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Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's interview with the RBC Media Holding, Moscow, February 19, 2021

42-53 minutes

Question: There is a feeling that the West is very annoyed by the appearance of the Russian Sputnik V vaccine. At first, they were very aggressive and wouldn't let it go. When I talked with Minister of Trade and Industry Dmitry Manturov, he called it "the vaccine war." Now the opinion has changed. Is this about the quality of the vaccine or is politics involved in this?

Sergey Lavrov: I think it is possible to use the logic of the Russian proverb that can be translated into English as "love it so but mother says no." Western experts know that the Sputnik V vaccine is definitely one of the best, if not the very best. Otherwise, there would not be such a stream of requests for it, which is growing geometrically.

On the other hand, they realise that the spread of Sputnik V and other Russian vaccines that will soon enter the international market, will enhance our authority and status in the world. They do not want this to happen. But they have come to realise that their first response was simply outrageous in the context of the facts and medical science. When President Vladimir Putin announced

the development of the vaccine in August 2020, the offensive was completely undiplomatic. Their response just betrayed their irritation, you are perfectly right.

And now many countries (the Czech Republic and others) are saying they can't wait for the certification of the vaccine by the European Medicines Agency. In Hungary, they believe they are ready to start vaccination and supplies are now underway. The number of requests from Europe is steadily on the rise. Just the other day, Prince Albert II of Monaco sent a request for the vaccine for the entire population of his principality.

After independent agencies published their scientific evaluations, the West had to admit that the vaccine was good. Yet, attempts to discredit it continue.

Just yesterday I read a somewhat ambiguous statement by President of France Emmanuel Macron. He put us and the Chinese into the category of those who are trying to gain advantages in the world arena at the expense of their medical achievements. The day before yesterday, President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen spoke with an emphatically negative connotation about the supplies of the Russian vaccines to foreign countries.

We must follow the correct position of principle, first voiced by President of Russia Vladimir Putin, notably, that we were the first to develop the vaccine, and we will continue to increase its production. This is not easy, we do not have enough capacities, and this is why we are negotiating with India, South Korea and other countries. At the same time, he said we are open to the broadest possible cooperation.

There is one more important point. When this issue was discussed at the UN the other day, Secretary-General Antonio Guterres urged the countries that have this vaccine or have the money to buy it, not to forget about the poor. In the meantime, attempts are being made to accuse us of trying to gain geopolitical favour by supplying it abroad. This is an obvious discrepancy. It is clear that the West is poorly prepared for this discussion.

Question: So, it's about the same as when President Putin said at the Davos Forum that the world cannot continue creating an economy that will only benefit the "golden billion," and we are actually accused of supplying the vaccine for the benefit of the "golden billion." Still, are they talking about the vaccine like this just because it was made in Russia?

Sergey Lavrov: I don't see any other reason, because no one even tried to conduct a medical or a scientific test. They just said right away that it was impossible just because it's impossible, meaning that "no one can do this that quickly." It was only in October 2020, when the West said they would be able to report on their achievements. President Putin announced in August that the Russian-made vaccine was ready for rollout.

Unfortunately, I often see that the response to everything we do, say or offer is, at best, questioned right off the bat. Usually, they say that "the Russians are playing their geopolitical games again."

Question: EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell, who was here recently and met with you, said that Russia is distancing itself from the West. At the same time, Presidential Press Secretary Dmitry Peskov said we are open to cooperation with Europe. You said we are ready to

break up, but we are not breaking off our relations. What really stands in the way of normal relations between the EU and Russia?

Sergey Lavrov: A biased attitude, by and large. I worked with EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell, a good colleague of mine, when he was Spanish Foreign Minister. Now many, in an attempt to give a controversial dimension to the High Representative's visit to Russia, forget how it all began. In May 2019, Mr Borrell said: "Our old enemy, Russia, says again 'here I am,' and it is again a threat." We then asked his protocol service to confirm what he said. We were told that it was a figure of speech and that he was misunderstood. However, this attitude shows.

We are seen as a stranger. In my interview with Vladimir Solovyov, replying to his question as to whether we are ready to break off with the EU, I gave an affirmative answer because there are no relations to talk about. As former US President Barack Obama once said (although he said it about the Russian economy), relations have been "torn to shreds."

