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Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's interview with Solovyov Live YouTube channel, Moscow, December 27, 2021



Vladimir Solovyov: We are like three-winged birds. The Russian Foreign Ministry operates on three fronts: on the first one, it communicates with our American partners, the second one is NATO, and the third are the Europeans, no matter what they call themselves (the OSCE is a bit more than just the Europeans). What matters the most to us in the extremely challenging dialogue at this stage? We launched it using methods that are totally at odds with the customary ways of Russian diplomacy. This approach proved to be very effective. Which of these fronts has the most importance?

Sergey Lavrov: What matters the most, as President of Russia Vladimir Putin has said, is that there is less empty talk, so that they don't water down our proposals in endless discussions, which is something the West knows how to do

and is notorious for. These diplomatic efforts must yield results. Even more importantly, these results must be achieved within a determined timeframe. We did not put forward any ultimatums. However, engaging in never-ending talks during which the West once again will make ambiguous promises, and will then definitely double-cross us down the road – we do not need that. In this context, the United States is our main negotiating party. It is with the United States that we will hold the main round of talks right after the New Year holidays.

Speaking on NATO's behalf, its Secretary General and Chair of the Russia-NATO Council Jens Stoltenberg proposed holding a Russia-NATO Council meeting right after that, the very next day. Of course, they did so at the initiative of the United States. This organisational structure reflects the projects we have submitted and presented to the United States and NATO for review. I am referring to the Russia-US treaty on security guarantees and a Russia-NATO agreement on limiting risks and threats on the European stage (hopefully, not a stage of military operations). These documents set forth specific proposals. You have seen them. They present our vision of NATO and the Russian Federation, with its allies, making their respective armed forces less of a threat.

Vladimir Solovyov: Who will lead the talks?

Sergey Lavrov: An interagency delegation with the participation of the Foreign Ministry and the military. There is no lack of understanding on behalf of the United States. As for NATO, we have warned them that since they have put all the military-to-military initiatives on hold since 2014 and reduced our contacts to sporadic telephone calls to the Chief of the General Staff, the conversation will make sense only if the military are directly involved. Our delegation will include high-ranking army representatives. We asked the other side to confirm whether they will do the same. We are waiting for their reply.

Vladimir Solovyov: Overall, NATO has been acting in quite a strange manner. By and large, we don't talk to them. There are virtually no contacts. They expelled our representatives. The ties have been severed almost entirely. Jens Stoltenberg's statements caused an international crisis. He said that if need may be, NATO would be ready to deploy its military infrastructure to the east of Germany. President of Belarus Alexander Lukashenko answered him, which caused an outpouring of criticism against him.

Sergey Lavrov: Yes, Jens Stoltenberg has a Nordic mentality. He makes quite simple statements. Yes, this is true.

Vladimir Solovyov: How will you deal with him?

Sergey Lavrov: We will not be dealing with him. I would like to repeat that we have proposed a Russia-NATO agreement. It will not be necessarily

drafted at the Russia-NATO Council, although this is not impossible either. We will not be dealing with Jens Stoltenberg, who is, technically, executive manager of the NATO Secretariat. We will be negotiating with the top members of the bloc, primarily the United States. It is logical that US President Biden reacted to our initiative days after we advanced it. He mentioned the negotiators: the United States plus the four leading Western countries. This provoked an outcry from the other NATO members, including Ukraine, which said that it must take part in the talks. What matters to us is not the form of our contacts with NATO, but the essence of the talks. First of all, they must be held professionally and responsibly in the military-to-military format.

Vladimir Solovyov: NATO is an amorphous organisation. They say they cannot do anything without a consensus decision.

Sergey Lavrov: That is none of our business. It is their internal matter. We do not care about the Washington Treaty, including Article 5, which stipulates collective defence. If NATO were a defence alliance, as Stoltenberg has been shouting from the rooftops, it would not have expanded eastward. NATO has become a purely geopolitical project aimed at taking over the territories orphaned by the collapse of the Warsaw Treaty Organisation and the Soviet Union. This is what it is doing now. And we cannot sit on our hands when they are approaching “the doorstep of our house,” as President Putin has said.

