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Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's remarks at a conference on relations between Russia and the European Union, Moscow, May 31, 2021

15-19 minutes

Mr Minister, dear Augusto,

Mr Ivanov,

Colleagues, friends,

Thank you for inviting me to this conference on the situation between Russia and the European Union. I would like to express gratitude to the Russian International Affairs Council, which has done a great deal to organise this event together with the Embassy of Portugal and the Delegation of the European Union to Russia.

I believe this will be an honest and frank discussion without any attempts to sweep the facts under the carpet, because we really do need a serious discussion on this matter. It is important that the potential for science diplomacy is being used at this conference. I would like to welcome all those taking part in this event online and also representatives of the Russian and foreign expert and political communities who are attending in person.

I hope that the outcome of this discussion, which, as I said, must be open and frank, will allow us to take a closer look at the difficult situation in current Russia-EU relations and will serve as a useful addition to the diplomatic efforts being taken to improve it.

The situation remains alarming. Our common European continent has been hit by an unprecedented crisis in confidence. New dividing lines are again being created in Europe; they are moving further East and becoming ever deeper, like trenches on the frontline. The outlook for a unifying agenda is extremely limited. The role of common European organisations is becoming devalued, and I am referring mainly to the OSCE and the Council of Europe. The mechanisms for structured cooperation and contact between Russia and the EU and NATO have been drained of all substance.

It wasn't that long ago that we worked with the EU on the Partnership for Modernisation and four common spaces. Numerous Russian initiatives focused on attaining these goals, from the proposed European Security Treaty to the idea of a common energy complex. Back in 2010, we were ready to establish a Russia-EU committee on foreign policy and security, but the EU shied away from the agreement reached in Meseberg. The same fate befell the all but ready framework agreement on cooperation in crisis management. We were only a step away from approving visa-free travel, even though the EU continued to put forth increasingly more conditions. I would like to say that these initiatives were formulated long before the state coup in Ukraine, following which the EU decided to side with those who came to power illegally there.

Overall, there were many more joint projects than the above,

which could have solidly cemented our relations. They told us that “anything is possible, with the exception of joint institutions.” While we did not have common institutions we did hold Russia-EU summits every six months and a joint session of the Russian Government and the European Commission once a year. We had the Russia-EU Permanent Partnership Council and 17 sectoral dialogue formats, which covered topics from human rights to energy and innovation. Our mutual trade reached \$417 billion in 2013. It was a factor on a global scale.

Today this multilevel, mutually beneficial architecture of cooperation has been suspended, to put it mildly, at the EU's initiative. The EU has decided to shut Russia out. At the same time, it is claimed that it is Russia who allegedly does not respect the EU and has been trying to create a rift in a “united Europe,” preferring instead to develop bilateral ties with EU member states. I would like to point out once again that if any EU country is interested in increased contacts with us, we would not reject such an offer. Brussels must bear this in mind.

Unilateral illegal sanctions are being adopted against Russia based on arbitrary attribution rules at the EU's discretion. Instead of a dialogue based on facts, they use unsubstantiated accusations like “highly likely.” The presumption of innocence has been replaced with the presumption of guilt by default. Just recently, the EU announced that the incident in Belarus could not have taken place without the knowledge of Moscow. This “highly likely” mentality is being applied to all situations. There is open interference in the internal affairs of Russia and our allied states. This is probably what a “rules-based order” must look like, an order the West would like to lean on increasingly while moving

ever further away from the universal norms of international law.

Actually, our view is that the EU's policy towards Russia is linked to Moscow's implementation of the Minsk agreements, which provide for a direct dialogue between Kiev, Donetsk and Lugansk and which the Ukrainian leadership is openly sabotaging, with Brussels' support. I would like to remind you that President of Ukraine Vladimir Zelensky has stated openly that they don't like the Minsk agreements but would like them to remain in place because they ensure maintaining anti-Russia sanctions. In other words, the EU has actually accepted the fact that Kiev is ready to sacrifice the unity of Ukraine and peace in Donbass to sanctions against Russia.

