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Meeting with heads of international news agencies • President of Russia

67-85 minutes





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During a meeting with heads of international news agencies.

President of Russia Vladimir Putin: Good evening, colleagues.

It is a pleasure to greet you all.

Our meetings at the St Petersburg International Economic Forum have become regular. They always wrap up a day of work at the St Petersburg Forum, at least for me: as a dessert, a sweet, the most exciting part begins at our meetings. I hope, this will run the same way, too. Greetings to everyone.

I would like to skip the long opening speech and give the floor to our moderator. I think it will be more interesting and useful if we start a live discussion straight away.

Mr Mikhailov, please.

TASS Director General Sergei Mikhailov: Good evening, Mr President. Welcome, colleagues, ladies and gentlemen. Good evening, and for some of you it is good night or even good morning.

I want to thank you for responding to the TASS invitation. It would be unforgivable to miss such a conversation for the second year in a row since we made a pause last year.

Mr President, there are 16 heads of the world's top news agencies here today. This time many of you in your countries have TASS foreign correspondents standing by, and they are always ready to help if need be.

Undoubtedly, the major drawback of our meeting's format today is that it is impossible to see the amazing and hospitable St Petersburg. We are twice as sorry to miss you at the meeting in the city on the Neva this year – I hope it will be an exception – since this time we have nine new participants. In the course of the conversation, I will introduce both our old friends and our new participants.

The time difference from Tokyo to New York is another problem – well, maybe not a problem but a factor at our meeting. We will definitely take it into account and give the floor to those for whom morning is approaching or has already arrived.

Briefly about the meeting format. I would like to ask you to prepare one question that is of the greatest importance for you. You will have the opportunity to ask your second or third question if we have enough time. I believe our dialogue will be just as useful and open as the seven meetings in the past.

Obviously, this year and last year have been unusual and sad for everyone. The world confronted the impact of COVID-19, people are mourning the loss of family members, friends and compatriots while their countries suffer enormous economic losses. This is a disaster of a global scale, which has changed and continues changing the world.

I would like to thank many of those present for backing the TASS initiative to hold our News Photo Award contest, which we devoted entirely to COVID-19 this year. We even called it *Overcoming COVID*. About 4,000 photos were submitted to the contest from 84 countries. Let me remind you that the winner was Brais Lorenzo Couto from the EFE news agency, Spain.

Mr President, TASS has reviewed the major themes, as usual, and the issue of COVID in 2020–2021 around the world is undoubtedly the key media topic which remains on the screens. So, this is the first question our colleagues entrusted me to ask you: How is Russia exiting the pandemic? What do you think of its causes and effects for the world?

Vladimir Putin: The causes of the pandemic?

Sergei Mikhailov: The causes of its emergence.

Vladimir Putin: Allow me to refrain from speaking about the causes of the pandemic because so much has already been said about it that I think it makes no sense speaking on this topic, and I am unlikely to say anything new or intriguing. But I suggest we proceed from the fact that we have faced this pandemic and we are living with it now. The world has yet to overcome these challenges and restrictions and we must continue our joint fight as an effective outcome cannot be achieved unless we work together on combating the pandemic.

I have already said today during the forum's plenary that if some hotspots of the infection remain somewhere in the world, they might trigger its spread across the entire planet again. This concerns millions of people. It is very dangerous and we must do everything we can in order not to politicise these processes. Moreover, even economic advantages should take a back seat to issues of a humanitarian nature and the fight for people's health and lives should be assigned primary importance. This is the key thing for us to do.

Regarding the situation in which the global economy, the entire world and Russia have found themselves, all this is also well

known and I have already spoken about this today. This was the greatest economic slump since WWII, and Russia was not an exception, but thank God the decline in the Russian economy was not as big as the world economy's.

In my view, we have used fairly properly and effectively the means allocated during the crisis and in order to deal with its consequences. We allocated about 4.5 percent of our GDP to this effect. This is a lot for Russia. And overall we have managed to accomplish two major objectives.

The first one was to preserve as many jobs as possible. The job market is recovering, this despite unemployment growing from 4.7 to almost 6 percent. Currently unemployment in Russia stands at 5.2 percent. I hope we will move down to five percent by the year's end, and next year will be back to the pre-crisis level of 4.7 percent.

The second issue, which is only partly connected with the pandemic, concerns inflation. I also mentioned this today. Regardless, we have managed to preserve this crucial macroeconomic indicator. We had record low inflation of four percent, now it is 5.8. And we get this number by comparing year on year, on a weekly basis. But if we look not at weekly indicators but, say at least monthly ones, inflation today could be under 5.8. I hope we will be able to arrive at five percent by the end of the year.

The economic recovery is progressing steadily. GDP growth is forecasted at 2.9 percent. But I think, as do a number of experts, it may exceed three percent and will be around 3.3–3.4 percent. At any rate, there are grounds for hope. I mean the recovery rate.

Our healthcare system has performed rather effectively, and we managed to focus administrative and financial resources to mobilise the manufacturing sector. The Healthcare Ministry managed to convert, and more importantly, build and make available a substantial number of new hospital beds, special COVID beds technologically equipped to fight COVID, both in Russia's centre and in the regions, with ventilators, oxygen and so on. These hospital beds remain on standby.

Most important, of course, is that Russia managed to develop and mass-produce the means to prevent people from getting COVID. As we know, this is the Sputnik V vaccine and three more vaccines that followed. They are effective. Sputnik V has been recognised by both Russian and international specialists as probably being the most effective. Its efficacy is 97.6 percent. I think in reality it is the safest in the world. Let me reiterate: after many millions of doses administered our health services have not recorded a single fatality resulting from the use of this vaccine, whereas other producers, regrettably, have had some tragic cases. We have not had them and I hope we will not have any ever, but some 10 percent of those vaccinated can run a small fever. However, it lasts just a few hours and that is it. These are just side effects. In addition, it provides active and effective protection. If people encounter an infection and get ill, they experience only a very mild form of the disease.

Concerning the economy, I believe that all steps have been taken – I will not list them now – directed, first of all, at supporting Russian families, primarily families with children. All these steps were much needed and effective.

The second part of the programme we pursued was supporting

various sectors of the economy, both major corporations, as well as small and middle-sized enterprises. I will not repeat myself, those efforts were primarily designed to support the labour market. We set up a complete system of stimuli to preserve jobs. It too, overall, did the trick.

We continue such efforts to support our economy and Russian families. In my view, they have been very effective, and we will stick to this approach moving forward.

Concerning the world economy, the colleagues who are gathered here know as much as I do as to what the economic prospects are. Since different countries have different capabilities, according to experts, the US economy will recover this year, while the economies of other developed countries are most likely to return to pre-crisis levels next year. Except for China. China has already reached its pre-COVID levels. As regards emerging economies, this might happen much later, by the end of next year or even the year after that. These are experts' tentative assessments.

I would very much like it if the hardships we faced last year pushed the world toward working more closely with one other, to rid the world of politically motivated restrictions, especially at a time when joint efforts are required for the sake of humanity and for the sake of the health and life of people around the world.