Vladimir Solovyov: What about the declared right of each country to choose their allies independently? They are using this argument all the time.

Sergey Lavrov: They are just trying to prop themselves up. It is an unscrupulous attempt made through foul means to use a document that is based on compromise. Not a single “brick” can be removed from that compromise without bringing it down. This is what they are doing. Even the 1990 Charter of Paris for a New Europe says that all states are free to choose their own security arrangements, including the alliances they join. But it also says that while doing this they must respect the principle of indivisible security.

Vladimir Solovyov: That is, as Vladimir Putin has said on the gas issue, “they lie all the time”?

Sergey Lavrov: They are telling half-truths, which is probably worse than outright lies, because they are trying to present their position as legally faultless. But legal is not a term that can be used in this case. All these documents, including the Paris Charter and the documents of the 1999 OSCE summit in Istanbul are political pledges. And the 1997 Russia-NATO Founding Act is a political document as well. All these political commitments made publicly at the highest level not to strengthen their security to the detriment of others' security

and not to deploy substantial armed forces have been destroyed systematically many times over, including during the five waves of NATO eastward expansion carried out contrary to their pledges, as President Putin has pointed out. Therefore, this time we demand – this is the only option – legally binding security guarantees. Trust but verify.

You have mentioned the OSCE: that organisation's striving to posture itself on the international stage is a separate subject. Back in 1975, when the Helsinki Final Act of the then Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe was signed, US President Gerald Ford said solemnly and even pompously: "History will judge this Conference not by what we say here today, but by what we do tomorrow – not by the promises we make, but by the promises we keep."

Vladimir Solovyov: That's wise.

Sergey Lavrov: The very truth itself, I would say. All our actions are guided by this legacy of one of the great American presidents.

Vladimir Solovyov: At the same time, Jens Stoltenberg keeps claiming that NATO never promised Russia that there would be no eastward expansion, alleging that he heard this from Mikhail Gorbachev. I showed this video to Mikhail Gorbachev, who tells me: "What do you mean there were no promises? What about James Baker? On February 9, 1990, he gave me this promise. We had this conversation, there are written records, and the transcripts are available." For these people, nothing matters unless there is a paper trail. Did they promise us that there would be no eastward expansion of NATO? The Americans keep repeating this narrative all the time.

Sergey Lavrov: Of course, they did. Only recently, I read the memoirs of a British diplomat who was involved in the talks, including on the reunification of Germany from a NATO perspective, on having no nuclear weapons to the east of the line where they were deployed at the time. He says that yes, they honestly promised that there would be no expansion of NATO, but this was not what they meant. They were driven by the historical opportunity to build a new Europe free from confrontation and so forth. This is what Zbigniew Brzezinski told one of his colleagues in all honesty: "We tricked them."

Vladimir Solovyov: Under Boris Yeltsin, Russia did not demand any written commitments either. On the contrary, during a visit to Poland we agreed...

Sergey Lavrov: This is all that there was to our relations with the West when the Soviet Union was coming apart and we were building new relations between us. President Vladimir Putin has mentioned this many times. There was

an unprecedented level of trust and an enormous desire to be friends, if not allies, as Vladimir Putin likes to say. However, we now see that all this was a mistake. You cannot take anything these people say on trust.

Vladimir Solovyov: The person who used to head the Russian Foreign Ministry, and is now a retiree living in Florida – his surname is Kozyrev – made a bombastic statement that at this stage Russia must join NATO. How come Russia does not want to be part of the family of civilised nations?

Sergey Lavrov: For many Russian politicians, primarily those in the opposition, the West is an undisputable ideal, an unchallenged leader to be followed in everything. For them, there is nothing bad about the West, and they fail to notice the damage the West causes around the world when it destroys countries and shatters their statehood. Some just want to fall into line with what is going on. Why look overseas to Florida? I read about this every day. The Presidential Executive Office provides us a digest of publications from the Russian media, including Meduza, Republic, and Novaya Gazeta. What they write...

Vladimir Solovyov: Didn't Mikhail Bulgakov say: "Don't read..."