Indeed, the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement [between the EU and Russia] entered into force in 1997. It contained a number of declarative goals for moving towards common economic, humanitarian and cultural spaces. For many years, we used a mechanism of summits, which were held every six months in Russia and in the EU alternately. In fact, our entire Government held annual meetings with the European Commission to discuss the participants' responsibilities in the context of over 20 sector-specific dialogues. We were building four common spaces and roadmaps for each of them. These were 100 percent substantive and specific projects. It was all destroyed, just like the Partnership

and Cooperation Council, within which the Russian Foreign Minister and the High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy reviewed the entire range of relations. This disappeared long before the Ukraine crisis.

Many in our country are just waiting for a chance to pounce on the Russian Government's foreign policy. We are being asked how we can say that we are ready to break off with the EU when it is our largest trade and economic partner. If we take the EU as a collective partner, it is our largest partner in terms of gross trade. For example, in 2013 (before the Ukraine events) Russia became a WTO member. From that moment, our trade relations were built on the principles advocated by that organisation rather than the EU's principles. As a single trade bloc, the EU also participated in the WTO. We traded with member countries based on WTO guidelines. If you think the EU is a valuable trade and economic partner, here are some statistics for you: in 2013, the United States was the EU's biggest trading partner with about \$480 billion, followed by China with \$428 billion and Russia with \$417 billion. That is, these numbers are of the same order of magnitude. Where do we stand now? In 2019, EU's trade with the United States stood at \$750 billion, with China \$650 billion, and with Russia at about \$280 billion. In 2020, it was \$218 billion, if counting with Great Britain, and \$191 billion without it.

The reason? It's the sanctions imposed by our "valued" and largest economic partner for reasons that have never relied on any facts whatsoever. At least, no facts have ever been presented to us. We understand Crimea. We understand Donbass as well. It's just that the EU admitted its inability, or perhaps, unwillingness, to prevent the anti-constitutional coup with an open Russophobic slant and

chose to turn things upside down. Brussels shifted the blame to us and imposed sanctions on Russia rather than the putschists, who, by and large, spat on the guarantees of the European Union, which signed the corresponding agreements, totally ignoring, as I said, the fact that the actions of the government, which they supported, were openly and violently anti-Russian.

Question: Without the events in Ukraine, would our relations with the West have sunk to where they are now?

Sergey Lavrov: It is difficult for me to talk about this. After all, later there were other events linked with the accusations of “the poisoning in Salisbury.” No facts were presented. We were not allowed to meet with our citizens. No evidence was offered. Everything was similar to what is happening now with the alleged poisoning of Alexey Navalny.

Question: It seems the West is looking for a pretext to spoil our relations.

Sergey Lavrov: They are looking but there are many pretexts: it's always possible to use something as an excuse to put the relationship on the required track. But it's not that they want to spoil relations. I don't think this is their main goal. They want to bolster their self-esteem. Now they are starting to act like the US, revealing the mentality of an exclusive group of states. I quoted German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas. When asked why they continue discussing sanctions against Russia and what goals they had achieved by imposing sanctions, he replied that he didn't believe sanctions should be used for any purpose. What matters is that they don't leave any action by the Russian Federation unpunished.

The concealment of facts that could somehow confirm accusations against us started long before the crisis in Ukraine. We can recall 2007 – the poisoning of Alexander Litvinenko in the hospital. There was a coroner's inquest. Later this trial was declared "public." In George Orwell's logic, in Britain this means a "secret trial" during which no inquisitorial procedures of the secret services may be presented. You know, these are system-wide problems.

I listed what we used to have in our relations with the European Union. Nothing is left now, not even sporadic contacts on some international issues. As regards the Iran nuclear programme, we are taking part in the work of the collective group of countries, which are trying to somehow put this programme back on track. This is not part of our relations with the EU proper. In the Middle East, we have a Quartet of mediators consisting of Russia, the US, the EU and the UN. In other words, this is multilateral cooperation rather than our relations with just the EU.

With regard to who is taking steps to prevent our relations from further decline, at least a little, we were thinking about that when Josep Borrell, High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, was getting ready to visit Moscow. He suggested cooperating in healthcare and vaccines. We have already discussed this here. As a Brussels institution, the EU will hardly be allowed to contact Russian agencies or companies independently regarding the vaccines. We would sooner cooperate directly with the producers of AstraZeneca, as this is already taking place.

On the eve of Mr Borrell's visit, we invited his experts to make a joint statement on the Middle East by the Foreign Minister of the Russian Federation and the EU High Representative for Foreign

Affairs and Security Policy. Our positions are nearly identical on the matter and we thought it would be appropriate to urge the Quartet to resume its activities and call for direct Palestinian-Israeli talks, respect for the relevant UN resolutions, and so on.

