. Mr President, Emergencies Minister Yevgeny Zinichev was at the site of the explosion and saw everything with his own eyes.

Mr President, does Igor Grekov deserve, in your opinion, to be awarded this title for saving human lives in a time of peace while risking his life?

Vladimir Putin: Sasha, I will answer your question, but first I have one for you. What

does this have to do with the fact that you are pregnant? I did not understand this.

Alexandra Bezukladova: Mr President, let me fill you in on the context. It just so happened that last year I came to your news conference two weeks before giving birth, and I did not get a chance to ask a question. This year, God willing, I am once again pregnant, so I decided to try my luck, and it worked. I thought that if I made a bright poster saying I was pregnant, it would be noticed. And it worked, thank you.

Vladimir Putin. I see; you tricked us. Ok, it's not such a big deal.

Regarding Igor Grekov: it was truly a heroic deed. If in time of peace a person risks his life to save others, he definitely deserves a state decoration. We will see what kind of decoration this should be. Thank you very much, Sasha, for drawing our attention to this. This means that you are a caring, warm-hearted and good person. This does you credit, no doubt about that. And your children will grow up in a positive environment. I wish you all the best.

We will definitely look into the situation with Igor Grekov as you said. Is that okay with you?

Alexandra Bezukladova: Thank you, Mr President.

I cannot help but note one thing. The Russian Popular Front Forum scheduled for this year was postponed. A colleague of mine submitted a video for the forum; for some reason the video was leaked online. Now my colleague has been ostracised. Being journalists, we would like to know that, if you report a socially important problem in the region, it will not become public before the event. Journalism is becoming unsafe, to put it mildly.

Vladimir Putin: Why did this harassment begin? I am not sure I understand.

Alexandra Bezukladova: My colleague reported a heating supply problem at the Novo-Ryazanskaya Power Plant, which has the monopoly in the region. And I do not know who or how leaked it. My colleague and the Russian Popular Front Executive Committee were the only parties that had the video, but it ended up on social media. What followed was paid videos involving journalist Andrei Karaulov. These videos are all over social media and public groups; they contain insults, libel and so on and so forth, down to defamation and personal insults.

Dmitry Peskov: Excuse me. This volunteer next to you will write down the details.

Alexandra Bezukladova: Thank you very much.

Vladimir Putin: Just a moment, Mr Peskov. Let Sasha talk.

So your colleague reported about the Novo-Ryazanskaya Power Plant, is that correct?

Alexandra Bezukladova: Mr President, my colleague is right here. He can answer all your questions, if you like.

Vladimir Putin: Give him the microphone, please.

Anton Nasonov: Good afternoon.

Anton Nasonov, Editor-in-Chief of 62INFO, Ryazan.

I am one of the winners of the Russian Popular Front's national competition, *Truth and Justice*. I prepared a video report on the city's problems related to the Novo-Ryazanskaya Power Plant. The video, which was only available to me and to the Russian Popular Front in Ryazan and in Moscow, was leaked on social media. As Alexandra said, I am being insulted, accused of corruption, etc.

Vladimir Putin: What kind of corruption? Anton, listen, I cannot figure out who is accusing you. You are fighting for the interests of the public. Who is accusing you? What kind of corruption? Who did you sell out? I do not understand. You did not poison or kill anybody. What kind of corruption are you talking about? What did you sell? I do not understand.

Anton Nasonov: They think my criticism of the Novo-Ryazanskaya Power Plant is unfair.

Vladimir Putin: I see. Fine. I think you understand, Anton, that your work involves certain risks. There is no getting around this. On the contrary, I think that this outcry, which was part of a paid-for campaign, as I see it, should have taught you that you are on the right track.

As for the Novo-Ryazanskaya TPP, I do not know what the problem is there, and I have not seen your reports, but I will ask my colleagues from the relevant agencies to look into this. They will definitely do so.

Is this a private TPP? Who does it belong to?

Anton Nasonov: It is a private entity that leases capacity and equipment from the city of Ryazan.

Vladimir Putin: Ok. Fine. I will definitely look into this and ask the relevant agencies to review your reports.

Thank you very much. Cheer up and be brave. There is nothing extraordinary here. This is how life is. There is a lot of nonsense in the media about me as well. What can I do?

Ok, all the best to you. Good luck.

As for Igor Grekov, who is he? What kind of official is he? Sasha, where does he work?

Alexandra Bezukladova: He is Deputy Governor of the Ryazan Region.

Vladimir Putin. Deputy governor. Very well, he did a good job.

Thank you, Sasha.

I have another paper, this time from Volosovo in the Leningrad Region. This is what Anatoly Terekhov writes. He had a conversation with an official (probably in Volosovo). Anatoly came to ask a question, and the official told him: "Did Putin promise you this? Then go and ask Putin. I did not promise anything." This is followed by a question: "Why do officials behave in such an ugly manner in their offices?" There are people of this kind.

Mr Terekhov, I would like to draw your attention to what Sasha has said. There are people like Igor Grekov, and there are those like the official you are talking about. There are different kinds of people in every sphere of activity. In fact, there is a rotten apple in every barrel. As for the fact that someone has treated you poorly, we will try to figure it out. Anyway, I will ask the governor to get in touch with you and get everything straight.

Mr Peskov, let us move on.

Dmitry Peskov: St Petersburg, we have not been to St Petersburg yet.

Olga Knyazeva: Mr President, Mr Peskov, good afternoon. Greetings from St Petersburg.

We have journalists here from all over the Northwestern Federal District. Please note, our signs are modest, nothing flashy, just a taste of refined St Petersburg. Shall we begin? Can I pick a journalist?

Dmitry Peskov: Yes, of course.

Olga Knyazeva: I really like this explicit question from the daily, *Sankt Petersburgskiy Dnevnik*: when will the borders open? I read it out loud, I am sorry. I could not resist.

Vladimir Putin: I see. Is that the question?

Kirill Smirnov: Good afternoon, Mr President.

Kirill Smirnov, *Sankt Petersburgskiy Dnevnik*.

Yes, my question is when will the borders re-open? You know, just a few weeks ago St Petersburg was recognised as a top international tourist destination. It out-ranked Paris, New York and Rome, which are serious competitors.

Opening borders is important from the viewpoint of budget revenue. We are aware that work is underway to resume passenger flights. There are countries that few Russians have ever been to, but air transport has been resumed with them. The tourism industry is the missing link in the revenue structure. It is important to know, even though the pandemic is a very important now, is there a chance that the borders will re-open any time soon? Thank you.

Vladimir Putin: Kirill, you and I love St Petersburg. I think that most people in our country also think highly of our hometown. To those who have not yet been to St Petersburg, I highly recommend doing so, as it is one of the best world capitals, without a doubt. Of course, it is a tourist magnet. We are helping St Petersburg in every possible way, including with visa services for visitors, including those coming by ferry. We are trying to create other favourable conditions so that the tourism industry expands throughout the country and in St Petersburg as well.

My congratulations to St Petersburg on winning this international competition. No doubt

the city deserves it, not just because of its marvellous world-class architecture by the best architects from around the world like Rastrelli, Trezzini, etc., but also because today's St Petersburg is a vibrant city that created new urban environments, overpasses and roads. It is proactive in infrastructure development, with outstanding new buildings, including culture and sports venues, Gazprom-Arena, and other landmarks. This is all very well. St Petersburg can host competitions at the highest level, and is already doing so. In fact, it has been quite good at it, serving as a model. All this, of course, attracts people to St Petersburg.

Is the closing of the borders in any way related to attempts to impose restrictions on St Petersburg? What is the current situation with COVID-19 in the city?

Kirill Smirnov: Of course, the incidence rate is high, even in terms of the averages. This is why the restrictions that we have in the region were introduced, including for the New Year holidays.

Vladimir Putin: This is what I am talking about. About 85 percent of COVID-19 hospital beds in the country are filled, and St Petersburg has an even higher figure. This is what these restrictions are all about. We need to protect the lives and health of St Petersburg residents. As soon as doctors give the green light, the borders will open.

In general, it would be great if Russian nationals explore domestic tourism opportunities more. They can benefit from the related government support measures and go to St Petersburg. There is no need to open borders for this. But as soon as it becomes possible, we will do it.

Air travel has been among the affected sectors. In this sense, it is definitely important to enable airlines to serve Russian destinations and for our companies to operate overseas routes. We have 32 million people flying abroad every year. Let's redirect this passenger flow to St Petersburg. These people spend \$35 billion abroad every year. If we can attract them to domestic destinations and thus promote domestic tourism, this would be great. St Petersburg deserves it. I am certain that we will succeed. It will happen as soon as it becomes possible.

Dmitry Peskov: Could you show the journalists in Novo-Ogaryovo, please?

Channel One has not yet asked a question.

Konstantin Panyushkin: Good afternoon.

Konstantin Panyushkin, Channel One. I would like to go back to pre-pandemic times early this year when you and the Government did not have to deal with manual anti-crisis control. At that point, you were talking about a big step forward and it seemed to journalists that the Mishustin Government had things in place to reach this goal. However, many big, ambitious plans had to be suspended and, as we see, even the implementation of certain national goals was delayed until 2030. Hence, some questions.

As for the national goals, is the coronavirus to blame for this delay or was Alexei Kudrin right when he said the national projects would not help achieve our national goals by 2024?

What about the Government? Do you think Mishustin's team is meeting expectations? There were some replacements recently, and it is rumoured that there will be more.

And the last question – about the leap forward. When will this be on the agenda again? Thank you.

Vladimir Putin: Our strategic goals have not gone anywhere and have not been suspended. Of course, the coronavirus made its adjustments. I have already said that we had to delay some programmes by half a year, for instance, the development of primary healthcare because we had to find the resources for promptly resolving the problems of countering the coronavirus and supporting our people and badly affected economic sectors.

Look, 838 billion rubles have been spent on direct support for people alone. These are huge funds, and we had to use them for this purpose, as well as for the support of affected industries. But nobody has cancelled our strategic goals. And the Government is doing well.

Now we are considering retail prices. I know that your channel showed our discussion with some Government members in this context. I think some Government officials missed this moment and did not react in a timely manner. But in general, especially considering the pandemic, the Government has been very effective and very busy. I can say without exaggeration that they work day and night. And, of course, we can and should thank them for this.

As for position changes, this is up to the Prime Minister. He has the right to select his own

team. I approve these changes; I do not see any other. The Prime Minister is not initiating anything further in this respect. It seems to me it is necessary to ensure the smooth operation of the established team, and stability is required. This is my answer to part of your question. Nothing else is planned at this point, no more personnel changes.

As for our strategic goals – yes, the Government was formed to carry them out. I believe it is doing well with these goals. Let me repeat that all of our goals have been determined. Obviously, there was criticism in the beginning: are we able to reach these national development goals using the instruments we call national programmes and national projects? Overall, yes, there are questions that require additional attention and analysis, but generally, we discussed all of them with the regions. And, despite this pandemic we will continue developing the country. Again, the example of primary healthcare: we planned to spend 500 billion rubles, plus 50 from the regions, on this, and this is what we intend to do. We are not using these funds for anything else. Everything will proceed according to plan.

Dmitry Peskov: Okay, let's continue in the middle. NTV.

Vladimir Putin: Excuse me, I just promised to listen to that young lady over there. Give her the mike, please.

Aisel Gereikhanova: Thank you.

Aisel Gereikhanova, Rossiyskaya Gazeta.

Mr President, why was the Constitution amended this year? Why now?

Vladimir Putin: You know, there is a proper time for everything. There is a proper time for fighting rising prices and there is a proper time for changes to the Fundamental Law. Many things were impossible before.

First of all, I would like to say that the fundamental provisions of our Constitution remain unchanged, which is very important. The 1993 Constitution was adopted in the difficult conditions of public opposition and, let's face it, amidst the military action in the Russian capital, Moscow. People were killed; automatic weapons were used and tanks fired at the parliament building. Those were the circumstances in which the Constitution was adopted. Our minds are such that we try to forget the worst memories, but those events did happen and here at home. The Constitution was adopted under those conditions and,

to a certain degree, it played a stabilising role and helped restore civil peace, and created a certain political foundation for development.

Now the situation is different. And we needed to change the Fundamental Law based on the current situation. We did not change it per se but made some corrections and amendments. Some of these things were not possible before. For example, social guarantees related to the necessary adjustment of pensions for inflation. What do I mean? Back in 1993, how could we include the government's obligation to adjust pensions for inflation under the Constitution? Pensions were delayed for six months. Neither military pay nor pensions were paid. That actually happened.

Now things are different. Now we must make sure that our current and future leaders cannot shrug this off because the foundations of the Russian economy allow it. Therefore, this measure can and must be included in the country's Fundamental Law, along with the problems related to alleviating poverty. Earlier, your colleague said that many Russian families are struggling. Yes, it is true. But the minimum monthly wage cannot be below the subsistence rate. Can we achieve that? I think we can. Therefore, this requirement was included in the Constitution.

There are other problems as well. I read the question about the janitor and the teacher. The cleaners who receive subsistence-level salaries saw their minimum wages go up, while the salaries for other categories of employees were not adjusted. However, the state will have to do this now, based on the Constitution, among other things, because the minimum wage cannot be lower than subsistence-level pay. You see, it is all related. Yes, efforts will have to be made to comply with the Constitution. This is the point behind these changes.

Alternatively, for example, we spoke about primacy. We enshrined the supremacy of Russian constitutional law over all sorts of international norms in the amendments to the Constitution. Or, take the inviolability of our territory. Could we do this with the state of our army in 1993? Well, we could. You can say anything you want. Could we ensure it? No. You cannot use a nuclear bomb in every conflict, can you? Our conventional armed forces were in shambles. I already mentioned this. We were unable to put together 50,000 capable troops from an army of over a million servicemen to fight international terrorists in the Caucasus.

Now, the situation has turned around, and even our opponents, as I call them, are saying, indeed, there are fewer of them, but they are much more efficient now. Russia has one of the most efficient armies in the world. We can now enshrine this in the Fundamental Law. This situation is ripe; we did it and did it at the right time.