Sergey Lavrov: But this is not about the communist...

Vladimir Solovyov: It's basically the same thing, just the other way around.

Sergey Lavrov: Quite a while ago it struck me that just as in the Soviet times, I learned to understand what an article is about by simply reading its headline. You can now treat many media publications this way. For example, the Republic or Novaya Gazeta tend to extol the West in their articles. A prominent Russian opposition figure wrote on what the West tried to portray as a crisis this past spring on the border with Ukraine, when we were holding regular exercises (there was much talk about it at the time around the world). But the exercise came to an end, and the troops returned to the places of their permanent deployment. This is how this was presented: "See, Putin got scared. He got a phone call from Joe Biden, and immediately withdrew the troops." The writer is a serious person who used to be part of our political establishment and was viewed as an interesting character. By the way, he took part in several shows of yours. Novaya Gazeta then published a long article titled "The fate of an outcast. Where will the Russian foreign policy take us." Of course, this was about the stubborn Russian Federation unwilling to come to terms with its diminished international role. It lost the Cold War, and that's all there is to it. You must show more modesty after that. You lost, so stay where you are. The historical comparisons in this article included post-WWII Germany and Japan. They lost,

accepted this fact, and received a “wonderful democracy” in return. These are the words of a former deputy foreign minister from the time you have mentioned. By the way, he worked a lot on the Kuril Islands during the talks with Tokyo.

Vladimir Solovyov: No surprise there.

Sergey Lavrov: There is no shortage of revelations of this kind. Treating the West as the holder of the ultimate truth is quite a serious matter.

Vladimir Solovyov: Many people had the same mistaken beliefs. At the very beginning of his presidential term, Vladimir Putin said that Russia did not object to different NATO accession terms, ones that would be equitable and partner-like. Are they offering such terms to us? Is there any possible situation when Russia could join NATO?

Sergey Lavrov: Of course, not. I cannot imagine such a situation because the entire process does not revolve around NATO and the European Union. It revolves around the fact that the West does not want any rivals with a more or less comparable level of influence on the international stage. This explains the hysteria regarding the rise of China. Well, China has risen because it accepted global economic and financial rules of the game, introduced by the West. Acting in line with this globalisation and Western rules, it has outplayed the West on its own field. Today, Washington and Brussels are demanding that all regulations of the World Trade Organisation be changed, and the WTO overhauled. They are saying openly that the United States and Europe should work on this and that all others should not even think about this. We will tell you in due time what you need to do. I don't even see any ideology here. President Putin has repeatedly said that this is not so much an ideology as it is a struggle for influence.

Vladimir Solovyov: Napoleon said that war is all about geography, first and foremost. And politics is all about geography, first and foremost.

Sergey Lavrov: Yes, that's right.

Vladimir Solovyov: Does this mean that we are enemies? Does it mean that NATO sees us as enemies, and that it simply wants to destroy us?

Sergey Lavrov: This life and geography can take on the form of adversity. But it can also be rivalry or competition. I believe that if the West was ready for fair competition, it would be an optimal way out of the current confrontation.

Vladimir Solovyov: Then it wouldn't be the West anymore.

Sergey Lavrov: Yes, it wouldn't be the West anymore. They now want to change the rules of globalisation and the World Trade Organisation because

China is leading the way under these regulations. China will become the largest power by 2030, in terms of all parameters, if it retains the current pace.

Vladimir Solovyov: Since we are talking about the WTO, now we are hearing how shameful it is that they imposed sanctions but, instead of dropping on our knees in tears, we dared to retaliate with our own measures. They have actually calculated how much money we owe them.

Sergey Lavrov: The WTO is not involved in this.

Vladimir Solovyov: But they complained to the WTO.

Sergey Lavrov: The World Trade Organisation must follow its own procedures. Right now, it is pretty much paralysed. The dispute resolution body was essentially inactive and did not work until recently. When China inundated this body with completely substantiated and fair complaints against the United States and its unfair competition practices, the United States took advantage of procedural ploys and started blocking any new appointees to this body. As a result, it could never meet the quorum requirement.