We gave them a page and a half text that was easy to approve after the first reading. Several days prior to his arrival, we were told that “it did not work out.” I will reveal a secret because this is a blatant example. I asked Mr Borrell at the negotiating table: “What about this statement? Why didn’t it work out?” He started turning his head all around. It was clear from his reaction, and he confirmed this later, that nobody had even told him about it. These are the people that deal with what some of our liberals call “relations with the EU.”

Question: Concluding this theme, I’d like to say that as a man born in the USSR, I understand that during the Soviet-Western confrontation we had different ideologies, economies and so on. Later, I thought that everything was the same on both sides. They were for democracy and we were for democracy; they had a market economy and we had a market economy. So what are the differences? Why do we fail to find a common language to this day? I thought we found it in the 1990s? Why did we find it then?

Sergey Lavrov: We found it at that time because nobody in the Russian Federation disputed the answer to the question of who was ruling the show. President of Russia Vladimir Putin has talked about this many times. We decided that was it – the end of history. Francis Fukuyama announced that from now on liberal thought would rule the world. Now there are attempts to push this liberal thought to the fore again in a bid to gain international influence. But when it became clear that Russia did not want to

live in the house of “a self-appointed boss,” all these complications began to emerge.

Initially, having become President, Vladimir Putin and his team tried to convey this message through diplomatic signals that educated and smart people would be bound to understand. But nobody listened. Then the explanations had to be made politely but openly in the Munich speech. All this started when this signal was not perceived (to be more precise, Russia was seen again as a “hoodlum” in the world arena and they were again going to teach it “good manners”). In any event, the West began its ideological preparations, for its current actions, at that time.

Question: Regarding the sanctions. Bloomberg posted a news item today that new sanctions against Russia are planned concerning the Nord Stream 2, however, they are not going to be tough but rather “soft.” On the other hand, they report that the Americans want to thwart the Nord Stream project but without irritating Germany. Where are we in this situation?

Sergey Lavrov: We are a country that completely complies with the contractual obligations undertaken by our companies that are part of the project, along with the EU companies that joined it. The current situation is largely due to a decision taken by what we call the European Union, a decision that proves beyond doubt what sort of alliance it is. A few years ago, when the Poles, and others sharing their attitude, attempted to impede the Nord Stream project, the Legal Service of the European Commission was asked for legal advice, official opinion. The service presented a document which stated in no uncertain terms that the investment project had been launched long before amendments were made to the EU’s gas directive, the Third Energy Package. That’s it. Period. This

issue should be closed for any person who has respect for the law. But no, the European Commission took this opinion and launched its own quasi-legal procedure which resulted in the conclusion that the project had indeed been launched much earlier, yet it fell under this third energy package and the gas directive. That's what kind of a partner we have in this "relationship."

This is about how we can "pounce" on them and express readiness to break relations with them when they are our main economic partner – that's what kind of a partner they are. Meanwhile, now Germany alone is fighting for the project.

And in fact, Joe Biden's administration will not cancel anything which was done by Donald Trump except for leaving the World Health Organisation (WHO). The Democrats are returning there now.

The NATO defence ministers meeting has just ended. But there was no let-up in US demands to pay 2 percent of a country's GDP for defence needs, i.e. for purchasing US weaponry. There was no backing off the demands on Europe regarding Nord Stream 2 – to stop participating in some matters that undermine European security. They see it better from across the ocean, right? This is about who is the boss. Europe also wants to run the house but it was taken down a peg. The situation around Nord Stream 2 is straightforward.

For now they are saying publicly that bargaining is underway and possible agreements between Washington and Berlin are being discussed, including that the Nord Stream 2 pipeline may be allowed to be completed and even start operating. However, if at the same time gas transiting via Ukraine is going to be falling, then

Nord Stream 2 must be shut off. I cannot decide for Germany, however, it is obvious to me that this proposal is humiliating. As Russian President Vladimir Putin said at his meeting with parliamentary party leaders, this is yet further evidence that they want Russia to pay for their Ukraine geopolitical venture.

Question: Do we have to pay for this geopolitical project? Why do they think we have to pay for it?