Sergei Mikhailov: Thank you very much, Mr President.

It is our seventh meeting already and certain traditions have evolved. We traditionally let representatives of the beautiful half of humanity ask the first question. Therefore, I would like to introduce our colleague from Press Trust of India, Ms Priyanka

Tikoo, Deputy Editor-in-Chief and Bureau Chief. This is her first time at our meeting. We welcome you. I would certainly like to express my great concern and convey my words of support to the people of India in connection with the pandemic, which has affected India greatly. To date, 27.5 million people have contracted the coronavirus. I hope we will defeat it despite these numbers. Please, Ms Tikoo.

Deputy Editor-in-Chief and CEO of the Press Trust of India news agency Priyanka Tikoo (India) (retranslated from Russian):

Thank you very much for your kind words.

Thank you very much, Mr President, for agreeing to meet with with us. My name is Priyanka Tikoo. I would like to ask about relations between Russia and India. Historically, this relationship has been very strong, but recently some problems have arisen due to the rapprochement between Beijing and Moscow, as well as due to India's participation in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue [Quad], which the Russian Foreign Minister described as the "Asian NATO."

Could you tell us, Mr President, if you think the rapprochement between Russia and China may affect Russia's strategic partnership with India?

And I would also like to ask, about your stance on the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue and India's involvement in it?

Vladimir Putin: We do not participate in this initiative, so I do not think I should give any assessments on the participation of other countries in it. Each country makes its sovereign decision about with whom, how and in what capacity, and to what extent it builds

its relations.

Let me state, though, that any partnership between countries should not be aimed at being friends simply to align against someone else. We need to be friends with each other so as to achieve common goals, to solve the tasks that states face.

I will repeat once again that we do not see ourselves in this configuration. However, this does not prevent us from working both with India and China. I do not see any contradictions here.

Moreover, we have created conditions for India, China and Russia to be able to work within the same organisations and they are well known: we collaborate in BRICS, and the SCO, and we work together in the United Nations. Yes, I know, of course, there are certain issues related to India-China relations. But you see, there are always a plethora of issues arising between neighbours. But I know the attitude of both the Prime Minister of India and the President of the PRC, these are very responsible people and in their interactions they treat each other with great respect. And I think that they will always find a way to resolve the problems and issues they face. The main thing is that extra-regional powers should not standing their way.

As for Russia-India relations, I repeat, they are unfolding very successfully and in a trustful and traditional manner. We really appreciate this level of relations with our Indian friends. These are relations of a truly strategic nature, as they cover a whole range of areas for interaction. They include economic issues, energy, and high technologies. They also include the military-industrial complex, and here we are not only talking about the sale and purchase of Russian weapons. I have already spoken about this more than once, that we have very deep and trusting relations

with India, which manifested in the fact that we and India (probably the only such partner of ours) take up joint efforts to design and produce, including on Indian territory, cutting-edge and advanced weapons systems, including missile equipment. But these are just a few; there are other areas in which we cooperate.

This is why I have no doubt that Russia-India relations will continue to develop consistently to the benefit of the peoples of India and the Russian Federation.

Sergei Mikhailov: Thank you very much, Mr President.

The Kyodo Tsushin news agency of Japan has been a regular fixture in our meetings, this being the seventh time they have taken part. Today, for the first time President and Editor-in-Chief of Kyodo News, Mr Toru Mizutani, is among us. He has been in charge of the agency since June 2018 and has been working there since 1979. Kyodo is the official state news agency of the XXXII Olympiad in Tokyo and the entire world is now following the travails this major competition, which has already been rescheduled once, is going through. We wish our Japanese friends and colleagues good luck and patience. I am sure that the world will duly appreciate Japan's tremendous efforts in preparing for these Olympic Games.

Mr Toru Mizutani, it is nearly morning where you are. Thank you for your perseverance. Your question, please

President and Editor-in-Chief of Kyodo News (Japan) Toru Mizutani (*retranslated from Russian*): Hello, my name is Mizutani of Kyodo Tsushin news agency.

First of all, I would like to thank you, Mr President, for the opportunity to take part in our meeting and also to thank

Sergei Mikhailov and everyone else involved in the preparation of this meeting for organising it.

The Tokyo Olympics have been mentioned now and I would like to seize this opportunity and ask how we can develop our relations and use sporting events and cooperation at them to promote our talks on the northern territories. There is much talk nowadays that amendments to the Russian Constitution have led to the situation when it may not be possible to even discuss the possibility of the transfer or the return of the four islands. How can we build a dialogue now? We always were of the opinion that concluding a peace treaty has been a problem directly connected with the return of the four islands.

Vladimir Putin: You see, Japan's stance has changed very often since 1956 when there was talk about two islands. Afterwards, at your initiative, at Japan's initiative, we stopped any talks about this part of the Kuril Islands. Later we resumed them at the request from the Japanese side when the discussion was about two islands. After that the Japanese position changed again and this time it was about four islands. Meanwhile, neither Russia nor the Soviet Union ever agreed to that. Therefore, yes, constitutional amendments have been adopted, and obviously we must take that into consideration. However, I do not think we must stop peace treaty negotiations.

There are many subtle issues here, and during preliminary discussions we asked our colleagues, friends and partners a number of questions including those related to ensuring security. We were very interested in how we will resolve these issues considering that your allies plan to deploy modern assault missile systems on Japan's territory. And we always had a concern about

whether those missile systems will be deployed at a distance that will threaten the Russian Federation. Regrettably, we never received an unequivocal, firm and clear answer.

However, I think we must in any case build neighbourly relations with Japan, which both the people of Japan and the people of the Russian Federation want. We are natural partners in very many areas. For a number of reasons I will not waste time listing them. Our friends in Japan are aware of them.

Therefore we are ready to continue these consultations, taking into account modern realities, but proceeding from the understanding that strategically both Russia and Japan are interested in concluding a peace treaty.

Sergei Mikhailov: Thank you, Mr President.

Our old-time partners and good friends, who are progressing rapidly, are working in all thinkable and unthinkable news formats while maintaining the honourable traditions of Xinhua News Agency. This coming November, Xinhua will celebrate its 90th anniversary.

I am delighted to welcome the new Xinhua President and Editor-in-Chief, He Ping. He was appointed the agency's president but also retained the post of editor-in-chief at a very difficult time, in October 2020.

Mr He attended our meeting in 2018 as the agency's editor-in-chief. We congratulate him on his new appointment.

I would like to remind everyone that He Ping holds many professional awards, for example, China's Top 100 Journalists Award. He supervised the production of a series of documentaries,

The Country's Photo Album, which has won nationwide recognition and received the 10 Most Influential Documentaries in China Award in 2017.

Mr He, your question, please.

President of Xinhua News Agency (China) He Ping

(retranslated from Russian): Good afternoon, colleagues, Mr President.