By the way, how many amendments were there? We received thousands, if not hundreds of thousands of them. I want to thank our citizens for their participation and for the fact that we held an all-Russian vote on this issue. Many people came to the polling stations. In fact, it was a referendum. Citizens authored the amendments to the Fundamental Law of the Russian Federation. This is important. It had to be done, and I would like to once again express my gratitude to everyone who supported the amendments to the Constitution.

Dmitry Peskov: We have not heard from Stavropol yet. Stavropol, go ahead, please.

Pavel Krasnov: This is Stavropol, in the south of Russia. We could even compete with Rostov-on-Don for the title of the southernmost location today. The Southern Federal District is, of course, located there, but in geographical terms Russia's southernmost point is in the Caucasus.

Here in this room we have journalists from the North Caucasus Federal District, and they are ready to ask their questions. If there are no objections, let's give them the floor. Mr Peskov, if you delegate your authority to me...

Dmitry Peskov: Yes, please.

Pavel Krasnov: I think that the first to speak on behalf of the Caucasus should be a woman. Go ahead, please.

Zarina Cherchesova: Thank you.

Zarina Cherchesova, radio broadcasting service of the Alania State Television and Radio Company.

There is no getting away from coronavirus-related topics. It is stuck deep in our heads. All sectors have suffered during the pandemic, especially healthcare, although this sector was suffering even before the pandemic from low salaries and destructive optimisation policies. At the same time, the regions have started revising their priorities, and developing domestic tourism is one of the key tasks today, and this is very important for South Ossetia.

Mr President, with this in mind, I would like to know what your plans are for supporting this sector of the economy moving forward. In many countries this sector accounts

for a substantial share of budget revenue, for example in Turkey where there are all kinds of various preferences.

I must say that South Ossetia has always been famous for its health resorts and unique springs. Today, South Ossetia has all it takes to develop tourism, including mountain skiing, gourmet tourism and most importantly, balneotherapy.

There is one issue, however, which is infrastructure, and the region cannot resolve this without federal support.

Thank you.

Vladimir Putin: We started talking about this in relation to St Petersburg: they are waiting for the borders to reopen and foreign tourists to come. You probably heard part of my answer; I was saying I believe it is very important to give our people the opportunity... our people are mostly used to vacationing abroad; 32 million of them travel. It is no less important to develop domestic tourism, I fully agree with that. This year, as you can see, we are trying to use various incentives, including the so-called cashback—a partial refund of the cost of their trips.

But there is something you need to know. We have 15 billion rubles for this cashback – but only 1.2 billion have been spent. However, we agreed with the Government that we will not redistribute this money but will use at least the same amount next year, and will try to expand this kind of incentive. This offer was not promoted as much as we needed, so I would like to ask you and your colleagues, the media, those who work online: would you please support the development of domestic tourism, show and talk more often about the opportunities that our country and its various regions offer for our own citizens and guests from abroad.

I certainly know, I understand, and I see people who say, yes, it is so beautiful, but excuse me, there is no toilet, no place to wash our hands, no restaurants and poor roads to drive or walk on. We are perfectly aware of this; it takes time and, of course, huge investment. But first, of course, we assume the money will come from the businesses that operate in this area.

The government should provide the necessary support, of course, infrastructural primarily. We will allocate appropriate funds for this; the money has been earmarked. As I have said, we will support business in general, including regional businesses, and an agency is being

created that is responsible for domestic tourism exclusively.

Very recently, the day before yesterday or even yesterday, I spoke with Dmitry Chernyshenko, who is responsible for this industry in our country, and he is very actively involved, he is fighting – in fact, he is your active supporter. We are aware of how important this is for the country as well.

You mentioned Turkey. It is close. For many decades, it was building a system and the state provided a lot of support for the industry. This is not an exception; I mentioned several examples. South Korea, for one, developed a whole system of government support for shipbuilding, through taxation. Later they brought everything back to normal and now it is South Korea that is building the largest capacity ships. Turkey did the same with its tourist industry. We will also move along a similar path. As for the funds that were allocated, let me repeat, the 15 billion for this year will be rolled over to the next one.

Dmitry Peskov: We have been going for more than two hours. Those who have disposable masks do not forget to change them. If you do not have one, our colleagues will provide you with fresh ones.

I promised to give the floor to NTV.

Vladimir Putin: Mr Peskov, just a second.

To follow up on the issue, let me say that we already had a question about the internet and the opportunities to study online. I have many questions: quality of communication and the internet – this is urgent, especially for those who study online. This is clear.

I have already said that we will introduce high-speed internet everywhere, at all schools in 2021. And, of course, it is very important to provide it in residential areas: before the end of 2021, a universal system of communications – both the telephone and the internet – must be created for residential areas of with 250 to 500 people. This is before the end of 2021. I will not go into detail at this point because there are many questions about it. The people in these residential areas sometimes ask odd questions: “Do we have to climb trees, really?” and so on. I understand all this; there are difficulties. But this problem must be resolved before the end of 2021. We are allocating 12.6 billion rubles for this purpose. It is envisaged in the budget and will be spent on this. I hope it will be spent in a way that makes people feel the change in quality.

By 2030, we will resolve this problem for residential areas with 100 to 250 people. This is

a major expense, but we will do it all the same.

I said this to break up Mr Peskov's dictate.

Dmitry Peskov: Now let us give the floor to NTV.

Vladimir Putin: Yes, do please.

Dmitry Peskov: Please, give him the microphone.

Sergey Kholoshevsky: Third time, lucky.

Good afternoon, Mr President.

Sergey Kholoshevsky, NTV television.

Vladimir Putin: Good afternoon.

Sergey Kholoshevsky: My question, with your permission, is about foreign policy and our so-called Western partners. Who of all world leaders, in your view, has been the most difficult negotiating partner and who was the most agreeable over the past four years? I, for example, remember you giving a geography lesson to Mr Macron and Ms Merkel at a G20 Summit in connection with the incident in the Kerch Strait. And what about Donald Trump? Or Recep Erdogan? You discussed Nagorno-Karabakh with him; he is an interesting person. To say nothing of Alexander Lukashenko – he must also be good company.

If you allow, I have another question regarding the Nord Stream 2 project. The United States is bringing unprecedented pressure to bear on Europe in connection with this project but, amazingly, Europe, in particular Germany, have stood up to this pressure.

What are the prospects for it do you think, will we finish the construction or not?

Vladimir Putin: Regarding convenient and agreeable or unpleasant partners, there are no such people. And I do not need to give lessons to anyone. All of these people are very knowledgeable. Believe me, these people have received top-level training. All of them seek to address the challenges facing their countries – and this comes first – through different

methods, but still.

There is a well-known maxim: there are no good or bad interests, there are only national interests. The same with me: I do not divide people into good and bad. I work with everyone to secure the best results for Russia. Sometimes there is a need for compromise and sometimes it is necessary to stick to your position. It is always like this. Anything else is counterproductive.

You mentioned several, but not all countries with which we maintain comprehensive and complex relations. What about China? We have overlapping interests in many areas. Maybe this or maybe some personal vibes have contributed to the fact that I have good, business-like relations, above all, but at the same time very trusting and friendly relations with President Xi Jinping. This, of course, helps in our work.

We have different, occasionally opposing views on certain matters with President Erdogan. But he keeps his word like a real man. He does not wag his tail. If he thinks something is good for his country, he goes for it. This is about predictability. It is important to know whom you are dealing with.

Nord Stream 2 is undoubtedly beneficial for the EU's economy in general and Germany's in particular. Because the other option (buying more expensive primary energy source, US-produced liquefied gas at a 20 percent premium over our pipeline gas) means a dent in the German economy's competitiveness and higher prices for households. That is all there is to it. This is obvious, and you do not need to be a gas expert or an economist to understand this. This is in line with the national interests of Europe and Germany. At least until now, representatives of the German economy have openly supported this project. We have many friends there, without any exaggeration, and Germany's political leaders try not to interfere, since this is a purely economic project.

There are 160 kilometres left to build to complete the single line. Both lines are a little over 160, 165 or so, kilometres. That is it. It is almost completed. I think we will finish the job. I hope that the new administration will treat its partners and allies with respect, will not insist on them neglecting their national interests, and will return to fair competition in global markets. I believe this project will also be fully implemented.

Dmitry Peskov: We have not heard from the call centre in a long time. Let us go to the call centre.

Nailya Asker-Zade: We thought you forgot all about us, but there are many questions

here, and their number continues to increase. Let me remind you that questions to the President can be asked on the moskva-putinu.ru website or mobile app. You can record a video or send a text message.

Let us get back to our volunteers. Sasha Pechenegin is here next to me now. During the pandemic, he and his colleagues processed more than 19,000 requests from people, including those for the delivery of medicines.

Sasha, could you tell us what questions you received today?

Alexander Pechenegin: Indeed, we have many questions now concerning benefits, social support measures, especially from mothers. People are interested whether there will be any new payments, because right now, people in various regions, such as Arkhangelsk, Ulyanovsk Region, and Tambov Region, I could list many regions, where people do not even know what they are entitled to, or where to go. In Moscow, for example, they complain about the integrated government service centres, which closed due to the coronavirus before people could apply for their benefits, and that service has been inactive on the gosuslugi.ru website. That is why people are concerned, because they do not know where to go.

In this regard, perhaps the most important question. Mr President, are any more child benefits planned for next year? Because more often than not, it is a problem, and the government assistance now being provided is actually the only help they get. Thank you.

Vladimir Putin: About child benefits.

I think I spoke about it at the beginning in some detail – how this work was organised, for children aged 0–1.5, then 1.5–3 and 3–7 years.

If people are telling you they do not know where to go, they have difficulties getting their benefits, then probably, everyone will agree with me that before thinking about any additional steps – we have a lot already happening on various tracks, I have listed just a few, but there are other forms of support, including for specific regions, and depending on the demographic situation in each region, there are specific support measures – so before we take any new steps, we need to streamline and ensure effective work of the support mechanisms already in place. I will definitely speak with the presidential plenipotentiary envoys to the regions and with the governors, and we will get back to this.

This is done mainly through the Pension Fund and the integrated government service centres. But if they are closed somewhere, it means they need to make some other decisions on this score. I can only thank you for bringing this up, for responding to the people who asked you about this.

Alexander Pechenegin: Thank you very much.

Vladimir Putin: Thank you for what you are doing.

Alexander Pechenegin: The volunteers have indeed done important work here. We were able to talk personally to petitioners – in some cases it worked, in others it did not, but we clarified certain information. Thank you very much for this opportunity.

Vladimir Putin: It is strange. This sounds very strange and even alarming that people cannot properly exercise their rights. I assure you, we will definitely... Not even you, but I assure the people who spoke to you, we will definitely straighten this out.

There are many questions about the healthcare system, of course. Altai Territory, for example. A district hospital was shut down. The person who asked this question is Natalia Dubovikova. People are panicking. Ms Dubovikova, I will definitely look into it. And I would like to bring this to the attention of the Altai Territory Governor and the plenipotentiary envoy. This happens, and quite frequently, unfortunately, when a small-town medical facility or educational institution, a school, is closed because it is inefficient and so on. But if people have nowhere else to go, considering Russia's vast territory, we must take this into account. We will absolutely try to straighten this out.

Please, let us move on.

Dmitry Peskov: Let us go back to the World Trade Centre. Andrei Kolesnikov.

Andrei Kolesnikov: Good afternoon, Kommersant daily.

Mr President, courtesy of Ms Valentina Tereshkova, an article appeared in the Constitution, which reset your time in presidential office to zero. That is, you can start all over again in 2024. What does this mean? Are you really ready to start all over again, or do you want to avoid becoming a lame duck, at least before time? What was on your mind when you went ahead with this idea? In the eyes of many people, including mine, it was a rather cruel thing to do to the Constitution.

Mr President, was it worth it?

One more question, if I may. An up-and-coming journalist taught us to ask two questions in a row (he is not really a beginner).

You spoke about Ivan Safronov's case several days ago. The takeaway was that if he took information from open sources, he cannot be prosecuted under the treason article. This, as I understood, is what you believe. Did you have a chance to learn more about this case as you planned? What sources, for example, do the investigation authorities believe he got information from? Do you not feel that this grave article is being applied too readily and too frequently?

I have something else to say. Several media outlets simultaneously published information yesterday that he may have taken information from classified sources. Even if we believe that this was the case, well, okay, he may have made a false step. This may have been the perfect case of someone who did not know what he was doing. I am sure that given these circumstances, he could be forgiven. I know Ivan as well as I knew his father, a man who was honest to the bone. I am ready to vouch for Ivan Safronov right here and now. This will not happen again, Mr President. And if it does, we will go down together. Not you and I, but he and I.

Vladimir Putin: Regarding the question of whether this was worth doing as part of the constitutional amendments, you know, there is one rule I always follow: I consider whether what we do benefits the country or not. If this is not the case, it is not worth it, but if it does have benefits, then we must do it. I have not decided yet whether I will run in the 2024 presidential election. That said, ensuring national stability and development is invaluable. From a formal perspective, the people have spoken. Whether I will do it or not, we shall see. This is my answer to your first question.

As for Safronov, and whether he took information from open or classified sources, it is up to investigators to find out. After all, Andrei, he is not being prosecuted for his activity as a journalist. This is what these events are all about. He is not some kind of a dissident journalist fighting the government and being prosecuted and thrown into jail for doing it. This has nothing to do with his work as a journalist. It has to do with the rather long period of time when he worked as Rogozin's aide or advisor at the Government and Roscosmos. This is not about journalism.

