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# Valdai Discussion Club meeting

142-180 minutes

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This year's theme is Global Shake-up in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: The Individual, Values and the State. The four-day programme includes over 15 in-person and online sessions.

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**President of Russia Vladimir Putin:** Ladies and gentlemen,

To begin with, I would like to thank you for coming to Russia and taking part in the Valdai Club events.

As always, during these meetings you raise pressing issues and hold comprehensive discussions of these issues that, without exaggeration, matter for people around the world. Once again, the key theme of the forum was put in a straightforward, I would even say, point-blank manner: Global Shake-up in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: The Individual, Values and the State.

Indeed, we are living in an era of great change. If I may, by tradition, I will offer my views with regard to the agenda that you have come up with.

In general, this phrase, "to live in an era of great change," may seem trite since we use it so often. Also, this era of change began quite a long time ago, and changes have become part of everyday

life. Hence, the question: are they worth focusing on? I agree with those who made the agenda for these meetings; of course they are.

In recent decades, many people have cited a Chinese proverb. The Chinese people are wise, and they have many thinkers and valuable thoughts that we can still use today. One of them, as you may know, says, “God forbid living in a time of change.” But we are already living in it, whether we like it or not, and these changes are becoming deeper and more fundamental. But let us consider another Chinese wisdom: the word “crisis” consists of two hieroglyphs – there are probably representatives of the People's Republic of China in the audience, and they will correct me if I have it wrong – but, two hieroglyphs, “danger” and “opportunity.” And as we say here in Russia, “fight difficulties with your mind, and fight dangers with your experience.”

Of course, we must be aware of the danger and be ready to counter it, and not just one threat but many diverse threats that can arise in this era of change. However, it is no less important to recall a second component of the crisis – opportunities that must not be missed, all the more so since the crisis we are facing is conceptual and even civilisation-related. This is basically a crisis of approaches and principles that determine the very existence of humans on Earth, but we will have to seriously revise them in any event. The question is where to move, what to give up, what to revise or adjust. In saying this, I am convinced that it is necessary to fight for real values, upholding them in every way.

Humanity entered into a new era about three decades ago when the main conditions were created for ending military-political and ideological confrontation. I am sure you have talked a lot

about this in this discussion club. Our Foreign Minister also talked about it, but nevertheless I would like to repeat several things.

A search for a new balance, sustainable relations in the social, political, economic, cultural and military areas and support for the world system was launched at that time. We were looking for this support but must say that we did not find it, at least so far. Meanwhile, those who felt like the winners after the end of the Cold War (we have also spoken about this many times) and thought they climbed Mount Olympus soon discovered that the ground was falling away underneath even there, and this time it was their turn, and nobody could “stop this fleeting moment” no matter how fair it seemed.

In general, it must have seemed that we adjusted to this continuous inconstancy, unpredictability and permanent state of transition, but this did not happen either.

I would like to add that the transformation that we are seeing and are part of is of a different calibre than the changes that repeatedly occurred in human history, at least those we know about. This is not simply a shift in the balance of forces or scientific and technological breakthroughs, though both are also taking place. Today, we are facing systemic changes in all directions – from the increasingly complicated geophysical condition of our planet to a more paradoxical interpretation of what a human is and what the reasons for his existence are.

Let us look around. And I will say this again: I will allow myself to express a few thoughts that I sign on to.

Firstly, climate change and environmental degradation are so obvious that even the most careless people can no longer dismiss

them. One can continue to engage in scientific debates about the mechanisms behind the ongoing processes, but it is impossible to deny that these processes are getting worse, and something needs to be done. Natural disasters such as droughts, floods, hurricanes, and tsunamis have almost become the new normal, and we are getting used to them. Suffice it to recall the devastating, tragic floods in Europe last summer, the fires in Siberia – there are a lot of examples. Not only in Siberia – our neighbours in Turkey have also had wildfires, and the United States, and other places on the American continent. It sometimes seems that any geopolitical, scientific and technical, or ideological rivalry becomes pointless in this context, if the winners will have not enough air to breathe or nothing to drink.

The coronavirus pandemic has become another reminder of how fragile our community is, how vulnerable it is, and our most important task is to ensure humanity a safe existence and resilience. To increase our chance of survival in the face of cataclysms, we absolutely need to rethink how we go about our lives, how we run our households, how cities develop or how they should develop; we need to reconsider economic development priorities of entire states. I repeat, safety is one of our main imperatives, in any case it has become obvious now, and anyone who tries to deny this will have to later explain why they were wrong and why they were unprepared for the crises and shocks whole nations are facing.

Second. The socioeconomic problems facing humankind have worsened to the point where, in the past, they would trigger worldwide shocks, such as world wars or bloody social

cataclysms. Everyone is saying that the current model of capitalism which underlies the social structure in the overwhelming majority of countries, has run its course and no longer offers a solution to a host of increasingly tangled differences.

Everywhere, even in the richest countries and regions, the uneven distribution of material wealth has exacerbated inequality, primarily, inequality of opportunities both within individual societies and at the international level. I mentioned this formidable challenge in my remarks at the Davos Forum earlier this year. No doubt, these problems threaten us with major and deep social divisions.

Furthermore, a number of countries and even entire regions are regularly hit by food crises. We will probably discuss this later, but there is every reason to believe that this crisis will become worse in the near future and may reach extreme forms. There are also shortages of water and electricity (we will probably cover this today as well), not to mention poverty, high unemployment rates or lack of adequate healthcare.

Lagging countries are fully aware of that and are losing faith in the prospects of ever catching up with the leaders.

Disappointment spurs aggression and pushes people to join the ranks of extremists. People in these countries have a growing sense of unfulfilled and failed expectations and the lack of any opportunities not only for themselves, but for their children, as well. This is what makes them look for better lives and results in uncontrolled migration, which, in turn, creates fertile ground for social discontent in more prosperous countries. I do not need to explain anything to you, since you can see everything with your

own eyes and are, probably, versed on these matters even better than I.

As I noted earlier, prosperous leading powers have other pressing social problems, challenges and risks in ample supply, and many among them are no longer interested in fighting for influence since, as they say, they already have enough on their plates. The fact that society and young people in many countries have overreacted in a harsh and even aggressive manner to measures to combat the coronavirus showed – and I want to emphasise this, I hope someone has already mentioned this before me at other venues – so, I think that this reaction showed that the pandemic was just a pretext: the causes for social irritation and frustration run much deeper.

I have another important point to make. The pandemic, which, in theory, was supposed to rally the people in the fight against this massive common threat, has instead become a divisive rather than a unifying factor. There are many reasons for that, but one of the main ones is that they started looking for solutions to problems among the usual approaches – a variety of them, but still the old ones, but they just do not work. Or, to be more precise, they do work, but often and oddly enough, they worsen the existing state of affairs.

By the way, Russia has repeatedly called for, and I will repeat this, stopping these inappropriate ambitions and for working together. We will probably talk about this later but it is clear what I have in mind. We are talking about the need to counter the coronavirus infection together. But nothing changes; everything remains the same despite the humanitarian considerations. I am not referring to Russia now, let's leave the sanctions against Russia

for now; I mean the sanctions that remain in place against those states that badly need international assistance. Where are the humanitarian fundamentals of Western political thought? It appears there is nothing there, just idle talk. Do you understand? This is what seems to be on the surface.

Furthermore, the technological revolution, impressive achievements in artificial intelligence, electronics, communications, genetics, bioengineering, and medicine open up enormous opportunities, but at the same time, in practical terms, they raise philosophical, moral and spiritual questions that were until recently the exclusive domain of science fiction writers. What will happen if machines surpass humans in the ability to think? Where is the limit of interference in the human body beyond which a person ceases being himself and turns into some other entity? What are the general ethical limits in the world where the potential of science and machines are becoming almost boundless? What will this mean for each of us, for our descendants, our nearest descendants – our children and grandchildren?

These changes are gaining momentum, and they certainly cannot be stopped because they are objective as a rule. All of us will have to deal with the consequences regardless of our political systems, economic condition or prevailing ideology.

Verbally, all states talk about their commitment to the ideals of cooperation and a willingness to work together for resolving common problems but, unfortunately, these are just words. In reality, the opposite is happening, and the pandemic has served to fuel the negative trends that emerged long ago and are now only getting worse. The approach based on the proverb, “your own shirt is closer to the body,” has finally become common and is now

no longer even concealed. Moreover, this is often even a matter of boasting and brandishing. Egotistic interests prevail over the notion of the common good.

Of course, the problem is not just the ill will of certain states and notorious elites. It is more complicated than that, in my opinion. In general, life is seldom divided into black and white. Every government, every leader is primarily responsible to his own compatriots, obviously. The main goal is to ensure their security, peace and prosperity. So, international, transnational issues will never be as important for a national leadership as domestic stability. In general, this is normal and correct.

We need to face the fact the global governance institutions are not always effective and their capabilities are not always up to the challenge posed by the dynamics of global processes. In this sense, the pandemic could help – it clearly showed which institutions have what it takes and which need fine-tuning.

The re-alignment of the balance of power presupposes a redistribution of shares in favour of rising and developing countries that until now felt left out. To put it bluntly, the Western domination of international affairs, which began several centuries ago and, for a short period, was almost absolute in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, is giving way to a much more diverse system.

This transformation is not a mechanical process and, in its own way, one might even say, is unparalleled. Arguably, political history has no examples of a stable world order being established without a big war and its outcomes as the basis, as was the case after World War II. So, we have a chance to create an extremely favourable precedent. The attempt to create it after the end



of the Cold War on the basis of Western domination failed, as we see. The current state of international affairs is a product of that very failure, and we must learn from this.

Some may wonder, what have we arrived at? We have arrived somewhere paradoxical. Just an example: for two decades, the most powerful nation in the world has been conducting military campaigns in two countries that it cannot be compared to by any standard. But in the end, it had to wind down operations without achieving a single goal that it had set for itself going in 20 years ago, and to withdraw from these countries causing considerable damage to others and itself. In fact, the situation has worsened dramatically.

But that is not the point. Previously, a war lost by one side meant victory for the other side, which took responsibility for what was happening. For example, the defeat of the United States in the Vietnam War, for example, did not make Vietnam a “black hole.” On the contrary, a successfully developing state arose there, which, admittedly, relied on the support of a strong ally. Things are different now: no matter who takes the upper hand, the war does not stop, but just changes form. As a rule, the hypothetical winner is reluctant or unable to ensure peaceful post-war recovery, and only worsens the chaos and the vacuum posing a danger to the world.

Colleagues,

What do you think are the starting points of this complex realignment process? Let me try to summarise the talking points.

First, the coronavirus pandemic has clearly shown that the international order is structured around nation states.

By the way, recent developments have shown that global digital platforms – with all their might, which we could see from the internal political processes in the United States – have failed to usurp political or state functions. These attempts proved ephemeral. The US authorities, as I said, have immediately put the owners of these platforms in their place, which is exactly what is being done in Europe, if you just look at the size of the fines imposed on them and the demonopolisation measures being taken. You are aware of that.

In recent decades, many have tossed around fancy concepts claiming that the role of the state was outdated and outgoing. Globalisation supposedly made national borders an anachronism, and sovereignty an obstacle to prosperity. You know, I said it before and I will say it again. This is also what was said by those who attempted to open up other countries' borders for the benefit of their own competitive advantages. This is what actually happened. And as soon as it transpired that someone somewhere is achieving great results, they immediately returned to closing borders in general and, first of all, their own customs borders and what have you, and started building walls. Well, were we supposed to not notice, or what? Everyone sees everything and everyone understands everything perfectly well. Of course, they do.

There is no point in disputing it anymore. It is obvious. But events, when we spoke about the need to open up borders, events, as I said, went in the opposite direction. Only sovereign states can effectively respond to the challenges of the times and the demands of the citizens. Accordingly, any effective international order should take into account the interests and capabilities of the state

and proceed on that basis, and not try to prove that they should not exist. Furthermore, it is impossible to impose anything on anyone, be it the principles underlying the sociopolitical structure or values that someone, for their own reasons, has called universal. After all, it is clear that when a real crisis strikes, there is only one universal value left and that is human life, which each state decides for itself how best to protect based on its abilities, culture and traditions.

In this regard, I will again note how severe and dangerous the coronavirus pandemic has become. As we know, more than 4.9 million have died of it. These terrifying figures are comparable and even exceed the military losses of the main participants in World War I.

The second point I would like to draw your attention to is the scale of change that forces us to act extremely cautiously, if only for reasons of self-preservation. The state and society must not respond radically to qualitative shifts in technology, dramatic environmental changes or the destruction of traditional systems. It is easier to destroy than to create, as we all know. We in Russia know this very well, regrettably, from our own experience, which we have had several times.

Just over a century ago, Russia objectively faced serious problems, including because of the ongoing World War I, but its problems were not bigger and possibly even smaller or not as acute as the problems the other countries faced, and Russia could have dealt with its problems gradually and in a civilised manner. But revolutionary shocks led to the collapse and disintegration of a great power. The second time this happened 30 years ago, when a potentially very powerful nation

failed to enter the path of urgently needed, flexible but thoroughly substantiated reforms at the right time, and as a result it fell victim to all kinds of dogmatists, both reactionary ones and the so-called progressives – all of them did their bit, all sides did.

These examples from our history allow us to say that revolutions are not a way to settle a crisis but a way to aggravate it. No revolution was worth the damage it did to the human potential.

Third. The importance of a solid support in the sphere of morals, ethics and values is increasing dramatically in the modern fragile world. In point of fact, values are a product, a unique product of cultural and historical development of any nation. The mutual interlacing of nations definitely enriches them, openness expands their horizons and allows them to take a fresh look at their own traditions. But the process must be organic, and it can never be rapid. Any alien elements will be rejected anyway, possibly bluntly. Any attempts to force one's values on others with an uncertain and unpredictable outcome can only further complicate a dramatic situation and usually produce the opposite reaction and an opposite from the intended result.

We look in amazement at the processes underway in the countries which have been traditionally looked at as the standard-bearers of progress. Of course, the social and cultural shocks that are taking place in the United States and Western Europe are none of our business; we are keeping out of this. Some people in the West believe that an aggressive elimination of entire pages from their own history, “reverse discrimination” against the majority in the interests of a minority, and the demand to give up the traditional notions of mother, father, family and even gender, they believe that all of these are the mileposts on the path towards

social renewal.

Listen, I would like to point out once again that they have a right to do this, we are keeping out of this. But we would like to ask them to keep out of our business as well. We have a different viewpoint, at least the overwhelming majority of Russian society – it would be more correct to put it this way – has a different opinion on this matter. We believe that we must rely on our own spiritual values, our historical tradition and the culture of our multiethnic nation.