It cannot escape our attention that in the EU's policy towards Russia (as well as public statements by representatives of the EU leadership, for that matter) more and more often Cold War terminology is being used. Concepts that are being introduced into everyday life are obviously incompatible even with normal relations, let alone any prospect of neighbourliness. I will cite some of these terms – old enemy, containment, regime, counteraction, etc. We believe these irrational things make no sense and contradict the natural interests of citizens and businesses in Russia and the EU.

Regrettably, the American 'umbrella' has led Europeans to lose any independence or even their sense of reality, their ability to correctly evaluate new challenges and the best ways to respond to them to uphold their own and common European interests. They seem to forget the axiom about the indivisibility of security. The EU's passive reaction to the consistent destruction of arms control regimes through the fault of the United States caused some

eyebrows to raise. Russian President Vladimir Putin's detailed and specific proposals on how to prevent the deployment of medium-range ground-based missiles in Europe have been ignored, including the one on a verification mechanism – I have to emphasise this specifically, as they are trying to gloss over this. These are highly specific proposals, which include a visit to the Kaliningrad Region and a reciprocal visit to US missile defence bases in Poland and Romania.

The main danger of the current development is that the understanding of its being critical is literally being drowned by the artificially created narratives about Moscow's malicious actions, which have nothing to do with real politics, the Russian state's intentions or the Russians' aspirations. The situation is further exacerbated by this narrative becoming the ideological foundation for military policies directed against our country and towards a military rapprochement between the EU and NATO on anti-Russia grounds.

There are more examples of this. They have to do with the EU and NATO preparing for high-level events to be held in the first half of June. I am not trying to prove anything by mentioning all this now; I just hope that lessons will be drawn.

I would like to believe that these trends are reversible. But for this to happen, we need to break the vicious circle of mutual alienation. We must try to see the horizon, to listen and hear, to open a substantive discussion, with facts in hand, instead of reciting your unfounded propaganda guidebooks from year to year. We must realise our shared responsibility for the future of the European continent and revive the culture of dialogue based on this. We must equally demonstrate the political will for cooperation based

on mutual interests.

The new reality, the polycentrism of the emerging world order, will sooner or later make us all reconsider the very nature of relations between Russia and the EU. If we reject any common landscape, what will we use as the foundation to build relations in the future? The 'guiding principles' invented by Josep Borrell's predecessor, Federica Mogherini, are obviously incapable of playing this role.

I know that any sane minds in the EU countries understand this. And I believe today's visit by the Foreign Minister of Portugal (that holds the EU presidency) confirms their interest in normalising relations between the European Union and our country. We welcome this.

No rhetoric is capable of changing the geography, the complementarity of economies, or the richness of people-to-people contacts. Our recent meetings with representatives of European businesses also indicated an interest in mutual investment and large joint projects. Russia is still the EU's fifth most important foreign trade partner, even after the damage caused by the sanctions. In turn, the EU cumulatively remains one of our main trade and investment partners. Last year, it accounted for about 34 percent of Russian trade (with \$192 billion), which is still not comparable to the 2013 level. The mutual investment picture is about the same. Our presence in each other's economies is also significant.

We are neighbours. Russia is part of Greater Europe. The European Union is a major player in the European space, but it is not the whole of Europe, no matter how some of the EU leaders juggle this word. Common history is evidence that Europe never

could build a solid security architecture and ensure the continent's peaceful, stable development while trying to spite Russia or leave it out of the equation. Many politicians have publicly acknowledged this. And I am sure it won't work.

We do not quite understand what motivates those who claim that Russia is not interested in a dialogue. This is untrue. We have said many times that we are open to constructive cooperation based on the principles of equality and mutual respect. It is on this firm foundation that we successfully develop relations with the overwhelming majority of states.

As President of Russia Vladimir Putin noted, it is necessary to approach bilateral dialogue in an honest way. It is essential to put aside past phobias and look to the future. In speaking about honest dialogue, President Putin referred to cases where facts rather than groundless accusations confirm the mutual concerns that emerge regularly. We also have questions about the European Union, but they are based on facts. We have not received answers to many of our questions at this point.