You said that this could have been a misstep on his behalf. Yes, this does happen. And he

could be forgiven. This can happen as well. We have to consider the danger posed by his acts, and what the actual damage was. He is being accused of espionage, betrayal. But treason is the worst sin. Handing classified information over to foreign intelligence is an act of treason. I understand that this may not go down well with those who trusted this person, and still trust him and like him. You have my sympathy. Honestly, I also have sympathy for him, as strange as this may sound, if what he did was actually a misstep. However, if he intentionally gathered information over a long period of time and handed it over to intelligence officers and was remunerated for this, this reveals who he actually is. Let me reiterate that at the end of the day, it is up to the court to determine to what extent he posed a threat to society. The question of whether he can be forgiven and pardoned will come afterwards. So far, it is too early to talk about this.

Dmitry Peskov: Let us carry on here.

Let us talk about sports. Match TV, go ahead.

Vladimir Putin: All right.

Olga Bogoslovskaya: Thank you very much, Mr President.

Olga Bogoslovskaya, national sports television, Match TV.

First of all, I would like to thank you for noting our five-year anniversary, a really important landmark for us, and for praising the work of our professional team. Thank you.

My question to you is only partly related to sports because the issue is much broader. I am talking about the situation with one of our leading football players, Artyom Dzyuba. His personal video was posted online and there were many public repercussions. This incident was discussed practically by all media. Some people sympathised with him and others did not, forgetting that he did not upload this video himself but was "helped" by hackers, if we can say that the hackers helped him. Putting it mildly, they are truly dishonest people.

Why did I say that this issue is only partially related to sports? Because this time an athlete got into this situation but it can happen to anyone in the future.

This is my question to you: should this situation affect a professional career of not only an athlete but any person?

Thank you very much.

Vladimir Putin: The answer seems obvious: of course, it should not. Let him deal with his relationships and personal affairs but it is not appropriate for normal society to meddle in someone's personal life.

Unfortunately, this will always happen and for celebrities – and he is still a celebrity – this was inevitable. But this is a good lesson for him and other people who lead a public life. Keep this in mind. This is my first point.

And my second point is that we should bear in mind that there are certain general rules and it is better to follow them.

But should such incidents affect professional careers? Definitely not.

Have you seen this video?

Olga Bogoslovskaya: You know, Mr President, I think the whole country saw it in some way. I did not watch it to the end but it was clear from the start what it was all about.

Vladimir Putin: I, for one, have not seen it.

Olga Bogoslovskaya: But you have probably heard about it.

Vladimir Putin: I have not seen it but I read different letters that are sent to me, in part, through call centres, as I have said.

For example, Yury Krasnyansky from Murmansk Region writes about the ambulance service in the village of Alakurtti. "We have one vehicle with one paramedic," he writes, "You can get to the outpatient clinic on your own, if you are well enough to do it, that is. In the outpatient clinic, we have one general practitioner," he continues. "She is 86 years old and can barely distinguish haemorrhoids from tonsillitis." They do seem to have a problem with transport and medical care there.

So here is what I would like to say in this regard: Mr Krasnyansky, first, if this is all true, if your 86-year-old doctor still continues working, she is clearly a labour veteran, and this means that she needs to be treated with special respect – I would like to emphasise that this

is exactly how it should be – it means that, first, she went on working no matter what, and the level of fundamental training of medical workers in Soviet times and even in tsarist Russia has always warranted respect. This is the first point.

Secondly – you might want to try to help her if she cannot distinguish haemorrhoids from a sore throat, help her somehow, support her, and we will try to support you.

I have already said that we have started purchasing vehicles, including for paramedical stations, even ahead of schedule this year. I will definitely ask the relevant government agencies and the Murmansk Region Governor to take care of this – of your village, of this paramedical centre, the ambulance service, service in this area, and of course, we will help with vehicles.

Dmitry Peskov: It is getting quite late in Vladivostok. Let us hear from Vladivostok again.

Dmitry Kaistro: Good evening.

It is almost midnight in the Far Eastern Federal District, and that is why our journalists' patience, excitement and, most importantly, their unflagging energy are even more surprising. We have the best professionals of the Far East here, so it is very difficult to choose.

Mr Peskov, with your permission, allow me to do this.

Dmitry Peskov: Go ahead.

Dmitry Kaistro: Excuse me, all of you are great, but I think that the young woman in a yellow cape with a poster saying "Politics and people" has hit on a crucial element of our current reality.

Please, introduce yourself.

Oksana Kiselyova: Thank you. Oksana Kiselyova, PrimaMedia Agency.

I think that people in the Far East will remember the year 2020 not only because of the pandemic, which is raging in all other regions as well, but also the appointment of new governors in several regions, including in the Jewish Autonomous Region,

Kamchatka and Khabarovsk Territory. The events in Khabarovsk Territory were especially memorable, and not only for local residents who spoke up in support of former Governor Sergei Furgal, because protest rallies were also held in Primorye Territory, Sakhalin, Kamchatka, Magadan Region, and so forth.

Mr President, the other day your Plenipotentiary Envoy to the Far East, Yury Trutnev, said in an interview with PrimaMedia that despite public sympathy for Furgal, he is responsible for botching several construction projects and was a difficult person to work with.

Here is my question: do you have fresh information from the investigative authorities that confirms the gravity of the charges brought against Furgal?

And about the protests: does public discontent over the decisions of some officials at different levels reach you? I am referring not just to political decisions, but also to their actions in the environment, culture and other spheres.

Thank you.

Vladimir Putin: Oksana, what can I tell you about Sergei Furgal? He is a member of a prominent party, which supported and continues supporting him. I had a good relationship with him, and, in general, he was loyal to the federal authorities. I had no problems with him. I am not aware of how Trutnev assessed him, but I think that he was working well, on the whole, doing his best as the leader of the region.

However, the charges brought against him are grave: he has been charged as a member of an organised criminal group that was guilty of eliminating its commercial rivals. We are talking about murder, not embezzlement, fraud or abuse of office, but murder. Look, this is a grave charge.

You asked if I have any additional information. The investigation is still underway. I do not phone them every day to demand additional information. Let us give them the opportunity to do their job in peace before taking the case to court.

I can understand the people who were disgruntled by the news of Sergei Furgal's arrest and the charges brought against him. I can understand that, because they had voted for him and hoped that he would deliver on his election promises. But what should we do about the charges? This is not political persecution; this is a criminal case.

Similar action has been taken against representatives of other parties as well. Take United Russia: we remember that some regional party leaders, who committed crimes, have been convicted and sentenced to long prison terms. Some of them are still serving their sentences. Should we make exceptions for some parties?

Regrettably, such cases have been reported in all parts of the political community; this has happened with members of all political parties. Our law enforcement and judicial powers must forget about their political preferences and act without bias in all cases. This also goes for Furgal.

Dmitry Peskov: Let us move on to Novosibirsk.

Anton Vernitsky: They are starting to shout here. You know, Mr President, during your press conference, some people have not only changed their disposable masks, but also redrawn their posters. But there are still those who came without posters, so here is someone without a poster, a lady in a black mask, who changed it, but did not draw a poster.

Please introduce yourself.

Yelena Malyshkina: Yelena Malyshkina, *Vesti-Irkutsk*, State TV and Radio Company *Irkutsk*. Irkutsk Region, Baikal, meaning it is about the environment.

Mr President, good afternoon.

I would like to ask you the following question. Over the past year, several major environmental incidents have occurred, and you personally had to take measures in order to sort out these situations: one had to do with Norilsk, and another with *Usolyekhimprom*. What punishment do you think those responsible deserve? And do you support the idea of, shall we say, maximum fines for those who cause such huge damage to nature and the environment?

Thank you.

Vladimir Putin: Look, Lena, we need to break this problem into two parts.

The first part concerns the so-called accumulated damage, which has been caused

by the operations of certain industrial enterprises since Soviet times, but is not associated with the activity of any specific modern commercial or state companies. And for this, the responsible party is definitely the state, represented by government authorities at various levels – both federal and regional. And of course, we must react to this, and we will. This is the story in Krasny Bor near St Petersburg, Usolye-Sibirskoye, some other facilities, storage facilities, and so on. The sooner we can effectively sort this out, the better.

Then there are current problems and man-made accidents, and here the culprits should be identified by the relevant supervisory authorities, and those authorities will decide on the degree of their responsibility. This responsibility lies primarily with the polluters, and they must be held accountable. How seriously? The severity of punishment should correspond not to the threat posed, but to the amount of damage they caused to the environment and the people who live in a particular area.

Therefore, as far as *Norilsk Nickel* is concerned, I am not interfering. I just know that the requirements for *Norilsk Nickel* are very high, and they must bear responsibility for what has been done.

By the way, in the city of Norilsk, the company should definitely pay more attention to environmental issues and be more attentive to what is happening with emissions, even to what is happening with medicine. The company can certainly take on a certain share of the burden and responsibility for these areas of the region's life.

Dmitry Peskov: Let us have a question from the centre.

Mir, go ahead. Introduce yourself, please.

Nadezhda Seryozhkina: Nadezhda Seryozhkina, Mir International Television and Radio Company.

Mr President, the Commonwealth of Independent States will mark its 30th anniversary in 2021. As we approach this anniversary, there is a feeling that the CIS is going through a midlife crisis: the President and Government in Kyrgyzstan had to step down; there were riots after the presidential election in Belarus, and Moldova's president-elect Maia Sandu said or even demanded that Russian peacekeepers leave Transnistria.

Mr President, I have the following question in this regard: are you concerned that Russia could lose any of its CIS allies?

Thank you.

Vladimir Putin: Nadya, you called it a “midlife crisis” and provided several examples, like Kyrgyzstan. But is this the first time it happened there? They are constantly playing musical chairs. I think that they are always trying to run ahead of the train in their attempts to fit their domestic policy into the mould of some Western countries. At the same time, they lack the level of political consciousness and institutional maturity of the kind, for example, France has.

Political systems in France or the Federal Republic took decades, if not centuries, to take shape. It would not be an exaggeration to say that it took centuries for the parliamentary form of government to come about or to have traditional political parties with steady political platforms that the voters understand. These are established political systems. But do countries in the post-Soviet space have all this?

For this reason, I would say that what happened does not result from short-term developments, but rather from the country's efforts to find its own path, since we have to treat all our partners with respect. Therefore, I would not say that we have reached some kind of a fault line.

President-elect Maia Sandu, I wish her all the best, I wish her every success in her work, but, as a representative of a certain political force, she did not say anything new. We have long been hearing representatives of various Western countries telling us that we need to withdraw our peacekeeping contingent. And Maia Sandu is the President of Moldova, but she is also a citizen of Romania.

We have heard representatives of Western countries tell us we need to pull out, and in general, we are all for doing just that as soon as the appropriate situation develops, as soon as a normal dialogue is established between Transnistria and the rest of Moldova, as soon as they are on the path towards peace and reconciliation. We support this, and we were already very close to that with former President Voronin, but at the last moment, representatives of Western countries put pressure on him, too, and he refused, and withdrew from the previous agreements, and the solution of the Transnistrian issue was postponed indefinitely. We do not know why. Later, I asked my colleagues from the European Union, “Why did you do this?” – “Well, it just happened.”

I suggest we do not go into detail now, but sooner or later, this problem must be resolved.

Belarus – I have made repeated statements on this score. It is my belief that Belarusian people need to be given an opportunity to address their issues inside the country, and resolve them calmly.

President Lukashenko has also made statements on this score. I agree with him that this should be done in a calm and measured manner. He initiated amendments to the Constitution – let us see how it goes. The only thing that definitely needed to be achieved there was, I have already mentioned this in one way or another – it all needed to be done without outside interference.

From what we can see now, unfortunately, this interference is taking place – the informational, political, and financial support for the opposition from abroad. Nothing good ever comes from abroad. You know, I can see through your mask that you are smiling, but this point is of the essence. Do you know what this essence is? The essence is that no matter how hard, difficult and even long this may take, it has to mature within society. Anything planted from the outside will never calm down the situation; rather, it will work as a bomb, a grenade, but it never helps. You just need to be patient and wait, and help all political forces avoid conflict with each other, but instead, encourage everyone to start a positive dialogue aimed at protecting people's interests.

Therefore, we will soon have a CIS event at the end of the year; I think it will be very appropriate and useful. We will discuss with my colleagues what tasks we should tackle as a matter of priority.

Dmitry Peskov: Let us go to Yekaterinburg.

Olga Armyakova: Colleagues, in our neck of the woods, no one hollers from their seat, after all, the tough Urals character makes itself felt. However, there are clearly more signs now. The journalists made some more while we were busy talking in the news conference format. Let us hear what the young woman in the second row has to say. She has the word everyone had to learn this year. Please introduce yourself and go ahead with your question.

Yekaterina Tsygankova: Good afternoon, Channel 4, Yekaterinburg, Yekaterina Tsygankova.

I had the word “lockdown” written on my sign, which has probably become a household name by now. Here is my question: of course, the coronavirus has hurt the national economy, and our region is no exception. Unfortunately, this year, the budget had

a shortfall in revenue of about 10 billion rubles, and revenue is down by 10 percent. Both small- and medium-sized businesses, as well as major industrial enterprises have felt the pinch. The unemployment numbers are up. Unfortunately, some enterprises are cutting staff, and some are laying off whole teams.

Of course, I would not say that the state has abandoned us to face this misfortune on our own. Significant funds have been allocated from the federal and regional budgets to support unemployed people and families with children. There were benefits for entrepreneurs as well. But the situation remains difficult nonetheless. My question is, how do you see the economy recovering from the coronavirus crisis? My second question is, when will we be able to return to the pre-crisis period? Is it perhaps related to the fact that you did not introduce lockdown in October and November that was there in the spring? Thank you.

Vladimir Putin: This is a legitimate question from Yekaterinburg, because Yekaterinburg and the Urals in general, is a major industrial centre. Of course, the restrictions caused by the coronavirus have affected, in one way or another, the Urals region, and the national economy as a whole.

I will spend a little more time discussing this issue, as it is of critical importance for our country.

Which industries were hit hardest? There are several such industries, including transport, primarily air transport, rail transport, especially passenger, retail trade in non-food products and the services sector, such as fitness centres, restaurants, cafes and the like.