Sergey Lavrov: Because they don't feel like lashing out on it. They need the Ukrainian regime for the sole purpose of constantly irritating Russia and finding new reasons to support their Russophobic policy. They want to weaken anything around us – Belarus, Central Asia, and now also the South Caucasus, as they got nervous after Russian President Vladimir Putin's successful mediation mission between Armenia and Azerbaijan: why was this done without them? They are now trying to infiltrate this region and step up their activities there. All of that has nothing to do with the Cold War-era ideology of a showdown between the two systems you talked about a few minutes ago. It has to do with the fact that our Western partners are unwilling, unprepared and unable to speak on an equal footing, whether with Russia, China, or whoever. They need to create a system where they will be the boss regardless. This is why they are taking an increasing dislike to the United Nations since they cannot have total control of it.

Question: Do you see the EU as a monolith, or as something more loose, with certain processes unfolding inside and some countries, no matter what, starting to talk about their willingness to be friends with Russia? In the case of the sanctions, the key figures behind them are, strange as it may seem, the Baltic States, which do not play a prominent role in the EU but, for some reason,

everyone is listening to them.

Sergy Lavrov: It sounds inappropriate to refer to the EU as a monolith a mere couple of months after Brexit. This “monolith” is not the same as before. If you mean a monolith in a figurative sense, my answer is no. Quite a few countries are maintaining relations with Russia. The visit of Josep Borrell was the first trip by an EU official of this level to Russia in three years. In the same three years, about two dozen ministers from European Union member countries have visited Russia. We are having a great dialogue, without wasting too much time on confrontation and moralising. Indeed, all of them do have their assignments – a couple of sheets of paper from which they read a script approved by the “party committee” in Brussels.

Question: Do you mean they bring a notebook with instructions with them?

Sergey Lavrov: Certainly. They do not dare to veer off course. This, for example, goes for Alexey Navalny, or the Skripals as in the previous case, or human rights. Now scientist Yury Dmitriyev from Karelia is in the spotlight. They flatly refuse to accept evidence of his involvement in crimes, like pedophilia. They read from their notebook and I would adduce my arguments to the contrary and describe our vision of this or that situation and wonder why we cannot obtain evidence on the Navalny case or the Skripal case. In response they simply read again from their notebook. Apart from this discipline induced by the bloc member states' solidarity, we discuss things normally. Yes, the EU sets the terms on which [its member countries] participate in the World Trade Organisation (WTO), while we are trading with these countries in the WTO on the terms that were agreed on for Russia

to join this organisation. But the EU has nothing to do with this cooperation in trade and investment activity, except for its attempts to restrict trade and economic ties with the sanctions.

You mentioned the Baltic States. Indeed, they run the show in this respect to a great extent. I have talked to your colleagues about this on more than one occasion. When in 2004 there were hectic activities to drag them into the EU, Russia and Brussels maintained a very frank dialogue. The President of the European Commission at the time was Romano Prodi. In 2005, the objective was set to move to visa-free travel.

Question: Nobody has any memories of this today.

Sergey Lavrov: We remember this when we reply to those who ask how we dare say that we are ready to break relations with the EU. You mentioned the Baltic States. We had long been negotiating an updated version of the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement between Russia and the EU, which the EU terminated in 2014. It was expected to go a bit beyond the boundaries of the WTO rules and allow us to negotiate additional trade preferences. At one time there was an objective to establish a free trade zone, but this has long since fallen into oblivion. However, there were plans to update the agreement in order to liberalise trade even more, in addition to the WTO rules. In 2014, they ceased to exist – another example of breaking down our relations.

A visa-free travel agreement was also finalised back in 2013. We had met all of the EU requirements: we agreed that only people with biometric passports would be eligible for visa-free travel and that those who violated EU entry rules or any other EU rules while in an EU country during a visa-free period would be subject to

readmission. We signed the relevant agreement. Everything they asked for, and that suited us, was done. Later, when it was time to sign the agreement and then ratify it, the EU said: "Let's wait." It did not take us long to learn why they had said this, all the more so as they did not try to conceal their motives. This Brussels team decided that it was politically incorrect to approve a visa-free travel agreement with Russia prior to offering it to Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova.

Question: In other words, Russia was made dependent on other countries?

Sergey Lavrov: It sure was, at the Baltic States' initiative. This is also important for understanding the nature of our relations. This is an attitude from people who decided that they were European, which is not at all the case. Russia sees Europe in all its diversity. If the "party committee" in Brussels does not like it, we cannot force them to.

Question: Europe stretches at least to the Urals.