Vladimir Solovyov: Now Europeans have addressed them. They are saying: "What are you doing, Russians? You caused us enormous damage." Even though we had warned them. Joe Biden twisted their arm, admitting that Europe did not want to impose sanctions. And now it turns out that we were telling the truth.

Sergey Lavrov: We don't even have to discuss this matter. It was a shameful act on behalf of the European Union. I feel sorry for the politicians who decided to publicly make this kind of statements complaining against Russia. It is simply beyond the pale.

Vladimir Solovyov: Everybody was saying: "Who do the Russians think they are? The economy is practically invisible. How dare they write to the Americans with their demands?" Everybody who looks up to the West as if it were the sun without spots claimed they would not even speak to us or deign to read our proposal. "Who do you think you are? You are about to be eaten for breakfast." At the same time, as you said, Americans did not say no. They are studying it carefully. Certain topics have been outlined for the dialogue to happen right after the holidays, very soon. Who will represent Russia in this dialogue? And who will represent the United States? It seems that the Americans are not unanimous on this matter and there are discrepancies in Jake Sullivan's stance and in Anthony Blinken's comments and views (they may be stylistic discrepancies, but they seem to exist).

Sergey Lavrov: We will announce that. I can say that the representatives will be from the Foreign Ministry and the Defence Ministry. We are aware of the

Americans' plans. They are aware of ours. I think these plans will become public shortly.

Vladimir Solovyov: Are we preparing for these talks every day?

Sergey Lavrov: We have been ready since the Soviet Union.

Vladimir Solovyov: Although not all of us happened to be pioneers.

Sergey Lavrov: Joking aside, national security and the problems that President Putin highlighted did not appear yesterday, and there is a need to establish a special research institute to study them. A large group of professionals are dealing with them, and it is this group that will be put in charge of preparing our position, holding the talks and evaluating their results. As President Putin said yesterday in the 'Moscow. Kremlin. Putin' show, we will assess these talks and determine the measures we need to take on the basis of a report prepared by professionals.

Vladimir Solovyov: Speaking about professionals, the Americans are angry that we have made the issue public. They continue to say that they would like the talks to be held quietly. On the other hand, they say that they have their complaints as well. At the same time, different people who have recently held senior positions, such as Michael McFaul, who had been appointed US Ambassador to Russia but acted as the ambassador of Ekho Moskvy, which explains his ineffectiveness, is saying that Russia must be forced to return Crimea and pull out of Donbass. In other words, they want to crown Alexey Navalny and to divide the country. Are we waiting for a list of demands, which will turn any talks into an absolute farce, or do we understand that this will not happen?

Sergey Lavrov: President Putin explained why we announced our initiative publicly, and the Foreign Ministry has already commented on that. We are aware of the Western ability to backpedal on any uncomfortable issues. When the sides play fair, the diplomatic practice provides for meeting to submit proposals and waiting for the other party to counter them with their own proposals. The proposals are studied, following which negotiators get together to coordinate a common basis that is subsequently formulated as a document. But this only happens when both parties want to come to an agreement. In this case, we suspect that if we use the traditional method they will backpedal on the main element of our proposals, our unconditional demand that NATO will not expand eastward any further. It is a matter of concern not only and not so much in the West. Our non-systemic opposition and even some parliamentary opposition groups are pointing out the violation of all diplomatic norms. You have mentioned Ekho Moskvy. A prominent radio host (who is living outside Russia,

as far as I know) has said recently that this is a diplomatic faux pas, and that decent people don't do this.

We are waiting for the Americans to respond to our proposals. We will definitely work based on the President's clear and unambiguous instructions.

Vladimir Solovyov: An evasive answer.

Sergey Lavrov: Why?

Vladimir Solovyov: It has only increased my anxiety. It is alarming when the diplomatic department uses such terms as military and military technological response.

Sergey Lavrov: The President of Russia mentioned "military-technical reciprocal measures."

Vladimir Solovyov: Yes, but Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov said that military and military technological...

Sergey Lavrov: The President of Russia said "military-technical measures." As I have already said, he emphasised during your show that our choice of response measures would depend on the report presented by our military professionals.