When I said that the Government has worked very hard this year and, in conjunction with the Presidential Executive Office, worked out the necessary decisions to support households and the economy, I named several sectors. What has been done in these sectors?

First, we have postponed all payments, except VAT, until a later date.

Second, we provided grants twice, I think.

Third, we issued loans at zero interest rate.

Fourth, we issued a loan at a 2-percent interest with an option to write off the entire

amount if 90 percent of the payroll remained in place, or writing off 50 percent of the debt if 80 percent of employees were retained.

We have postponed payments for state property lease. Finally, a far-reaching decision was made to reduce payments to social funds from 30 to 15 percent for small and medium-sized businesses. This is a permanent measure, and will outlast the pandemic.

It is a whole package of measures that have generally supported the affected industries. In addition to the affected industries, we also worked with representatives of the backbone industries. What industries am I referring to? The automotive, the aircraft construction industry, shipbuilding, agriculture and construction.

All our automotive programmes are progressing. You probably noted that the day before yesterday, the MS-21 powered by PD-14 engines, also produced domestically, took off on a flight. It is in fact already good enough for commercial production. A great achievement, among other things, for our engine builders and aircraft manufacturers. I congratulate them on this event. Yesterday, they also flew another Il-114, a completely new aircraft, practically a new modification. Also a great event. Congratulations!

Our civilian shipbuilding industry has grown by 30 percent, despite all the problems caused by the pandemic.

Construction. True, we built a little less this year, but in general, we supported the industry, and well enough. In fact, we supported both consumers and the industry at the same time, including through preferential mortgages at 6.2 percent. This was also a huge help to the economy.

Overall, 4.6 trillion rubles were allocated to support individuals and industry, and to fight the pandemic. It is unprecedented spending, at 4.5 percent of the country's GDP. I have already said, I have cited the figure; the government channeled 838 billion for the direct support of individuals.

We have developed a whole package of measures. They were planned, then initiated and formalised accordingly. This package of measures has also been used effectively.

Now we are thinking about what to do next. As you said, we need to make our way out of the crisis. Emerging from the crisis will depend on how well we cope with the pandemic

itself, how quickly it will end, how quickly we launch nationwide vaccination, and subsequently lift all the restrictions that are still in place.

I expect that over the next six months, the situation will change for the better one way or another. As for the economy, according to various estimates, according to various calculations, we will overcome all these problems somewhere around the end of 2021 – the first quarter of 2022. Moreover, next year we expect to see positive trends in the country's GDP, the gross national product. But everyone needs to work hard. It is my belief that we will be able to achieve this goal and address these challenges.

Dmitry Peskov: Let us turn to the call centre.

Nailya Asker-Zade: (*no sound*)... did not receive benefits for her nine-month-old child in December.

Dmitry Peskov: Nailya, could you repeat that from the beginning? The sound was off.

Nailya Asker-Zade: During the pandemic with its challenges, this money is the only way to make ends meet. So the parents are asking whether new child benefits will be paid out next year.

Vladimir Putin: Please, repeat your question from the beginning.

Nailya Asker-Zade: The next application comes from Algiza Tuktarova in Bashkortostan. In November and December, she did not receive any benefits for her nine-month-old child, and does not know where to go. During the pandemic with its challenges, this money is the only way to make ends meet. Therefore, the parents are asking whether new child benefits will be paid out next year.

Vladimir Putin: I have already answered a question on the new payments. We are constantly monitoring the situation and what is going on. We are also thinking about paying out new benefits, and I will discuss this in a short while. However, if the woman that contacted you did not receive the payments for November and December, this means that the fault lies with the system for paying out these benefits that were designed to support people. We need to get it right and make sure that it works.

Could you please tell us who raised this issue, and where she lives? Please, share her address. This has to be done through the Pension Fund, and using the integrated state

service centre as a one-stop-shop. We will definitely look into this issue. What was the region again?

Nailya Asker-Zade: Bashkortostan.

Vladimir Putin: Bashkortostan. The governor probably hears us. Where specifically in Bashkortostan?

Nailya Asker-Zade: We can find this request and share the details in a minute.

Vladimir Putin: Please do, since we need to know the specific location. I know that Bashkortostan has a young governor who is quite active and effective, although mishaps are always possible. Please tell us the exact community.

Nailya Asker-Zade: Yes, we will be back.

Dmitry Peskov: Let us now turn to Novo-Ogaryovo and the Kremlin pool. Please, show us Novo-Ogaryovo.

I think I see RT in the back row. Go ahead, please.

Igor Zhdanov: Igor Zhdanov, RT.

Mr President, I have a question on security, in particular on the terrorist threat. Russia has always condemned all terrorist acts and continues to do so, including those happening in Europe. For example, this year there were attacks related to the publication of cartoons depicting the Prophet Muhammad. Russia, in turn, does not support publishing these cartoons.

In your opinion, where does the freedom of expression as an inalienable human right end and become an insult to the feelings of religious people? Regarding Russia, what is being done to prevent us from following in Europe's footsteps?

Thank you very much.

Vladimir Putin: Where does freedom end and become an offence? I will not tell you anything new, Igor. How can we draw a line between two freedoms? The answer is simple.

A person's freedom ends where another person's freedom begins. This is a universal formula. Those who act without thinking and offend people of faith and hurt their feelings have to remember that there will be a response, one way or another.

On the other hand, this response should not be aggressive. No world religion, including Christianity and Islam, as I have recently quoted from the holy books – the Quran, the Bible and the Torah, and the Buddhist holy texts – mentions aggression. When someone's rights are violated, including for people of faith, the response should not be killing the perpetrator, since it runs counter to the spirit of any world religion. God gives life, and only God can take it. This is something everyone should remember.

How does this apply to Russia? You asked me what we do to prevent this from happening. You know, from the outset Russia has been a multi-faith country. We have developed a certain culture of interaction between representatives of various faiths and ethnic groups. This is an essential element of the heritage our ancestors, the preceding generations passed on to us.

There were very many tragic, difficult and even black pages in the history of our country. Just take a look at the deportation of some ethnic groups after the Great Patriotic War. This is a painful subject, and we try to avoid speaking about it, but this did happen in our history. I am not going to assess those events now. But it is a fact that some members of the ethnic groups that were later persecuted had given a hospitable welcome to the occupiers – and there were such people among nearly all of the Soviet Union's ethnic groups in the occupied territories. Do you agree? Yes, there were traitors everywhere. At the same time, other people, including, by the way, members of the ethnic groups that were later deported, had fought heroically for the interests of their country, and fought to the bitter end and until their last breath.

Why am I saying this now? There were no persecution campaigns on religious grounds; well, priests were indeed persecuted by the Soviet authorities, but it was only priests. Ordinary people were not persecuted because of their faith, never in our history, you see? This is extremely important.

What I mean is that the culture of relations between different religions, as well as between non-believers, developed in our country over centuries. This is why, thankfully, we never permitted and do not permit such offensive behaviour with regard to people of different faiths. I hope that this will never happen, and I am asking all of you to ensure that this never happens, because this would destroy the country from the inside. We must not allow this to happen.

As for what is taking place in some European countries, do you know the reason for it? For example, Muslims account for around 10 percent of the population in some European countries. But most of them are first, second- or third-generation immigrants, while in our country people of different religions live in their own country and have never had any other home countries. This is an extremely important feature, which explains the difference between relations that have developed and continue to develop among people of different faiths in our country and in Europe. This is why the multiculturalism project has ended in a fiasco, has failed there, something many of those who had advocated and promoted it had to admit. They had to admit that it failed. But in our country it has developed intrinsically over centuries and we treasure it.

Dmitry Peskov: We have undeservedly overlooked major news agencies.

Let us begin with TASS. You have the floor, please.

Veronika Ichochkina: Today, we do not have so many questions on the international agenda. I have a question on an international matter, namely, the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh. For convenience, I will divide the question into three parts.

First. Why, in your opinion, did this long-standing conflict flare up so violently and why precisely now? Did this amount to objective conditions, or is it possible to blame one of the parties, or did someone toss the match from the outside?

Second, how did Turkey behave in this conflict? It is common knowledge that Ankara provided considerable military support to Baku during the conflict's hot phase. It was decided to establish a monitoring centre following the ceasefire agreement. Ankara therefore shows that it has its own interests in this region. And what interests does Russia have in this region, and how do they intersect or even directly clash with those of Turkey?

And the situation in the vicinity of Gadрут is the last aspect. How great is the risk that ceasefire violations will continue in the region? And what will Russia do if these violations continue in the future? For example, is it possible to expand the peacekeeping contingent?

Here is another aspect dealing with Gadрут. Judging by statements and discussions in these countries, certain tensions arise because the parties interpret differently Clause 4 of the trilateral agreement, under which the Russian peacekeeping contingent is deployed as the Armenian forces withdraw. To the best of my knowledge, Baku sees this clause and interprets it in such a way that Armenian forces should completely leave Nagorno-

Karabakh. In turn, Yerevan believes that, under this clause, they should leave only those territories that are being ceded under the agreement.

The Armenians therefore believe that they should leave only those territories they are ceding under the agreement, and the Azerbaijanis believe that Armenian forces should completely leave Nagorno-Karabakh.

I therefore would like to ask you the following question on this aspect: As a co-author of this trilateral document, could you explain what you, Aliyev and Pashinyan had in mind while approving this clause?

Thank you very much.

Vladimir Putin: You brought up so many issues. We could stay up all night discussing these.

Firstly, why exactly did it happen at this particular time? The situation spiraled out of control and lasted for many years. I do not think this was the result of outside interference. Friction, shootings and skirmishes had been happening for some time. In the end, it all led to a full-scale conflict.

Russia has invariably insisted that an agreement be reached without bloodshed. This is how we positioned ourselves in the Minsk Group, which Russia, the United States and France co-chair. We have for many years – I will reiterate our position – operated on the premise that Azerbaijan should get back the seven areas outside Nagorno-Karabakh. The very status of Nagorno-Karabakh should remain unchanged in the future. The status of Nagorno-Karabakh should be made permanent. However, Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenia should be able to maintain contact, so it was decided to create the “Lachin corridor,” that is, a physical connection between Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh. Why Lachin? Because the area this corridor passes through is called Lachin District. This is not complicated.

Turkey has publicly stated that it upheld, as they see it, the just cause of Azerbaijan, namely the return of the territories that were occupied in the 1990s. From an international legal standpoint, and I also mentioned this, these territories are an integral part of the Republic of Azerbaijan. I will say it again: Armenia did not recognise the independence of Nagorno-Karabakh, so in this respect, Nagorno-Karabakh is part of Azerbaijan from the perspective of international law.

However, I believe things are more complicated than straightforward regulations, including international legal ones. The roots go back to the ethnic conflict, which began in Sumgait and then spread to Nagorno-Karabakh. Here, each side has its own truth. The Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh then took up arms to protect their lives and dignity, which led to the situation at the time the conflict escalated this year.

As you know, we agreed, in the trilateral statement, to stop the hostilities. Importantly, we agreed that the sides should stop at the positions they were holding at the time of signing the trilateral statement. This is where everyone has to stop.

In this connection, there are many technical, infrastructure-related matters. Incidentally, this agreement to cease hostilities was essential, as I have said, because it stopped the bloodshed and spared lives. This is what actually mattered the most, and all the rest fades in comparison. The main objective that we have been able to achieve was to preserve the lives and health of the people.

Since the armed forces stopped in their positions at the time of signing, certain infrastructure-related challenges had to be resolved, for both Azerbaijan and Armenia. But these matters have to be settled in a calm atmosphere, as part of the negotiating process. This trilateral statement provides the necessary framework and opportunities, since it states that once the ceasefire is in place, the next step will be to bring relations in the region back to normal by unlocking its economic and infrastructure potential, including roads and railway links, etc. This applies to the Nakhichevan Autonomous Republic, as well as transport links between Armenia's north and south. The outbreak, the ceasefire violation happened only once. I hope that it will stay this way, and that the parties will sit down at the negotiating table, whether mediated by us or by the Minsk Group. It does not matter. What matters is that this process gets off the ground and comes to a positive conclusion.

As for what troops should be deployed and where, I have already answered this question.

We do hope that international mediators will move from words to action and start providing actual assistance to people who need help, primarily the refugees returning to Nagorno-Karabakh, so the humanitarian convoys do not come exclusively from Russia. International organisations should also make their presence felt, including UNICEF, UNESCO, and the United Nations World Food Programme. I hope that those willing to support the people in the conflict zone will respond via bilateral channels and move from words to actions. As for us, we are ready to carry on with these efforts.

Regarding the expansion of our peacekeeping force, it is possible, but only if all the parties

agree to this, including Azerbaijan, since we agreed on the number of peacekeepers early on. This is a purely technical matter, so if everyone comes to the conclusion that it has to be done, we will do it.

If not, then we will not do it. That said, this is not just a matter of peacekeepers, but also how well Russia's Emergencies Ministry and its staff, as well as the Border Guard Service of the Russian Federal Security Service operate there.

Dmitry Peskov: Let us move on to Nizhny Novgorod.

Yevgeny Khvan: I want to note that the news conference has been going on for over three hours. During this time, both the colours of the signs and the questions have changed. Our colleagues have prepared several questions and are trying to draw the President's attention in various ways.

Mr Peskov, I have a proposal. In fact, being a journalist, I would also like to give everyone the opportunity to speak, but apparently there is simply not enough time, so maybe you can look at the signs our colleagues are holding up and pick a question yourself.

Dmitry Peskov: Penza, please. Pensions.

Yevgeny Khvan: Please, introduce yourself.

Yulia Izmailova: Good afternoon.

My name is Yulia Izmailova, I am editor-in-chief of *Molodoi Leninet*s newspaper from Penza.

Mr President, the indexation of pensions for working pensioners was abandoned five years ago. It was said that it was a temporary and forced measure. Please, tell me, under what conditions will indexation be resumed?

Yevgeny Khvan: Thank you.