Sergey Lavrov: Correct. In 2009, when Jose Manuel Barroso was President of the European Commission, we held a Russia-EU summit in Khabarovsk. Our European colleagues arrived later in the day. We went out for a walk along the embankment. We were showing them around the city and Mr Barroso said: "It's amazing. It took us 13 hours to get here from Brussels, and it's still Europe." This is the key message behind the slogan "Europe from the Atlantic to the Pacific."

Question: I'm going to ask you about one other country, Belarus. There will be a presidential summit on February 22. President Lukashenko will come to Russia. Recently, Foreign Minister of

Belarus Vladimir Makei gave an interview to the RBC media holding and mentioned Belarus' multi-directional foreign policy. Do you think we have managed to work well with Minsk on integration? What should we expect from these talks?

Sergey Lavrov: The term “multi-directional” should not be used as a profanity. Most normal states want it. Russia, too, has used a multi-directional approach as the basis of its foreign policy since 2002. In our understanding, a multi-directional approach is possible only if based of equality, respect and a balance of interests, as well as mutual benefit. This is the only way it can work.

First, they threaten us with sanctions, and then the same people are saying that we “had it coming” and impose unilateral restrictions on us, and then say that we are “bad” because “we are looking to the East.” Everything has been turned upside down.

Russia is a Eurasian country. We have close contacts with Europe, which have been cultivated for centuries, before anyone even thought of a European Union, and the Europeans fought and competed against each other. By the way, we often helped them achieve peace and fair outcomes in wars.

Question: We even saved the monarchies?

Sergey Lavrov: Yes, and they are aware of it. The republic in the United States, too, to a certain extent.

However, our European neighbours have severed almost all of our ties and left only sporadic contacts on international crises that are of interest to the EU in order to keep a profile on the international arena. In many ways, the EU is driven by a desire to be seen as an important operator in Syrian and other matters. If we are not

welcome here, we will simply continue to work with our other neighbours who are not prone to whims like that.

Objectively, our trade with the EU is almost half of what it was in 2013. Our trade with China has doubled over the same period.

Question: Back to Minsk. What can we expect from talks between President Putin and President Lukashenko on February 22?

Sergey Lavrov: There are some who want to interpret Minsk's words about the multi-directional nature of its foreign policy as proof of its "unreliability" as a partner and ally. I do not think so.

In the Council of Europe, of which Belarus is not a member yet, we advocate the CoE establishing relations with Minsk. We supported the accession of Minsk to a number of Council of Europe conventions. We have always been in favour of Belarus enjoying normal relations with its western neighbours. I'm not sure what the CoE will do next. Russophobia has swept over most of the EU countries, and the most "violent" ones are in charge of the agenda.

I read the remarks by President Lukashenko (not all his interviews, but they were cited) to the effect that he sees no obstacles to deepening integration. Progress will depend on how President Vladimir Putin and President Lukashenko agree on things.

There are two more days to go before the talks. I don't think we should be speculating on the outcome of the summit. We will know everything soon.

Question: Recently, US President Joseph Biden said the United States will no longer be "rolling over in the face of Russia's aggressive actions" (ostensibly, Donald Trump did this). How can we build our relations now? Are there subjects we

can discuss with Washington? Are they ready to talk with us?

Sergey Lavrov: These comments on who is rolling over or will be rolling over in the face of someone's actions illustrate a very deep split in US society. It reached a level of personal enmity that is aggressive and contrary to American political culture. The politicians did not particularly mince their words during previous presidential campaigns or prior to elections to Congress, but I don't remember anything comparable to what is being said now.

Our liberal media promote a tough pro-Western line. In looking for objects of criticism in Russia, they are infringing on the threshold of decency and getting personal. They are very crude, and behave not like journalists but like inveterate propagandists, accusing others of propaganda.

The fact that the New Start Treaty was extended in time is a very positive step. This shouldn't be overrated, but it shouldn't be underrated, either. In his election speeches Joseph Biden mentioned his willingness to extend it, but these were election speeches after all. His promise could be interpreted differently later, but he extended this important document for five years without any conditions, like we suggested. If this had not happened, there would not have been a single instrument of international law, not only in Russian-US relations but in the entire range of multilateral ties, that contained any restrictions in the sphere of disarmament, arms control and nuclear weapons non-proliferation.