I remember the year 2018 and the forum, which was held here in St Petersburg, very well. You agreed to grant an interview to me and answered my question. That time we spoke about bilateral trade between Russia and China and that our trade should grow to more than \$100 billion. As you have mentioned now, our bilateral trade was more than \$100 billion during the past three years.

Here is my question. This year we will celebrate the 20th anniversary of the Treaty of Good-Neighbourliness and Friendly Cooperation between Russia and China. This is a new historical start for us. What are your expectations, and what are the priority spheres you discussed with President Xi Jinping for the development of Russian-Chinese relations of comprehensive cooperation and strategic partnership in a new era? How can we advance them to a new development stage? How should we streamline and reform the international system of governance and create a Community with Shared Future for Mankind? What efforts can be made in this sphere?

Thank you.

Vladimir Putin: You mentioned the Treaty, which undoubtedly played a vital role in the development of Russian-Chinese

relations. They are truly unprecedented in terms of the quality and level of interaction. But we both understand that it is not just about the Treaty, although it really is a very important thing, an important document, and an important milestone. The point is that Russia and China have many overlapping interests. This is what underlies the development of our interaction.

In this regard, one of the key fields of cooperation is the one you already mentioned at the start, and that is economic cooperation. Quite so, several years ago now, President Xi Jinping and I worked out a plan to reach the \$100 billion mark in our mutual trade. Now I should tell you (you know about this) that we did actually reach this milestone, and more than this, even despite the challenges of the pandemic in 2020, we kept to that level. Despite the slight decrease, it amounted to 104 billion. And I think that over a period of the next few years, as we agreed, as we wanted, we can reach 200 billion even by 2024, despite that slight decline. We have also discussed this with President Xi Jinping. The pace we have gained and the growth rate we have achieved in the first quarter of this year also confirm this.

It is of utmost importance that we cooperate across a wide variety of areas. We are following global trends and we are increasingly focusing on the most important fields of high-tech. I have repeatedly mentioned that we continue to work together in aircraft manufacturing, we are more and more expanding our cooperation in space, including the joint lunar programme; there are very interesting prospects here.

Quite recently, you are aware, President Xi Jinping and I broke ground for four new nuclear reactors in China. This is very important high-tech collaboration.

Work continues in other segments in the energy industry too. On the other hand, I believe our cooperation in nature conservation and in the humanitarian field is no less important. From year to year, we hold a variety of forums, all kinds of cross year projects. This brings people ever closer together. All this requires good support in terms of infrastructure, so we are developing it as well. Quite recently, you know we have opened a bridge in one of the most important regions of the Russian-Chinese border.

Russia and China are jointly working on major projects that have an international dimension. As you are aware, China is promoting the New Silk Road idea, including in the economy. This is quite consistent with what we are doing within the framework of the Eurasian Economic Union.

We have many overlapping interests and fields of activity. I simply do not doubt for a second that we will continue to be as active as possible, keeping in mind both Russia's and China's interest in maintaining collaboration on the international arena, and this interaction is undoubtedly one of the most important factors of stability in international affairs.

Sergei Mikhailov: Thank you, Mr President.

Thank you, Mr He.

I am happy to introduce the first-time participant in this kind of meetings, Mr Cho Sung-boo, President and CEO of Yonhap News Agency, South Korea. He took the lead at the biggest South Korean news agency in 2018 and in 2019, his colleagues elected him president of the powerful Organisation of Asia-Pacific News Agencies.

It is now early morning in Seoul. Please go ahead, Mr Cho. Thank you for staying up for us.

President and CEO of Yonhap News Agency (South Korea)

Cho Sung-boo (*retranslated from Russian*): Hello, everybody.

My name is Cho Sung-boo and I represent Yonhap News Agency.

First of all, I would like to thank Mr President and Mr Mikhailov for the opportunity to participate in this meeting.

In 2017, Russia and China presented a joint plan of action, a roadmap on North Korea's nuclear issue, and in 2019, in pursuance of this roadmap, Russia presented a joint plan and asked everybody to support and fulfil this plan. I would like to ask about Russia's stance on the North Korean nuclear issue and the prospects for resolving it.

Last year, Russia and South Korea celebrated the 30th anniversary of their diplomatic relations. I know that Mr President even wanted to visit South Korea but the COVID-19 pandemic prevented him from doing that. The pandemic is subsiding. Does Mr President have any plans to visit my country this year?

Thank you.

Vladimir Putin: Thank you very much for your questions.

First of all, I would like to say that the relationship between Russia and South Korea is developing well in a great number of areas. We are satisfied with our economic cooperation with South Korea. Indeed, the pandemic caused a certain decline in trade but already in the first quarter of this year, we noted that trade is recovering.

The question that you have formulated is, of course, extremely important and sensitive not only for the Republic of Korea, but also

for the entire region and one can also say for the whole world. The North Korean nuclear programme is, naturally, the focus of your attention as well as ours.

I have formulated Russia's attitude on this subject on many occasions. We are point-blank against the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction all over the world. Everybody, including our friends in North Korea, are well aware of this. Still, I would like to emphasise that a solution to this problem should not be based on "strangling" North Korea or any further sanctions against it, but rather on the creation of conditions, which would guarantee the security of the North Koreans. And in this case, acting from such positions, using tact, patience and desire to solve this matter, I think we could make some progress.

By the way, over a period of the past years, when there was at least an attempt to follow along this path, we could also see some positive trends, including a favourable response from the North Korean leadership. However, later on North Korean partners, above all the US partners, drifted away from their earlier obligations, which brought about another spiral of tension.

I would like to believe that all of us, including Russia, will find an optimal way of solving the North Korean problem. However one of them, since we all live in one region and Russia in this context is a regional country: we have a common border with the DPRK, we also have such an instrument as trilateral programmes, primarily in the field of the economy, and we have not forgotten them. Unfortunately, they are not being implemented but we are ready to work together to do this and it seems to me that it could create good conditions for solving issues in the political sphere.

Thank you.

Sergei Mikhailov: Thank you, Mr President.

The Reuters agency has been repeatedly involved in our meeting. I am happy to be able to introduce you to Reuters President Michael Friedenbergr for the first time. He came to head the agency in December 2018 and immediately started planning his visit to Moscow and St Petersburg. Unfortunately, these plans were adjusted because of the coronavirus pandemic. Michael, I am confident that you will visit St Petersburg soon.

It is not necessary to say much about the Reuters news agency. Suffice it to recall that the agency, the world's largest multimedia news provider, will mark its 170th anniversary in October 2021.

Michael, your question, please.

Reuters President Michael Friedenbergr (*retranslated from Russian*): Thank you very much, Mr President. Thank you for the time. Congratulations on holding this magnificent forum.

You will soon hold talks with President Biden, on June 16, and it appears that you disagree on some political measures. But your opinions coincide in some areas, including the environment and strategic stability. What would you like to achieve during your summit with President Biden?

Vladimir Putin: You know, I am not expecting any breakthroughs following this meeting. But I believe that (you are absolutely right) that, despite the disagreements, which were not created by the Russian side, we, nevertheless, have coinciding interests.