Vladimir Putin: The condition is quite simple: enough money in the budget. As you know, in the Soviet Union... It is good that being a *Molodoi Leninet*s [Young follower of Lenin], you take care of the older generation. But Lenintsy know that in the Soviet Union,

working pensioners did not receive any pension at all. Today, especially with the coronavirus pandemic and a drop in real income, indexation is very important. There are certain issues where several components of pension provision are lacking in the resulting sum for pensioners, and we definitely need to deal with this.

I would think also about certain categories of pensioners who need additional support from the state. Their incomes are not big and they work at jobs that other people do not want to work at. In fact, the state is interested in these pensioners taking these jobs.

Next year plans call for introducing indexation at a level higher than inflation, which is expected to be about 4 percent, maybe 4.1 percent. Pensions will be indexed by 6.3 percent. And we will do everything we can to meet this goal.

As for your question, we, of course, are thinking about it and we believe that pensioners deserve it.

Dmitry Peskov: Did you manage to find out anything at the call centre?

Nailya Asker-Zade: Can you hear us now?

Dmitry Peskov: Yes, you can speak.

Nailya Asker-Zade: We have found that question. Algiza Tuktarova from Kumertau, Bashkortostan, asks when will "Putin's payments" be provided for November-December for children under three.

Vladimir Putin: All right, I wrote that down, thank you. We will answer it.

Nailya Asker-Zade: If I may, there is a question from a volunteer.

Dmitry Peskov: Go ahead.

Nailya Asker-Zade: Dmitry Bazhenov is joining us. Dmitry became a volunteer when he was still at school. During the pandemic, he has worked at Kommunarka Hospital. Dmitry, what questions have you received?

Dmitry Bazhenov: Good afternoon.

People are mostly concerned about water supplies. We have received questions from different parts of the country but Crimea is, of course, in the lead. The situation is particularly bad for the residents of Yevpatoria and Simferopol where the administration has already warned people that they may not have hot water until the end of the year. Not only the Crimean Peninsula but also many cities on the Black Sea coast suffer from lack of water during certain hours under a schedule, or not at all. At this point, I would like to read a question from Mikhail Masterkov, "Why is a water-supply schedule an emergency for Crimea but normal for Novorossiysk?"

Mr President, the Russian people want to know whether there is a plan to restore water supply and when it will put into action.

Vladimir Putin: There is a plan. I would like to respond to Mr Masterkov and all the people who asked about this. Yes, we know about this situation, and it is being dealt with at the Government and regional levels. As for Crimea, geological prospecting is being conducted there, as you know, and some water supply inlets are being redirected. I hope Sevastopol will not have these restrictions soon, and this applies to all of Crimea. There is every indication that Crimea has enough fresh water of its own. It just so happened that this problem was neglected in Soviet times, not to mention when Crimea was part of Ukraine. Now this plan is being carried out on a large scale. Some water is desalinated, but this may only be a limited alternative because desalination is quite expensive and the price might have to be included in the water rates. On the whole, the regional governor does not believe it will work on a broad scale.

There may be another alternative for Crimea. Specialists maintain that there may be large reserves of fresh water in the Sea of Azov water area adjacent to Crimea and under the Sea of Azov. Put together, all these measures give me grounds to say that we will resolve this problem and the required funds are being allocated for this purpose. There is no doubt that the state will not try to economise on this issue. I am one hundred percent sure, so do not have any doubt. This concerns not just Crimea, though it is the hardest hit area. I understand that people are concerned about this problem. This also applies to Novorossiysk and Gelendzhik. Here I have selected a question on water supply and wastewater disposal. We will treat these problems in the same way.

In Novorossiysk and Gelendzhik, they had a single waste water disposal system. Unfortunately, there was no separating of sewage disposal and storm water drainage. These two must be separated and then one system should be designed for one and later for the other and funding for construction should be provided. All this has been planned. Unfortunately, it is taking too long, I can see this both in Novorossiysk and Gelendzhik,

and in other cities. But all this is planned and, I am sure, will be carried out.

Dmitry Peskov: We have somewhat neglected the foreign media. BBC, please. Steve, we have not heard from you or seen you for a while.

Steve Rosenberg: Steve Rosenberg, BBC News.

Mr President, we increasingly hear the phrase “New Cold War” to describe relations between Russia and the West. Russia regularly blames the tension on external forces, either America, Britain or NATO. But having been in power yourself for 20 years, don't you think that you bear some of the responsibility for the woeful relations, especially considering Russia's actions over the past years, from annexing Crimea to using chemical weapons on British soil, in Salisbury? Or not? Are Russian authorities “squeaky clean”?

And when it comes to chemical weapons – have you read the Bellingcat report that shows in detail that the attack on Alexei Navalny was orchestrated by the Russian state? Thank you.

Vladimir Putin: I have already discussed the assassination attempt against the famous Russian blogger. I can only add to what has already been said on multiple occasions. We are ready to launch an investigation. If someone holds information that a chemical weapon was used, in this case Novichok, as we keep hearing, we ask you, please share it with us. We suggested that our specialists go to Germany, Sweden and France so that they can look into this issue together with their colleagues. Or we ask you to come to us and bring the biological samples or at least share an official statement with us.

Steven, can you explain to me why, despite repeated requests from the Prosecutor General's Office of the Russian Federation, we have still not received even an official statement? The German authorities turned all the materials over to the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, and they refuse to share them with us, saying that Germany refused to authorise them to do so. Germany, in turn, tells us to inquire with the OPCW.

Can you explain this to me, Steven? Why can't they even give us an official report on the use of this Novichok?

Steve Rosenberg: Are you asking me?

Vladimir Putin: Yes, I am asking you.

Steve Rosenberg: I am the journalist here, I am asking a question, and you answer it.

Vladimir Putin: Okay, fine. I apologise. Let me continue with my answer. Very well. Suppose this question remains hanging in the air. So be it.

Regarding whether we are “squeaky clean.” Do we feel any responsibility for what is going on? I feel responsible for what is going on in Russia and with its people. I will do everything in the interests of the Russian Federation. This applies to Crimea returning to the Russian Federation. I would like to draw your attention to the fact that this is how the people expressed their will.

In Kosovo, it was the parliament that took the decision, and you bought into it saying that this was the right way to go, everything is fine and democratic. In Crimea, people came to the polls and voted in a referendum, but for some reason, you do not like it. Let me remind you that democracy is the rule of the people, and you have to recognise this or stop using the term altogether.

Crimeans have been facing sanctions. What have you sanctioned them for? If they were annexed, they cannot be blamed. Why should they be punished? If they were not annexed, if this reflects the result of a vote, it has to be recognised that this is democracy and they should be left alone, together with the accusations against Russia of annexing Crimea.

Now, with regard to us being squeaky clean. Compared to you, yes, we are, indeed, squeaky clean, because we agreed to free the countries and peoples who wanted to be independent from a certain Soviet diktat. We heard your assurances that NATO would not expand eastward. However, you failed to keep your promises. Indeed, those promises were not made in writing; these were verbal statements, from NATO among others. However, you have done nothing in this regard. There have been two waves of expansion, and NATO's military infrastructure is moving closer to our borders. Should we not respond to this? Was it us who withdrew from the ABM Treaty? No, it was not us. So, we are forced to respond by creating innovative weapons systems that can nip these threats in the bud.

Later on, our colleagues withdrew from the INF Treaty. Mind you, not we, but our US partners did so. Accordingly, we said that we would not produce or deploy such weapons until US weapons are deployed in Europe. However, no one has responded to this so far. Then, they withdrew from the Open Skies Treaty. What were we supposed to do? I do not

want to ask you this question, but what were we supposed to do in this regard? Leave it at that? So, as a NATO country, you will fly over our territory and make everything available to our US partners, whereas we would not be able to do the same with regard to US territory? You are intelligent people, what makes you think we are dumb? Why do you think we cannot analyse and understand these elementary things?

There are more issues that cause our concern. We are forced to respond to them. With all of that in place, we are facing the threat of the START Treaty expiring. Then, there will be no arms race restrictions, nothing at all. From day one, we have been calling on our partners to renew this treaty for at least another year and to conduct substantive, as diplomats say, talks on what to do next.

We understand that Russia has developed state-of-the-art hypersonic systems, which no one else in the world has access to. We are aware of that. We are not against taking this circumstance into account. But to this day, no one has spoken to us about this. Similar systems are being developed in Great Britain and the United States. They have not yet developed them, we understand this, but we are open to talks. However, no one is talking to us. So, go ahead and answer your question about who is “squeaky clean” and who is not.

We have two or three bases in Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Syria where the terrorist threat is quite real. The other side, the United States, operates a vast network of bases around the world.

Do you know the size of our military budget? It is 46 billion. Great Britain has a much bigger one. The US military budget is 770 billion. In terms of military spending, Russia ranks sixth internationally, after the United States, China, Saudi Arabia, Great Britain, France and Japan.

So, who is squeaky clean and who is aggressive? Well, aggressive is not about us, for sure. If not squeaky clean, then, at least, we are comely and committed to maintaining dialogue and seeking compromise solutions. I would like to quote Leopold the Cat from a Russian cartoon: “Let us be friends, guys!”

Dmitry Peskov: Let us move to Stavropol.

Vladimir Putin: Just a moment, there is a very important question I keep waiting for, but it has not been asked yet.

It is a question from Smolensk, or rather from Smolensk Region. Galina Klimova is asking

about gas supply on behalf of the people in the villages of Kommuna and Myasoyedovo in Vyazma District, Smolensk Region. She writes that high-pressure gas lines were laid back in 2015, but the villagers still have no gas.

Ms Klimova, this is what I would like to say in this connection. First of all, this matter can and must be resolved, and we will certainly do that. Overall, provision of gas supply is estimated at 71.1 percent, and this year we allocated additional funds for this project. Gazprom has invested 22 billion rubles, and total investment is estimated at 56 billion rubles. It is important that 70 percent more gas lines are laid towards villages than to townships and towns. In other words, we are prioritising gas distribution for rural areas. I hope very much that the level of gas connectivity will reach approximately 90 percent by 2025, provided the technical capability is available. What does this mean? Laying gas lines to some areas is absolutely impossible because there are no gas deposits nearby or no infrastructure. But gas connections for Russia as a whole should reach some 90 percent by 2025. As for your villages, I promise to see to it that they are connected to the distribution system without delay.

Dmitry Peskov: Stavropol.

Pavel Krasnov: Thank you again. I suggest looking at the signs and posters prepared by my colleagues. As you can see, there is a great variety of subjects. Of course, this is a difficult choice, but frankly, I am attracted to a poster with the famous photograph by Yevgeny Khaldei, *The Victory Banner over the Reichstag*.

Leonid Nechepurenko: Good afternoon. Yes, this is a great picture and a great moment, probably a pivotal moment in our history and in the history of the world. Actually, my question is about the 75th anniversary of the Great Victory, which we celebrated this year. Incidentally, Stavropol was one of the cities where a military parade was held.

I represent Stavropol. Leonid Nechepurenko, *Svoyo TV* Channel. I had the luck to attend that parade. It was a unique event and one of the highlights of the year.

It hurts even more to see some of the new tendencies, first of all probably on the part of our foreign partners who are trying to somehow revise the events of those years, question their significance – calling for a revision. The German Minister of Defence says that the only way to negotiate with Russia is “from a position of strength,” as if historical lessons have taught our partners nothing.

Actually, my question is: what can Russia do and will it do anything at all to prevent

a rewriting of history and to preserve the historical memory of that event?

Vladimir Putin: To prevent a rewriting of history and, in general, any rewriting, we need to be self-sufficient, strong in every respect, primarily economically. We also need to develop our political system so that we feel confident in our country and that citizens understand where the country is headed and how it is progressing, and to build relationships with our partners in the international arena based on our interests and taking them into account. And of course, we should never forget about the feat of our ancestors, what they contributed to history not only during World War II and the Great Patriotic War, but also over the previous centuries. We have a lot to be proud of.

As for the Great Patriotic War, you know that we are unlocking archives now, and publishing archival materials; we are creating agencies that will do that on an ongoing basis.

I have said many times that all attempts to rewrite history are done for the sake of momentary political motives and will ultimately harm those who do it. This is especially true about the glorification of Nazism.

I would like to point out that the UN General Assembly today adopted a resolution (I mean today New York time, I do not know how they dated it, maybe yesterday) condemning the glorification of Nazism. There were only two countries that voted against it – the United States and Ukraine. I do not think this flatters them, to put it mildly. And it is not even clear why. Well, I mean, on the one hand, it is clear, but on the other hand, there are things of a fundamental nature, not part of any current political situation. But we, for our part, are proud of our fathers, mothers, our grandfathers, and grandmothers. We are proud of our country and its history, and we will do everything to ensure that this pride stays with us throughout our life and is passed on to our children.

Dmitry Peskov: Stavropol, will you please show us the room again. You have someone with a poster about Chechnya waging a war against somebody.

Madina Musayeva: Vainakh State Radio and Television Company, Chechen Republic. First, I would like to relay words of greeting, gratitude and deep respect from the residents of the Chechen Republic who love you and are looking forward to your coming to Grozny.

And now the question. The Chechen Republic today is a developed and safe region. This is largely due, among other things, to the efforts by the team, established with your support,

by Hero of Russia Akhmat-Hajji Kadyrov, the first president of the Chechen Republic. After this national leader's death you micromanaged the region and helped bring life back to normal. However, we face almost annual attacks by the United States of America against Ramzan Kadyrov and his team. Sanctions have been imposed many times on the Head of our region as well as his wife and children, and recently on a number of Chechen officials, sports organisations and a charity foundation named after our first president.

Mr President, what do you think is the objective pursued by the West, and why do they enact these sanctions against Ramzan Kadyrov's team?

Vladimir Putin: Madina, is Mr Kadyrov the only one about whom sanctions and stories are made up about? I think they are made up about Russia in general. Ramzan Kadyrov defends the interests not only of Chechnya and the Chechen people but also of the entire nation. This is why it is one of the objectives for our so-called opponents abroad. There is nothing special or unusual here. I know that Ramzam Kadyrov also takes it in stride.