It is very important that just a few days prior to February 5, 2021, the date the treaty was extended for five years, President of Russia Vladimir Putin and US President Joseph Biden reaffirmed

their intention to promote talks on strategic stability in these new conditions, in their first telephone conversation after the US presidential election. The situation has changed substantially since 2010: We and the Americans have acquired new weapons some of which are covered by the treaty. We announced this last year. We said that they must be taken into account. Some other weapons are not covered by the treaty – they are basically very different because of their physical characteristics.

Question: Are you talking about hypersonic weapons?

Sergey Lavrov: Yes, the United States also has such weapons. Hypersonic weapons are partly covered by the New START Treaty, if these are ballistic missiles.

The New START Treaty already covers some weapons systems, so we now have to include these weapons systems in the Treaty for the next five years and see how all this will be verified. But it does not cover some weapons.

The United States has developed a new system called the Prompt Global Strike (PGS). By the way, this system implies a non-nuclear strike. We have suggested negotiating all issues without exception that have an impact on strategic stability and the legitimate interests of the contracting parties.

Question: Did they agree to this? Are they ready?

Sergey Lavrov: In October 2020, we submitted draft joint understandings to the Trump administration. This rough outline shows how we can sit down and start negotiating the agenda. We have received no reply from them. Instead of addressing this matter, Marshall Billingslea, the Special Presidential Envoy for Arms Control, mostly made vocal statements that the United

States was all for it but that the Russians did not want to do this.

When I spoke with US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, I reminded him that Russia had submitted its proposals to the Trump administration, which dealt with this matter and many other issues, including cybersecurity and concerns over interference in each other's domestic affairs. We would like to get back to them, and to hear the Biden administration's opinions in this regard. We realise that they now need some time to settle down in the White House and the Department of State. I hope that this will not take too long.

There are still some questions on disarmament, for example, the lineup of participants in the disarmament process. The US position on China, approved by Donald Trump, remains unchanged; the same concerns a number of other matters.

Regarding multilateral talks, first of all, this should not annul Russian-US agreements because we have several times more nuclear weapons than other nuclear countries. Second, if we make this a multilateral process, then all prospective participants, primarily the five nuclear powers, should reach a voluntary agreement. We will never try to persuade China. We respect the position of Beijing, which either wants to catch up with us or proposes that we first reduce our arsenals to China's levels and then start on the talks. All circumstances considered, if this is a multilateral process, then we will get nowhere without the United Kingdom and France. The Trump administration insisted that China should take part and at the same time said about its allies that they were the good guys, literally. This sounds funny. Apart from the complicated and lengthy disarmament process, we do not have so many promising spheres where we can cooperate

constructively.

Question: Does this mean that their vision of the issue is entirely different or that they are reluctant to negotiate?

Sergey Lavrov: They think that they are the boss, and this mentality is still here and it determines the perception of their enemies. So far, they have not designated China as an enemy, but they have called us an enemy a couple of times. Democrats have an additional motivation for expanding this policy. Their position is that, supposedly unlike with Donald Trump, they will be “no Russian tail wagging the dog.”

Question: Don't you think that Democrats have come to power with the intention of taking revenge against Russia, and that they will implement Donald Trump's anti-Russia plans that he failed to accomplish in four years.

Sergey Lavrov: They made such statements during the election campaign. Joe Biden and his supporters said openly that the Trump administration had gone soft, that it was constantly making advances and working for the Russian intelligence. Donald Trump said that he was conducting the toughest policy with regard to Russia. He said that he liked Vladimir Putin, but he introduced more sanctions than all of his predecessors taken together.

We are also witnessing a cowboy-style showdown there. But this is normal for US politics, especially today. Disagreements between liberals who considered liberalism an irreversible trend have become aggravated to the greatest possible extent. Donald Trump, who did not like liberal principles and approaches, suddenly took over. He tried to think more about the basic interests of the American founders, the people who moved there (and it has

always been a nation of immigrants), and who accepted its laws. So, the big question is whether people should remain loyal to the country that has accepted them, or do they want to erode its principles?

Question: Should they try to fit in?

Sergey Lavrov: Yes, and they want to be the boss. Everything boils down to this once again.

Question: Karabakh, the subject of that. Fortunately, the war is over and a peace agreement has been inked. We covered extensively the role Russia and Azerbaijan played. I have a question to do with Turkey. I was in Azerbaijan during the war and heard many people say that the Azerbaijanis are supportive of the Great Turan idea (a state that covered the territory from Turkey to Central Asia). Is Moscow concerned by Turkey becoming a stronger state?