You have now mentioned some of the subjects that would be of interest to the United States and the Russian Federation. This

includes the solution of environmental problems, strategic stability and joint work to resolve a number of regional crises. All this is highly important because this is linked with our countries' security matters, considering intra-regional crises, such as in the Middle East. What do these unresolved crises lead to? They cause an upsurge in terrorism, and this is extremely dangerous for everyone, including the United States, Russia, Europe and other regions. These unresolved matters are the cause, and terrorism is the direct consequence of what is happening in these regions.

Strategic stability is extremely important. We don't want to scare anyone with our new weapons systems. Yes, we are developing them, and we have achieved certain results and successes here. But all leading countries and leading military powers are doing this, and we are just one step ahead. We realise that other high-tech countries, such as the United States and other states, will achieve similar results sooner or later. Therefore I believe that it is better to reach agreement in advance on how we will live together in a changing world. We are ready for this.

I assume that President Biden is a very experienced politician who has been dealing with politics all his life, he is well-versed in many of the problems I have mentioned because he was time and again involved in assessing similar matters, in different capacities. This is why I hope that our meeting will be constructive.

Sergei Mikhailov: Thank you, Michael. Thank you, Mr President.

One of the most influential media alliances in the world is the European Alliance of News Agencies, EANA, which turns 65 this year. Our next speaker is serving his second term

as President of EANA, and we congratulate him on his re-election. This is Peter Kropsch, President and CEO of the German agency DPA, which he has headed since 2017. In 1996, Mr Kropsch joined the Austrian agency APA and later headed it. In 2015, he was recognised as the best media manager and became head of DPA in Germany. He is joining us for the fourth time, Mr President; he is very active in meetings, and very active in sports. He is your colleague in judo and has achieved considerable results: a first-degree black belt, so let us congratulate him on this too, Mr President.

Go ahead, Peter, your question please.

Peter Kropsch, President, CEO of Deutsche Presse-Agentur (Germany) (*retranslated from Russian*): Thank you, Sergei.

Mr President,

I am delighted to see you all tonight, and I am glad that you are all well. Unfortunately, I did not have a chance to see many of you all this time.

There is a lot of talk about Russia's relations with other countries. I would like to ask you about relations between Russia and Germany, and how they are faring. These relations are going through hard times. There have been several situations that worsened our relations, and there is also the disinformation campaign. There is the high-profile case of Alexei Navalny, his health getting worse, his stay in Germany, and his arrest after he returned from Germany. The journalistic community notes that independent journalists also suffer in Russia, and it is very difficult for them to work in Russia being independent – I would even say, impossible.

Furthermore, the attitude towards NGOs has soured, and some of them have been declared foreign agents. I would like to know if this will be discussed at subsequent bilateral meetings. All these factors could be negatively affecting relations between Russia and Germany. Do you think there will be an improvement in our bilateral relations? What do you expect from the new German government to be formed next autumn after the elections we are all waiting for? Thank you.

Vladimir Putin: It is not surprising that we have different views on developments in our countries and the world.

You mentioned that members of the opposition are being persecuted in one way or another by the state. Now look, I talked about this at a session in our forum. Let's not scatter to different countries.

Take a look at the sad events in the United States where people refused to accept the election results and stormed the Congress. As a result, 450 people were detained and are facing serious charges, including conspiracy to seize power, and could spend between 15 to 25 years in prison. Immediately after the attack, 70 people were detained, and 31 of them are still under arrest. Have you asked on what grounds? Why are you only interested in our non-systemic opposition? There are many similar opposition groups in the European countries as well. They are quickly dispersed through the effective efforts of the security services.

I do not think Russia is an exception in this sense. Our opposition, including non-systemic opposition, operates openly. The main requirement is that everyone who is involved, or say, engaged in politics, act within the framework of current legislation. This is

the only requirement for everyone.

We have 35 parties, 32 of which are preparing to take part in elections at various levels. Why only 32? Because some of them are being reformed. There are four parties in our parliament and three of them are opposition parties.

Views on our political system can differ. It develops in step with the general development of Russian society. Just leave us to determine how to organise this part of our life. That's the first thing.

Second, regarding foreign agents. Was the foreign agent law invented in Russia? No, it was invented in the United States many years ago, back in the 20th century. There is nothing new in our actions, and our foreign agent law is much more liberal – just take a look at the texts of these laws and you will see that it is much more liberal than the US law. Why don't you criticise the US law then?

Our law is aimed exclusively at restricting interference in our internal affairs, just as many other countries do, including in Europe, and the United States is doing the same. We will continue doing this. We will restrict and try to reduce interference in our internal affairs to a minimum. There is nothing unusual in this, and we do not see it as something to be ashamed of.

Now, journalism and journalists' work, you know, we have so many news channels and internet channels here in Russia, so many different opinions, including harsh criticism by the media, views, topics and judgement of the activities of the Russian authorities and my own actions as well. I think that this does not exist in your countries, there is no such strong criticism. Journalists keep

working and nothing happens to them. If you knew the wording and the tone of publications, I think you would see how freely people discuss things, including politics.

But what happens to our journalists in certain foreign countries raises questions. Russian journalists are pressured and persecuted; Russian channels get shut down and their operation gets restricted using administrative and financial tools. Essentially, our channels are being strangled to death. Financial institutions are prohibited from working with them. It is becoming difficult for Russian media outlets to hire local workers or to lease offices, and so on.

We really wish we could operate on equal terms. I would like to point out the following. For example, you are the head of a very powerful holding, as I understand it. Here in Russia, we basically have only one media outlet that targets a foreign audience. It is Russia Today, and it has been vilified and badmouthed so much; its journalists have been called all kinds of names. Please take note of this aspect of our cooperation. I really hope that we will cooperate as equals in this area.

As for cooperation with the future government of Germany, I would like to say that Germany is one of our priority partners in the economy; on a global scale, it is one of our largest trade and economic partners, our largest partner in Europe and one of the biggest in the world after China. We have a large number of friends in Germany and we have a strong interest in developing our trade and economic links. Thousands of German companies operate in Russia, with our mutual investment amounting to \$29 billion. These are significant resources, and our business partners invest not in financial operations but in the real economy and real

production. We very much appreciate this and try to provide our help and support, which we intend to continue.

I personally meet with representatives of German businesses on a regular basis. We listen carefully to their feedback concerning our cooperation, respond to them and plan our work accordingly.

In the political sphere, I really hope that, considering the special nature of our relations and our people's particular interest in continuing cooperation, Germany's future leadership will build its political relationships with Russia accordingly. We are ready to fully cooperate to overcome all the difficulties you mentioned.

Sergei Mikhailov: Thank you, Mr President.

I welcome Mr Gary Pruitt, President and CEO of The Associated Press, the largest international news and information agency. We recently congratulated The Associated Press on its 175th anniversary. Mr Pruitt has headed the AP since 2012, and the agency has won the prestigious Pulitzer Prize four times during those nine years. We congratulate The Associated Press on this achievement.

Gary, please go ahead with your question.

