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Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's remarks and answers to media questions at a joint news conference following talks with High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Vice President of the European Commission Josep Borrell, Moscow, February 5, 2021

19-24 minutes

Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen.

I had a substantive discussion with High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Vice President of the European Commission Josep Borrell.

We reviewed in detail the state of relations between Russia and the EU. Clearly, they are going through a rough period, partly related to the unilateral illegitimate restrictions imposed by the EU under far-fetched pretexts. We expressed this openly today.

Importantly, both sides confirmed their interest in maintaining and expanding our dialogue, including on matters where our positions differ, which are numerous. We noted a mutual willingness to

maintain pragmatic cooperation in areas of common interest that may be beneficial for both parties.

We share the opinion that further degradation of our ties may lead to negative and unpredictable consequences. We hope that during the strategic review of relations with Russia at the next EU summit scheduled for March 2021, its participants will opt for constructive, professional and pragmatic interaction. Our differences may not go away, but it is better to have as few as possible. We are neighbours and we are responsible for maintaining stability on our common European, or rather Eurasian continent, for ensuring most comfortable lives for our citizens in this vast geopolitical space. Russia and the European countries share common centuries-old history, culture and people-to-people contacts. We have a lot in common in the economy, although trade is almost half of what it was in record-high 2012 and 2013. We are witnessing a positive trend now where the EU remains our largest trade and economic partner. EU businesses are the biggest, or at least among the biggest, foreign investors in the Russian economy. Despite the pandemic, the bilateral trade numbers continue up. Our relationship, especially energy interdependence, must be used for the benefit of both sides. We have an understanding that we will look for other areas to apply our joint efforts as part of building renewed relationships.

Today, we covered healthcare, climate change, science and education as areas in which the experts and ministers from both sides can come up with significant agreements. We will do our best not to delay this effort if our European colleagues are ready for it. At least, we heard them say they were, during the talks.

We want to continue the political dialogue. Today's talks are proof

that it is useful regardless of everything else. There are preliminary agreements to expand cooperation in a number of promising areas, including combating terrorism and the drug threat that continues to come from Afghanistan, and other areas.

We paid special attention to the situation in the Middle East and North Africa. We also discussed the settlement of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. We see eye to eye on the need to resume the activities of the Quartet of international mediators, given that the new administration in Washington is disposed favourably to this idea. We both realise the need to use the Quartet's capabilities to create conditions for resuming direct dialogue between the Palestinians and the Israelis in order to help the parties find a solution that will fit into the two-state formula approved by the UN and as part of the Arab Peace Initiative.

We discussed other crisis-ridden regions, including Syria and Libya. We understand that continuing instability continues to weigh down the situation in Europe, including in the context of the inflow of migrants and refugees to the EU. We believe it is necessary to overcome the existing problems, but not to forget about the events that preceded everything that we are now witnessing. Clearly, there would be much fewer of the problems had many Western states refrained from reckless geopolitical gambles in the Middle East and North Africa.

We will continue implementing the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) on settling Iran's nuclear programme. A critical moment is coming. We hope that in this area, too, the US administration that held the talks and signed the JCPOA, will decide to what extent it will be ready to return to this major international document that is acknowledged as an achievement of

multilateral diplomacy and shows what efforts must be made to ease tensions in various hot spots and to consolidate the nuclear arms non-proliferation regime.

We are willing to cooperate on other conflicts as well and regional issues in general. We will continue to inform each other on the approaches that are taking shape in the European Union and the Russian Federation.

I would like to express our regret that during the coronavirus pandemic when it would seem that all countries in the world should unite and act as one, some forces in the EU have used this issue to accuse Russia of disinformation. Russia has proved by deeds its willingness to help all of its interested colleagues, including in the EU, to counter this dangerous virus. If we really want to stop these information wars and false rumours, we must agree with the European Union to create one more channel and to buttress our talk about disinformation with facts that will allow us to consider mutual grievances at the professional level. Our proposal remains valid.

We are willing to discuss issues linked to the EU's plans on the post-Soviet space (the South Caucasus and Central Asia) in which the EU displays substantial interest. We hope that in drafting its policy, the European Union will consider Russia's lawful interests near its borders and in its relations with its next door neighbours and allies. It would be right to agree on principles that would include commitments not to interfere in the affairs of sovereign states, be it in the post-Soviet space, West Balkans or anywhere else.

This was an honest discussion. We did not conceal our differences

but were motivated to discuss them in the open rather than harbour a grudge against each other. At the same time, we tried to promote our contacts wherever it was beneficial to both sides. We are ready for this. Today, we heard assurances that the same opinion is forming in the EU.

I would like to thank Josep Borrell and his team for the good talks.

Question (addressed to Josep Borrell): A third meeting of the Joint Cuba-EU Council, which you co-chaired, took place recently. What can you tell us about EU-Cuba relations today? Can this format help reduce the differences between Cuba and the US?

Question (to Sergey Lavrov): What can you tell us about current EU policy towards Cuba?