The advocates of so-called ‘social progress’ believe they are introducing humanity to some kind of a new and better consciousness. Godspeed, hoist the flags as we say, go right ahead. The only thing that I want to say now is that their prescriptions are not new at all. It may come as a surprise to some people, but Russia has been there already. After the 1917 revolution, the Bolsheviks, relying on the dogmas of Marx and Engels, also said that they would change existing ways and customs and not just political and economic ones, but the very notion of human morality and the foundations of a healthy society. The destruction of age-old values, religion and relations between people, up to and including the total rejection of family (we had that, too), encouragement to inform on loved ones – all this was proclaimed progress and, by the way, was widely supported around the world back then and was quite fashionable, same as today. By the way, the Bolsheviks were absolutely intolerant of opinions other than theirs.

This, I believe, should call to mind some of what we are witnessing now. Looking at what is happening in a number of Western countries, we are amazed to see the domestic practices, which

we, fortunately, have left, I hope, in the distant past. The fight for equality and against discrimination has turned into aggressive dogmatism bordering on absurdity, when the works of the great authors of the past – such as Shakespeare – are no longer taught at schools or universities, because their ideas are believed to be backward. The classics are declared backward and ignorant of the importance of gender or race. In Hollywood memos are distributed about proper storytelling and how many characters of what colour or gender should be in a movie. This is even worse than the agitprop department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.

Countering acts of racism is a necessary and noble cause, but the new ‘cancel culture’ has turned it into ‘reverse discrimination’ that is, reverse racism. The obsessive emphasis on race is further dividing people, when the real fighters for civil rights dreamed precisely about erasing differences and refusing to divide people by skin colour. I specifically asked my colleagues to find the following quote from Martin Luther King: “I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the colour of their skin but by their character.” This is the true value. However, things are turning out differently there. By the way, the absolute majority of Russian people do not think that the colour of a person's skin or their gender is an important matter. Each of us is a human being. This is what matters.

In a number of Western countries, the debate over men’s and women’s rights has turned into a perfect phantasmagoria. Look, beware of going where the Bolsheviks once planned to go – not only communalising chickens, but also communalising women.

One more step and you will be there.

Zealots of these new approaches even go so far as to want to abolish these concepts altogether. Anyone who dares mention that men and women actually exist, which is a biological fact, risk being ostracised. “Parent number one” and “parent number two,” “birthing parent” instead of “mother,” and “human milk” replacing “breastmilk” because it might upset the people who are unsure about their own gender. I repeat, this is nothing new; in the 1920s, the so-called Soviet Kulturtraegers also invented some newspeak believing they were creating a new consciousness and changing values that way. And, as I have already said, they made such a mess it still makes one shudder at times.

Not to mention some truly monstrous things when children are taught from an early age that a boy can easily become a girl and vice versa. That is, the teachers actually impose on them a choice we all supposedly have. They do so while shutting the parents out of the process and forcing the child to make decisions that can upend their entire life. They do not even bother to consult with child psychologists – is a child at this age even capable of making a decision of this kind? Calling a spade a spade, this verges on a crime against humanity, and it is being done in the name and under the banner of progress.

Well, if someone likes this, let them do it. I have already mentioned that, in shaping our approaches, we will be guided by a healthy conservatism. That was a few years ago, when passions on the international arena were not yet running as high as they are now, although, of course, we can say that clouds were gathering even then. Now, when the world is going through a structural disruption, the importance of reasonable conservatism

as the foundation for a political course has skyrocketed – precisely because of the multiplying risks and dangers, and the fragility of the reality around us.

This conservative approach is not about an ignorant traditionalism, a fear of change or a restraining game, much less about withdrawing into our own shell. It is primarily about reliance on a time-tested tradition, the preservation and growth of the population, a realistic assessment of oneself and others, a precise alignment of priorities, a correlation of necessity and possibility, a prudent formulation of goals, and a fundamental rejection of extremism as a method. And frankly, in the impending period of global reconstruction, which may take quite long, with its final design being uncertain, moderate conservatism is the most reasonable line of conduct, as far as I see it. It will inevitably change at some point, but so far, do no harm – the guiding principle in medicine – seems to be the most rational one. *Noli nocere*, as they say.

Again, for us in Russia, these are not some speculative postulates, but lessons from our difficult and sometimes tragic history.

The cost of ill-conceived social experiments is sometimes beyond estimation. Such actions can destroy not only the material, but also the spiritual foundations of human existence, leaving behind moral wreckage where nothing can be built to replace it for a long time.

Finally, there is one more point I want to make. We understand all too well that resolving many urgent problems the world has been facing would be impossible without close international cooperation. However, we need to be realistic: most of the pretty slogans about coming up with global solutions to global problems that we have



been hearing since the late 20<sup>th</sup> century will never become reality. In order to achieve a global solution, states and people have to transfer their sovereign rights to supra-national structures to an extent that few, if any, would accept. This is primarily attributable to the fact that you have to answer for the outcomes of such policies not to some global public, but to your citizens and voters.

However, this does not mean that exercising some restraint for the sake of bringing about solutions to global challenges is impossible. After all, a global challenge is a challenge for all of us together, and to each of us in particular. If everyone saw a way to benefit from cooperation in overcoming these challenges, this would definitely leave us better equipped to work together.

One of the ways to promote these efforts could be, for example, to draw up, at the UN level, a list of challenges and threats that specific countries face, with details of how they could affect other countries. This effort could involve experts from various countries and academic fields, including you, my colleagues. We believe that developing a roadmap of this kind could inspire many countries to see global issues in a new light and understand how cooperation could be beneficial for them.

I have already mentioned the challenges international institutions are facing. Unfortunately, this is an obvious fact: it is now a question of reforming or closing some of them. However, the United Nations as the central international institution retains its enduring value, at least for now. I believe that in our turbulent world it is the UN that brings a touch of reasonable conservatism into international relations, something that is so important

for normalising the situation.

Many criticise the UN for failing to adapt to a rapidly changing world. In part, this is true, but it is not the UN, but primarily its members who are to blame for this. In addition, this international body promotes not only international norms, but also the rule-making spirit, which is based on the principles of equality and maximum consideration for everyone's opinions. Our mission is to preserve this heritage while reforming the organisation. However, in doing so we need to make sure that we do not throw the baby out with the bathwater, as the saying goes.

This is not the first time I am using a high rostrum to make this call for collective action in order to face up to the problems that continue to pile up and become more acute. It is thanks to you, friends and colleagues, that the Valdai Club is emerging or has already established itself as a high-profile forum. It is for this reason that I am turning to this platform to reaffirm our readiness to work together on addressing the most urgent problems that the world is facing today.

Friends,

The changes mentioned here prior to me, as well as by yours truly, are relevant to all countries and peoples. Russia, of course, is not an exception. Just like everyone else, we are searching for answers to the most urgent challenges of our time.

Of course, no one has any ready-made recipes. However, I would venture to say that our country has an advantage. Let me explain what this advantage is. It is to do with our historical experience. You may have noticed that I have referred to it several times in the course of my remarks. Unfortunately, we had to bring back

many sad memories, but at least our society has developed what they now refer to as herd immunity to extremism that paves the way to upheavals and socioeconomic cataclysms. People really value stability and being able to live normal lives and to prosper while confident that the irresponsible aspirations of yet another group of revolutionaries will not upend their plans and aspirations. Many have vivid memories of what happened 30 years ago and all the pain it took to climb out of the ditch where our country and our society found themselves after the USSR fell apart.

The conservative views we hold are an optimistic conservatism, which is what matters the most. We believe stable, positive development to be possible. It all depends primarily on our own efforts. Of course, we are ready to work with our partners on common noble causes.

I would like to thank all participants once more, for your attention. As the tradition goes, I will gladly answer or at least try to answer your questions.

Thank you for your patience.

**Moderator of the 18<sup>th</sup> annual meeting of the *Valdai*  
International Discussion Club closing session Fyodor**

**Lukyanov:** Thank you very much, Mr President, for your detailed remarks covering not only and not so much the current political problems, but fundamental issues. Following up on what you said, I cannot fail to ask you about the historical experience, traditions, conservatism and healthy conservatism that you have mentioned on several occasions in your remarks.

Does unhealthy conservatism frighten you? Where does

the boundary separating the healthy from the unhealthy lie?

At what point does a tradition turn from something that binds society together into a burden?

**Vladimir Putin:** Anything can become a burden, if you are not careful. When I speak about healthy conservatism, Nikolai Berdyayev always springs to mind, and I have already mentioned him several times. He was a remarkable Russian philosopher, and as you all know he was expelled from the Soviet Union in 1922. He was as forward-thinking as a man can be, but also sided with conservatism. He used to say, and you will excuse me if I do not quote his exact words: “Conservatism is not something preventing upward, forward movement, but something preventing you from sliding back into chaos.” If we treat conservatism this way, it provides an effective foundation for further progress.

**Fyodor Lukyanov:** Speaking of traditions, you also tend to mention traditional values quite frequently, and this is a hot topic in our society. In particular, you have proposed relying on traditional values as a foundation for bringing the world together. However, traditions are destined to be unique for every nation. How can everyone come together around the same traditional values, if they have their own traditions?

**Vladimir Putin:** Do you know what the trick is? The trick is that of course there is a lot of diversity and every nation around the world is different. Still, something unites all people. After all, we are all people, and we all want to live. Life is of absolute value.

In my opinion, the same applies to family as a value, because what can be more important than procreation? Do we want to be or not to be? If we do not want to be, fine. You see, adoption is

also a good and important thing, but to adopt a child someone has to give birth to that child. This is the second universal value that cannot be contested.

I do not think that I need to list them all. You are all smart people here, and everyone understands this, including you. Yes, we do need to work together based on these shared, universal values.

**Fyodor Lukyanov:** You made a powerful statement when you said that the current model of capitalism has run its course and no longer offers a solution to international issues. One hears this a lot these days, but you are referring to our country's unfortunate experience in the 20<sup>th</sup> century when we were actually rejecting capitalism, but this did not work out for us either. Does this mean that this is where we want to return? Where are we headed with this dysfunctional capitalist model?

**Vladimir Putin:** I also said that there were no ready-made recipes. It is true that what we are currently witnessing, for example on the energy markets, as we will probably discuss later, demonstrates that this kind of capitalism does not work. All they do is talk about the "invisible hand" of the market, only to get \$1,500 or \$2,000 per 1,000 cubic metres. Is this market-based approach to regulation any good?

When everything goes well and there is stability, economic actors around the world demand more freedom for themselves and a smaller role for the state in the economy. However, when challenges arise, especially at a global scale, they want the government to interfere.

I remember 2008 and 2009 and the global financial crisis very well. I was Prime Minister at the time, and spoke to many Russian

business leaders, who were viewed as successful up to that point, and everything is fine with them now, by the way. They came to me and were ready to give up their companies that were worth tens of millions, if not hundreds of millions of dollars, for a ruble. Why? They had to assume responsibility for their workforce and for the future of these companies. It was easier for them just to keep what they earned and shift their responsibility to others.

At the time, we agreed that the state would lend them its shoulder: they kept their businesses, while the state paid off their margin loans and assumed responsibility, to a certain extent. Together with the businesses, we found a solution. As a result, we saved Russia's largest private companies, and enabled the state to make a profit afterwards. We actually made money because when the companies were back on their feet, they paid back what they owed the state. The state made quite a profit.

In this regard, we do need to work together and explore each other's experience. Other countries also had positive experiences in making the state and the market work in tune with each other. The People's Republic of China is a case in point. While the Communist Party retains its leading role there, the country has a viable market and its institutions are quite effective. This is an obvious fact.

For this reason, there are no ready-made recipes. Wild capitalism does not work either, as I have already said, and I am ready to repeat this, as I have just demonstrated using these examples.

In a way, this is like art. You need to understand when to place a bigger emphasis on something: when to add more salt, and when to use more sugar. You see? While being guided

by the general principles as articulated by international financial institutions such as the IMF, the OECD, etc., we need to understand where we are. To act, we need to understand how our capabilities compare with the plans we have. By the way, here in Russia we have been quite effective over the past years, including in overcoming the consequences of the epidemic. Other countries also performed quite well, as we can see.

**Fyodor Lukyanov:** Do you mean that we are moving not only towards an optimistic conservatism but also towards an optimistic capitalism?

**Vladimir Putin:** You see, we need to build a social welfare state. Truth be said, Europe, especially the Nordic countries, have been advocating a social welfare state for a long time. This is essential for us, considering the income gap between various social groups, even if this problem exists in all the leading economies of the world. Just look at the United States and Europe, although the income gap is smaller in Europe compared to the United States.

As I have said on multiple occasions, only a small group of people who were already rich to begin with benefited from the preferences that became available over the past years. Their wealth increased exponentially compared to the middle class and the poor. This problem clearly exists there, even if it is not as pressing in Europe, but it still exists.

**Fyodor Lukyanov:** Thank you.

I will ask the last question so that we do not keep the audience waiting. You mentioned the UN's invaluable role. We can understand this, since the UN is a fundamental institution, and so

on. However, many now criticise the UN, and you have mentioned this in your remarks.

Just a few days ago, President of Turkey Erdogan, whom you know well, said that the Security Council must be reformed because a group of WWII victor countries monopolised power, which is not the way it should be. Do you agree with this statement?

**Vladimir Putin:** I do not. He has recently visited Russia, as you know, and I had a meeting with him. I raised this question myself, saying that I saw his main points. I have to admit that I did not read the entire book, but I did look at some of the ideas. I agree with some of them. This is a good analysis. We can understand why a Turkish leader raises this issue. He probably believes that Turkey could become a permanent Security Council member. It is not up to Russia to decide, though. Matters of this kind must be decided by consensus. There are also India and South Africa. You see, this is a question of fairness, of striking a balance.

Different solutions are possible here. I would rather not talk about this now, getting ahead of things and preempting Russia's position on this discussion. But what is important (I just said so in my opening remarks, and I also said this to President Erdogan), if we dismantle the permanent members' veto, the United Nations will die on the same day, will degrade into the League of Nations, and that will be it. It will be just a platform for discussion, Valdai Club number two. But there is only one Valdai Club, and it is here. (*Laughter.*)

**Fyodor Lukyanov:** We are ready to step in.

**Vladimir Putin:** Valdai Club number two will be in New York.



**Fyodor Lukyanov:** We will go and replace it with pleasure.

**Vladimir Putin:** But this is the point – we would rather not change anything. That is, some change might be necessary, but we would rather not destroy the basis – this is the whole point of the UN today, that there are five permanent members, and they have the power of veto. Other states are represented on the Security Council, but they are non-permanent members.

We need to think how we could make this organisation more balanced, because indeed – this is true, and in this sense, President Erdogan is right – it emerged after World War II, when there was a certain balance of power. Now it is changing; it has already changed.