Vladimir Solovyov: President Vladimir Putin once said that sometimes, when listening to Sergey Lavrov, he catches himself thinking that it is Sergey Shoigu who is speaking... I do understand that the times are tough. As we prepare to talk to the United States, we are probably seeking to anticipate their moves, right? This is a very serious and challenging issue.

Sergey Lavrov: We need to see what they have to offer first. At the end of the day, everything will be on the table. I read in a Russian media outlet (the Republic, or Novaya Gazeta) that Russia "piled up" too many demands: give us this, and do not go there, and do not deploy anything there. But is Russia ready to take any reciprocal steps? All talks are about having the partners sitting on opposite sides of the table meet each other halfway. People who write this forget an essential thing: we have long done our part, and probably even more than we had to. They, in turn, have come so close that they are just a step away. We need to start from where we were in 1997. If we need to meet each other halfway, this means that we still can move slightly to the left.

Vladimir Solovyov: Wandering off to the left in Russian is synonymous to having an affair on the side. This is a dangerous thing to do. Or our pivot to the left can take us all the way to communism.

Sergey Lavrov: It is every man's right to get it outside.

Vladimir Solovyov: But where will this take us? What if they adopt a

“sanctions bill from hell,” just as one of the participants in my show has said: “They have no phone lines up there in heaven, so calling from hell is all they can do.” Kamala Harris has woken up and promises sanctions like we have never seen... Will we turn into North Korea? Will people be unable to travel abroad? Vladimir Putin will not be able to do his shopping on Champs Elysees, as the German Defence Minister promised him. I can picture Vladimir Putin on Champs Elysees, surrounded by Cossacks. She was probably referring to the early 19th century. Still, this is quite an unpleasant situation. They are putting pressure. Does this mean that the Iron Curtain and the Soviet Union are back?

Sergey Lavrov: Sometimes all these misgivings regarding the Russian Federation are nothing more than hysteria. Not all suffer from it. I do not see any hysteria of this kind among prominent, reputable leaders. I have mentioned the Geneva meeting between Vladimir Putin and Joe Biden several times already. They had a serious conversation on specific steps and understood very well that we have diverging views on key matters. Still, they talked to each other as serious, adult people and seasoned politicians, and at the end of the day, managed to outline directions for dialogue. We have not had such dialogue for many years.

People in NATO are not “serious adults.” The alliance sought to revive communication channels between Moscow and Washington, but at the same time moved to sever these ties. Jens Stoltenberg expelled eight people. We are now limited to 10 employees, including technical staff. We cannot have anyone beyond this number in Brussels. We cannot work this way. There are people who understand the need for dialogue no matter the circumstances, but there are also those who think otherwise. You have mentioned Michael McFaul. I can name quite a few other people, including both former and current officials in the Baltic states and Poland (I am not even speaking of Ukraine). They respond to anything Russia does in a hysterical manner and without even trying to get to the bottom of the issue, see it as we see it, or hear our arguments. Sometimes, this hysteria reminds me of our opponents as portrayed by the Kukryniksy cartoonists. Many are those who want to reach these heights and stay there. I do hope that our Western partners show common sense. Despite all the electoral upheavals and the consequences they lead to, as we can now see in Germany where you have a hedgehog and a timid deer pulling the same sledge, mature politicians are always needed.

Vladimir Solovyov: So we will not turn into North Korea in terms of being fully isolated from the West, prohibiting travel and deliveries of goods?

Sergey Lavrov: I cannot answer for crazy people – this is where they are

pushing the Western countries. I have not seen people of this kind calling the shots in the West, at least for now. I cannot vouch for crazy people trying to whip up hysteria in the Baltic states, Ukraine and Poland. I am certain that even if this unbelievable scenario does materialise in one way or another, we will find an answer.

President of Russia Vladimir Putin recently had a conversation with Prime Minister of Luxembourg Xavier Bettel. Foreign Minister of Luxembourg Jean Asselborn, who was appointed to this position at about the same time as I was, has been saying publicly during our conversations that sanctions do not make any sense. Still, there are those who fail to see that every day Russia proves its ability to resolve all the issues it faces and will not change the way it lives and what it believes just because the West “got angry” and blocked access to technology. The MC-21 plane did take off, even if it happened 18 months later than planned.