Sergey Lavrov: This opinion is entertained by a portion of the society. I'm not going to give a percentage of how many people support this idea. I'm not sure many of those who informed you about this really know what "Great Turan" is all about.

The relations between Turkic-speaking peoples have become an integral part of cooperation between Turkey and the corresponding countries, including Azerbaijan and a number of Central Asian states.

There is the Cooperation Council of the Turkic-Speaking States, in which we participate as observers. A number of our republics are interested in contacts with it and are promoting their specific projects.

There is TURKSOY - the International Organisation of Turkic Culture. There's also the Parliamentary Assembly of Turkic-Speaking Countries. All of them have been functioning for a long time now. They draft their own plans and hold functions. Their cooperation is mainly based on cultural, linguistic and educational traditions.

Speaking about the Great Turan as a supranational entity in a historical sense, I don't think that this is what Turkey is after. I don't see how former Soviet and now independent countries can be supportive of this idea in any form. On the contrary, their foreign policies and practices focus on strengthening their national states.

Turkey has its interests which include its fellow tribesmen who speak the same language. We also want the Russian World to communicate. We have created an extensive network of organisations of our compatriots living abroad; we are opening Russian World centres at universities in different countries with purely linguistic, educational and scientific goals.

The Centre for the Russian Language and Culture created by the Russkiy Mir Foundation was recently closed in Krakow. This is an obvious step for Poland, as well as for the Baltic States, which are fighting everything that is Russian. Ukraine followed in their footsteps and shut down several media outlets and imposed a language ban. We are well aware of all this. We will keep raising this matter at the OSCE, the Council of Europe and the corresponding UN agencies. One cannot pretend that this comes with the "growth" and the "coming of age" of the Ukrainian nation, which, as they say, is an "ill-fated" one. The Ukrainians claim that they are the descendants of Alexander the Great. In that case, they should be responsible for the orders they introduce. The EU,

and Germany and France as the Normandy format participants, avoid performing their duties when it comes to “educating” Ukraine in terms of making it comply with the Minsk agreements, and this has become a chronic behaviour pattern which does not reflect well on Germany or France.

Question: It was announced that Ukraine was recognised an unfriendly state. How will this affect relations between us?

Sergey Lavrov: This is just a descriptive attribute. What's friendly about it? Russian schools are being closed, customers and shop assistants are not allowed to speak their native language, and the Nazis are burning Russian flags.

Question: This is reminiscent of the Baltic States 20 to 30 years ago.

Sergey Lavrov: Back when the Baltic States were about to be admitted to the EU, we asked the Brussels bureaucrats, the Eurogrands, whether they were sure they were doing the right thing. The problems that are at odds with the membership criteria persist, including non-observance of the rights of the Russian-speaking minorities in Latvia and Estonia. We were told that the Baltic States are phobic of Russia (war, the so-called occupation, etc.), the EU will bring it into its fold, it will calm down and ethnic minorities will be happy and contented. Things turned out the other way round. The Russians were not granted any rights, and statelessness is still there.

Question: Let's go back to Turkey: Ankara's stronger position, its active role in the Nagorno-Karabakh war, President Erdogan's visit to Northern Cyprus (which a Turkish leader has not done for quite a while). What does Moscow think about it?

Sergey Lavrov: As far as Turkey and Northern Cyprus are concerned, we see it as Ankara's relations with its "fellow countrymen." I have not heard about Turkey refusing to honour the UN obligations accepted by the conflicting parties. These obligations include seeking a mutually acceptable solution and creating a bicommunal bizonal federation. There is a discussion of whether the federation will be strong or weak. But there is no disagreement about the fact that it must be one state. Although not so very long ago, it was the common opinion that the entire project would fail and they would have to create two states. We understand that Ankara is interested in Cypriot Turks living in equality and their rights being observed. We support the idea that the same motives with which Turkey explains its actions in the Eastern Mediterranean, including with respect to hydrocarbons, should determine its dialogue with Greece and Turkey.

On February 17, 2021, I spoke with Greek Foreign Minister Nikos Dendias who told me that on January 25, 2021, he had had a probing conversation with Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu. They did not iron out all issues. But it is good news that a dialogue was established. They agreed to continue it. On February 18, 2021, I spoke with Mevlut Cavusoglu. We continued sharing opinions following the telephone conversations between President Putin and President Erdogan on Syria, Libya, Nagorno-Karabakh and our bilateral relations. New power units of a nuclear power station are under construction; the TurkStream project is ongoing. There is much common ground between our countries when it comes to energy.