President and CEO of The Associated Press (US) Gary Pruitt (*retranslated from Russian*): Thank you very much, Mr President, for the opportunity to see you. Thank you, Sergei, and TASS for organising this event. We understand that this event can only be held remotely due to travel restrictions, but I really miss the white nights in St Petersburg.

Mr President, you will be meeting with President Biden in Geneva in mid-June. Today, relations between our countries are at a very

low level. What do our countries need to do to increase the level of trust in order to resume cooperation? What does Russia need to do for this? What does the United States need to do?

Thank you.

Vladimir Putin: The main thing that needs to be done is to treat each other with respect and take into account each other's interests in the broadest sense of the word. But this is not a general phrase, it is a meaningful matter. President Biden belongs, in my opinion, to the most experienced class of international politicians, as I mentioned earlier, because in different capacities and at various times over the course of many years, he has personally participated in the discussion and preparation of the decisions on all issues that matter today for the entire world and bilateral relations.

But it was not us who drove Russia-US relations into the state they're in today. We didn't do this. After all, we have never taken a single first step in matters that are detrimental to Russia-US relations. I will not list all of them now because I think that in the run-up to our meeting it is better not to go into the things that have brought destruction in Russia-US relations. But there are enough of these steps.

Did we impose sanctions on the United States? No, it was the United States that imposed sanctions on us and continues to impose them for every reason or for no reason at all, just because we exist. But they will have to live with this, because Russia was, is and will be here. Just as there is and will be the United States, which plays a very important role in the world. I would very much like it to play a stabilising role. But in this

context, in my opinion, Russia-US relations are also important. To reiterate, I would very much like our meeting to be held in a constructive manner.

Sergei Mikhailov: Thank you, Gary.

Thank you, Mr President.

I would like to welcome Chairman and CEO of one of the world's biggest news agencies, Agence France-Presse, Mr Fabrice Fries. He was elected the AFP Chairman and CEO in April 2018. Mr Fries started his career at the French Court of Audit, the secretariat of the European Commission President Jacques Delors, and held executive posts in media, IT and communications companies. It is the fifth time AFP has participated in a meeting with you, Mr President. It is also the second time we have welcomed Mr Fries. Mr Fries, your question, please.

Agence France-Presse Chairman and CEO Fabrice Fries

(retranslated from Russian): Thank you very much for this opportunity, Mr President.

I will be brief. Do you personally approve of Alexander Lukashenko's actions, specifically, that he ordered a plane to turn around and land in Minsk where an opposition activist was detained?

Vladimir Putin: I do not think I have the right to evaluate the actions of other leaders and heads of state. If I did this, my relationships with my colleagues would be ruined in an instant.

I think that there should be certain ethics when it comes to relationships at this level. This is the first thing.

Second, as President Lukashenko explained to me, he did not

order the plane to land. There was a bomb alert and, as far as I remember, the captain, who could have landed in Vilnius, since the plane was closer to Vilnius than to Minsk, decided to land in Minsk. Nobody forced him to land – at least this is President Lukashenko's account of the events. That is it. How am I supposed to evaluate the actions of the Belarusian President here? I think it would be inappropriate on my part. But if you are not familiar with what President Lukashenko told me about that incident, I do not think it is a secret and I am ready to share this information with you – which I have actually just done.

Sergei Mikhailov: Thank you, Mr President.

The next question goes to Spain, which is as beautiful as our guest. I am delighted to introduce another new colleague of ours who is new to this meeting, Gabriela Canas. President of Spain's leading news agency, EFE. A journalist and a writer, Ms Canas assumed leadership of EFE at the start of the pandemic in May 2020. She is the first woman in the history of that agency to head it. Her novel *Torres de Fuego* (Towers on Fire) was published in 2011. This is her first time at our meeting.

EFE is Spain's main news agency founded in 1939, at the end of the 1936–1939 Civil War. It is the leading Spanish-language media outlet in Spain, Latin America and North America.

By the way, the state is the main shareholder in EFE.

Madam Canas, please go ahead.

President of EFE Agency (Spain) Gabriela Canas (*retranslated from Russian*): Thank you very much, Mr President, for organising this event, which is so interesting for us.

I would like to ask you about the vaccine. Russia has supplied

vaccines to many countries, and a great number of vaccines have come to Latin America. Argentina has announced the production of this vaccine in its own production facilities. What do you think about the accusation from the West that vaccines can be used as a tool in a geopolitical struggle?

I would also like to ask you about Russia-Spain relations. Russian tourists enjoy coming to Spain and vice versa. I would like to ask you about opening the borders and improving our relations.

Thank you.

Vladimir Putin: As for the vaccine and its use as some kind of a geopolitical weapon, you said that the West is accusing us. I do not think the West is accusing Russia of that. First, this is complete nonsense and sheer delusion, I cannot express it otherwise.

Second, you know, there are different assessments of what is happening regarding our vaccines. I think this version is promoted by people who are far from politics in reality, even though our media and public opinion believe that accusations against Russia are created allegedly for political reasons.

I think that such accusations, false accusations, are created for the purposes of competition. The vaccine market is estimated at about \$100 billion a year, probably even more. And I will tell you why this is being done. This is being done because, among other things, the delays in registering the Russian vaccine in Europe are due to the commercial interests of those who are doing so, since they are thus gaining time for the competitors of Russian producers of the vaccine to take over the European market, since long-term contracts are being concluded for the supply

of vaccines. When the relevant European agency issues a permit to use the Russian vaccine in Europe, it will become clear that the market is already 100 percent full, and long-term contracts have already been concluded. That's it; the ship will have sailed for our companies.

However, this is not the point, because, as I have already said, we are selling our vaccines to 66 countries and this market is enough for us. But I have no doubt that this is being done for commercial reasons.

Of course, some Russophobes have taken up this topic. We are guided not by commercial gain but by humanitarian considerations above all. I have already said that this is recognised by international experts: our vaccine is effective, with 97.6 percent efficacy. I think it is the safest. And this gives us every reason to say that we have every right to offer it, and whether to take it or not is our partners' business. In Europe, as you know, some small and medium-sized countries have already made such a decision, and are using it and thank us for this opportunity.

We are the only country in the world that is ready to pass on technology. We are doing so and starting production at foreign facilities. We are ready to do this in European countries as well; we can see no obstacles here. In fact, this is just another myth about the use of the vaccine. But, you know, if there is any political aspect to it, it concerns only those who are not ready to admit that Russia is not a gas station. Russia is a country with a high level of science and education. Maybe some do not like this, I repeat, for Russophobic reasons. But I think that this will also pass, considering Russia's intent to build relations with all our partners based on mutual benefit.

Speaking about mutual travel, yes, unfortunately the pandemic is not yet over. There are restrictions in European countries, and there are certain restrictions here, too. The incidence rate has grown a little in Russia lately. There is nothing unusual here; we are in full control. Vaccination is underway.