Sergey Lavrov (speaking after Josep Borrell): Josep, I see no surprise in that you were asked about Cuba. When I travel to various countries, I am always asked about Ukraine. You were asked about Cuba because you have fairly obvious and important relations with this state. I think this is a positive example of being guided by common sense, avoiding unilateral unlawful pressure, not to mention any form of blockade or embargo.

We have the same approach with the European Union: international partners must resolve their problems exclusively through dialogue. Power pressure, ultimatums, sanctions and penalties through extraterritorial restrictions on those who want to develop normal relations are methods and instruments from a colonial past.

Unfortunately, the European Union increasingly resorts to these instruments, which are a US invention. This is sad. I hope upcoming international events, including the UN Security Council

Permanent Members' summit, which was proposed by President of Russia Vladimir Putin and supported by others (President of France Emmanuel Macron reaffirmed his willingness to take part in it yesterday), and other conferences will be used to figure out what kind of world we are building. Will it be a multipolar world that ensures equality for all major actors, including the EU, or will it be a so-called multilateral world which is a cover to justify the methods of a unipolar world arrangement?

Today, we have started talking about the nature of genuine multilateralism and I hope we will continue this discussion. We are convinced that this is a format in which all states are represented. In other words, the United Nations. When initiatives on effective multilateralism are proposed, for example, by France and Germany, we begin to look into this slogan. It appears that the European Union is assumed to be an ideal of multilateralism, while others must follow in its wake.

These are philosophical issues, but they are related in practice to real politics. I am happy that today we talked honestly about them as well as about the questions that our European colleagues have for the Russian Federation. I believe this is the only constructive approach.

The example of Cuba graphically reveals the malignity of unilateral approaches and the need to revise them.

Question (retranslated from English): Regarding shared interests that can bring together the European Union and Russia rather than divide them, I want to ask you if you see the Sputnik V coronavirus vaccine as a tool for rapprochement or as the opposite influence that will sow even more seeds for discord between the

two blocs?

Sergey Lavrov: We are not talking about whether the Sputnik V vaccine might play a positive role but about establishing cooperation between all vaccine producers on an equal footing.

When Russian President Vladimir Putin announced that the Sputnik V vaccine had been created, this news received a negative response – opinions varied from the skeptical “it is too early and nobody knows anything as yet” to “the Russians have rushed it for geopolitical advantages.” However, as the vaccine started to be given, the perception of it has changed, largely because at the very beginning Russian President Vladimir Putin, while announcing this achievement by Russian scientists, called for the broadest possible cooperation in this field with our foreign partners.

Yesterday, during the conversation with US Secretary of State Antony Blinken we talked about the Sputnik V vaccine. Mr Blinken congratulated us on the vaccine being effective. We agreed to promote contacts between our laboratories, scientists and producers and see if there is the potential for cooperation in this area.

We are maintaining contact with our European colleagues on a wide scale regarding this issue. A number of countries are interested in buying and producing the vaccine domestically. In her recent telephone conversation with Russian President Vladimir Putin, German Chancellor Angela Merkel supported the idea to see if there is a possibility for cooperation between Russia and Germany.

The Gamaleya National Research Center of Epidemiology and

Microbiology has established contact with AstraZeneca to see if a mixed version of the vaccine that combines the positive effects of both vaccines might be produced.

I believe that not only can cooperation in this area play a positive role but it is already doing so. We welcome this in every way.

Question: You said a revision in the European Union's attitude towards Russia is in the offing but for now, as I see it, the EU is proceeding from the five principles of Federica Mogherini. Does Russia have principles we are guided by in building our relations with the EU? I must also ask you about the videos that were given to High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell and your Swedish colleague Ann Linde earlier. Doesn't this move remind you of the old Soviet joke: "And you are lynching Negroes"?

Sergey Lavrov: I have expressed my view on "the five principles of Federica Mogherini" more than once. I'll just mention one principle, the one that says relations with us will be normalised as soon as Russia fulfils the Minsk Agreements. In parallel, President of Ukraine Vladimir Zelensky says he doesn't like the Minsk Agreements but will have to keep them because this will allow him to maintain the sanctions against Russia. This trap into which the EU has put itself is indicative. We have asked Berlin and Paris, as the co-authors of the Minsk Agreements in the Normandy format, what they think about such statements by President Zelensky but our questions remain unanswered. Any more or less sensible person will understand that this condition is absolutely artificial.

Therefore, I would rather not invent counter principles but suggest relying on international law, the norms and principles of the UN

Charter, the Helsinki Final Act and other OSCE documents adopted at top level. These documents provide for respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, non-interference in each other's internal affairs and free access to information (something we do not see being ensured by our Western colleagues). They also envisage many other principles, such as equitable dialogue, mutual respect and the search for a balance of interests. These principles underlie any dialogue that is aimed at achieving results rather than deriving some geopolitical advantage. Of course, reciprocity is a must. You recalled the Soviet saying "And you are lynching Negroes." But this is not the point. This is just a witty interpretation of the principle of reciprocity.