The indivisibility of security, which we, all Euro-Atlantic countries have unanimously and ceremoniously declared, is incompatible with attempts to create "islands of stability," whether it's around NATO or the EU. The pandemic is a sad reminder of this. New points of tension may appear in addition to the ones we already had: the post-pandemic reduction of technological chains, the transition to a green economy, including the introduction of a hydrocarbon tax, and digitisation. Meanwhile, this is happening while the non-sanctions sector of the global economy continuously declines.

Cooperation between us is ongoing in a number of areas despite the current crisis; examples include healthcare, the energy industry, science, technology and climate change, including the entire list of complicated issues on a green transition. Common cross-border challenges and threats, such as international terrorism, drug trafficking and cybercrime, have not disappeared. It is necessary to continue to work together on many international problems, such as settlement in the Middle East, Iran's nuclear programme, and strategic stability. And the need to pool our efforts in countering the coronavirus pandemic is on the agenda.

A master-slave approach no longer works in patterns of cooperation. Politically, neither the world of NATO nor the world of the EU exists. Countries are acquiring freedom of choice as regards development models and participation in integration projects. This is reality.

The Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) is strengthening its external ties. It has established itself and is developing steadily. It is high time to stop forcing our common neighbours, including CIS and CSTO members, with an artificial choice. Their membership commitments must be respected.

We are building cooperation in the SCO, while our Chinese colleagues are successfully carrying out their Belt and Road initiative.

Obviously, what is required today are not new dividing lines but a joint search for additional points of support and levers for growth to ensure recovery from the COVID-caused recession. The merging of integration potential in Europe could become a driver for these efforts in Eurasia. This philosophy underlies President Putin's

initiative on the Greater Eurasian Partnership that is open to all countries and associations in this area. We are convinced that consistent implementation will only further strengthen the economic and transport coherence of all parties, make them more competitive and become a tangible contribution to the efforts to assert peace, security and stability on the vast territory from Lisbon to Vladivostok.

We suggest that our colleagues seriously consider the pluses they can receive from this fundamentally new model of cooperation that implies the synergy of national development strategies and multilateral economic undertakings, and the most effective use of the relative advantages of our location in an enormous Eurasia that is the driver of growth for the entire global economy. We might start with little things, such as stable cooperation between the EAEU and the EU, something we have long urged our European partners to consider. We know that EU Ambassador to Russia Markus Ederer has also raised this issue during his meetings in Moscow. Our commissions have established professional, technical contacts between the commissions on regulations and other issues but we believe it is time for political contacts as well.

Colleagues,

Today's realities are incompatible with the logic of hegemonism and domination and recreating a *cordon sanitaire* and an iron curtain. Let me repeat that we know that many Europeans realise that a course of confrontation towards our country is counterproductive. We hope that common sense will eventually prevail and that we will be able to start working on a new, balanced model of relations with reliance on the principles of international law. Russia is always open to equitable, and, once again, honest

cooperation.

This does not mean that we will leave unanswered new unfriendly steps and attempts to talk to us from the positions of strength and interference in our internal affairs. Preparations for such steps are underway; this has been openly admitted. However, they will trigger a response. I would like to emphasise that those who initiate this vicious policy (something we will never do) should think twice about whether this meets Europe's interests.

In conclusion, I would like to say that we are currently at a very complicated and contradictory stage in our international relations. Europeans are facing the urgent task of leaving the former comfort zone and determining their own strategic relations, including the realisation of their natural competitive advantages of being part of a rapidly developing Eurasia. If Europe does this, we will be able to move from the current "conflict-ridden co-existence" to a conflict-free, albeit competitive one. Maybe we will be able to do even better than that.

I am confident that the representatives of the expert and academic circles taking part in this conference can make a tangible contribution to determining the algorithms of future Russia-EU relations. Your reputation and authority are well known. Today's discussion has proved your ability to look beyond the horizon. I would like to wish you success.

Thank you.