Before this, we had not produced vaccines at such a large volume, and primarily only for Russia. I think that in July we will reach a production level of 20 million per month. We have enough for domestic consumption now, and we are ready to vaccinate the entire adult population, but we are doing this voluntarily. I think that in September 60 percent of the entire population of the Russian Federation will have immunity, counting those who unfortunately fell ill, including mildly, plus vaccinations. We will reach an immunisation level of 60 percent in September. After that, it will be possible to talk about wider access to our territory, and about Russian tourists who will also be able to travel more freely to other countries, including European ones. But, by the way, it would be nice if European regulators recognised that people vaccinated with our vaccines are no different from those vaccinated with Moderna, Pfizer or AstraZeneca.

Sergei Mikhailov: Thank you, Ms Canas.

Thank you, Mr President.

Mr President, this is the sixth time that Clive Marshall, Chief Executive at what has been Press Association Group until recently, has attended a meeting with you. They went through a rebranding, changing the name to PA Media Group, but it remains a major information agency in the UK. Over the years I have described almost everything I knew about Mr Marshall. The only thing I might

have failed to mention is that he is an inveterate motorcyclist and likes hiking through Scotland's mountains. Now I am making up for this oversight. In addition, since 2016 Clive has been President of the News Agencies World Council, which includes most of the world's news agencies as its members, and has proved to be very effective.

Please, Mr Marshall, your question.

Chief Executive at PA Media Group, the United Kingdom, Clive Marshall (*retranslated from Russian*): Thank you very much, Sergei.

Good day, Mr President,

The new chief of MI6 said recently that Russia was an example of a declining power. More than that, they constantly talk about the irresponsible behaviour of the Russian Federation. Do you think there is truth in this?

I also want to ask you about the climate change summit in Glasgow scheduled for later this year. Do you plan to attend?

Thank you.

Vladimir Putin: You said these assessments had been given by the new head of MI6, but he is new, in the sense that he is the newly appointed chief. I believe that as he gains experience he will revisit his assessments. This is the first thing.

Next, if Russia is a declining power, why should one worry? Calm down, stop bothering about it and do not make Russian-British relations worse. If you do not interfere, the trend that has gained momentum is likely to persist. The United Kingdom is one of few countries in Europe, and even the world, where economic relations

continue to be on the up side. Even last year – the pandemic year, when our trade with many countries slumped, trade with the UK grew by 54 percent. This is record high. So, if nobody interferes, everything will be good and mutual trade might help Russia turn from a withering country into a prosperous one. We strongly hope that Russian-British relations will contribute to this process.

As for the environmental agenda, we are giving it much attention. Hopefully, cooperation in this area will also be included on the agenda of our relations with the UK and we can offer something to each other in this respect, I mean cooperation in industrial production and science. The most important thing is that we have respect for each other, trust each other and hope that nothing occurs in the UK that would allow us to come up with assessments like those given by the new head of your country's intelligence service with respect to Russia.

Sergei Mikhailov: Thank you, Mr President.

Turkey. Yusuf Ozhan, deputy director-general and editor-in-chief of the Turkish Anadolu Agency is with us for the first time. His journalism career began at Turkey's The Daily Star, where he worked as a foreign policy editor and specialised in Turkish-American relations, US foreign policy, and the Syrian civil war. His articles have been published in a variety of world publications.

Mr Ozhan took office as Anadolu editor-in-chief and deputy director-general in April 2021, just recently. As a reminder, Anadolu is the largest news agency in Turkey, and was founded by Kemal Ataturk in 1920.

Please, Mr Ozhan, your question.

Yusuf Ozhan, Deputy Director-General, Editor-in-Chief

of Anadolu Agency (Turkey) (retranslated from Russian): Thank you very much, Mr President.

I thank you for the opportunity to ask a question, and I would like to thank TASS for organising this meeting.

Mr President, as you know, we have seen a significant escalation of violence against the civilian population in Palestine in the past month. We are also aware that Russia plays a unique role in the Middle East, considering the sizeable Islamic population in Russia and its close ties with Israel. I would like to ask you how Russia can contribute to the peaceful and expeditious resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Thank you.

Vladimir Putin: Russia has indeed been involved in these processes for a long time, for many decades. We have very good relations with Israel; many people from the former Soviet Union live there. It is a significant factor in Israeli-Russian relations. However, we also have traditionally friendly relations with the Arab world and especially with the Palestinian people. Here is what I would like to say in this regard, and what I would like to highlight.

We welcome the normalisation of relations between different states of the region, including between Arab countries and Israel. When ties between states are restored, it always benefits the peoples of these states. At the same time, and we are now clearly seeing this, it is hardly possible to achieve a stable peace and a stable situation in the region without a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Here, we need to restore multilateral formats of cooperation and multilateral formats for discussing the problems at hand.

There are issues that require special attention from the international community. Of course, overcoming inter-Palestinian differences is among the essential elements.

I think that this entire range (I am not talking now about Israel's settlement policy etc., but many questions accumulated in that area), the entire range of issues, of course, needs to be studied very carefully. And Palestinian settlement must not be pushed back to the periphery of international politics given the pressing nature of this issue and the importance of this problem not only for the Arab world but, I think, the entire world as well.

We very much hope that the issues of fundamental importance, namely, the creation of two states, including the Palestinian state, will be resolved on the basis of mutual interests of the peoples living in this region, and taking into account the future. It is very important to look into the future, it is very important not to be guided by fleeting political opportunistic considerations, but to create conditions for a lasting long-term settlement.

But, I repeat, coming up with recipes for resolving this long-standing problem is hardly possible in a short conversation that we are now having, especially a virtual one. Russia is willing to work actively with all the participants in this process and do its fair share in settling the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

Sergei Mikhailov: Thank you, Mr President.

It is now Vienna's turn, and I am happy to present our Austrian colleague, President and CEO of APA Dr Clemens Pig.

Mr Pig, as well as APA, is taking part in our meeting for the first time. Back in 2014, Mr Pig was appointed managing director of the APA Group, and in 2016 he became President and CEO. Mr

Pig is working on an interesting subject: political communications amid the media's digital transformation. He has won a lot of prizes and titles. In 2018, the Austrian Journalist magazine named him Media Manager of the Year, and this is the main trade magazine in Austria. In 2021, he was named Communicator of the Year by the Extra 1 magazine. This September APA marks its 75th anniversary, and of course, we congratulate them.

Please, Mr Pig, your question. It is very good that you have joined us.

**President and CEO of the Austrian Press Agency (Austria)
Clemens Pig** (*retranslated from Russian*): Thank you very much.

Let me also thank you for congratulating us on the agency's 75th anniversary.

Mr President, thank you very much for inviting me to this meeting. Thank you for the opportunity to exchange opinions and ask questions.

How do you assess relations between Russia and Austria?

On the one hand, it looks like Russia's relations with some Eastern and Central European countries like Germany, Slovakia, the Czech Republic, and Poland have deteriorated after reports of hacker attacks and other similar problems. In addition, recently, on May 27, an Austrian Airlines flight from Vienna to Moscow was cancelled, and this became a serious problem because there is no other direct way to get to Moscow from Austria. Mr President, do you think you could use your influence on Belarus to ensure freedom of movement and freedom of information?