Vladimir Solovyov: Won't the internal political situation devolve as well? People are apprehensive. If we start looking for enemies...

Sergey Lavrov: Russia will become a besieged fortress? I am sure that Russian leaders have no such plans. President of Russia Vladimir Putin always reiterates, in his remarks, his commitment to expanding opportunities for the unimpeded development of society and democratic principles.

Vladimir Solovyov: Who is a democracy now? Is it us, or the countries that hold “forums for democracy,” and choose convenient partners? Russia and China are not invited, labelled as authoritarian states.

Sergey Lavrov: This is immaterial now. Who is a democracy and who isn't. At least for me, these terms have lost their meaning. You mentioned the Summit for Democracy convened by US President Joe Biden. If you look closely at the list of participants, they were not even selected according to the criteria of what is called American democracy, what they consider exemplary for democratic states. The overwhelming majority are those who unquestioningly follow the US policy line. Plus a few others that have their own approach but want to have good relations with the United States. In fact, everyone wants to have good relations with other countries; it all depends on the price.

Now plans have been announced to promote the Summit for Democracy next year, to establish an organisation. This is an overt bid to develop an alternative to the UN, suggesting the old members are behind the times, conservatives and retrogrades, while they are forward-looking trailblazers carrying the “beacon of freedom.” It is going to be another attempt to move the

decision-making centre from universal platforms, where one needs to argue their position to their own platforms, where no one really disputes what they say. This means truth is unlikely to be born there.

Vladimir Solovyov: You know the United States very well. When we put forward our demands, when we say, let's stop seeing each other as enemies, we are actually suggesting they change the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA), which was passed by Congress and the Senate. We understand that this is not even up to the President.

Sergey Lavrov: We aren't saying this.

Vladimir Solovyov: We are proposing that we stop seeing each other as enemies.

Sergey Lavrov: But that's different. We have never asked anyone to lift the sanctions. We will never humiliate ourselves like that.

Vladimir Solovyov: I mean, not seeing us as enemies means changing their laws. But Joe Biden cannot come to an agreement with either Congress or the Senate.

Sergey Lavrov: We have never asked them to stop seeing us as enemies. We said we believe that neither Russia nor the United States have any compelling reasons to be enemies.

Vladimir Solovyov: Diplomats are polite people. But this still reads as "they have designated us as enemies at the legislative level."

Sergey Lavrov: We aren't going to dangle after them, asking them to abolish these laws.

Vladimir Solovyov: Joe Biden will sign this, but Congress and the Senate, united in their anti-Russia policy line, will ask him why he signed it, kind of like what happened with the Iran nuclear deal.

Sergey Lavrov: It is impossible to guarantee. Vienna negotiations should resume before the end of the year (now that the Catholic Christmas holidays have ended). Iran has made its return to the deal conditional on several requirements. Along with lifting the sanctions against Iran, Washington would have to faithfully fulfil its obligations under the deal and not interfere with any economic projects implemented by Tehran and its foreign partners if they fully comply with the deal. In addition to that, Iran proposed stipulating that the United States can never again withdraw from the agreement they would restore. The Americans said they couldn't do this, exactly for the reason you mentioned. What you just said is absolutely true. Many sanctions against Russia, including CAATSA and the act to support economic stability and democracy in Ukraine,

and whatever legislation that has been approved by Congress is not subject to change by the President and his administration. Considering what is happening there now, the anti-Russia bacchanalia is working as a unifying factor. I believe we need to forget it for the sake of pride and pragmatism, and concentrate on making our own composite wings for our aircraft and other things. We already produce enough food to meet our needs.

Vladimir Solovyov: They are not capable of delivering on their obligations. A Russian border guard or a Russian military base is a real guarantee that NATO won't spread to the East. You can't just keep coming closer. That is what the Americans are doing it: first, they move the military infrastructure and then present it to us as a fact of life.