If you are so concerned about human rights and the treatment of protesters, it is necessary to also look at the images we gave our Swedish colleagues as well as to Brussels on the eve of the current visit. Look at them. They show how a policeman drives his jeep over the demonstrators lying on the ground and many other things. The entire world saw footage how a young woman was squeezed against the wall by a stream of water from a fire hose in the Netherlands, after which she left the place covered in blood.

We had nothing like this. The police were repeatedly attacked during the recent demonstrations in Russia but did not use any special force. Demonstrators used teargas against the police.

Yesterday I talked with US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken. He mentioned the situation around Alexey Navalny and the demonstrators. I asked him if he had any information that would clear up the location of those who were detained during the events at the US Capitol. In some estimates, there are about 400 people. Several dozens of them are charged with attacking the police.

Under US law, this is punishable by a term in prison from one to 20 years. There were numerous attacks against the police during the recent demonstrations in Russia and all of them are documented. These facts are being processed now.

There are many cases in Europe where the courts are suspected of passing politicized verdicts. I would like to draw your attention to what has never been mentioned in our public statements, notably, the case of three prisoners in Spain who were sentenced to 10 and more years in prison for organising referendums in Catalonia, something we were accused of provoking without any evidence. I recall this because our court was accused of passing a politicised verdict. The judicial authorities in Germany and Belgium urged the Spanish leaders to revoke the sentences for these three Catalonians. This is what Spanish government authorities replied: "You know, we have our own judicial system. Don't even think of calling into doubt the decisions that we adopt in our courts under our laws." This is exactly what we want from the West as regards reciprocity.

As for transparency in our relations, we have simply become stuck on an issue that the West is trying to push into the background for some reason, drawing all attention to the protests and demonstrations in the Russian Federation. I am referring to the issue of finding the truth of what happened with Navalny, when and where. I have spoken about this many times. Neither Russian nor civilian German doctors have found what supposedly went into his body. This was discovered only by German military doctors. This is a tell-tale fact. Our numerous requests to receive the results of these tests from Germany, France, Sweden or the OPCW Technical Secretariat, which has become so tame and obedient,

have remained unanswered. They simply do not answer our questions. All they say is “You know everything yourselves.” But this is simply disrespectful, to put it mildly.

I think this arrogance on behalf of a supposedly cultured Europe is absolutely unacceptable and inadmissible. But if our partners believe that we do not deserve to have information that would confirm their accusations against Russian leaders, let this be on their conscience. We favour honesty and transparency. No need to count these principles again. A mathematical approach is unnecessary. I think we all understand what we are talking about.

Question (for Josep Borrell): Which messages did you convey to Mr Lavrov regarding the sentence against Alexey Navalny and the repression of the peaceful demonstrations? Do you think it is possible that the European Union will adopt in the near future sanctions against the eight people named in the list of oligarchs elaborated by [Alexey] Navalny?

Sergey Lavrov (speaking after Josep Borrell): I have already spoken about this issue. I will not speak at length about Navalny, the demonstrations and protest rallies or, most importantly, about the double standards when it comes to the media coverage of these events. Western media outlets mostly report on police response without showing what they were responding to, whereas their coverage of demonstrations in the West is focused on the riotous behaviour of protesters.

We believe that there must be double standards here. It seems they are beginning to hear us. However, the EU countries' allied collective stand is that no facts are provided to us. We understand that this stand is formulated in Berlin. It has decided that this

should be so from the very beginning and has announced this decision to the others. It was followed by France and Sweden. I am not surprised by this, considering the EU's principle of solidarity. I am sure that the majority of European politicians are aware of the absurdity of this stand. This is obvious, provided there is respect for international law. Roman law, which has survived in a large degree and is applied in Europe, says that "the burden of proof rests on who asserts, not on who denies." This is exactly what we want.

As for sanctions, we regard them as an internal affair of the European Union. We have grown used to Brussels applying unilateral sanctions without any legal substantiation more and more often. We are proceeding from the assumption that the EU is not a reliable partner, at least at the current stage. I hope that in future strategic attention will be given to the EU's fundamental interest in its closest neighbours and that the talks we have held today will promote movement to a more constructive trajectory. We are ready for this.

In conclusion I would like to say a few words to journalists. This concerns the problem, or the deadlock created by the results of the tests made in Germany, France and Sweden. I am surprised that journalists, who often show interest in less significant events, making them part of their reports and the questions they put to politicians, have been incredibly passive this time. I cannot understand the reason for this. I hope that the intrinsic features of journalists – inquisitiveness and a desire to get to the truth – will prevail, after all.

Maybe you will conduct a journalistic inquiry (not an investigation). Has it ever happened anywhere in the past that a politician, or

someone claiming to be one, called on foreign states to adopt sanctions against his homeland? If any journalist looks into this matter, this will produce an interesting brief, which all of us will accept with interest.

As it is said in media circles, good news don't sell; everyone needs a scandal. However, we can offer you positive results in the spheres we have mentioned, that is, healthcare, science, education and climate change. These issues are of fundamental interest for large neighbouring players on the Eurasian continent. There is no doubt that we will try to translate these interests into practical agreements, which will help address global problems in a way that is comfortable for all participants.

I would like to thank Josep Borrell and his team once again.