We are well aware that China has overtaken the United States in purchasing power parity. What do you think that is? These are global changes.

And India? Another nation of almost 1.5 billion people, a rapidly developing economy, and so on. And why is Africa not represented? Where is Latin America? We definitely need to consider this – a growing giant there such as Brazil. These are all topics for discussion. Only, we must not rush. We must not make any mistakes on the path of reform.

**Fyodor Lukyanov:** The leaders of the Valdai Club will consider holding a meeting in New York. Only, they might not issue visas to all of us, I am afraid, but no problem, we will work on that.

**Vladimir Putin:** By the way, why not? The Valdai Club might as well meet in New York.

**Fyodor Lukyanov:** After you and Biden agree on the visas.

*(Laughter.)*

**Vladimir Putin:** I do not think the heads of state will need to step in. Just ask Sergei Lavrov, he will speak with his colleagues there.

Why not? I am serious. Why not hold a Valdai Club session on a neutral site, outside the Russian Federation? Why not? I think it might be interesting.

We have important people here in this room, good analysts who are well known in their countries. More people can be invited in the host country to join these discussions. What is wrong with that? This is good.

**Fyodor Lukyanov:** Well, we have just set a goal.

**Vladimir Putin:** It is not a goal; it is a possibility.

**Fyodor Lukyanov:** A possibility. Like a crisis. It is also a possibility.

**Vladimir Putin:** Yes.

**Fyodor Lukyanov:** Please, Piotr Dutkiewicz.

**Piotr Dutkiewicz:** Mr President, I would like to return to the words you have just said, that Russia should rely on Russian values. By the way, we were talking about this at a Valdai Club meeting the day before yesterday.

I would like to ask you which Russian thinkers, scholars, anthropologists and writers do you regard as your closest soul-mates, helping you to define for yourself the values that will later become those of all Russians?

**Vladimir Putin:** You know, I would prefer not to say that this is Ivan Ilyin alone. I read Ilyin, I read him to this day. I have his book

lying on my shelf, and I pick it up and read it from time to time. I have mentioned Berdiayev, there are other Russian thinkers. All of them are people who were thinking about Russia and its future. I am fascinated by the train of their thought, but, of course, I make allowances for the time when they were working, writing and formulating their ideas. The well-known idea about the passionarity of nations is a very interesting idea. It could be challenged – arguments around it continue to this day. But if there are debates over the ideas they formulated, these are obviously not idle ideas to say the least.

Let me remind you about nations' passionarity. According to the author of this idea, peoples, nations, ethnic groups are like a living organism: they are born, reach the peak of their development, and then quietly grow old. Many countries, including those on the American continent, say today's Western Europe is ageing. This is the term they use. It is hard to say whether this is right or not. But, to my mind, the idea that a nation should have an inner driving mechanism for development, a will for development and self-assertion has a leg to stand on.

We are observing that certain countries are on the rise even though they have a lot of unsolved problems. They resemble erupting volcanoes, like the one on the Spanish island, which is disgorging its lava. But there are also extinguished volcanoes, where fires are long dead and one can only hear birds singing.

You, please.

**Piotr Dutkiewicz:** Mr President, you have referred to Lev Gumilyov, who presented me with a samizdat edition of his first book in St Petersburg in 1979. I will pass this samizdat on to you.

**Vladimir Putin:** Thank you very much.

**Fyodor Lukyanov:** Samizdat, a tradition.

Dear friends, please introduce yourselves, when you take the floor.

**Alexei Miller:** Good afternoon, Mr President.

I am Alexei Miller, a historian from the European University at St Petersburg.

**Vladimir Putin:** There are two Alexei Millers. Russia is a rich country. *(Laughter)*

**Alexei Miller:** Two years ago, you were asked during a meeting at the Valdai Club about the European Parliament's resolution, which made the Soviet Union (and hence Russia) and Nazi Germany equally responsible for the outbreak of WWII. Since then, you have commented on this issue several times in your statements and in the article published in the summer of 2020.

In particular, during the ceremony to unveil a monument to the victims of the siege of Leningrad at the Yad Vashem memorial complex in January 2020, you said you would like to propose a meeting of the Big Five leaders to discuss this issue as well, so that we could overcome the current confrontation and end the war on memory. I believe the situation has not improved since then. Or maybe you know something the general public is not aware of, maybe there have been some improvements? It would be great if you could tell us about this.

My second question follows on from the first one. When there is such confrontation in the countries that are involved in the war on memory, some forces may be tempted to join ranks and to restrict, to a greater or lesser degree, the freedom

of discussion, including among historians. Such discussions always involve a difference of opinions and some risqué or even wrong views. Do you envision the threat of such restrictions in our country?

**Vladimir Putin:** No, I do not believe there is such a threat in our country. We sometimes see the danger of not being responsible for what some people say, indeed, but then this is the reverse side of the freedom you have mentioned.

As for my initiative to hold a meeting of the heads of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council, it has been supported by everyone, in principle, and such a meeting could have been organised. The problems that arose are not connected with Russia but with some disputes within this group of five countries. As I have said, they are not connected with Russia. This is the first point.

And the second is that the pandemic began soon after that, and the situation has become really complicated.

The idea of the meeting received a highly positive response, and I hope it will be held eventually. This definitely will be beneficial. We are discussing this with our American partners, with our Chinese friends, with France – incidentally, the French President supported it immediately, as well as with Britain. They have their own ideas and proposals on additional subjects that can be discussed at such a meeting. I hope the necessary conditions will develop and we will hold this meeting.

As for historical memory, the memory of WWII, you know, of course, that I am ready to talk about this with arguments in hand. We have many complaints about the country's leadership

between 1917 and 1990, which is obvious. However, placing the Nazis and the Communists before WWII on the same level and dividing responsibility between them equally is absolutely unacceptable. It is a lie.

I am saying this not only because I am Russian and, currently, the head of the Russian state, which is the legal successor of the Soviet Union. I am saying this now, in part or at least in part, as a researcher. I have read the documents, which I retrieved from the archives. We are publishing them now in increasingly large amounts.

Trust me, when I read them, the picture in my mind started changing. You can think about Stalin differently, blaming him for the prison camps, persecution campaigns and the like. But I have seen his instructions on documents. The Soviet government was genuinely doing its best to prevent WWII, even if for different reasons. Some people would say that the country was not ready for the war, which is why they tried to prevent it. But they did try to prevent it. They fought for the preservation of Czechoslovakia, providing arguments to protect its sovereignty. I have read, I have really read – this is not a secret, and we are declassifying these archives now – about France's reaction to those events, including regarding the meeting of the leading politicians with Hitler in Munich in 1938.

When you read this, when you see it, you understand that attempts can indeed be made to distort these facts. But you can at least read these documents. I can understand the current Polish leadership's attitude to the 1939 events, but when you tell them: Just take a look at what happened slightly before that, when Poland joined Germany in the division of Czechoslovakia. You lit

the fuse, you pulled the cork, the genie came out, and you cannot put it back into the bottle.”

I also read the archival documents which we received after the Red Army entered Europe: we have German and also Polish and French documents, we have them. They directly discussed the division of Czechoslovakia and the time for the invasion. And then to blame it on the Soviet Union? This simply does not correspond to reality and facts.

Simply put, who attacked who? Did the Soviet Union attack Germany? No, it did not. Yes, there were secret agreements between Germany and the Soviet Union. Incidentally, I would like to note that the Soviet troops entered Brest when the German troops had been already deployed there; the Germans simply moved back a little and the Red Army moved in. Do you see?

There is no point adding a political dimension here. Let us act calmly at the expert level, read the documents and sort things out. Nobody is accusing the Polish leadership. But we will not allow anyone to accuse Russia or the Soviet Union of what they did not do.

And lastly, I would like to say that there are some perfectly obvious things. Firstly, it was Germany that attacked the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941, and not vice versa, and secondly, let us not forget who stormed Berlin. Was it the Americans, the British or the French? No, it was the Red Army. Have you forgotten this? It is easy to recall, for it is an obvious fact.

As many as 1.1 million of our people died in the Battle of Stalingrad alone. How many casualties can Britain claim? 400,000. And the United States, less than 500,000. A total of 75

percent, and probably even 80 percent of the German military potential was destroyed by the Soviet army. Are you a little rusty on this?

No, you are not rusty at all. These events are being used to deal with the current internal political matters in an opportunistic manner. This is wrong, because nothing good will come of manipulating history. At the very least, this does not promote mutual understanding, which we need so badly now.

**Fyodor Lukyanov:** Orietta Moscatelli, go ahead please.

**Orietta Moscatelli:** Orietta Moscatelli, Italy. Thank you for the meeting.

As you mentioned, different things have been said about Homo sovieticus over the 30 years since the Soviet Union's disintegration. Was there really a person like that? Here is my question: Do you think it was true? Do you believe Russia has fully overcome Soviet experience as a society? What are the main features of the Soviet times that you have kept in your life?

**Vladimir Putin:** I, as well as many people of my generation certainly remember this idea and this formula – a new community, Soviet people, the Soviet person. Of course, all of us remember this. In reality, this definition is not at all bad. This is my first point.

The second point. Look, the whole world and the United States describe the US as a “melting pot,” in which people of different nations, ethnicities and religions are melting together. What is bad about this? They are all proud – the Irish, people of European and East European origin, you name it, as well as Latin Americans and Africans by their initial descent – many of them are proud to be US citizens and this is wonderful. This is what “the melting



pot” is about.

Russia is also “a melting pot.” Since the formation of a united Russian state – the first steps were made, probably in the 8<sup>th</sup>-9<sup>th</sup> centuries, and also after Conversion of Rus’, the Russian nation and a centralised Russian state began to take shape with a common market, common language, the power of a prince and common spiritual values. The Russian state began to be established and later expanded. This was also a “melting pot.”

Nothing particularly new was created in the Soviet Union except one very important circumstance: this new community, the Soviet person, the Soviet people acquired an ideological tinge. Of course, there was nothing good about this because this narrows the horizons of the possible. This is the first point.

The second point. Positive features of the Soviet times reflected on the Soviet people. What were they? Patriotism inherent in our peoples, supremacy of the spiritual dimension over material things, all these values I mentioned, including family ones. But negative things in the life and destiny of the Soviet Union also stuck to the Soviet people. Thus, they were deprived of property as such. Private property was embodied in a household plot, but this is quite a different category. Hence, their attitude to labour, the one-size-fits-all approach and so on.

The Soviet Union had many problems. They triggered the events that led to the collapse of the USSR. However, it is wrong, crude and inappropriate to paint everything black. Yes, I know we have people that paint everything black. Hence, they deserve to be put into something that smells bad.

There are both pluses and minuses, as for “the melting pot,” I think

it was good to have it because it enriches the people, enriches the nation.

You know, what is typical of Russia, something you can find in all historical documents: when expanding its territory Russia never made life difficult for the people who became part of the united Russian state. This applied to religion, traditions and history. Look at the decrees of Catherine the Great who issued her instruction in clear terms: treat with respect. This was the attitude towards those who preached Islam, for instance. This has always been the case. This is a tradition. In terms of preserving these traditions, the new community of the Soviet people had nothing bad about it except the ideologisation of this melting pot and the results of its functioning.

I think I have described everything linked with the Soviet period of our history. Now I have mentioned this again and I do not think it is worth discussing this topic again.

As for me, like the overwhelming majority of people of my generation, I faced the problems of that period, but I also remember its positive features that should not be forgotten. Being from a family of workers, yours truly graduated from Leningrad State University. This is something, right? At that time, education played the role of a real social lift. On the whole, the egalitarian approach was very widespread and we encountered its negative impact, such as income levelling and a related attitude to work, but a lot of people still used the preferences of social lifts I mentioned. Maybe, it was simply the legacy of past generations or even cultivated in the Soviet Union to some extent. This is also important.

I have now recalled my family. My mum and dad were simple people. They did not talk in slogans but I remember very well that discussing different problems at home, in the family, they always, I would like to emphasise this, treated their country with respect, speaking about it in their own manner, in simple terms, in the folk style. This was not demonstrative patriotism. It was inside our family.

I think I have the right to say that the overwhelming majority of the Russian people and the other peoples of the USSR cultivated these positive features. It is no accident that over 70 percent of the population voted for preserving the Soviet Union on the eve of its collapse. Many people in the union republics that gained independence regretted what had happened. But now life is different and we believe it is going its own way and generally recognise current realities.

As for the Soviet person, the new formation, as they said then, I believe I have already said enough on this subject.

**Fyodor Lukyanov:** This year's Valdai Club meeting is special in part because we have a Nobel Peace Prize laureate here with us for the first time in our history.

I would like to give the floor to Dmitry Muratov.

**Dmitry Muratov:** Thank you. Good afternoon.

Mr President, Valdai Club guests, Fyodor, I want to let everyone know that the prize money has been distributed.

Thanks go to the *Circle of Kindness* Foundation. Furthermore, we hope that our modest contribution will help everyone realise that the *Circle of Kindness* Foundation helps young people under 18,

but then after they are 18, they are left without guidance. It is like saying, "Thank you, we saved you, and now goodbye." We look forward to the *Circle of Kindness* Foundation (they appear ready to do this) expanding its mandate. There is the children's hospice *Lighthouse*, the First Moscow Charity Hospice Foundation *Vera*, the *Podari Zhizn* Foundation, the Anna Politkovskaya Award, and the Foundation for Medical Aid for Media Members. That is all.

Of course, I also think that, to some extent, probably, this is a prize for our country as well, although I consider myself an impostor. I will do my best to make sure it benefits our people.

Now, if I may, a brief remark and a question.

Mr President, I have very carefully studied the answer you gave during Moscow Energy Week regarding foreign agents, where you said that we were not the first to adopt this law, that the United States did so back in the 1930s.

But, Mr President, since we do not adopt every law that is adopted in the United States, my question about foreign agents remains. After all, I believe this concerns not only dozens and dozens of journalists and human rights activists who are listed in the register, but also hundreds of thousands and even millions of readers. Therefore, I believe it is a serious matter.

Most importantly, you have just mentioned Leningrad University and I think your subject of study will help us understand each other well. This law does not provide for any court recourse. You are designated a foreign agent and there is no argument of the parties, no provision of evidence, no verdict. It is a stain. Let me remind you of our favourite childhood book. This is the same kind of brand Milady in *The Three Musketeers* had. But before Milady was

beheaded, the executioner of Lille read the verdict to her at dawn whereas in our case there is no verdict whatsoever.

Furthermore, it is impossible to get away from this law. There is not even a warning that you become a foreign agent starting, say, tomorrow. For many, this status undoubtedly means they are an enemy of the Motherland. I remember from my days of army service that under the guard service regulations, the sentry first fires a warning shot in the air. Excuse me, but only security guards at prison camps shoot to kill without a warning shot.