In October 2019, the first Russia-Africa Summit in history was held in Sochi. A record number of heads of state and heads of

government attended. In the course of the preparations for the summit, we reviewed the development of our relations with African countries and the current state of affairs, including from the perspective of expanding our presence on the continent which political scientists consider to be the most promising in the long term. We reviewed other countries' presence in Africa. Since 2002, the number of Turkish embassies in Africa has increased from 12 to 42. Turkey's trade with the region is estimated at around 20 billion dollars a year and Russia's trade is around 15 billion dollars. This is to say that Turkey has an eye for potential.

Question: Perhaps Turkey is disappointed with the EU because nobody accepted it?

Sergey Lavrov: I believe it could partially be the case. In its contacts with the EU, Ankara continues to insist that the EU promised it accession. Turkey is spreading its wings and gaining weight despite the existing economic problems at home. Turkey mainly goes on by accumulating its national debt but this model is widely common around the world.

Question: 2020 is the year of the pandemic. During such times, countries should join forces and help each other. Do you think that this was the case? Or did the world fail to put aside disagreements and rally together even when it came to the COVID-19 infection?

Sergey Lavrov: Now this conversation is back to square one. There are no ideologies anymore. But this ideology-based, politicised perception of the Russian vaccine was not a very good signal. The Sputnik V vaccine was announced in August 2020, many months after the G20 summit (March 2020) where Vladimir Putin strongly advocated cooperation in vaccine production. Even

then, we were ready to create joint scientific teams. But Western countries and their companies, unwilling to help competitors, did not respond to that proposal. So much for unification in this purely medical field.

There is also the humanitarian sphere. UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, and UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet made calls during the pandemic to suspend all unilateral sanctions in fields directly affecting food, the supply of medicine and medical equipment, in order to alleviate the suffering of the population in countries that were under unilateral sanctions (regardless of their reasons). There was no reaction from the initiators of those sanctions (primarily the US and the EU). Also, there was no response to President Vladimir Putin's proposal, at the G20 summit, to create 'green corridors' for the period of the pandemic, to move goods under the most relaxed rules – without tax, duties, tariffs, delays, or special customs inspections.

We are all in the same boat, and it's not so big. Some forecasts say this situation will continue for a long time, and the coronavirus will be a seasonal infection, and it is not at all the same as the flu or other diseases, so we will have to use precautions permanently, use PPE. This realisation should somehow prod countries to more open cooperation, especially those that up until recently had some doubts.

True, there have been some good shifts. One of them is the United States' return to the World Health Organisation (WHO). Some hotheads in Washington believe that, now that they have returned, they will make others do their bidding. There are fewer than 50 Chinese people in the WHO Secretariat, 25 Russians, over 200 Americans, and more than 2,000 NATO representatives. The past

US administration said China was manipulating the WHO. That is not true. Otherwise, we are admitting the complete helplessness of 2,000 NATO members who should be the majority in the WHO Secretariat.

Nevertheless, there are some positive results though. This problem has been recently considered at the UN General Assembly and the Security Council. It is important now to focus on equitable collaboration within the WHO. Besides the attempts at carrying out “soft coups” and establishing their own rules in the organisation, hardly based on consensus, an idea has been suggested to move the main decision-making on global health policies outside the universal organisation. We have been pointing out this tendency for some time now – the one to replace international law with a rules-based world order. As it turns out in reality, those rules boil down to working out all decisions in a circle of those who agree with you rather than in a group with universal representation where you have to argue your case and search for balances and compromises. And then you just present the decision as ‘the ultimate truth’ and demand that everyone respect it.

This underlies the Franco-German initiative for a new multilateralism and some limited partnerships in the West. For example, Paris has launched an International Partnership Against Impunity for the Use of Chemical Weapons. Under this non-universal, non-UN partnership, the EU creates the so-called ‘horizontal’ regime of sanctions to be imposed on anyone that France-initiated partnership points at. A similar sanctions regime is being created for cybersecurity. Instead of any open-ended discussion, the French are promoting some partnership to defend

freedom in cyberspace. This is another example of rules on which 'order' will be based.

There are attempts to start similar groups outside the WHO. But people's health is not a field where one can play geopolitics. Unless there is a conspiracy behind this to reduce the population of the Earth. Many are now starting to develop such theories and concepts.