Some of my close associates, friends, or you might call them companions or teammates, even feel insulted by our partners if no sanctions are imposed on them. They say, "Why not, it looks almost humiliating and makes me wonder what we failed to do that we are not targeted by sanctions, as if to say that we have some peculiar relationship with them," with our partners, as I say.

There is really nothing so bad about this. Russia is a self-sufficient country and so are the Chechen people. Chechnya is progressing despite the heavy wounds of the mid-1990s, and progressing fairly quickly with its new team, which is relatively young.

I know Mr Kadyrov, and I know him well. He has devoted his life to Chechnya, the people of Chechnya and Russia. My best wishes to him and all of you. I am certain that Chechnya as a whole will look just as good as Grozny does today.

Madina Mysayeva: Mr President, I am afraid that there will be no second chance, so I would like to ask you another question.

Dmitry Peskov: This is somewhat immodest. Let us move on...

Madina Mysayeva: You said that Russia is Islam's best friend and quoted from the Quran, and you always support Muslims. In your opinion, how important is it to build closer ties with the Arab world and what role does Ramzan Kadyrov play in this regard?

Vladimir Putin: Regarding the Arab world, Ramzan Kadyrov's role is just like that of any other head of a Russian region.

In fact, it is the Foreign Ministry of the Russian Federation that is in charge of foreign policy. Still, regions have always contributed to the Foreign Ministry's efforts in meaningful ways.

As for the Arab world, and the Muslim world in general, we have long-standing ties with these organisations and countries. Russia has observer status with some of the prominent international Islamic organisations. Russia, the Soviet Union and today the Russian Federation have long maintained ties with the Arab world. We share strong and long-standing relations and are even witnessing a trend to further expand them. In Soviet times, there were ideological considerations at play, but now we have greatly expanded the geography of our cooperation with the Islamic world and the Arab world. We attach great importance to this and will keep moving in this direction and further develop these relations.

In fact, the Russian Direct Investment Fund works with almost all sovereign wealth funds around the world. We have even built a unique relationship with some of the Arab investment funds. They came to trust the Russian Direct Investment Fund to an extent that they decided to automatically approve co-financing projects it is involved in. This speaks volumes about the level of confidence and the quality of our cooperation.

Dmitry Peskov: Let us return to the World Trade Centre.

Interfax, please.

Lana Samsonia: Good afternoon, Mr President.

Lana Samsonia, Interfax news agency.

I will start with an economic issue. During the pandemic Russia has not used the National Welfare Fund (NWF). It has left it almost untapped, and is using loans to make up for the budget deficit. Does this mean that we are preparing for an upheaval in the raw materials markets in the near future? Should those who hoped to get a return on their investment in the NWF forget about it for now?

I would like to clarify one more point. Recently, talk of possibly suspending the results

of privatisation has cropped up in the market. I would like to get a more specific answer to the following question: Is the state content with the current economic structure or can control of some major assets be returned either directly or through state-owned companies?

And one more quick question. It is impossible to avoid the pandemic. I would like to know what you think about the introduction of certificates for those who decide to be vaccinated. What is your attitude towards this?

Vladimir Putin: Once again please?

Lana Samsonia: To the introduction of international certificates for those who decide to be vaccinated.

Vladimir Putin: What are these certificates? I do not understand.

Lana Samsonia: They will allow people to travel freely, to visit other countries. Maybe, Russia could initiate the introduction of international certificates like this. This would help promote our vaccine on the international market and allow people to travel, not to go into lockdown when they are abroad, in part, in the US.

Thank you.

Vladimir Putin: As for international certificates that would allow inoculated people to travel freely, we can probably discuss this, although, it is common knowledge, and I am not revealing anything new by saying that even vaccinated people can infect others. We simply have to keep this in mind.

They say that researchers have established a type of antibody with qualities that will not allow COVID to last long. The virus is quickly destroyed by the person's immune system with these antibodies. But such questions require additional study. I do not know if it is possible to receive a certificate of this kind now.

Vaccination is all about protecting your individual health. To a certain extent, it will work as a barrier to the disease. This is also true. This is how herd immunity is acquired. Of course, we can discuss this with our colleagues.

Now about the National Wealth Fund. Indeed, it is up significantly, by 70 percent in ruble

terms, I believe, which can also be accounted for by the exchange rate difference. This is a safety cushion. This does not mean that we are getting ready for more shocks. But we must have a safety cushion.

Look, we have a law under which we can spend money from the NWF if its volume exceeds 7 percent of GDP. We are now close to 7.1 percent of GDP in the NWF. Liquid NWF funds amount to 8.2 trillion rubles. What does liquid mean? This means that we are already investing a portion of it, including from the NWF.

This year, 60 billion was allocated to expand the so-called "eastern range," that is, the Trans-Siberian Railway and the Baikal-Amur Railway. This year, we will use some of the funds from the NWF to cover current budget expenditures, primarily, payments to people, families with children, doctors and students of medical universities and colleges. This also includes supporting the affected sectors of the economy and major companies. The total amount of funds that we will allocate from the NWF this year will amount to 350 billion rubles, of which 250 billion has already been spent. Spending accelerates at the end of the year. I think 100 billion or so more may be spent before the year runs out.

Therefore, we are using it, but we must do so carefully. I have already mentioned that we will have 7.1 percent of GDP in the NWF next year. But the Finance Ministry always looks at these numbers from a three-year perspective, bearing in mind possible exchange rate differences, economic growth in the country and external events.

To reiterate, we are using every avenue to ensure budget stability and borrowing mainly on the domestic market, but we do take some money from the National Welfare Fund.

Dmitry Peskov: Let us give the floor to St Petersburg.

Olga Knyazeva: Thank you for coming back to us.

Mr President, I would like to draw your attention to the fact that this room looks like a chess board from high up. These are the magnificent interiors of the Yeltsin library. Who will make the next move? I would like to give the microphone to the discreet young lady in the blue vest. She has been focused on following the news conference for more than three hours now.

Arina Aksyonova: Thank you.

Good afternoon, Mr President.

My name is Arina Aksyonova, Novgorod Region TV.

My question is on education. I am from a small region, and we are eager to attract more young people to study here. Novgorod Region is doing a great deal in this regard. We have already invested over a billion rubles in our colleges and vocational training centres, and young people come to the region to study from 24 Russian regions. However, we are now facing a new challenge. We lack accommodation for them. Could it be possible to have a federal programme to upgrade and build new dormitories for colleges and vocational training schools?

Vladimir Putin: All higher education and vocational training institutions face this problem. We work on this on a case-by-case basis. Usually the budget chips in, but mostly these initiatives are part of the programmes carried out by the education institutions themselves. We keep coming back to this issue, it is a common concern for all educational institutions, and it became especially acute after the National Final School Exam was introduced. School graduates from across the Russian Federation who have high marks and are entitled to apply for the country's top universities have started to use this right. So many students from the regions, from small communities have started moving to large educational centres. Novgorod Region may not be a major region, but it is an established educational centre. Students move there and need places to live. There are many ways this can be resolved, including renting and living in dorms. In some cases, students get their rental charges reimbursed. Some universities try to help students find additional sources of income. We are aware of this problem and we will work on it.

Dmitry Peskov: All right, let us go on.

Let us move to the World Trade Centre. *Kultura* TV channel. Let us give the floor to *Kultura*.

Yana Muzyka: Good afternoon.

My name is Yana Muzyka, *Rossiia-Kultura* TV channel.

We have a question about the promotion of the Russian language and culture. There are examples of business projects gaining an enormous audience and tremendous influence both in the country and beyond. Everyone remembers, for instance, the animated series

Smeshariki [*Kikoriki*, known in the US as *GoGoRiki*] and *Masha and the Bear*. They have received enormous world recognition and have been such a great success that our colleagues have even made accusations that they were ordered by the Kremlin. Maybe there is something we do not know, and they were really ordered by you?

Seriously speaking, you are using private initiative in 'soft power'. How can we make our official efforts to promote our language and culture so impressive, powerful and successful?

Thank you.

Vladimir Putin: Look, what is 'soft power'? Culture is, of course, one of its aspects. Education, culture, and humanitarian ties in general. In this sense, they are the most universal instruments of cooperation in the world, and they are certainly immune to any restrictions or sanctions. If someone tries to introduce any sanctions, this will be primarily counterproductive for the initiators of such activities.

There are some fundamental aspects in this respect. This is the foundation of the culture of the peoples of the Russian Federation – Russian culture and the culture of other peoples. These are the basic foundations of culture expressed in the level of culture in this country. By tradition, they are supported at the government level. I am referring to classical music, ballet and theatre art. No other country has such a school of theatre art. So many state-supported theatres certainly do not exist anywhere else in the world. They are our national asset. This is perfectly obvious. All of them have their own problems. There are many problems. However, this is still a powerful layer supported by the state.

There are absolutely private initiatives as well, the ones you mentioned, for instance. This is amazing animation created by our talented people based on a solid foundation. But here the support of the state is obviously in demand and is absolutely insufficient. Yes, we are proud and happy for the artistic groups that have created such impressive images that are remembered and popular in the world. But in general, animation needs support from the state and business structures. I will not go into details at this point. I discussed this with my colleagues only recently. We talked a lot about *Soyuzmultfilm* [Russian animation studio]. It has many outstanding problems that must be dealt with more thoroughly, especially with animation.

Why am I talking about this? Because whole generations of our children are being brought up on this animation. They must be brought up on things that small children understand, based on compassion, love for one's country, family and friends, and nature. All these

endless, crazy “shoot ’em up” games obviously attract the attention of small children, but I think that sometimes they may even do harm. So, one has to use extreme caution in this respect. As for everything positive, it certainly deserves greater support on behalf of the state than it has received up to now.

This is ‘soft power’ as well, but it cannot be ordered by the state in any way. Support is the only thing required from the state. This is exactly the case when fewer orders and commands must be made. It is simply necessary to provide more support.

Dmitry Peskov: Mr President, we have been going for four hours now. I suggest going to the call centre again, and then we will wait for you to decide how many more questions you are willing to take before we wrap it up. Bring on the call centre please.

Nailya Asker-Zade: The call centre has received some questions from children. In the past, they had videos with poems and songs, but this year they are asking adult-like serious questions, which volunteer Dzhemiyat Kurbanova, has put together.

Dzhemiyat, please read the questions.

Dzhemiyat Kurbanova: Good afternoon, Mr President.

Here is what Mikhail Yakovlev, 10, from Kursk wrote to us. He says he loves to watch the news. Recently, he realised that other countries do not like Russia. He is curious why. After all, we did nothing wrong to them.

Vladimir Putin: I can tell you straight away that people in many countries around the world love Russia. If we have discussions and arguments with big boys and girls, our colleagues, it is about adults sorting things out among themselves.

Of course, in one way or another, what is happening between adults affects the relations between them, but relations between nations, people and ordinary citizens in most countries are very stable, friendly and based on mutual respect.

Nailya Asker-Zade: We have more questions.

Dzhemiyat Kurbanova: Yes. Gavriil Lazovoy wants things to be fair and is asking why his brother Pyotr, an 8th grade student, has been studying remotely for three months now,

whereas he, a 5th grader, has to go to school every day. Here is what the boy says, I quote: "Please, let me study remotely too, or let my brother go to school, otherwise it is unfair."

Mr President, what would you say to that?

Vladimir Putin: I would say that, unfortunately, this is an involuntary measure and, indeed, it is unfair, I completely agree with you. Of course, your family should be together. However, we need to do as the doctors say, and they say that young children do not get this infection as much or as badly as older children and adults. It goes unnoticed for them. Therefore, it is okay if they get together in class. Older children get sick more often, so it is better for them to use remote learning. I strongly hope it will be over sooner or later.

There is something I noticed here, and I am happy for you and your brother, and want to thank your parents. Do you know what it is? It is special that you and your brother treat each other like that.

Nailya Asker-Zade: One more question. Yelena Vorontsova from Yekaterinburg asks, Mr President, what books do you read to your grandchildren?

Vladimir Putin: Marshak, for example.

Nailya Asker-Zade: Which ones?

Vladimir Putin: *Twelve Months*. There are other good books by Russian and Soviet writers. Our fairy tales are very good.

Nailya Asker-Zade: Thank you.

Dmitry Peskov: Let us continue here. We have not yet given the microphone to RIA Novosti. Go ahead with your question please.

Olga Samsonova: Mr President, good afternoon.

RIA Novosti, Olya Samsonova.

I would like to follow-up on one of the subjects you mentioned. I am referring to arms control, the future for the Open Skies Treaty and the INF Treaty.

It seems to me that the prospect for bringing these treaties back to life looks dim, even with the new administration. But what about the New START? If efforts to extend it fall through, could it be that Russia will face the threat of a new arms race that we will not be able to shoulder economically, especially considering the current situation?

This leads me to the second part of my question on hypersonic weapons. Can you tell us please, in your opinion has this transformed the global military and political balance? Have all the projects you mentioned, including in your 2018 address, been implemented, or are we to expect new arms systems to be developed in the future? Thank you.

Vladimir Putin: Let us start at the beginning, as the saying goes. Regarding the New START, unless something happens, this treaty will cease to exist in February. I have already said during this news conference and have said in public many times that we are ready to continue the dialogue. I know that president-elect Biden said (this is at least how it sounded to me) that he was ready to continue this dialogue and preserve this fundamental treaty. We are ready for this, no problem, but we need our American partners to respond.

If this does not materialise, will there be an arms race? It is already on, no doubt about that. It all started when the United States withdrew from the ABM Treaty. This is how it all happened. One country started building an umbrella for itself. What did this mean? This would have made our nuclear capability completely irrelevant. What were we supposed to do? We had to do everything we could to prevent this: either build a missile defence shield on our own, or develop systems that would not be affected by these missile defences. This is what we did in developing hypersonic weapons, including Avangard. Let me remind you that this missile has a speed exceeding Mach 20 with global range, and it is not a ballistic missile, which means that it cannot be intercepted by any missile defence system.