I believe we need to sort this out, since the criteria are woefully vague. Take, for example, receiving organisational and methodological assistance. What does this mean? If I am asking a member of the Valdai Club for a comment, and they come from another country, does that make me a foreign agent? They make their announcements on Fridays. I want to remind you that tomorrow is Friday.

I would like to ask you to respond to the way this issue is presented. Perhaps, you, Mr President and, for example, the State Duma Chairman, could hold an extraordinary meeting with the editors from various media in order discuss the issues at hand.

Thank you very much.

**Vladimir Putin:** First, I would like to congratulate you on the Nobel Prize. I would like to draw your attention to one fact: Nikolai Berdyayev, whom I have mentioned, was expelled by the Bolsheviki on the well-known Philosophy Steamer in 1922. Nominated for a Nobel Prize more than once, he never received this award.

**Dmitry Muratov:** That was about literature.

**Vladimir Putin:** No difference, but yes, I agree. The first Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev and Barrack Obama also received Nobel peace prizes. So, you are in good company.

Congratulations! But we really know. You have just spoken about a hospice. I would give you a prize for that because you are doing this good work. It is truly noble work, the *Circle of Kindness*, and the like.

Your concern about foreign agents; I will not deviate to the right or left. Look, you said that here when these decisions are made... firstly, American laws. Do we have to copy everything from the Americans? No, we do not need to copy everything. Yet many liberals in Russia still think we should copy almost everything. But I agree with you: not everything.

You said this is not decided in court. This is not done in the United States either. They summon people to the Department of Justice. Ask *Russia Today* about what they are doing. Do you know how tough they are? Up to and including criminal liability. We do not have this. This is not about the position of some public figure, some public organisation, or a media outlet. Their position does not matter. This law does not ban anyone from having one's own opinion on an issue. It is about receiving financial aid from abroad during domestic political activities. That is the point. The law does not even keep them from continuing these political activities.

The money that comes from abroad, from over there, should simply be identified as such. Russian society should know what position someone comes from or what they think about internal political processes or something else, but it should also realise that they receive money from abroad. This is the right of Russian society. In fact, this is the whole point of this law. There are no

restrictions in it at all.

So, when you said there is no verdict, that is right. There is no verdict. There was a verdict for Milady – her head was cut off. Here nobody is cutting off anything. So, just continue working like you did before.

But you are right about one thing. I will not even argue with you, because this is true. Of course, we probably need to go over these vague criteria again and again. I can promise you that we will take another look at them. I know it happens occasionally. Even my personal acquaintances who engage in charitable activities were telling me that cases were being made against them portraying them as foreign agents. I am aware of the fact that our colleagues discuss this at the Human Rights Council. I keep issuing instructions on that score to the Presidential Administration and the State Duma deputies so that they go over it again and again, improve this tool, and in no way abuse it.

So, thank you for bringing this up. We will look into it.

Thank you very much.

**Fyodor Lukyanov:** Just a quick follow-up on that. Mr President, are you not afraid of excessive acts?

**Vladimir Putin:** I am not afraid of anything, why is everyone trying to scare me?

**Fyodor Lukyanov:** Okay, then we are afraid, and you tell us about excessive acts, since you know your former security service colleagues well.

**Vladimir Putin:** Not everyone, this is a mass organisation, how can I know everyone?

**Fyodor Lukyanov:** Well, not everyone, but many.

**Vladimir Putin:** When I was [FSB]director, I sometimes even summoned operatives with specific cases and read them myself. And now I do not know everyone there. I left it a long time ago.

**Fyodor Lukyanov:** I am talking about specific cases. Their psychological makeup is that overdoing things is a safer approach than missing things. Will there be no blanket approach to identifying foreign agents?

**Vladimir Putin:** What?

**Fyodor Lukyanov:** Will they not use a blanket approach to identifying foreign agents?

**Vladimir Putin:** Is there anything there that looks like a blanket approach? How many do we have? Every second, or what? I believe there is no such thing as widespread branding of people as foreign agents.

I think the danger is vastly exaggerated. I believe I have formulated the underlying reasons for adopting this law quite clearly.

**Fyodor Lukyanov:** Good. In addition to a Nobel prize winner, we also have a foreign agent in the audience.

Margarita Simonyan, please share your experience.

**Margarita Simonyan:** Yes, thank you, good afternoon,

We have been foreign agents for many years now. Moreover, I was summoned for interrogation in the United States several years ago, because we did not register as foreign agents earlier, despite the fact that our lawyers, including former rather high-ranking



officials from the US Department of Justice (Dima, this information is mostly for you, congratulations on winning the prize), told us – and we have these legal opinions in writing – that this law does not apply to us, because it clearly said in English “except the media.”

But when our audience started growing, and we got in their way, they told us: “We do not care what the Department of Justice is telling you, you either register or go to prison for five years.”

And I have a summons for questioning because I myself failed to register earlier, before they registered me. I do not travel there anymore, just in case, because I might be jailed. This is my first point.

**Vladimir Putin:** There is no fence against ill fortune, Margarita.

*(Addressing Dmitry Muratov)* You see, in the United States, some people face a five-year sentence.

**Margarita Simonyan:** Yes, five. And we know people who are doing time under this law, five years.

Secondly, unlike in Russia, this law definitely has consequences and implies sanctions. For example, one’s accreditation to Congress gets instantly revoked, and if you are not accredited with Congress in the United States, you can no longer go anywhere – not a single event, nowhere (I can see people that know this nodding their heads). You actually work on semi-underground terms there. This is how we have been working for how long now? Six years. But we will continue to do this work.

Mr President, as a mother of three young children, I would like to thank you very much for your healthy conservatism. I am terrified by the thought of my 7-year-old son being asked to choose a gender, or my 2-year-old daughter being told from all

mobile devices, and even at school, as is now happening in many Western countries, that her future is that of a “person with human milk who gave birth to a baby.” And the thought that these tentacles of liberal fascism, so-called liberal, will reach us and our children. I really hope that this will never be allowed in our country, despite its great openness.

You mentioned bloviating, which the so-called humanistic foundation of the European political thought turned out to be, but this so-called freedom of speech turned out to be bloviating too. Freedom of speech turned out to be a postcard made for the people we were in the 1990s, so that we could look at it and think: “Wow, it does exist. Great, we will do that too, we will not have foreign agents, and everything will be fine with us.” This freedom of speech has just strangled our YouTube channel, which was very popular, and everything was cool there, really. And you know very well that this is not a privately-run outfit, but a public project which we created not for ourselves, but for the Motherland, and we have run out of options to get this project back. And we no longer believe in anything other than reciprocal measures.

According to their own analyses, Deutsche Welle was behind us in Germany in certain rankings. It broadcasts in Russia without any problems, but we cannot broadcast there. We have already built studios, hired people, produced shows and earned an audience, but now, with the strike of a pen and without any reason, and, Mr Muratov, without a court ruling, everything fell apart in a single moment.

This is no a question actually, I am asking, pleading for protection, Mr President. I do not see any other way to protect us other than through retaliatory measures.

My question is the following. Moscow has recently hosted a Congress of Compatriots, and you sent greetings to the participants. I took the floor at this forum and asked those of my colleagues in the audience, people who are proactive in defending the Russian world and the Russian language around the world, sometimes putting their lives and freedom at risk, who wanted but could not obtain Russian citizenship, to raise their hands. Half the audience had their hands up.

We have discussed this many times. You may remember that several years ago we spoke about granting citizenship to Donbass residents. The procedure was streamlined for them. Can this be done for all Russians? Why is Russia shying away from doing this? The Jews did not hesitate about it, and neither did the Germans nor the Greeks, but we are hesitating. This is my question. Thank you very much.

**Vladimir Putin:** First, regarding the retaliatory measures, I think we need to be cautious when someone makes mistakes like this, and I do believe that you have suffered from them, when a channel is closed or you are unable to work. I know about the fact that your accounts were blocked and that you could not open, etc. There is a plethora of instruments to this effect.

**Margarita Simonyan:** More like carpet-bombing.

**Vladimir Putin:** Yes, to make it impossible for you to work there. I know.

On the one hand, of course, they are infringing on freedom of speech and so forth, which is a bad thing. But since they are doing this, you and I have to think about how to spread the word about the fact that they are cancelling you, and then more people

will become interested in what you do.

**Margarita Simonyan:** The only problem is that there is no place for people to watch us. People are interested, but there is nowhere to watch us.

**Vladimir Putin:** I do understand, but we need to give this some thought, and explore technical and technological opportunities.

As for retaliatory measures, let me reiterate that what matters the most is that they do not turn out to be counterproductive. I do not oppose them, but I do not want them to be counterproductive.

As for your question on Russian citizenship, you are right. My position is that we need to improve this tool. There are questions here related to socioeconomic matters: clinics, kindergartens, jobs, housing, etc. Still, the citizenship laws must become increasingly liberal. This is obvious. By the way, this is what the labour market compels us to do. We are thinking about this.

**Margarita Simonyan:** Thank you, Mr President.

**Vladimir Putin:** Thank you.

**Fyodor Lukyanov:** Colleagues, in addition to those in this room, there are other participants who are watching us online, as they could not join us here due to the well-known circumstances.

I would like to ask – Robert Legvold, our longtime friend, member of the Valdai Research Council, professor at Columbia University.

**Robert Legvold:** Thank you very much, Fyodor. For me, it is a disappointment that I have not been able to be with all of the participants in the Valdai conference, but I am particularly pleased to have this opportunity to be part of this session.

The topic of Valdai this year has been very transcendent and fundamental questions, and I admire Valdai for doing that.

President Putin has certainly risen to the challenge of that agenda and has addressed it in an extremely engaging and revealing fashion.

My question, however, is narrower but more specific, and I apologise for descending to this level, but it is a question that is important in my country. I think it is important in your country. Although neither your government nor the Biden administration believes that a reset of the US-Russian relationship is possible at this juncture, how do you evaluate or assess the evolution of US-Russia relations since your meeting with President Biden in June? In what areas has there been progress, if any? And what, in your view, are the obstacles to further progress? Thank you very much.

**Vladimir Putin:** On the whole, I have spoken about this; I have answered questions like this. I can only repeat myself now. On second thought, not just repeat – there is actually something to be said about what is happening.

The meeting in Geneva was generally productive, and it seemed to us – when I say ‘us,’ I mean my colleagues and myself – that overall, the administration was interested in building ties, reviving them at least in some important areas.

What did we agree on? We agreed to begin consultations on strategic stability, and the consultations began and are held regularly, on cybersecurity issues as well. At the expert level, cooperation has started. So we can safely say that although the scope of matters we agreed on was limited, we are on the right

track nonetheless.

These are the most important matters for today. And in general, the administration (on the American side) and Russia (on the other side) are fulfilling the plans and are moving along this path.

And when this happens, as we know, it is always a sign, one of a systemic nature. And now, look, our trade has already grown by 23 percent and in many areas. This, among other things, is an indirect effect of our meeting in Geneva.

So, overall, we are on the right track, although, unfortunately – I would not like to talk about sad things now, but we also see certain backslides, remember that phrase we used years ago – one step forward, two steps back – this is also happening sometimes. Still, we are progressing in line with our general agreements.

**Fyodor Lukyanov:** Thank you. Since we are in a new world now, for balance, I will give the floor to our kind friend Zhou Bo from Tsinghua University in Beijing.

Go ahead, please.

**Zhou Bo:** Mr President, it is really my great honour to ask you this question. First of all, let me thank you for this opportunity. I will ask you something about Afghanistan. Afghanistan lies in the heart of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. So, if Afghanistan has a problem, then the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation has a problem. Now the United States has withdrawn from Afghanistan. So how can the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, which is led by China and Russia, united with other countries, help Afghanistan to achieve political stability and economic development? Thank you.

**Vladimir Putin:** The situation in Afghanistan is one of the most urgent issues today. You know, we have just had a meeting in the appropriate format, in part, with representatives of the Taliban. The People's Republic of China (PRC) is also active in Afghanistan. This is a very serious issue for all of us because for both China and Russia it is extremely important to have a calm, developing Afghanistan that is not a source of terrorism, or any form of radicalism, next to our national borders, if not on our borders.

We are now seeing what is happening inside Afghanistan. Unfortunately, different groups, including ISIS are still there. There are already victims among the Taliban movement, which, as a whole, is still trying to get rid of these radical elements and we know of such examples. This is very important for us, for both Russia and China.

In order to normalise the situation properly and at the right pace, it is necessary, of course, to help Afghanistan restore its economy because drugs are another huge problem. It is a known fact that 90 percent of opiates come to the world market from Afghanistan. And if there is no money, what will they do? From what sources and how will they fund their social programmes?

Therefore, for all the importance of our participation in these processes – both China and Russia and other SCO countries – the main responsibility for what is happening there is still borne by the countries that fought there for 20 years. I believe the first thing they must do is to release Afghan assets and give Afghanistan an opportunity to resolve high priority socio-economic problems.

For our part, we can implement specific large projects and deal with domestic security issues. Our special services are in contact with their Afghan counterparts. For us, within the SCO, it is very important to get this work up and running because Tajikistan and Uzbekistan are right on the border with Afghanistan. We have a military facility in Tajikistan. It was based on the 201<sup>st</sup> division when it was still Soviet.

Therefore, we will actively continue this work with China on a bilateral plane, develop dialogue with relevant structures and promote cooperation within the SCO as a whole.

In the process, we will allocate the required resources and create all the conditions to let our citizens feel safe regardless of what is happening in Afghanistan.

**Fyodor Lukyanov:** Thank you.

Mikhail Pogrebinsky, please.

**Mikhail Pogrebinsky:** Thank you, Fyodor. Thank you, Mr President.

I will try to ask a question, the answer to which is awaited, I am sure, by hundreds of thousands of people in my homeland.

You mentioned a Chinese proverb about living in a time of change. Our country has been living like that for almost 30 years now, and the situation is becoming more difficult in anticipation of winter, amid the pandemic, and, I would say, the situation with the Americans. A couple of days ago, we had Defence Secretary Lloyd Austin visit our country. He brought \$60 million worth of weapons and promised us a bright future as a NATO member, figuratively speaking.



I will note right away that any allegations that NATO is irrelevant because Europe does not agree, are prevarication. One does not need to be a NATO member to have US or British military infrastructure deployed in Ukraine. I believe this process is already underway.

In your July article on historical unity, you wrote that transforming Ukraine into an anti-Russia country is unacceptable for millions of people. This is true, and opinion polls confirm it. Over 40 percent have good or very good thoughts about Russia. However, this transformation has, in fact, started. A rather long and very dangerous, in my opinion, distance in this direction may have already been covered. I think that if this idea with a para-NATO infrastructure continues to be implemented, the process to form what is now a not so stable anti-Russia Ukraine will be cemented for many years to come.