Thank you very much.

Vladimir Putin: We have very good relations with Austria. We value them very much and consider Austria to be a reliable partner in Europe; we implement major important projects together, including Nord Stream 2, as I mentioned earlier. Yes, indeed, life is complex and diverse, and there are issues with some European countries that require special attention and efforts at various levels for these relations to improve.

As for what happened to the Austrian Airlines flight, I honestly don't know; this is the first time I've heard about it. I would guess that this is likely due to pandemic restrictions. I just don't know anything about it. If so, if it is connected with the pandemic, it will pass, the situation will improve in our countries, and flights will be resumed.

As to freedom of movement, I feel that you are bringing me back to the issue of the plane landing in Minsk. I have already answered this question in general. To be honest, I didn't want to talk about it, but you have forced me to do so. And I would like to strike the ball back to you: what do you think about President of Bolivia Evo Morales' plane being forced to land in Vienna, escorting him off the plane and searching the presidential aircraft? So, the same thing happened in Vienna; in Vienna they grounded the head of state's airplane. Sorry, I want to present myself as a hospitable host, but you are just pushing me into these questions. If you can ground the plane of the president of an independent country in Vienna, why can't they land a plane in Minsk, especially if there was a signal that a bomb had been planted on board?

We just need to measure similar situations with the same yardstick, and not only in this case, but in general. We need to get rid of double standards; you can't always say that one person can

do this, and another cannot. A well-known proverb from the ancient world is well known to us: what is permissible for one person may not be permissible for another. May not be permissible for a bull. What's that?

Let's work out common approaches and come up with common assessments. Using tear gas, rubber bullets and water cannons to disperse demonstrations in Europe, and knocking out eyes with rubber bullets, is okay, but when there is an arrest in Belarus, maybe, done in a harsh manner, it is unacceptable. Why? Because European countries are democratic and they can do this in Europe. Let's then come up with acceptable ways of handling street protests and define what exactly is unacceptable. Let's develop common criteria and approaches, at least develop common definitions that will be understood by everyone the same way. Then it will be easier for us to give assessments to the events that are taking place in various regions around the world, including Europe.

I will not ask you anything about the President of Bolivia's aircraft being forced down, but if you choose to comment on it, I think everyone would be interested to hear. Your colleague, who asked me a question like that in relation to my assessment of President Lukashenko's actions, would be interested as well.

Sergei Mikhailov: Dr Pig, do you have a comment?

Clemens Pig: Thank you very much for your answer, Mr President.

Frankly, in my question, I did not intend to touch on the issue of this plane landing nor push you to comment on it. I wanted to ask if your influence could be used.

Vladimir Putin: Used for what?

Clemens Pig: Just take advantage of your reputation to send a signal to everyone and to emphasise that freedom of movement, freedom of information are a great benefit that needs to be protected.

Vladimir Putin: Yes, of course, I fully agree with this. You know, we have a fairly open stance on almost all issues that are sensitive to us all. We are not hiding anything behind our back. We are open to an absolutely candid exchange of information, and we have nothing, strictly speaking, to hide. And we believe that this is the right approach. I have already covered the difficulties that our journalists encounter when working in some European countries or in the United States. They find it difficult to do their job, do you understand? Let's approach this kind of work with the same yardstick. This also applies to freedom of movement, of course, I agree with you. But I assure you that you are overestimating my influence. I have expressed my position, and we will promote it. I will only be too happy if we work on this together.

Thank you very much.

Sergei Mikhailov: Thank you, Dr Pig.

Mr President, thank you.

Ms Rosalind Mathieson, Executive Editor at Bloomberg, is taking part in our meeting for the third time. She is a reputed journalist and political expert who came to Bloomberg in 2013 and was appointed executive editor in 2018. I mentioned during our previous meetings that she is keen on Thai boxing, and I hope that Ms Mathieson's successes in this sport are as impressive as in her job.

Rosalind, please, your question.

Bloomberg News (US) Executive Editor for International Government Rosalind Mathieson (*retranslated from Russian*):

Thank you.

Good evening and good morning to my colleagues in Asia.

Thank you for organising this event. Thank you, President Putin, for finding time to answer our questions. I believe that all our readers would be interested in learning your opinion. I would just like to know if you are willing to talk about this and if you are willing to talk publicly. I have a question about the United States.

Russia wants to de-dollarise the economy, to de-dollarise its stability fund because of Western sanctions. Would you say that the dollar is a weapon used against Russia? And in this connection, if you are dependent on the dollar, you will be able to get rid of it completely. What will you do to get rid of dependence on the dollar?

In addition, we have a new administration in the US, and a change of administration is important. As my colleague has already said, there will be a new government in Germany, too. You have known Angela Merkel for a long time, for many years; you have met many times, talked many times, and worked together. Yes, you had a lot of disagreements, but nevertheless you always kept talking. And when she is gone, will you miss her?

Vladimir Putin: Definitely.

Rosalind Mathieson: What exactly will you miss in the person who will come after her?

Vladimir Putin: I do not know who will come after her. It is true

that Angela and I have a businesslike relationship, and I appreciate her a lot. She is a very experienced politician and a straight-forward but reliable person. If we have agreed on something, then I see – which is frankly surprising to me, but it is true – that she is consistent and knows how to defend her position. We feel it too; we feel it in our joint affairs. Some things we may like, some things we may not, but she is a reliable, stable partner.

I would like stability and reliability to remain in the activities of the German government to come, too, but at the same time, we will try to reduce the number of disagreements you have mentioned as much as possible.

Let me say this once again: Germany is an important partner for Russia, both in Europe and in the world, and we very much hope that the situation will consistently improve.

As for the dollar, I have already said that we are not trying to get rid of the dollar. If you heard something I said about the dollar and took it that we wanted to get rid of it as a reserve currency or as a universal means of payment, this is not true. I meant something else. What I was saying is that the United States is using the dollar, its national currency, to impose a variety of sanctions.

Just to give you a sense of what it is all about. It's not that we do not like the dollar because the United States is bad and it imposes sanctions on us, which forces us to get rid of it; of course not. The question has a practical dimension. Let's assume we are unable to make payments in dollars with our partners in defence cooperation. You see? We have a problem. What should we do?

We switch to paying in national currencies or currencies of other countries. Our US partners force us to do this. We are not moving away from the dollar purposefully, we are compelled to do so. When we do this, a system of financial relations with our partners is formed outside dollar transactions.

But why are the US political authorities doing this? They are cutting off the branch they are sitting on and will crash to the ground in the end. Everyone in the world can see this, you know? Everyone can see it, hence the question about the reliability of dollar transactions. This is leading to the decline of gold and foreign exchange reserves in dollars, and not just in our country, but almost all over the world, including US allies.

The volume of settlements in dollars is on the decline.