Has the appearance of hypersonic missiles in Russia influenced... I am referring not only to Avangard but also Kinzhal [Dagger] and Zircon that are now being developed. The latter is a major weapon. Recently we subjected it to regular testing, which was very important for us. In effect, the work on this has been completed for the most part. It can exceed Mach 8 and has a long range. Importantly, it can be deployed as a fixed-base missile or stationed on ships, both surface ships and submarines. Where can these missiles be deployed? In neutral waters. If you calculate the range and speed, everything becomes clear. Does this influence the situation? Does it change anything? Of course, this influences the situation; it changes it.

Our American partners (they have developed a lightning disarming strike theory, that is, a precision weapon strike primarily at control centres) have precision weapons but they do

not yet have hypersonic weapons. Of course, they will develop them sooner or later. This much is obvious. However, as I have said, we will be prepared for this. You asked me what we are working on now. In part, we are working on this, the technology to counter future hypersonic weapons from the other leading armies in other countries. I am sure we will develop this. We are on the right track and working hard.

Yes, we are also working on the other arms systems that I announced in my address, in one of my addresses. Some of them are already combat ready, for instance the Kinzhal and the Peresvet laser system. We are moving fast on the Sarmat heavy missile. In fact, we are in the final stages there. Work on the Poseidon system is going well. We are on plan in building a global range nuclear engine.

There are some technical issues, but not a single problem that calls into question any goal in our plan. We will do all of this; I am sure of it.

As for the arms race, as I have said, it is already underway. But look at how we have managed to deal with all this. We are sixth in the world in funding our army and defence industry but mostly the army, spending a bit over 46 billion as compared to 770 billion spent by the US. Yet, we have succeeded in developing what others do not have. Plus, we have a scientific and industrial base and school, the minds of our scientists and designers, talented engineers and workers. That will allow us to avoid engaging in an arms race. One executive in the US defence industry said recently, yes, they have reduced their numbers, their army has become more compact but they have become much more effective. This is true. This was our goal. We have not done everything we wanted. But we are on the right track and will continue our efforts to ensure the ultimate security of the Russian Federation and its people.

Dmitry Peskov: Mr President, what is your decision? Two or three more questions and we wrap it up?

Vladimir Putin: Let us take two or three more.

Dmitry Peskov: And then we will wrap up?

Vladimir Putin: And we will be finished.

Dmitry Peskov: Connect us with Rostov-on-Don, please.

Aina Nikolayeva: Greetings,

Thank you very much for coming back to us. We were anxiously looking forward to it; we have many distinct posters here, journalists from Kalmykia are wearing wonderful outfits. But our colleague in the front row is giving me a gesture with her hand across her throat indicating that she urgently wants to talk. Let us find out what all the urgency is about.

You have the floor; you may lower your mask, and will you please keep standing?

Vera Yuzhanskaya: Thank you very much.

Vera Yuzhanskaya, *Nashe Vremya* newspaper, a regional paper in Rostov Region.

Mr President, you see, I happened to attend all of your press conferences but I have not been able to ask a single question, so as a bonus, if I may, I have a two-part question. The two parts are different, though.

The first part refers to what has already been partially addressed – the harvest and prices. Rostov Region celebrated a record-breaking harvest this year, but soon people began complaining, of course, because the prices were a real surprise. This defies logical explanation.

I would like to ask why this happened. Obviously, you said the magic words to the Government and everyone started running around; now everything will be done right away. But why is this? Is it because we export too much or import too much? That is, we export grain, sunflower seed and import cattle breeding technology, many types of seeds; we import equipment for our food processing industry. What is the problem here?

I will ask the second part after you have answered the first one. It concerns a totally different subject, spiritual food.

Vladimir Putin: All right.

Yes, indeed, we must increase our independence. This includes some new technologies, seed and some areas of animal husbandry. But this is not related to prices. What do prices have to do with that? I have already clarified what it is related to; the prices are related to world markets.

For example, oil and sugar. The sugar harvest this year was a bit smaller but it meets domestic demand. However, sugar prices went up on the global market, and so it was immediately used for export. This is it, there is nothing unusual here. Meanwhile, domestic prices began climbing to match global pricing. This happened in the oil industry as well, by the way.

Manufacturers and exporters believe they should not be losing money with domestic prices. This is nonsense, of course, they must understand that they are not losing anything, they are producing things here. They are counting their lost opportunities since they are not exporting more. However, they forget how much the state has already invested and continues to invest in agriculture, and what they got from the budget in order to achieve these numbers.

We have developed a system for supporting and subsidising exports. Despite the fact that the situation on the global markets has changed and exports have become more lucrative, the state continued to subsidise exports. This was a mistake and a belated response from the corresponding government agencies. My colleagues and I discussed this in no uncertain terms. Again, I believe this will be corrected soon.

The same goes for bread and grains and everything that is produced from it, like pasta. A record-high harvest, 131 million or maybe even more – and bread prices are rising. This is nonsensical and is also related to exports and export incentives. To reiterate, these things may not be critical, but what is bad is that it affects our people. This is annoying. But it can be fixed. Most importantly, administrative actions should not be damaging to the industry. It is important to work within the market mechanism, including timely use of certain customs regulations when exporting food products.

Indeed, we must provide incentives in the areas that need support.

What was the second part of your question, Vera?

Vera Yuzhanskaya: It was on behalf of some of my colleagues in the audience. The question is about the small town of Bataysk, and a small local newspaper *Vperyod*, which made it to the top ten newspapers list in Russia. It is a no-nonsense newspaper that protects the townspeople. The editor received the title Editor of the Year. We all learned our trade from Lena Pivovarova; everyone knows her in the community and on other platforms. In early November, the Property Management Committee, which owns the newspaper, fired the editor without providing any reason.

People were indignant. No one should be fired for doing good work, and the newspaper is really good. Then, the people behind this decision began to make up reasons for firing the editor. They have sent an inspector there, after the editor was removed. Then, the security people come, seize documents and remove hard drives. Meanwhile, there is neither an accountant, nor an editor-in-chief there.

At the same time, "special" parallel media came in. We have ordinary media and "special media" that throw mud at the editor, and she instantly goes from a person who has been working for 23 years and only received awards, to being a bastard, a swindler, a bandit and everything else.

Aina Nikolayeva: What is your question?

Vera Yuzhanskaya: What is my question? Mr President, how do you see the end of this story? Now, watching this editor being rolled into the dirt, other editors at small municipal newspapers will hide and say, "Let us keep quiet and not tell anyone anything, and not do real journalism, because the outlet's managers will be taken down like Pivovarova; clearly, this can happen to the best of us." Or will there be a different outcome to this problem?

This is about soul and spirit because without normal media we cannot build a civil society.

Thank you.

Vladimir Putin: Yes, I agree that we cannot build a civil society without proper media outlets. This is obvious because an effective and live press is part of civil society.

I do not know about the situation you have just described or about the work of Pivovarova, Editor-in-Chief of *Vperyod* Newspaper, but I believe you, I take your word for it, as they say.

You said that the property committee had fired her, right? We understand that agencies that manage property do it on behalf of the state. However, it is completely clear that this is an organisation that should not be dealing with content, as they say. They should only monitor that nothing is stolen and everything is in place, so that nothing is taken away from the state. I hope the paper clips, chairs and other editorial furniture are in place, so it is clear that it was not the property committee that did it, but someone who runs the Bataysk property committee.

Of course, I will ask the governor to deal with this. If he is not able to do it, I will help.

Vera Yuzhanskaya: Mr President, if you could, please do not simply involve the officials. Can you please involve the Russian Popular Front, too?

Vladimir Putin: Yes, this is a good proposal. I will do this. Agreed.

Dmitry Peskov: Thank you, Rostov-on-Don.

Let us return to the World Trade Centre. We have not taken any questions from that wing yet.

Yevgenia Avramenko: Good afternoon,

Yevgenia Avramenko, Federal News Agency.

Mr President, a lot has been done this year in the context of the pandemic to support Russian businesses, but small enterprises are still not quite healthy. Can small businesses, for example, individual entrepreneurs, expect any federal support next year?

In addition, on behalf of our agency I would like to thank you personally and perhaps Russia in general for not giving up on our compatriot – sociologist Maxim Shugalei. He and his interpreter spent about 18 months or even longer in a Libyan prison. We kept a close eye on this story, and it was a very cruel affair. We are happy that they are home for the New Year.

Thank you.

Vladimir Putin: This takes us back to the question from Grozny on Russia's cooperation with the Arab world. Among other factors, and perhaps most importantly, we have been able to do this through our cooperation with some of our Arab friends who have been helping us, and this case was no exception.

As for supporting SMEs, I have already listed the support measures, so there is no need to repeat all the measures we have developed and implemented for the affected sectors, primarily small and medium-sized businesses. We have allocated about a trillion rubles through various channels to the affected sectors. Independent business owners have

suffered great damage, so this applied to them as well. The measures included returns on paid taxes, and reducing tax payments this year. These measures are well known, and people have been using them.

We are monitoring the situation, how it is unfolding and where it will take us in the near future. Of course, if the need arises, and it probably will, we will think about what else can be done to support the self-employed.

Dmitry Peskov: The President said very warm words about the Arab world. We have never had a journalist from Iceland ask a question at our new conference.

Please introduce yourself.

Haukur Hauksson: Haukur Hauksson, which translates as Falcon Son of Falcon.

Thank you for the opportunity. Thank you, Mr Peskov, for giving me the floor and the opportunity to ask questions on air.

This happens twice in Russia. Now, because of the coronavirus, there is no live broadcast, and journalists from all over the world can ask any question. So, this is good, and it is unique to Russia, where journalists and people can ask questions just like that.

Therefore, I would like to put forward an idea of an international round table discussion where other presidents and leaders of state would also be present. From Scandinavia, too. There are presidents and kings today. Comrade Rosenberg, however, is gone, and if the queen...

That is, when any person or a media member can ask questions, it is direct democracy. This is about grounding a leader, and this is actually very cool and very good. What is interesting is that comrades from other countries are teaching you democracy.

What do you think about holding a roundtable discussion around the world with you and other participants? Technically, it is a very simple thing to do.

The second part of my question is probably more fun. Happy upcoming New Year, Mr President! You once hinted that some day you would let us in on the secret of family happiness. You said it at a news conference. If you feel like it, you are welcome to do so

now.

And the last thing: a boy, I do not remember, from Rostov, I think, said that the West does not like Russia. That is far from the truth. We love Russia with all our hearts. It is the media and the authorities such as the BBC, CNN and others, including the Icelandic press, that accuse you of very bad things. There is a big war underway against you personally. Apparently, someone is afraid of you. But people in the West do not hate or think badly about Russia.

So, thank you for the conference. Thanks go to technicians, interpreters, drivers and engineers.

Keep it up, Mr President, and stay in good health at all times.

Vladimir Putin: Thank you very much for your kind words. I rarely hear them. You will probably get in trouble for saying it later when you return and see your colleagues. But I think that putting up with things is part of the job.

With regard to the roundtable discussion idea. It is a good idea. But you see, we have to first realise another one of our proposals, that is, to have the leaders of the permanent member states of the UN Security Council meet to discuss the issues that are of concern to all of humankind. This includes, by the way, the pandemic, which French President Macron suggested we focus on; it also includes the disarmament agenda, and an issue that concerns all of us – the environment, definitely a key problem facing humankind, combating terrorism, ethnic intolerance and religious intolerance. We could have an entire package of issues to discuss. The very idea of holding a roundtable discussion, possibly online, is certainly possible. It is crucial, though, that your proposal be supported by my other colleagues.

As it happens, we have very good relations with Iceland, and not only at the people's diplomacy level but also at the interstate level. We appreciate this and have respect for Iceland. Iceland has much to offer and to learn from. I mean energy, including hydro power. We cannot come close to your practices, although in some regions of the Russian Federation, Kamchatka in particular, we are studying and using it and hope that it will yield concrete practical results.

As to the secret of family happiness, it is love. But this is no secret. Everybody knows that; it is a universal notion, it must be a cornerstone of relations both in families, and – since you

mentioned international relations, in relations between different peoples.

Dmitry Peskov: Mr President, the final question comes from Novo-Ogaryovo.

Vladimir Putin: All right. Please.

Dmitry Peskov: Stream Novo-Ogaryovo, please.

I see *Izvestia*. *Izvestia*, go ahead.

Viktor Sineok: *Izvestia*, Viktor Sineok.

Mr President, we have heard many questions about many different problems but mine is a little different. Over the past year we have understood, we really felt what it meant to have a very hard time, including emotionally. You said at the press conference a few years ago that you put your emotions into your work. Here is my question: what sort of emotions have you felt in recent years, including this difficult year of 2020? And which emotions would you like to wish us in the coming year? Maybe you already know how you will toast the New Year?

Vladimir Putin: Please, be seated.

As to which prevailed – the good or the bad... You know, each year brings issues we have to overcome, and each year brings us great joy – both family, and state, national achievements. Against all odds, we have great achievements that we can and should be proud of, and we are.

Yes, the year was complicated, but what would I like to draw your attention to? You know, this is what I thought about when you were asking me this question. Haven't we faced difficulties in our recent history? Just now, in this meeting I remembered how hard life was in the 1990s and the early 2000s. It seemed at that time that there was no light at the end of the tunnel, that there was nothing. No army, no economy, a ruined social sphere and skyrocketing unemployment. One out of three lived below the poverty line, but look at what it is like now.

Yes, there are problems. Yes, people are still living a very hard life, and there are very many such people. That said, the foundations of Russian statehood, the pillars of the Russian

economy, and the potential of the state are incomparable with what they were in the 1990s and the early 2000s. This gives us tools we have never had before. This gives us an opportunity to focus on resolving the most important, most urgent problems without forgetting about the strategic development goals of the Russian Federation.