Sergey Lavrov: This is precisely the red line. Anyone with ears will hear. Same with the eyes. President Vladimir Putin stated this in no uncertain terms.

Vladimir Solovyov: They are talking about Russia's military build-up near the border with Ukraine. They aren't sure how many troops. It's either 94,000 or 120,000. They aren't sure about the distance, either, whether it is 200 km or 400 km. I asked the former Ukrainian ambassador how many Ukrainian troops are there and how close they are to our border. He said it was irrelevant, because we are devils incarnate.

Sergey Lavrov: While they are angels incarnate. It doesn't surprise me. The gall of adopting the current positions of the West and NATO. The Baltic States, Poland and Ukraine are clearly stirring it up. We are on our territory. President Putin made it exceedingly clear for our friends during the news conference, asking them to imagine that what we are now witnessing on the western borders of the Russian Federation was unfolding near the US border with Mexico or Canada.

Ukraine is being loaded up with weapons. They are boasting about the \$2.5 billion in ammunition and systems, including offensive weapons, supplied since 2014. It was reported that anti-tank Javelin systems and ammunition worth of another \$100 million were supplied in October-November. I do not rule out the possibility of them planning to stoke militaristic sentiment in order to start a small war and then blame Russia and impose new sanctions with the goal of undermining our ability to compete. Just yesterday I read in the news that someone in Europe asked why they should wait until one starts and suggested that the sanctions be imposed preventively, and if there are no hostilities, lift them. Clearly, no one will ever lift them.

Since we are discussing the situation in Europe, a few words about the EU

are in order. Federica Mogherini headed EU diplomacy in 2016. She spearheaded a policy towards Russia which was based on five principles. It was approved and acted upon. One of these principles was to break our neighbours away from the Russian Federation. There was a need to “work” with our civil society (we know what this means). The main principle was that the EU will normalise relations after Russia fulfills the Minsk Agreements. Anyone who read them will know that this is a case of political schizophrenia.

Ms Mogherini left office after her term expired, and her successor Josep Borrell is now heading the European foreign policy service. I have known him for a long time now since he was the Foreign Minister of Spain. He came to us and said that he wanted a new constructive policy towards Russia. After his visit to Moscow, he took significant heat simply because we provided clarifications about Alexey Navalny and everything else, including Germany and Europe's role in inflating this lie, the failure to present any facts or answer elementary questions, including the questions that the opposition asked in the German parliament. The questions were clear and straightforward, while the previous German government's attempts to walk away from honest answers were utterly shameful. When Josep Borrell finished drafting a new initiative, the European Council chose to leave “Federica Mogherini's five principles” in place (whereby Russia “must” fulfil the Minsk Agreements) and solemnly proclaimed a new approach which is to “push back, contain and engage.” I pictured the moves. Pardon me, but this is political Kama Sutra.

Vladimir Solovyov: You have to explain it again and again. You explained this to a countless number of US Secretaries of State, who seemed to begin from scratch. Now you will need to teach European diplomats. For example, it turns out that nobody can read. Like in the case of the Minsk agreements, when the whole of Europe claims that Russia is not a guarantor but a party to the conflict. This is the Ukrainisation of European and US politics.

Is there any use in talking with the Ukrainians about anything? I am referring to the political establishment. It is no longer possible to comment on the fuss created by Vladimir Zelensky and Pavel Klimkin, who pretends to be a foreign minister, even if he goes by a different last name now. I sometimes think that while he has many faces, Klimkin's essence never changes.

Sergey Lavrov: It really is bad. Vladimir Zelensky, who ran for the presidency as Vasily Goloborodko from the Servant of the People comedy television series, who was progressive minded and called for liberating people from the oligarchs, for respecting the rights of Russians and other national

minorities, and, most importantly, for bringing peace to Donbass, doesn't differ much from Arseny Yatsenyuk. When he was prime minister, he travelled abroad, where he spoke about building a wall with barbed wire and a ditch, a project everyone soon forgot about. And Yatsenyuk referred to the people of Donbass as subhumans.

Vladimir Solovyov: Subhumans, this is what he said in his address.