You wrote in your article that if the process continues unabated, it will pose a serious threat to the Russian state, and this may be fraught with Ukraine losing its statehood. People who oppose this movement are facing reprisals. You are aware that they are trying to put Viktor Medvedchuk in prison based on some outlandish charges.

How, in your opinion, can this process be stopped? Maybe, you have a timeline for when it might happen? What can be done in this regard at all?

Thank you.

**Vladimir Putin:** Unfortunately, I will probably have to disappoint you – I do not yet know the answer to this question. On the one hand, it seems to lie on the surface: the easiest thing is to say that

the Ukrainian people must make a decision themselves, and form the bodies of power and administration that would meet their needs and expectations. From one perspective, this is indeed true.

But on the other hand, there is another perspective, and I cannot avoid mentioning it. You have just mentioned Viktor Medvedchuk, who has been charged with high treason. For what? Did he steal some secrets and illegally disclose them to a third party? No. What then? Was it his open political position about stabilising Ukraine's internal affairs and building relations with its neighbours because those relations are extremely important for Ukraine itself? It is concerning that such people are not allowed to raise their heads. Some of them end up killed, and others locked up.

One gets the impression that the Ukrainian people are not allowed and will not be allowed to legally form the bodies of power that would uphold their interests. The people there are even afraid to respond to polls. They are scared, because the small group that has appropriated the victory in the fight for independence holds radical political views. And that group actually runs the country, regardless of the name of the current head of state.

At least this is how it was until recently: people ran for leadership positions relying on voters in the Southeast, but once elected, they almost immediately changed their political positions to the opposite. Why? Because that silent majority voted for them in the hope that they would fulfil their campaign promises, but the loud and aggressive nationalist minority suppressed all freedom in decision-making that the Ukrainian people expected, and they, in fact, are running the country.

This is a dead end. I do not even know how this can be changed.

We will wait and see what happens in Ukraine's political affairs in the near future.

For our part, we are making every effort to improve these relations. But the threat you just spoke about — not even spoke about, only mentioned — is quite important to us. And you are right that formal NATO membership may never happen, but military expansion on the territory is already underway, and this really poses a threat to the Russian Federation, we are aware of this.

Consider what happened in the late 1980s – early 1990s (I will not tell the whole story now, although you just made me think about talking more about it), when everyone assured us that an eastward expansion of NATO infrastructure after the unification of Germany was totally out of the question. Russia could be absolutely sure of this, at the very least, so they said. But those were public statements. What happened in reality? They lied. And now they challenge us to produce a document that actually said that.

They expanded NATO once, and then expanded it twice. What are the military-strategic consequences? Their infrastructure is getting closer. What kind of infrastructure? They deployed ABM (anti-missile) systems in Poland and Romania, using Aegis launchers, where Tomahawks can be loaded, strike systems. This can be done easily, with the click of a button. Just change the software – and that is it, no one will even notice. Medium and short-range missiles can also be deployed there. Why not? Has anyone even reacted to our statement that we will not deploy this kind of missile in the European part if we produce them, if they tell us that no one will do so from the United States or Europe? No. They never responded. But we are adults, we are all adults here. What should we do in this situation?

The Minister of Defence arrives, who, in fact, opens the doors for Ukraine to NATO. In fact, his statement must and can be interpreted in this way. He says every country has the right to choose. And nobody says no, nobody. Even those Europeans you mentioned. I know, I spoke to them personally.

But one official is not a security guarantee for Russia – he may be here one day and he might be replaced the next. What will happen then? This is not a security guarantee; it is just a conversation on a given topic. And we are naturally concerned.

**Fyodor Lukyanov:** Mr President, since you mentioned NATO...

**Vladimir Putin:** Yes, sorry. About the bases – I know about the corresponding clauses in the Ukrainian constitution. It allows setting up training centers. But these can be anything at all, accounted for as a training center. As I already said, and it was also said publicly: what if tomorrow there are missiles near Kharkov – what should we do then? We do not go there with our missiles – but missiles are being brought to our doorstep. Of course, we have a problem here.

**Fyodor Lukyanov:** We started talking about NATO. NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg was interviewed just two days ago, and he announced that NATO is adjusting its strategic vision somewhat, and now views Russia and China as one common threat rather than two threats. This is an interesting approach, apparently a far-reaching one. But if this is how they see us, maybe it is time for us to unite with China and consider someone else as a threat?

**Vladimir Putin:** We have said many times that we are friends with China, and not against anyone else, but in each other's interests.

This is the first point. The second point is, as distinct from NATO, from the NATO countries, we are not creating a closed military bloc. There is no Russia-China military bloc and we will not create one now. So, there is no reason to talk about this.

**Fyodor Lukyanov:** I see.

Mark Champion.

**Mark Champion:** Thank you. Mr President, on the subject of the potential for sending extra gas to Europe, which, as you know, is in a gas crisis at the moment, you have talked about this before, but, you know, at times it has been quite confusing. Sometimes Russian officials indicate that there is additional gas available that can be sent if Nord Stream 2 is opened, and at other times, they have suggested that there is no gas available to send to Europe. And I just wondered if you would take this opportunity to clarify whether there is additional gas available that Russia can send to Europe, if say, Nord Stream opened tonight, or if there is not.

**Vladimir Putin:** Frankly, it is strange for me to hear questions like this. It seems to me I explained everything during the Russian Energy Week in Moscow. However, if these questions are being asked, we should certainly talk more about it.

Look what is happening. I believe I said at the meeting with the Government yesterday or the day before yesterday: this is not just about energy sources or gas, but also about the state of the global economy. Shortages are increasing in the leading, economically advanced countries. Take the United States, for one. It has recently made yet another decision to increase its national debt.

For those who do not deal with the economy, I can tell you what a decision to increase the national debt means. The FRS will print money and put it at the government's disposal. This is emission. The deficit is increasing, and inflation is increasing as an emission derivative. This leads to price increases on energy sources, on electricity. This is how it works, not the other way around.

However, the situation is also deteriorating due to realities in the energy market. What are these realities? You just spoke about Europe. What is going on in Europe? Maybe I will repeat some of my ideas or maybe I will say something new, if I recall it. In the past few years, the European Commission's philosophy was entirely devoted to regulating the market of energy sources, including gas, via a commodities exchange, through the so-called spot market. They tried to persuade us to give up long-term contracts where prices were tied to the exchange, that is, market quotes on crude oil and petroleum products.

Incidentally, this is market price formation. Since gas prices are established with a lag of six months after a change in oil prices, this is, firstly, a more stable situation and, secondly, a six-month lag allows consumers and suppliers to make adjustments along the way based on developments on world markets.

So, everything began to be brought to this spot market, but it largely holds gas on paper, not real gas. These are not physical amounts, which are not increasing (I will explain why in a minute). A figure is written on paper, but there is no physical amount, it is declining. So, a cold winter requires gas from underground storage; a wind-free hot summer means a lack of wind generation on the necessary scale. I have already mentioned the macroeconomic reasons, and these are the sector-based

reasons.

What happened next on the European market? First, a decline in production in the gas producing countries. Production in Europe fell by 22.5 billion cubic metres during the first six months. This is first. Second, gas storage facilities were underfilled by 18.5 billion cubic metres and are only 71 percent full. The gas storage facilities were underfilled by 18.5 during the first six months of the year. If you look at annual consumption, this number must be doubled.

Primarily American, along with Middle Eastern companies withdrew 9 billion cubic metres from the European market and redirected the gas to Latin America and Asia. By the way, when the Europeans were formulating the principles governing the formation of the gas market in Europe, and said that all gas must be traded on the spot market, they were proceeding from the assumption that the European market is a premium market. But the European market is no longer a premium market, you see? It is no longer a premium market. Gas was redirected to Latin America and Asia.

I have already said that 18.5 billion cubic metres, plus double that amount, 9 billion (undersupplied to the European market from the United States and the Middle East), plus a decline in production of 22.5 billion – the deficit on the European market may amount to about 70 billion cubic metres, which is a lot. What does Russia have to do with it? This is the result of the European Commission's economic policy. Russia has nothing to do with it.

Russia, including Gazprom, has increased deliveries to the European market by 8.7 percent, I believe, and deliveries

to non-CIS countries by 12 percent, I think. But when we speak about non-CIS countries, we mean China as well. This is also good for the international market, because we are increasing deliveries to the global market, and increased deliveries to the European market by 8.7. In absolute terms, this represents over 11 billion cubic metres of gas. American and Middle Eastern companies undersupplied by 9 billion, while Gazprom increased its supplies by more than 11 billion.

Can everyone hear me? Not in this audience, but the so-called stakeholders. Someone out there is cutting supplies to you, while we are increasing them.

But this is not all. Today, under the so-called long-term contracts – I would like you to listen attentively and to hear what I say – the price of gas is now \$1,200 or \$1,150 for a thousand cubic metres. European companies that have long-term contracts with Gazprom receive it – take note – at four times less than the current price! Gazprom does not make any windfall profits. We are not concerned about this because we are interested in long-term contracts and long-term mutual commitments. In this case, we ensure the opportunity to invest in production and produce the required amounts for our consumers steadily and reliably.

You are asking me if it is possible to increase supplies. Yes, this is possible. Speaking about Nord Stream-2, its first line is filled with gas and if the German regulator issues the permit for shipping tomorrow, it can deliver 17.5 billion cubic metres of gas the day after tomorrow.

Technological work on filling the second line of Nord Stream-2 will be completed before the end of this year, in mid- or late December.



The total volume is 55 billion cubic metres of gas. Considering that in our estimate the shortage of gas in the European market will reach 70 billion cubic metres, 55 billion is a decent amount.

Once the second line is filled, and the German regulator issues its permit, we can start supplies on the next day. Is this possible or not, you asked. Yes, it is possible, but one must have a responsible attitude to one's commitments and work on this.

By the way, we keep saying: Nord Stream-2, Gazprom... But there are five European companies taking part in this project. Why do you mention Gazprom alone? Have you forgotten about them? Five major European companies are working on this project. So, this affects not only the interests of Gazprom but also the interests of our partners, primarily in Europe, of course.

**Fyodor Lukyanov:** Mr President, to an extent, Nord Stream 2, which is now on everyone's lips, can be viewed as your joint achievement with Angela Merkel. Do you regret that she is leaving office? Will you miss her?

**Vladimir Putin:** The decision on her departure was not mine, after all, but hers. She could have run for another term. She stayed in power for 16 years.

**Fyodor Lukyanov:** Not a long tenure, at all.

**Vladimir Putin:** You cannot say that this is not long enough. Quite a tenure. Helmut Koehl, who unified Germany, also spent 16 years at the top.

As for the Nord Streams, we started this process back in the Schroeder days. At the time, when we were working on Nord Stream 1, there were similar attempts to undermine this process,

just like today. It was all the same. Fortunately, today this pipeline delivers gas to Europe and Germany, and the volumes are quite high.

By the way, we are all talking about green energy. This is important, of course. If there are questions on this subject, I will try to explain how I see this. As for the Russian natural gas, let me emphasise that it has a three times lower carbon footprint compared to LNG from the United States. If the environmental activists are not guided in their efforts by a political agenda and really do care about the future of humanity, they cannot fail to hear this. They must oppose the construction of and demand that all LNG terminals are closed.

Unfortunately, the same applies to Ukraine's gas transit system. I have already said that Nord Stream 2 is a modern, state-of-the-art pipeline that can handle higher pressure. There are absolutely no emissions involved when you deliver gas via the bottom of the Baltic Sea. The compression stations are like small factories. They are gas-fired and also emit CO<sub>2</sub> into the atmosphere. Emissions from Nord Stream 2 are 5.6 times lower compared to Ukrainian gas transits, because the system there is old and has been in use since the Soviet times.

Environmental activists should have said: "Immediately close down the Ukrainian gas transit!" But no, it is the opposite: "Go ahead and increase supplies through Ukraine." How is that possible?

In fact, it is the same with oil. Even if we leave gas alone, since I have already talked about this at length, what is going on with oil? I think that from 2012 until 2016 annual investment in oil extraction was at about \$400 billion, but in the years that preceded the pandemic investment decreased by 40 percent, and now

stands at \$260 million. This is a cycle that lasts for 15 to 30 years. Do you understand this?

In my opinion, what are current problems on top of what I have said? I talked about various political issues. This is one of the important topics that springs to mind. There is a lack of overlap between political and investment cycles in the leading economies, including in energy, a very important sector. How long is a political cycle? Four or five years. What do the leading political forces, parties and politicians do all this time? They make promises. They promise everything, as much as possible and at the lowest cost. This applies, among other things, to the green economy. What comes out of this? Banks stop funding investment, and investment dwindles. The time will come like what we are seeing today, when the market will need to accomplish a breakthrough, but there will be nothing to back this effort. Even today, OPEC Plus countries are increasing oil production even slightly above their agreement, but not all oil producing countries can increase output quickly. This is a long-term process, and the cycle is quite long.

**Fyodor Lukyanov:** Please, Raghida Dergham.

**Raghida Dergham:** Thank you very much, Fyodor.

Mr President, it is good to see you again in Valdai and Sochi. My name is Raghida Dergham. I am the founder and executive chairman of Beirut Institute. So I have come to you, I have come to Sochi, from Lebanon, a very wounded country. I am sure, sir, that you are aware of the explosion that took place – the fourth largest – at the port, the civilian port of Beirut. There has been an attempt to investigate what happened, the story itself. There

was a Russian captain, there was a Georgian owner of the ship.

There was a request to you, Mr President, to share – the request came to you from the judiciary, and it is an independent body from the government – to share what you have, from your satellite pictures, to tell us, to help find the story, this horrible story that happened, that amounted to the assassination of the city, of the capital. My first question, sir: are you willing to share now the information you have, the satellite information, and to lend cooperation to this investigation so that, you know, the values that you spoke about are implemented where it really matters?

And secondly, your two allies, Hezbollah and Iran, have been resisting and, in fact, have been demanding the dislodging of the – not the prosecutor, he is really the investigator – the judge who is investigating the case. They have issued a warning that if – to both friends of yours, the President, Michel Aoun and the Prime Minister, Najib Mikati – that if they do not dislodge this investigator, this judge, then the government will fall. Do you support such a position, particularly given that this country is on the verge of a civil war, with Mr Nasrallah announcing that he will not back down, announcing, at the same time, that there are a hundred thousand fighters ready to launch? So, this is a civil war in the action, maybe, right next door to a prize accomplishment of yours, Mr Vladimir Putin, which is in Syria. I thank you.

**Vladimir Putin:** Just a minute, please. Can you explain the beginning of which war you are talking about? I do not understand.