As for toasts, like every person, every citizen, I always have toasts for the New Year. It is only important that the amount of champagne and other drinks you consume is limited. As for toasts, the number does not matter.

Of course, we will all raise toasts to the people in our lives, our family, friends and colleagues. But I, my family and friends always have one main toast – “To Russia.”

Not to finish my remarks on this pathetic note but on something heart-felt, I would like to say the following: during this meeting, some of my colleagues asked me what we were planning to do to support families with children and whether we have plans for this. This is what I would like to say. Some volunteers told me recently that they have various ideas and initiatives on supporting children before the New Year. Unfortunately, this year large events like children's New Year parties have been cancelled due to the restrictions. Large events in theatres, children's studios and so on have been cancelled as well.

But still, this is an unusual holiday. It comes with expectations and hopes for the future and, at the same time, with difficulties. Therefore, before coming here I consulted the Government and the Presidential Executive Office. We agreed that our country, our state will also give a gift to our children. It is a small, modest gift, but nevertheless, we will pay 5,000 rubles to all families with children under 7 years old; 5,000 will be paid for every child in this age group.

I would like to thank all of you for our common work. I would also like to wish you all the best. I hope we have not worn each other out. I would like to hope that the people who listened to us for more than four hours, for four and a half hours, have found this useful and interesting.

For my part, I would like to say that the meeting was very useful for me. We will do all we can to give the best possible response to all your questions, concerns and problems that are faced by the country and each Russian family.

All the best to you!

Thank you very much.

Dmitry Peskov: Thank you, Mr President.

All the best, goodbye.

Vladimir Putin: Goodbye.

* * *

Vladimir Putin: Go ahead, what are your questions?

Question: Have you had enough of self-isolation? How do you cope with it?

Vladimir Putin: First, I am not in complete self-isolation. As you see, we do meet from time to time. I have in-person communication with my colleagues.

And then there is one more way. I work with my colleagues from the Government and the Executive Office occasionally – no, in fact, regularly – but not at the same distance we have now with you. We just get seated farther from each other, three, four or five metres apart. However, this distance does not interfere with discussing current and future problems we are working on.

Question: Mr President, you have just recalled the 2000s. Meanwhile, now is the 20th anniversary of the new version of the national anthem. Back then there were such heated debates, even overheated, and many people were against this anthem.

Do you think it has become a unifying symbol of the nation 20 years later?

Vladimir Putin: Sure, that is what it was, and it remains the same. I always said and I want to reiterate: We should never throw a baby out with bathwater.

We must feel that we are not, as they say in Russia, Ivans with no kith and kin. We should take along all the very best that unites us all. And this music by Alexandrov is amazing and wonderful, and the entire nation knew it. Why should we give it up?

Sure, the situation has changed, and yes, we changed the lyrics. I think there is nothing to worry about, everything proceeded in an absolutely natural way. And it is one of the symbols which unite the country.

Question: Mr President, as a Russia Today staff member, I cannot but ask you about the work of our channel and oftentimes about RT-affiliated projects on Western internet platforms. We constantly encounter some sort of hurdles, one can even call it censorship – one day they restrict access to RT Documentary, then they do something else of the kind.

Can you tell us, please, if any steps will be taken at the state level to protect not only us but all Russian media outlets that have to use these Western platforms such as YouTube, Facebook and so on?

Vladimir Putin: We have to develop these platforms ourselves – this is the best road to independence in this area, in the information area. Information independence is impossible if we depend on foreign platforms. It is truly impossible. They can shut everything down at a push of a button. And this is happening, we see it with our own eyes.

Is it possible to respond to that at the state level? Yes, it is possible to respond, and the Foreign Ministry does that. But how effective is that? It is not effective.

This is why we are obliged to and we will point that out to our partners who are particularly preoccupied with human rights and freedom of information. But let me repeat again – the key to ensuring independence in information space is developing technological and technical capabilities ourselves. This is what we will be doing.

Question: When answering the question about Navalny today, you said that stealing billing data of the Russian security services' officers by Americans is a common thing, it is routine.

Vladimir Putin: Yes, the NSA [the US National Security Agency] does it, we are aware of that. It is their job, and they are not hiding it. What is wrong with that?

Remark: In this case personal data was also stolen and the names and photos were published. And CNN knocked on the door of the flat.

Vladimir Putin: Listen, it has been going on always and everywhere and it will go on. But

we know it, they are not even concealing it. Some former NSA employees talk about this not only with respect to our country, but also with respect to other countries, with respect to their own citizens, the same thing happens. This is the way their intelligence agency works.

To be honest, I do not see anything special here. It is a compilation, a scrapheap where they keep dumping, dumping, dumping in the hope that it will somehow impress the public and will sow mistrust in the political leadership. This is a form of information warfare.

Question: Mr President, may I?

Zvezda TV channel.

You spoke about the 75th anniversary of Victory and about historical memory. I do not know if you heard about the recent statement by German Defence Minister Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer that Russia should be spoken with only from a position of strength. Probably because we do not understand any other language. Do you think this is an reasonable statement from a defence minister?

Vladimir Putin: Of course, not. The lady became a defence minister and she probably wants to show how tough she is. In this case she repeated a fairly trite cliché which is being repeated in many NATO countries.

It is counterproductive for our inter-state relations. It is absolutely meaningless from the point of view of defence policy because... Because! Because they need to take a look at what the Russian Army is like today, that's why.

To be honest, I would not think much of that, and we should not inflate this issue. I am not sure she is happy about making that statement, just as many responsible politicians in Germany. It is just a traditional cliché.

Question: What event are you most looking forward to in 2021?

Vladimir Putin: In 2021? Let us first wait for the New Year to arrive. We will see the New Year in and raise our toasts, including to Russia.

Question: How long will the pandemic last, Mr President?

Vladimir Putin: Nobody knows that. It will depend on the achievement of herd immunity and the vaccine efficiency. I said earlier that some Western partners have expressed readiness for joint work. This is very good.

It shows that professionals can find resolve to step beyond political limitations. I am not sure about political developments but I would very much wish the work were done at the professional level.

We also have an option – to design a light vaccine, as specialist call it, by the Gamaleya Centre: just one jab which will not be effective for as long, the protection level will be lower but the efficiency will stand at 85 percent anyway, but we will be able to produce tens of millions vaccine doses right away. This is also an option.

And we can design it ourselves or we can do it with our partners. There are many options here.

As to when it will end – nobody gives a straightforward answer to this question. Some vaccine producers, thank God, said frankly that things are not going so well, they have had some failures. But I do not see anything terrible here either. I do not think we should point fingers saying, “Hey, they can't make anything” and gloat. No, this is not our way.

Question: How did China manage to defeat the pandemic so fast? As a follow-up on the topic.

Vladimir Putin: They had tough restrictive measures and the authorities were able to implement them.

Question: Do you fear that people are just going crazy now – cafes and restaurants are being closed before the New Year's eve, that the people will just not be able to stand it?

Vladimir Putin: I do not think that closing cafes and restaurants is a critical matter for their visitors. However, from the point of view of business we need to think and look at the losses that emerge here. Because obviously the business plans included operation and revenues during the holiday season but it did not materialise. This is what needs to be considered.

Meanwhile, most people celebrate the New Year with their families. Although fatigue is

growing, naturally. But people see and understand what is going on. One can be a COVID dissident or whatever until they themselves contract the disease.

Question: But there will be no lockdown?

Vladimir Putin: We are not planning a lockdown.

Question: As a man who has been vaccinated, I really want to ask you this. I took part in the third stage of the post-registration trials of the Gamaleya vaccine, had a jab, but I faced the fact that many of my friends and even family members did not understand why I had done it. A lot of people are not going to be vaccinated ...

Vladimir Putin: We need to explain it to them, they need clarifications.

Remark: I do, I show them with my example.

Will we have a way to persuade people to get the vaccine? Because very many people will refuse if this continues to be voluntary. And the recovery period will be longer.

Vladimir Putin: It can only be done voluntarily. As to explaining and persuading, it must be done with your help and the help of your colleagues, representatives of the media, bloggers and specialists who must give the necessary information to the people in a clear and plain language so that it invokes their trust.

Question: What do you write there? (*Points at the pad.*)

Vladimir Putin: I put down what your colleagues were asking, the names of those who asked questions, the topic: Yana, culture, Olga, the New START, National Welfare Fund. So as not to forget a part of the question being asked.

Question: Did you note any governors following the results?

Vladimir Putin: You see, we keep records, everything. It is a case when nothing is lost. We will not lose anything

Question: What have you got in your mug, if it's not a secret?

Vladimir Putin: Tea. It is not even tea, but an infusion of Siberian herbs.

Question: Has the composition changed over the years?

Vladimir Putin: No, it is a herbal tea brewed from Siberian herbs.

Question: Mr President, will you miss Ms Merkel?

Vladimir Putin: Ms Merkel? Well, she is not leaving yet, thank God, she is working. That is why I think it is not quite appropriate to tell me she has left and something will follow. They have a parliamentary government there.

I am aware of the developments in their domestic politics, I am aware of what can happen there in the nearest future. We have rather good personal relations with the Federal Chancellor, and the inter-state relations are of quite a high level.

The Federal Republic of Germany is one of our biggest trade and economic partners. It follows China, probably, coming in second, I need to see the latest data. Everything has gone down due to the pandemic, but German businesspeople are undoubtedly among the biggest investors in the Russian economy. Unlike other investors, they invest in the real sector. We highly appreciate this, let me stress it again, we really have a lot of friends there who trust us and we value their trust.

Question: What do you think your relationship with Mr Biden will be like?

Vladimir Putin: I do not know. It will largely depend on the new administration. Let me reiterate, he is an experienced person, he has been in politics all his life.

You know, there is a famous formula: the retinue makes the king. This is why it depends on who will make up his team. Actually, we already see candidates to the key positions, we know all of them and we have worked with them one way or another.

We are not expecting any surprises here. Nevertheless, we heard the statement by the president-elect that it would be reasonable to extend the New START. We will wait and see what that will amount to in practical terms. The New START expires in February.

Question: Mr President, can you guarantee that such restrictions ...

Vladimir Putin: Come on, let us avoid such wording. *(Laughter.)*

Question: ...promise that there will be no more restrictions like the tough ones in spring with many non-working days, restriction on retail centres, and closures of businesses?

Vladimir Putin: I can say that they are not in our plans. There is no need. The incidence of the disease is fairly high but according to specialists it has entered a plateau, which means that we do not see a sharp increase.

We proceed from the assumption that given the number of specialised beds that we have, provided we increase drug production, I hope that we will not have the negative developments you mentioned. We will monitor this more closely so that people will get the necessary drugs and be hospitalised when needed.

Here's what you say: some people do not believe in vaccines and do not want to be vaccinated, or they do not believe anything at all; others are unhappy if they were not taken to hospital straight away; yet others are unhappy because they were not given the medications – all that must be reviewed carefully, calmly, in time, and we must give a timely response. If we do this, if we follow the rules and comply with requirements from the sanitary doctors, we will need no lockdowns.

Question: Could you give us a little clarification about Safronov, whatever there is, Ivan is still our colleague. You said he is accused among other things of working as Rogozin's aide in the Government.

Vladimir Putin: Did I? No, I did not say that.

Remark: He has been working at Roscosmos for the past six months.

Vladimir Putin: Listen, I did not say that he was charged because he worked as an aide. I said that the investigation considers some elements of his activities to be illegal, they are connected not with his work as a Kommersant journalist, but with a long period of his life, including the period when he worked as Rogozin's aide. That is all. But he gathered and passed information. That is what the investigators tell me.

Remark: That is, while he was a Kommersant journalist.

Vladimir Putin: No, not that alone. Also when he worked in other positions in other places. So what we need is the investigation to get to the bottom of the matter so that the case can go to court.

There are no people who want to persecute him. Do you think he has some enemies at the Federal Security Service or the Investigative Committee? There are no personal enemies there. Did he rub any of them the wrong way or accused of something? No, there was nothing of that.

The matter is different – whether what he did falls under the articulated clause and the crime he is charged with, or not.

Question: Can you say what exactly he is charged with?

Vladimir Putin: Passing classified information to intelligence agents of western countries. This is a straightforward charge. That is all there is to it.

Question: Did it also happen last year and the year before?

Vladimir Putin: I am not going to go into detail now. What is the point? To be honest, I do not know the details, and I should not make things up. I am not going to specify. What for? It is a sensitive matter, let the investigators do their job in peace.

He has no enemies, do you understand? But it is an obvious fact, isn't it, that the man working in the sphere of information collected some sort of information which he should not have deliberately passed on to intelligence agencies but he still did. These are the facts.

If he, as a journalist, a free journalist, fulfilled his duties and signed a contract with someone, be it even a Western media outlet, that is a different matter regardless of whether the authorities like it or not. However, if he collected secret, classified information and passed it on to an intelligence agent, if he realised what he was doing and still did it – that is a completely different story, isn't it? That is the point, and this is what it is about. There is no conspiracy there. Who cares about him anyway?

Remark: What if he is used to put pressure on Rogozin?

Vladimir Putin: Oh my God, this is total nonsense.

Rogozin – why should he be under pressure? He is an official, he works today. If he works well, let him. If he does not want to work or if he does not work well, we will replace him. There is nothing special about it.

By the way, he is getting ahead, progressing as Roscosmos head. There is no conspiracy theory here. It is pure nonsense, just get it out of your heads.

As I see it, he is your colleague, many of you knew or know him personally. But what can we do if he deliberately collected and deliberately passed on information, fully aware of who he was passing it to and what information it was? I am sorry, but in that case let him face the consequences. But the investigators and security services must prove that, that's true. If they do, then the court will hear the case. If they do not, then they will apologise to him.

Question: Mr President, will the 5,000 ruble payments be paid out before the New Year and what is the procedure?

Vladimir Putin: Before the New Year. The procedure is standard, like the one when 10,000 rubles were given to children under 16.

Thank you, everyone,

Remark: Happy upcoming New Year!