I am afraid I might get my numbers wrong, but look at the statistics provided by international institutions. Look at them. These are not our statistics, they are statistics compiled by international financial institutions. You will see that the volume of dollar transactions is decreasing every year, and gold and foreign exchange reserves in dollars are also going down, and not just in our country. Well, even more so with us. There are increasingly more sanctions, and we hear more threats from Congress and other places.

All of that is being done as part of some internal political processes in the United States. The people who are doing this seem to operate on the premise that the economic power of the United States, its military and political power is so strong that it does not scare them – “we will get through this,” is what they are thinking.

You know what the problem is? I will tell you as a citizen of the former Soviet Union. What is the problem with an empire?

They think they are so mighty they can afford minor faults and mistakes. It is okay, we will buy these people and scare other people; we will reach an agreement with still others, give beads to those and threaten others with our warships – problem solved. But problems are piling up, and there comes a time when it is no longer possible to cope with them all. And the United States is firmly and steadily following in the footsteps of the Soviet Union.

I will say it again: this is not our initiative. Some of our companies, for example, in the oil sector, are reluctant to leave the dollar, mindful of the volatility of national currencies. But if the United States continues to force them into this, eventually, they will find a way to de-dollarise their settlements and convert to national currencies or currencies of third countries. They will just find a solution, end of story. And this will be a severe blow to the dollar as the global reserve currency.

Multiple reserve currencies and units of account are a good thing for the global economy if we want to achieve a more stable situation in international finance and the global economy in general.

Sergei Mikhailov: Thank you, Mr President.

At this year's St Petersburg International Economic Forum, Qatar became the guest of honor. I welcome the Qatar News Agency, and with special care, I introduce Director-General of the Qatar News Agency Mr Youssef Ibrahim Al-Malki.

Welcome! Mr Al-Malki is at our meeting for the first time. He took over as CEO of the Qatar News Agency in 2017 with an impressive track record and extensive experience in the media. Please, your question, Mr Al-Malki.

Director-General of the Qatar News Agency (Qatar) Youssef Ibrahim Al-Malki (*retranslated from Russian*):

Thank you, Mr President, for giving me the opportunity to participate in this meeting. Thank you for the excellent organisation of the forum.

I would like to ask you about relations between Russia and Qatar, which in recent years have reached a new level, and mutual trade as well as investments amount to billions of dollars. What do you think of the level of the current Russian-Qatari relations and their prospects?

Thank you.

Vladimir Putin: Thanks to our joint efforts, including the personal attention of the Emir of Qatar to the development of Russian-Qatari relations, our cooperation has indeed reached a new level. It has become trustworthy and is already acquiring an all-encompassing character. This applies to the economy, to our interaction in the political sphere and to culture and humanitarian issues.

As regards economic interaction, it is sufficient to recall our cooperation through sovereign wealth funds, where a platform worth \$2 billion has been created, if I'm not mistaken, and this investment work is making good progress. As far as I know, our Qatari friends are satisfied with the progress in this area.

As for the humanitarian areas, then, of course, Qatar's preparation for the FIFA World Cup is coming to the fore. We talked with the Emir; I understand the difficulties that Qatar is facing, I mean both regional problems and the pandemic, and there are other issues that require special consideration. For our part, we will do

our best to support our friends in Qatar and help them prepare for this important global event. We understand how difficult it is. We know the problems that Qatar is facing in this regard; they are both economic and of any other nature. There are many issues that require extra attention.

We will work closely with you and look for other areas of activities and the development of our relations. I am confident that we will find them and will work effectively and move forward.

Sergei Mikhailov: Thank you, Mr President.

In conclusion, it is time I introduced one of those who is taking part in our meeting for the first time, although he represents Italy's leading news agency, which is a regular participant in all our forum meetings: Stefano De Alessandri, CEO and Managing Director at ANSA.

Mr Alessandri was appointed CEO and Managing Director at ANSA in September 2018. He is fond of music and is very good on the bass guitar.

ANSA is Italy's leading news agency, as you know well. It was founded on January 13, 1945 by three members of the main political forces in the Italian Resistance.

On June 2, Italy marked Republic Day, 75 years since this national holiday was declared. Please, accept our congratulations.

Mr Alessandri, your question, please.

CEO and Managing Director at ANSA (Italy), Stefano De Alessandri (*retranslated from Russian*): Thank you, Sergei, for introducing me and thank you for the invitation.

Mr President, thank you for this unique opportunity and for sparing

the time to answer our questions.

Here is my question. Despite the pandemic, Russia and Italy continue to maintain sustained economic relations, and Italy is once again Russia's fifth major trade partner. Currently, 600 Italian companies are operating in Russia, one of which is a partner of this economic forum. However, if we compare Italy with Germany or France, our relations are still waiting to be taken full advantage of, particularly given the potential of the Russian market and Italian producers. What can we do to bring more Italian companies to Russia to do business here? Thank you.

Vladimir Putin: This should be a question for us: what can and should we do to see more Italian companies operate in our country? According to my information, the number of Italian companies operating in Russia is not 600 – apparently, it is about 500. Last year, there was a slight decline in trade with Italy, much like with the overwhelming majority of European countries.

Here is what I would like to note. After all, we have long-standing relations with our Italian friends – just think back to the automobile plant in Togliatti. There are many interesting areas of cooperation related to high-tech industries and energy. Eni has been operating in our country for a long time now and has a strong market presence. It is a reliable partner. We cooperate in transport, the environment and logistics. You know, there are very many areas of interaction, but one has always occupied a prominent place in Russian-Italian relations – cultural ties and tourism.

Areas of interaction abound, and here is what I would like to note: that we have a good public background for expanding relations with Italy. Relations between our people are very good. We have

always had great interest in Italian culture, and it has always been widely represented in Russia. It constitutes a very good basis for developing relations in politics and the economy. I very much hope that things will turn out that way because we have a solid foundation.

I have a feeling that we have a national consensus regarding the development of Russian-Italian relations. But I would very much like the status of our relations not only to be preserved, but to move forward. There is every chance for this, and we will work to make it happen and will do our best to provide our Italian partners and friends with a good, effective and economically lucrative work in Russia.

Sergei Mikhailov: Thank you very much, Mr President. I think everyone will join me in extending thanks to you, once again, for keeping this tradition, despite your challenging schedule.

The 7th meeting is coming to an end. In turn, I hope for an in-person meeting in St Petersburg next year, since many people miss the white nights, as Gary Pruitt said.

Thank you, Mr President.

Vladimir Putin: Sergei, I also want to thank you and our colleagues who joined us here today and wish some people good night and others good morning. I hope those who did not have enough sleep will be able to catch up on it today. I wish you all the best, and especially good health, which is so important today. In order to maintain good health, you need to be injected with a Russian vaccine like Sputnik V, which is a dependable and safe prophylaxis against this disease.

I wish you all the best. And I am sure this is not our last meeting.

I hope your interest in Russia will continue to grow and will not wane, and that you will, in a conscientious and objective manner, inform your viewers and readers – those who consume your information product which you have created at such a high-quality international level – about what is happening in our country.

Thank you very much. All the best.