**Raghida Dergham:** Civil war, because, you see, there are armed people on the streets already. You do remember the civil war

in Lebanon, and right now... Hezbollah is not the only armed group, I am not claiming that. There are many armed groups, but right now the conflict is over this investigator. His name is Tariq al-Bitar. The insistence of Hezbollah is that he needs to be dislodged. And, in fact, this is interfering with the very principle of the separation of powers, and that led to confrontations on the streets and the possibility of a civil war really happening, Mr President. Do not dismiss that possibility; it is a very scary one. And I am not sure at all it would be in the interests of the Russian policy even for Syria, never mind for Lebanon, and we wish that you will pay attention to Lebanon, particularly after hearing you today emphasise these values.

**Vladimir Putin:** First, about the explosion in the port of Beirut. Frankly speaking, when that tragedy happened – I would like to once again offer my condolences to the Lebanese people over it, the large number of casualties and catastrophic damage – I learned about it from media reports, of course.

Many years ago, ammonium nitrate was delivered to and stored in the port; the local authorities did not give it the attention it needed, although, as far as I know, they wanted to sell it profitably. And that desire to sell at a profit came into conflict with the possibility of doing so, with the market and some internal contradictions related to who would get the profit, and so on. In my opinion, this is the main reason for the tragedy, and that is it.

As for helping with the investigation, frankly speaking, I do not understand how satellite pictures can help, and whether we even have any. However, I promise that I will make inquiries, and if we do have anything and can provide assistance to the investigation, we will do this. But first I need to discuss the matter with

my colleagues who may have this information.

As for Hezbollah, Iran and so on, regarding the situation in Lebanon. Take Hezbollah: different people in different countries have a different attitude to it, which I am well aware of. Hezbollah is a serious political force in Lebanon itself. But there is no doubt that we always, including in Lebanon, call for settling any conflicts through dialogue. We have always tried to do this, one way or another. We are maintaining contact with nearly all political forces in Lebanon, and we will try to continue doing this in the future as well, so that the situation can be settled without any bloodshed. God forbid. Nobody is interested in this. The situation in the Middle East has been precarious recently as it is. Of course, we will do everything we can to convince all the parties to the internal political process to stick with common sense and to strive for agreements.

Please, take the microphone.

**Raghida Dergham:** President Vladimir Putin, do you support the ultimatum given by Hezbollah that either the investigator Tarek Bitar is dislodged or there is a downfall of the government? Do you support that ultimatum?

**Vladimir Putin:** Listen, colleague, we cannot comment on the internal political processes you have mentioned, whether we support an ultimatum of one of the sides or not, or one of the side's positions. This would amount to taking the side of one of the conflicting parties, which would be counterproductive regarding the effectiveness of our peace-making efforts. Therefore, I would like to abstain from making such comments. As I have noted, the main thing is to find a platform that can be used

as the basis for agreements, without any shooting, God willing. We in Russia are definitely interested in that.

**Fyodor Lukyanov:** Please, Stanislav Tkachenko.

**Stanislav Tkachenko:** Thank you.

Stanislav Tkachenko, St Petersburg State University.

Mr President, a question about energy. On October 13, Chief of the European External Action Service Josep Borrell first unveiled the Arctic Strategy and then sent it to the European Commission and the EU Council – a new EU document that considers a wide range of problems, including energy.

I would highlight two points in that strategy. First, the European Union believes that the mineral resources found in the Arctic – oil, gas and coal – should stay in the ground, including in the Arctic, and to achieve that, the world may even have to impose a temporary moratorium. The second point is linked to the first one. It concerns plans by the European Union and its member states to develop a series of instruments, financial and others, to prevent countries (perhaps primarily the Russian Federation), which will be selling energy resources on the global market, from selling the resources produced in the Arctic.

My question is: What is Russia's attitude to this. Thanks.

**Vladimir Putin:** Right. To be honest, I try to follow what is happening there behind the European scenes, what is going on there every day, but at times, as our people say, I feel like I am missing something.

Regarding the EU's Arctic Strategy, what can I say? Russia has its own strategy for our presence in the Arctic – this is my first point.

Second, we have always worked and are working quite productively; Russia is currently chairing the Arctic Council, where EU countries are also represented. Third, we have always talked about this, and I actually spoke about this at the meeting with President Biden and his team members in Geneva: we are ready to continue cooperation, in a broad sense, with all interested countries in the Arctic, within the framework of international law.

As you know, there are several conventions, on territorial waters, and on the law of the sea, from 1986, I think. We act on the basis of those internationally recognised documents, which Russia is a party to, and we are ready to build relations with all states including the European Union on the basis of those documents.

But if someone from the outside is trying to circumvent these internationally recognised documents and limit our sovereign right to use our own territory – according to international law, territorial waters are part of a coastal state's territory – it is an infringement using mala fide means.

The same applies to the 400-mile zone, which is called the zone of preferential economic development. The rules that apply to that area are determined by international law, and we fully adhere to these requirements.

By the way, consider the Nord Stream project – in accordance with these rules, we had to request appropriate permits from the coastal states – Finland, Sweden, and Denmark – when we did not even have to enter their territorial sea, but the pipeline crossed those countries' exclusive economic zones. This is a requirement of international law, and we abide by this law, and everyone, including Europeans, insisted that we acted within the framework



of those international legal norms. Do they mean they are not going to abide by them now, or what? We are required to comply, but they can suddenly ignore them, is that it? It will not happen.

And if they want to restrict our activities, including in the energy sector, it is up to them, and they can try it. We can see what is happening in the world now, including in the European energy market. If they act like this, take categorical and poorly substantiated action, I doubt anything good will come of it.

I remember this popular fairy tale, at least with the Russian audience, where one of the characters makes a wolf fish in the ice-hole in winter using its tail as a rod, and then sits by the wolf's side chanting quietly, 'freeze, freeze wolf's tail.' If the Europeans follow this path, they will find themselves in the same position as those characters in the Russian fairy tale.

**Fyodor Lukyanov:** Who is the wolf?

**Vladimir Putin:** It is not difficult to guess, I think.

**Fyodor Lukyanov:** I don't get it, I really don't. Do you mean Russia? They chant –

**Vladimir Putin:** The wolf is the one who has put its tail into an ice-hole in winter trying to catch some fish, in troubled water in this case – that's who. They will freeze. But of course, if they try to impose restrictions. They are already restricting investments, as I said, the investment period in the oil industry is 15–20, or even 30 years, and now banks are refusing to issue appropriate credit resources for these projects. Here you go – the shortage will be felt soon, and nothing can be done about it.

The problem is that, unfortunately, decisions in this area,

in the energy sector, are made as part of political cycles, which I have already mentioned, and they are not made by experts. As one of my colleagues said, the decisions are not made by engineers, but by politicians who are not really competent in the matter, but they simply deceive their voters.

Everyone is alarmed by the climate agenda, which suggests a gloomy future unless we achieve a decrease in the temperature rise to its pre-industrial level, the level as of the beginning of industrialisation. Yes, we know. Between 1.5–2 degrees is the critical line, we know this. But this must be done carefully, while relying on a thorough and deep analysis, not on political slogans. But we can see that some countries are guided precisely by political slogans, which are not even feasible.

Still, no one can forbid us to act on our territory as we see fit. We are ready to negotiate with everyone, but we hope that it will be a professional conversation.

**Fyodor Lukyanov:** Mr President, you keep referring to international law, and have just mentioned it once again. So does Russian diplomacy. However, international law is not written in stone like Moses' tablets. It results from a certain balance of power and interests, then it changes. Maybe it is time to adjust it?

**Vladimir Putin:** But these adjustments are always late, which applies to all kinds of law, including international norms. Social interactions and international relations change faster than the legal norms. This is a well-known tenet of state theory and law. Relations change quicker, they need to be regulated, and those in charge of setting norms usually fail to keep up with these

changes.

What is international law? It is an aggregate of international norms. By the way, these are not simply rules that someone has scribbled under a blanket, thinking that everyone has to follow them. If we are discussing international public law, the norms governing interstate relations have to be coordinated and agreed upon: you sign them, assume obligations and honour them. If today's world order hinges upon sovereignty, this means that if someone does not sign a document, you cannot demand that this state complies with something it did not subscribe to. This is called "trying to impose someone's will on other countries." The faster we move away from attempts to introduce such practices into international relations, the better, and this would make the world calmer and more stable.

**Fyodor Lukyanov:** We have another colleague from the United States – Christian Whiton, Centre for the National Interest.

Christian, you have the floor.

**Christian Whiton:** Hello, Fyodor. Great. Thank you so much for calling on me, and thank you for Valdai, for organising this important conference.

President Putin, I really appreciate your important comments, which I do not think we have heard from any other world leader, about culture and its importance. One person here in the United States that might be interested and supportive of what you have said is former President Donald Trump. I am not certain about that, but he has spoken of similar things. My question for you is that there is a lot of speculation that former President Trump may again run for office in 2024, and you have spoken about Angela Merkel,

for example. What do you think about the idea of a second Donald Trump presidency?

**Vladimir Putin:** Would you vote for him? *(Laughter.)*

I am not kidding. Where is the joke? Please help us. Would you vote for Donald Trump as a presidential candidate in the United States of America?

**Christian Whiton:** I am sorry, I thought you were asking President Putin.

Yes. My view, and I worked in the Trump administration at the State Department, early in his administration. I think it is remarkable. He has redefined conservatism, perhaps, along some of similar lines that President Putin talked about healthy conservatism.

However, in our system, if you begin a second term, you are essentially a lame duck, in that you cannot run again, so people start discounting you. Also I like what Donald Trump does in challenging the vocal minority that has infected our culture, but on the other hand his administration had a lot of inefficiencies, if you will, staff in very senior levels that did not agree with his agenda. Sometimes it seemed like the authority of his presidency did not extend beyond the White House to the rest of the very large US government.

So my preference is that other conservatives step up like Ron DeSantis, the Governor of Florida, step up and run for President. But if it is a choice between Donald Trump and a Democrat, I would vote for Donald Trump, yes.

**Vladimir Putin:** If you allow me, I would prefer to keep my point

of view on this matter to myself and refrain from commenting on what you have just said. Otherwise, you will have to register as a foreign agent. *(Laughter.)*

However, I do understand your idea.

Thank you very much for your participation.

**Fyodor Lukyanov:** Anastasia Likhacheva.

**Anastasia Likhacheva:** Thank you.

Mr President, when speaking about the biggest challenges of our time, you have mentioned water scarcity and food supply issues. In your opinion, what positive contribution could Russia make to addressing them within as well as beyond its borders, considering that Russia ranks second in the world in terms of its renewable freshwater resources, and has its unique Lake Baikal and great traditions in research, on top of being a major food exporter. Thank you.

**Vladimir Putin:** We are already doing this and will step up our efforts even more. Let me explain what this means and where the concerns about a possible food crisis come from.

As I have already mentioned, both at a recent meeting with members of the Government, and just now, there are system-wide dysfunctions within the global economy. They are attributable to growing deficits and inflation and lead to disrupted supply chains. This is not just about the Suez Canal, and the shortage of lorry drivers in Great Britain for delivering fuel to the pump. There is a general disruption, and COVID-19 did play a role in this, unfortunately.

There are other reasons, however. Where does all this lead? We

were discussing rising fuel prices. This, in turn, pushes up electricity prices. If we convert our prices into euros, one megawatt-hour costs 20 euros in Russia, and over 300 euros in European countries. Of course, there is a difference in terms of income levels, but this gap is too big.

Some governments and representatives of international institutions say: "This is the right way to go, keep up the good work." Just think about this. They are now thinking about paying out subsidies in order to offset this huge hike in energy prices. It could seem appropriate. After all, the state must lend its shoulder to its people. However, this is a one-time fix, and afterwards people will still suffer.

Why? Because the volume of primary fuel stays the same, which means that someone will not get it. People, the households who receive this subsidy will not reduce their consumption, despite all the fear mongering on German television. They will not reduce their consumption as long as they are subsidised. Why cut back? But the supply will remain the same. What does this mean? Someone will have to consume less. Who will that be? Industry. In what sector? The metals industry. This will lead to higher prices on all products containing metal and all the way down the value chain. This is a huge chain, from cars to tiepins.

Second, fertiliser producers that use natural gas are already closing their manufacturing facilities. This is already happening. There are reasons to believe that the soil fertilizer sector will be underfunded. What will this result in? There will be less food on the global market, and people will have to pay higher prices. Once again, it all falls on the people, although it all started with an initiative designed to help them.

It may seem as if it is headed in the right direction, but it is necessary to raise the question of whether it is appropriate to restrict extraction, including in the Arctic. Do we need to restrict new transit routes, including Nord Stream 2, for political reasons? These are the questions to be asked. We need to think about fundamental things.

Considering the growing risks and uncertainty, do we really have to transfer all the supplies to the spot market? Or maybe thinking about long-term investment would make more sense, and using long-term contracts instead, at least in part. This is what we must think about. This is how we can prevent crises from suddenly breaking out.

Russia is making a significant contribution to food security today. We are increasing food supplies to the world market; we are exporting over US\$25 billion worth of foodstuffs. I have already said this many times and I would like to thank our agricultural producers once again. This is primarily the result of their efforts. We could never even dream about this. Now we must thank the Europeans for their agricultural sanctions. Well done. Thank you for all your sanctions. We have introduced countermeasures in agriculture and invested appropriate resources.

By the way, we have boosted the so-called import substitution in industry, not only in agriculture. And I must say, the effect has been good. I did have some anxiety, I must admit, but the overall effect has been very good. We have used our brains, resumed some old projects, and started new ones, including in high-tech industries. I hope will continue to increase production in agriculture.

Climate change has also been bringing changes to Russian agriculture. What am I referring to? For example, in Russian black soil regions, the quality of the soil is changing, and things are shifting a little further north. There are also problems caused by natural phenomena and cataclysms – desertification and things like that. But Russia will adapt to this, this is quite obvious, and it will fully meet not only its own needs, but also provide our main partners in the world markets with high-quality and affordable food at world prices.

There is also something else. I just said fertiliser plants are closing, but the quality and quantity of harvests, the volume of crops depend on them. But we supply the necessary amounts of fertilisers to international markets, and we are ready to increase production further. By the way, in this respect, in terms of their impact on human health, our fertilisers are among the best in the world – our companies' rivals are reluctant to talk about this. But I hope that after I have mentioned this, our media will show what I mean, I just do not want to waste time now.

Well, as for water resources, some say water will soon be more expensive than oil, but we are not yet planning projects to reverse rivers. This must be treated very carefully and with an understanding of the long-term consequences of the decisions we make. But in general, Russia is one of the countries whose water balance will be stable and secure for a long time. Although we must also think about it. We must think about the purity of our rivers, carefully watch what is happening with the water sector in the Far East, at Lake Baikal, and so on.

I will not go into detail now, but we really have enough problems to address. We know about them, we identify new problems. We



will continue working according to the plans we have outlined in this regard. When faced with new challenges, we will try to overcome them.

**Vladimir Putin:** You have just mentioned the possibility of assuming the lead. You know, of course, it seems to me that one should seek to tackle the most important objectives. But it is necessary to proceed from reality. We publicly declared our aim of achieving hydrocarbon neutrality by 2060, and so we are doing this.

Incidentally (I have mentioned this repeatedly and will say so once again), Russia has a greener energy mix than that of many other industrialised countries. In Russia, 86 percent of the energy mix is composed of nuclear power generation that produces almost no emissions, hydropower generation, gas generation, and renewable sources. Eighty-six percent! The US figure is 77 percent.

In Germany, if my memory serves me right, it is 64 percent, and even less so in Asian countries. Isn't that the lead? It certainly is!

We understand, of course, that this is not enough. This is not enough even for us, because here the temperature is rising more rapidly than the global average, while in the North the rise is even faster than on average in the rest of Russia. For us, this is fraught with serious consequences, given that a considerable part of Russia's territory is in the Far North. We certainly are thinking about this.

A few words about people's lives.

Starting with the removal of all kinds of landfill sites, which also generate CO<sub>2</sub> in large cities and contaminate people's lives,

something that we are working on, and ending with the situation in our large industrial centres, we have a programme for all of this. We may not be advancing as fast as we would like to, but, overall, we are on schedule with our plans.

We would have accomplished this earlier if it were not for the 2008–2009 crisis, which came to us from without, as we are all aware. But our industry simply screamed that many enterprises would keel over if we started to implement the so-called best technologies in that sphere. We had to postpone the implementation of our plans, but now the decisions have been taken at the legislative level and are being implemented.

We are giving priority attention in our programme to 12 cities that are the largest emission producers, after which we will turn our attention to all the other emission producers and all industries. This is one of the priorities of our national projects and national plans.

As for carbon neutrality in general, it should be remembered that 45 percent of carbon emissions are being absorbed, if my memory serves me well. Incidentally, in this connection we will insist that our absorption ability is taken into account, that is, the absorption ability of our forests, our seas and the territories connected with the ocean. It is an objective fact, and it should be taken into account.

Moreover, in this context we have major reserves regarding the implementation of plans, for example, in the area of housing and utilities and energy efficiency. This is definitely what we can and should work on.

In other words, what we need is not a mechanical, mindless

implementation of measures formulated by others, but a result. We intend to work towards this result absolutely transparently and honestly. However, I would not like our efforts to protect nature and implement climate policy recommendations to become a covert instrument of rivalry on the global markets. This would be very bad. This would undermine trust in what we are doing for the future of humankind.

**Fyodor Lukyanov:** Mr President, do we have a programme of our own regarding our actions in the event the EU introduces a carbon tax and Russian producers have to pay it?

**Vladimir Putin:** So far, no fundamental decisions have been taken that would undermine our interests or that would be non-transparent or absolutely unfair. I have talked with some of the [Western] leaders – I will not name them now – who are aware that the requirements that are being formulated at the level of European institutions are not transparent and cannot be described as fair. All of this certainly calls for more work. We hope that this will be done through dialogue with other countries, including Russia.

**Fyodor Lukyanov:** Angela Stent, our veteran and scientific council member, is with us from Washington.

Angela, please, go ahead with your question.

**Angela Stent:** Thank you very much, Fyodor, and I am sorry I am only here virtually.

Mr President, I heard you talk about some ways in which the US and Russia are working together, and I want to ask you another question about Afghanistan.

Twenty years ago Russia and the United States cooperated to defeat al-Qaeda and to remove the Taliban from power. Twenty years later, now in the aftermath of the American withdrawal, do you believe that counterterrorist cooperation between Russia and the United States is desirable? Is it possible? Do you think we would still share some of the same goals vis-à-vis Afghanistan that we did twenty years ago?

**Vladimir Putin:** I think that cooperation between Russia and the United States on counter-terrorism is not only possible, but is a necessity. We have discussed this many times, including with you. It is too bad you cannot be in this room with us today.

It is obvious that this is a common threat. Unfortunately, it has not become less of a danger than it was 20 years ago. Moreover, this threat has been growing bigger and took on a global dimension on our watch. We can only be effective in countering it by working together.

I have already said that our countries' special services maintain contact, although in my opinion they could have established an even closer relationship, but we are grateful to our American partners for the information that has enabled us to prevent terrorist attacks in the Russian Federation.

I can assure you that we will do everything we can to relay any necessary information to our American colleagues in a timely manner if it is relevant to them and if we have the information at our disposal. I would like to emphasise once again that everyone stands to benefit from this cooperation.

**Fyodor Lukyanov:** Mr President, on Afghanistan. The Taliban is de facto in control there. They came to Moscow, and in general

communicate with everyone. How long will Russia view them as a terrorist organisation with everyone having to say it is a terrorist organisation every time it is mentioned?

**Vladimir Putin:** This is not about us, Russia. You can see that we work with the Taliban and invited them to Moscow, and we have been maintaining contact with them in Afghanistan.

In fact, these decisions were taken at the UN level. It is clear that the Taliban are currently in control in Afghanistan, and we expect them to bring about positive momentum. Depending on how it goes, we will come together to decide whether it can be excluded from the list of terrorist organisations. I believe that we are getting there. Russia's position will be to move precisely in this direction.

However, we need to take decisions like this the same way they were adopted before, when we decided to designate this movement as a terrorist organisation.

**Fyodor Lukyanov:** Asia is clearly underrepresented.

We have Professor Shimotomai joining us. Please go ahead.

**Nobuo Shimotomai:** Thank you.

Mr President, I am honoured, although I was unable to come to Sochi this time.

I found your report very interesting, including your point that state borders have become an anachronism. Indeed, perhaps the most acute antagonism exists in Northeast Asia over state borders and the like. Prime Minister Abe and you made an attempt to fill this gap in search of a new peace treaty. However, over the past two years the prime minister of Japan has changed twice without meeting with you. How do you see future bilateral relations,

primarily, the prospects for a peace treaty between Russia and Japan? Thank you.

**Vladimir Putin:** Yes, indeed, political life in Japan is structured in a way where the political scene changes quite quickly, but the interests of the Japanese and Russian people remain unchanged and are based on the desire to reach a final settlement in our relations, including the conclusion of a peace treaty. We will strive to make this happen despite the changes in figures on Japan's political stage.

Most recently, as you are aware, on October 7, I spoke with the new Prime Minister of Japan by telephone. He is undoubtedly an experienced person and is up to date on our relations since he was engaged in international affairs. He is fairly close in a political sense to former Prime Minister Abe. So in this sense, of course, I think we will see continuity in Japan's position regarding its relations with Russia.

Under Mr Abe, we aligned a series of joint actions and joint work to bring Russian-Japanese relations to a new level. I would very much like this work to continue in the same vein going forward.

**Fyodor Lukyanov:** Friends, the President has been taking our questions, just questions, for two and a half hours now. I have a suggestion to optimise our work. We will have a quick Q&A session now. Please, ask short questions, do not make statements like Ms Dergham just did, but ask short questions. The President will give quick answers like a machine-gun burst. Yes?

**Vladimir Putin:** I will do my best.

**Fyodor Lukyanov:** Ryan Chilcote, go ahead please.

**Ryan Chilcote:** Thank you, Fyodor.

But please, do not give me a machine-gun burst in response.

**Fyodor Lukyanov:** It depends on your question.

**Vladimir Putin:** We have it, too. *(Laughter.)*

**Ryan Chilcote:** I understand.

My question is about the pandemic. The biggest foreign agent and the greatest external threat is the continuing pandemic.

The only difference between Russia and many countries is the low vaccination rate. What do you think about mandatory vaccination as a solution to the problem?

**Vladimir Putin:** I have already said that vaccination will become mandatory when it is listed in the National Immunisation Calendar. Vaccination against the coronavirus infection is not listed there, and in this sense, it is not mandatory. But under current legislation, the regional authorities have the right to introduce mandatory vaccination for certain categories of people in conditions of a growing epidemic on the recommendation of chief sanitary doctors. This is what is happening in our country.

But a requirement is not the point. I personally do not support it. Why? Because it is possible to get around any decision imposed from above. People will buy certificates.

Maybe it is the other way around with those who get some Western vaccine. I have heard many times how it goes: citizens from European countries come here and get a Sputnik jab and then buy a certificate that they got Pfizer. I am serious. This is what doctors from European countries say. They believe that Sputnik is more reliable and safer.

But this is not the point. I am saying this not to promote Sputnik. I am saying that it is relatively easy to get around any imposed solution. It is a well-known observation that hundreds or thousands work on the laws and millions think about getting around them. As a rule, they succeed. Therefore, it seems to me, it is necessary to convince people rather than impose something on them. We need to convince them, to prove that vaccination is a better choice. I talked about this just recently.

This applies not only to Russia but also to other countries. There are only two scenarios for almost every person: either get sick or get the vaccine. It is not possible to slip through raindrops. It is necessary to enhance the confidence of people in the actions of the authorities. It is necessary to be more convincing and to prove a point through example. I hope we will learn to do this.

**Fyodor Lukyanov:** Mr Sajjadpour, go ahead please.

**Seyed Kazem Sajjadpour:** Thank you, Mr President. My question relates to Afghanistan. How do you see the American defeat and withdrawal from Afghanistan in a broader strategic sense? Would it change the US global positioning, and what would impact on the alignment of forces that you talked about? Thank you.

**Vladimir Putin:** First, I would like to say that the President of the United States did the right thing by withdrawing troops from Afghanistan. Probably, he did not know the details of how this would proceed but he understood that this would be a line of attack on the domestic political scene. But he still made this decision and assumed this responsibility.

Of course, we see how this happened and probably it could have



been done differently. Naturally, this will primarily affect the attitude towards the US of those countries that consider the US their ally. But I think that with time everything will fall into place and there will be no cardinal changes.

Yes, this will affect relations with allies in the near future but the appeal of a country still depends not on this but on its economic and military might.

**Fyodor Lukyanov:** Alexander Rahr, go ahead please.

**Alexander Rohr:** Mr President, when you and Gerhard Schroeder met at the first session of the Petersburg Dialogue, you said relations between Germany and Russia were the best in a hundred years.

Unfortunately, they have deteriorated a lot now. My question is: Will it be possible to resuscitate at least the Petersburg Dialogue with the new German Chancellor, in all probability, this will be Olaf Scholz.

Thank you.

**Vladimir Putin:** You know, Alexander, this does not depend solely on us. If the Germans display interest in this issue, we will step up our efforts in this area. That said, the Petersburg dialogue still exists, it has not disappeared and it continues in principle.

Of course, it is possible to make bilateral contacts more intensive and productive. I understand this but it is necessary to depoliticise these contacts. I hope this will be done.

The coalition in Germany seems to be complicated and its various political forces are likely to have different views. Let's see what it leads to in practice. I don't know. But we are for it, we are ready

for this.

**Fyodor Lukyanov:** Anatol Lieven, go ahead please.

**Anatol Lieven:** Thank you, Mr President, for coming. Anatol Lieven from the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft.

China and other countries have made a move to electric cars, a key part of their action against climate change. What are Russia's plans in this regard? Thank you.

**Vladimir Putin:** I have spoken about this many times. Of course, when cars move in cities they are one of the biggest air pollutants like housing and utilities and industry. This is obvious. But on a global scale we should not forget where electricity comes from.

Let us be straight with each other. Electric vehicles are a good thing but pollution of the environment during electricity generation is not so good. Meanwhile, the coal generation in European countries, such as Germany, since Alexander just asked about this, is twice as much as in Russia. It is double there. I think it amounts to 32 percent, and here is it 15–16 percent.

But in principle this is good. In Russia, such global reserves of natural gas could make gas engine fuel an alternative. It is necessary to change the energy balance in favour of the green agenda and in this case, we will achieve the desired result.

**Fyodor Lukyanov:** Mr President, have you driven an electric car?

**Vladimir Putin:** Yes, I have, in Ogaryovo.

**Fyodor Lukyanov:** How is it? Is there a difference?

**Vladimir Putin:** I drive these cars in Ogaryovo, this is true, but

I don't feel much difference. They are good cars.

**Fyodor Lukyanov:** Konstantin Zatulin.

**Konstantin Zatulin:** Mr President, I am Konstantin Zatulin, a member of the State Duma from the city where we are meeting [Sochi]. But my question is not about this.

**Vladimir Putin:** But mentioning this is not out of place.

**Konstantin Zatulin:** Yes, certainly.

My question is about history and memory. At the beginning of this meeting much was said about “Homo Sovieticus,” post-Soviet countries and post-Soviet space today. I would like to note that on November 2 we will mark 300 years of the Russian Empire.

This year we celebrated the 800<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Prince Alexander Nevsky, and you personally unveiled a monument, which made a great impression on many people. But for some reason nothing is being said about the 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Russian Empire. Is it because we are embarrassed to use the word “empire”? If so, this is a bad idea. This was a major period in our history, the continuous existence of our state, from the Russian Empire to the Soviet Union and on to the Russian Federation, even though they might reject each other in some ways.

I would like to hope – we have addressed you on this occasion – that you will receive our letter and will consider the possibility of taking a more active part in this event, even if we miss the exact date, November 2, at least we will remember it.

**Vladimir Putin:** I agree with you. The continuity of history is important for knowing where we are moving. I fully agree with you. If we have missed something here, please accept my apologies.

The next event will be connected with your name. *(Laughter.)*

**Fyodor Lukyanov:** Yury Slezkin.

**Yury Slezkin:** My question concerns history as well. You have been the head of the Russian state for many years, and you certainly think a great deal about your role in Russian history. What do you regard as your main achievements and largest failures as head of state?

**Vladimir Putin:** You know, I never think about my role in history. As soon as you start thinking about this, you need to step down because these thoughts stand in the way of decision-making. I am speaking absolutely honestly now. As soon as you think: “What if this or that happens, and what would Princess Maria Alekseyevna say?” – the game is over, and you better step down.

As for what I have accomplished, we had 40 million people living below the poverty line. Today there are too many as well, over 19 million, or even 20 million, according to various estimates. This is too many, but not as many as 40 million. This is probably my main achievement.

Our economy has recovered. Some industries, including the defence sector, were as good as dead. If we had lost more time, we would have been unable to restore them; the production links and our scientific schools would have been lost forever. We have restored them, not to mention the fact that the statutes and constitutions of the constituent members of the Russian Federation included all manner of provisions, including the right to mint money, they even had their own state borders, but they did not mention the fact that they were constituent members of the Russian Federation. It was a very serious challenge. We

have dealt with that.

Or take the fight against international terrorism. You know, I will tell you what I sometimes think, and will be honest with you. Yes, we did overcome that difficult period in the life of our country, especially when it comes to terrorism. This was by far not only my personal contribution that we did it, but thanks to the patience, courage and will of the Russian people. I am not saying this for effect but absolutely sincerely, because I saw the difficulties and suffering Russian families faced. But Russia was equal to the task, which means that this passionarity we mentioned at the beginning, has a big role to play in the Russia nation. We definitely have the internal impetus for development and it is very powerful.

**Fyodor Lukyanov:** Mr President, since you don't want to talk about your role in history, I would like to try another track.

There is a popular trend to discuss the vision of the future, everyone is looking for a vision of the future. The Valdai Club is also looking for it as are many others. Mr Andrei Bezrukov is sitting here in the front row; he also does a lot in this regard.

Personally, I am afraid we will not find a vision now, because the world is incredibly uncertain. But I might be wrong.

Do you have any vision of Russia's future, or the world's, something you would like to see or that you would like your descendants to see?

**Vladimir Putin:** You know, one can talk a lot about this, and I have already answered this question more than once, one way or another, in different forms, and I do not want to repeat my old phrases.

I would start with the theme of today's Valdai meeting. What is it?

**Fyodor Lukyanov:** The Return of the Future.

**Vladimir Putin:** No, no. The slogan of today's meeting?

**Fyodor Lukyanov:** Global Shake-Up.

**Vladimir Putin:** It's longer.

**Fyodor Lukyanov:** The Individual, Values. But “individual” is rarely remembered.

**Vladimir Putin:** Well, it should be, because this is the most important point.

I have been remembering [Nikolai] Berdyaev. As you know, he wrote several major works, and they are still popular. He wrote about the new Middle Ages, as was relevant at that time, about freedom, how it was such a heavy burden. But he also said something else – that the individual should always be at the centre of development. The individual is more important than society or the state. I would very much like to see a future where all the resources of society and the state are concentrated around the interests of the individual. We definitely need to strive for this. It is difficult to say now how effective we will be in creating such a system, but this is what we should strive for.

A young man over there has raised his hand. Go ahead, please.

**Dmitry Suslov:** Thank you very much, Mr President.

Dmitry Suslov, Higher School of Economics.

You noted in your remarks today that disagreements around the world – both intranational and international – have reached a level where world wars used to break out in previous eras. So

far, we have not seen a world war, at least not a 'hot' one.

**Vladimir Putin:** Do you miss this?

**Dmitry Suslov:** I just wanted to ask if this means – we probably have not seen a world war because the world has nuclear weapons – but does this mean it cannot happen at all? And if it cannot happen, it's like Dostoevsky wrote: if there is no God, anything is permitted. I mean, if there is no threat of a world war, it can lead to complete irresponsibility: you can do whatever you want because there will be no world war, there are no obstacles for pursuing an aggressive policy – and so on.

But, if there is a threat of a world war, if the danger of a world war is still out there, shouldn't Russia, as a nuclear superpower, as a country that has gone through the hardest wars – you also mentioned this today – a country that knows the value of peace, and peace is probably also a universal value, shouldn't Russia declare a little more strongly that the protection of peace, strengthening peace is the goal of Russia's foreign policy, and some practical steps should be taken here too?

Thank you.

**Vladimir Putin:** We say a lot of positive and important things, but our partners simply prefer not to notice many of them.

So more talk would be pointless; we must act to achieve what we are talking about. This is not an easy job, not an easy task, but we will definitely work at it.

You spoke about nuclear weapons. It is a huge responsibility that nuclear powers have. You also said a third world war may be improbable in the modern situation; but there is still a threat

of mutual destruction, let's not forget about that.

The central sector now, please.

**Tatiana Kastoueva-Jean:** Thank you very much.

Tatiana Kastoueva-Jean, French Institute of International Relations.

I have a question that may seem unexpected but it is very important for France. Newspapers have been asking questions these past days about the presence of Russian mercenaries in Mali. To keep it short, this is my question: can the interests of a private military company that operates outside Russian law be at odds with Russia's state interests? Thank you.

**Vladimir Putin:** We have discussed this with our French colleagues on numerous occasions, including with President Macron who raised this subject with me.

You said that these are private companies, not the state. They do not represent the interests of the Russian state. If they are operating somewhere without instructions from the Russian state, this is a private business, private initiatives related, among other things, to fuel production and other resources, gold, or gems, what have you. However, if this contradicts the interests of the Russian state, which can happen, we will unfortunately have to respond, and we will definitely do something about it.

**Mehdi Sanaei:** Mr President,

First, thank you for this opportunity to have this conversation.

I have a question about South Caucasus. There was a ceasefire and some agreements were reached, but so far, there has been no final solution, and you know that some countries, republics



in the regions, have reasons to question whether this will happen.

The three-plus-three format emerged, including with Russia's support. However, it has yet to become operational. Iran, Azerbaijan and Russia had a platform for working on the North-South corridor. Iran, Russia and Turkey had a trilateral platform for fighting terrorism. By the way, it is unfortunate that South Caucasus has also been affected by terrorism.

Of course, Russia plays a very important role here. Other formats with the participation of Armenia and other countries are also possible.

Do we need to fast-track initiatives in order to create a format of this kind? What do you think? What format, in your opinion, would offer the most effective solution, taking into consideration the interests of the South-Caucasian republics and countries in the region?

Thank you.

**Vladimir Putin:** First, I would like to praise the President of Azerbaijan and the Prime Minister of Armenia for their political wisdom. After all, despite all the tragedy with the ongoing developments, they were able to rise above the political fray and make some very responsible decisions.

I do know that they have been facing criticism inside their own countries, as strange as this may seem. There are always political forces that are unhappy and believe that things could have been better. "Go ahead and do a better job" – this is what always springs to mind. After all, President Aliyev and Prime Minister Pashinyan succeeded in stopping the bloodshed.

However, there is more to it, although there is nothing more important than saving human lives. Nonetheless, there are other critical aspects to it, namely: it is vital to create proper conditions for a long-term settlement in the region. These conditions can be created only if both sides accept the existing arrangements as long-term and appreciate the advantages, I want to emphasise this, offered by peaceful coexistence, and everyone is interested in this.

Azerbaijan is interested in normal transport links with Nakhichevan. It is interested in deblocking connection lines. One of the first tasks facing Armenia is to create an effective economic life and effective interaction in the region going forward, including with Azerbaijan. Armenia is basically interested in this. Interested in unfreezing its relations with Turkey and giving them a modern dimension.

In either case, it should lead us to achieving our main goal which is to create a safe environment for the coexistence of the two states and for economic growth. Is it possible to accomplish this or not? It may well be. We did our best to stop the bloodshed, and not only this. Our peacekeepers are performing their duty in a dignified manner, and over 50,000 refugees have returned home.

Overall, the situation in the conflict zone remains as it is with no major hostilities. Unfortunately, some incidents do happen, and unfortunately, people die sometimes. Maybe it is difficult to conjure up a completely idealistic picture after so many years of confrontation. The most important thing to do now is to finally settle the situation at the border. Of course, not much can be accomplished without Russia's participation. Perhaps, we do not need anyone else but the two sides and Russia. Why? There are

simple and pragmatic things, such as the maps that show where the border between the Soviet republics was in the Soviet period, which are kept by the General Staff of the Russian army.

Based on these documents, both sides should sit down and talk. There are things that require compromises on both sides: some things need to be straightened out and some exchanges could be made but both sides must recognise that a deal is beneficial for both sides. Can this be done or not? It can. But, of course, we are also in favour of establishing a multilateral format, such as, say, step up the Minsk Group's activities. We are working on this, including with our partners.

Most importantly, we should achieve our main goal which is to ensure security and to build relations in a positive manner. So far, we have been able to achieve our goals. Of course, we need to look to the future and see what will happen next. It is not about a declaration on a possible extension of the Russian contingent's stay; it is not about that. The point is to properly align relations between these two countries. This is what matters. I hope we will be able to get it done.

**Fyodor Lukyanov:** Igor Istomin. He has been holding his hand up for a long time.

**Vladimir Putin:** We must wrap up, it is already after 9 o'clock.

**Fyodor Lukyanov:** Yes, we are wrapping up.

**Igor Istomin:** Good evening, Mr President. Igor Istomin, MGIMO [Moscow State Institute of International Relations].

In your speech – I hope I am quoting you correctly – you said that the reforming or cancellation of some international organisations

may be on the agenda. In this context, I would like to ask you about the prospects for the Council of Europe and the OSCE, as well as prospects for Russia's participation in them. Thank you.

**Vladimir Putin:** In general, if these organisations work for implementing the goals that they were established for in a broad sense, there are prospects for their existence. The Council of Europe is primarily a European question. The same largely applies to the OSCE. But if they work exclusively with the post-Soviet space, trying to lecture the newly-formed independent states that appeared in the post-Soviet space, their prospects are limited. I can assure you that if Russia were to withdraw from one of these organisations it would be interesting to see what would happen with them as regards the participation of other countries.

Nobody needs moral preaching. So, we need to take a broader look at humanitarian issues and cooperation with the Council of Europe, or security issues in Europe in the broad sense of this word.

But let's finish our session. There's a colleague with his hand up in the centre.

**Muhammad Athar Javed:** Thank you very much. Dr Athar Javed from Pakistan House, Islamabad.

Actually, with all due respect, of course, the counterterrorism campaign is very important internationally, and it will continue. My question to you, Mr President, is about the ongoing negotiations in Pakistan, Iran, Russia and China. And, of course, Pakistan facilitated this Doha process as well. In the wake of NATO failing completely on almost every adventure –

or misadventure – they made, including Afghanistan, of course, the mess is their responsibility. But if the Taliban manages to prevent drug trade, secures its territory against ISIS and terminates all the infrastructure, what will be the reaction or the response from Russia, China and Pakistan?

Of course, it is not about recognition only. It is, as you said very rightfully, important to empower the Taliban on the ground economically, so the continuity should award social areas, like doctors, salaries, nurses, education, teachers or anything else related to social factors.

I think I would really appreciate if you could, say, shed light on this one, on how important it is to again wrap the mess of NATO. But it is important for the region, that is why I think Russia and China should take the lead on this account as well. Thank you very much for this opportunity.

**Vladimir Putin:** As for the mess created by NATO, I do not think we should comment on this because everyone has already expressed his opinion on what the United States and President Biden have done. I have already said what I think about this. I think he did the right thing by deciding to withdraw the troops. But, of course, now we should look to the future. But because they were the one to create this mess, as you said, they shouldn't shed the responsibility for what is going on there and for the future. And they have plenty of instruments, primarily financial ones, for exerting influence on the situation in Afghanistan. Europe has them, too. One shouldn't look down at this territory, as our colleagues in the Council of Europe often do. They are also responsible for what happened there. So everyone should join in helping the Afghan people.

However, we must still avoid repeating the mistakes of the past. Nobody should impose on the Afghan people what the Soviet Union or the United States tried to inflict on them. Incidentally, the Soviet Union was even more prudent there and this is why the word “shuravi” as the Soviets were called, does not have a negative connotation. The region’s countries are even more interested in normalisation, and Russia will do all it can to achieve it.

We see the Taliban trying to fight the extreme radicals and organisations such as ISIS, which leave no doubt as to their terrorist intentions. Yes, they were their fellow travellers, we understand that – after all, we are proceeding from reality – momentary fellow travellers. Now they are attacking the Taliban.

But the thing is the Taliban needs to establish relations with all ethnic and religious groups, with all political and public organisations inside Afghanistan.

Let’s start with the ethnic component. Yes, the Taliban is mostly made up of Pushtun groups. But there are also the Tajiks – from 40 to 47 percent, according to various estimates. This is a lot, isn’t it? There are Uzbeks, the Hazara, and so on. If we look at this component, then right, I know of course that these groups have their representatives at the ruling level, in the government, but they are not playing the leading roles, and these people do aspire to take important positions in the national governance system. This balance must be found.

We are not pushing them, we are just saying how this is seen, in principle, from the outside. We are doing our best to influence them to have regard for the appetites of the people we are

in contact with – and we are in contact, by the way, with all political forces in Afghanistan, and we are establishing sufficiently stable relations with everyone. But we would like acceptable compromises to be found so that the problems confronting the country are not being resolved with weapons alone, as it has been. Women's interests should be taken into consideration as well.

After all, Afghanistan is aspiring to be a modern state. And it seems to me that Pakistan plays a no less important part in this than Russia or China. This is why we are interested in promoting cooperation, including with your country, to achieve a common, desirable result.

There is no doubt that Russia is interested in Afghanistan at long last emerging from the unending, permanent civil war. The people of that long-suffering – without exaggeration – country must feel safe within their national borders and have a chance for development and prosperity. We will seek in every way to attain this goal.

**Fyodor Lukyanov:** Mr President, thank you for the conversation. I will relieve you of your duties as a moderator, because it is time.

**Vladimir Putin:** I am not claiming your salary.

**Fyodor Lukyanov:** Well, just in case, pre-emptively.

I think we had an exceedingly interesting session because we covered practically all matters. Thank you very much.

In the course of this session, I was thinking that we should probably stay away from New York for a while. Next year, the Valdai Club will probably meet in Sochi again. We very much

hope that everything will be good, and we will see you like this, in person, and talk – only our conversation will last about five hours then. Thank you.

**Vladimir Putin:** Thank you very much.

There is no need to hold the closing session in New York; I am saying this without irony. It is fun to visit New York, and some platforms there... It is good to visit Afghanistan, and it makes sense to do that. Other places, like Europe, as well, and to discuss issues that concern Europe most of all such as energy and climate. Why not? I know forums are being held one way or another.

**Fyodor Lukyanov:** We are holding them in many places.

**Vladimir Putin:** Yes. New York is an option, too.

**Fyodor Lukyanov:** Thank you.

**Vladimir Putin:** Are you laughing? Do you think this is impossible?  
(*Laughter.*)

Colleagues, I want to thank you. Indeed, you have been coming to Russia for many years now and continue to show interest in our country. This gives my colleagues and me an opportunity – I am not the only one at this forum, our ministers attend as well, such as the Foreign Minister and the mayors, and the Mayor of Moscow spoke recently – to share our vision of Russia in the modern world and where we are headed. In my opinion, this has a positive practical outcome.

Our colleagues travel abroad occasionally. A Deputy Prime Minister returned from the United States recently and had the following to say: “I was surprised to find out during



my conversations with top officials from the US administration or a national security adviser that there is a lack of information.” That is strange. Maybe they do not have enough trust in the CIA, I am not sure. But, in fact, such forums are much sought after, since they provide an opportunity to have a candid conversation, to have a sense of each other and to give the people who make decisions at different levels of power an opportunity to be aware of what is being discussed, including at the Valdai Club.

Thank you very much.