Sergey Lavrov: Zelensky said in a recent interview, "Well, these are species." And a little earlier, he, the President of Ukraine got emotional and said, "if anyone in Ukraine feels like a Russian, they should go to Russia." He said that, and no one in the West, in any European capital or in the United States, has commented on that outrageous statement.

Vladimir Solovyov: He described as "species" those against whom the National Security and Defence Council of Ukraine adopted sanctions.

Sergey Lavrov: That is, nearly everyone in Donbass.

Vladimir Solovyov: He was asked, "That is, you think they are not human?" And he replied: "Do you think they are? No, they are species."

Sergey Lavrov: In principle, he is a "big democrat." Those who are analysing the developments in Ukraine point out that he is waging a war against the oligarchs by adopting an unprecedented law that permits political solutions to deal with opponents on the right, as well as the left, like Viktor Medvedchuk.

We have asked our Western colleagues many times to comment on these developments. Their comments are funny. In October 2021, a Ukraine-EU summit was held in Brussels, where Russia was referred to as the aggressor and a party to the conflict, while Ukraine was patted on the back for implementing the Minsk agreements. Moreover, they demanded that Russia ensure the operation of economic enterprises in Donbass and supply electricity and water to territories not controlled by the Ukrainian government, so that their residents can enjoy the same rights as people in the rest of Ukraine. If Russia does this, the EU will give priority support to the economic revival of these territories after their reunification with their "homeland." This is what they said in no uncertain terms.

Another interesting fact: after a meeting between Angela Merkel, Emmanuel Macron and Vladimir Zelensky, a statement was not issued by the Ukrainian press secretary, but by the German government spokesperson Steffen Seibert, who said that the parties were unanimous on the necessity of implementing the Minsk agreements, and that their unity will continue to determine their position in the Normandy format and on the Ukrainian crisis. In other words, Germany has accepted Kiev's interpretation, or rather distortion of

the Minsk agreements. It is a revealing statement.

We later asked the French about talking with Donetsk and Lugansk, as provided for in the Minsk agreements. They replied that they did not see anything in them that would stipulate consultations with “separatists.” This is exactly what they said. When we told them that three television channels had been closed on Zelensky’s orders in violation of Ukraine’s commitments within the framework of the OSCE, the Council of Europe and UNESCO, they replied that the decision was made in accordance with Ukrainian law.

Vladimir Solovyov: And what are we supposed to discuss with them?

Sergey Lavrov: This is how it works out. They are now advancing from all directions and requesting a Normandy format meeting. They are moving to advertise the so-called ten steps, included in the Normandy format in early December 2021, they have submitted a draft version to the United States and the Contact Group. This is simply a mockery of common sense. They are demanding that a ceasefire be quickly introduced.

Vladimir Solovyov: Whom are they urging?

Sergey Lavrov: Russia and Donbass.

Vladimir Solovyov: They should urge themselves.

Sergey Lavrov: In July 2020, it was agreed not to retaliate immediately in the event of any attack, but to calm down a bit, think it over and notify superiors. President of Russia Vladimir Putin commented on this. The republics issued the relevant orders the very next day when all this was agreed upon. Kiev issued no order and only made a statement distorting the gist of the agreement (I will not go into details). They urged Kiev several times to formalise the agreement in accordance with the law. This was eventually done. But later on, Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of Ukraine Valery Zaluzhny openly said that this was not right, and that every field commander personally decided whom to fire on and when. There are many bandits and “volunteer battalions” in the region, and it is easy to imagine what kind of people we are talking about.

Vladimir Solovyov: Add to this foreign private military companies...

Sergey Lavrov: And, finally, several days ago, they issued some half-baked balancing act of a statement. The document implies that they intend to fulfil this agreement, no matter what. I regularly watch Russian news reports from the Donbass section of the demarcation line. Numerous civilian facilities are hit, civilians are being killed, and people live under the constant threat of shelling. I listen to my partners who start talking about “separatists” and saying that they should be “reined in,” that they should not provoke Ukraine and shell its territory. And I ask them why there are no journalists working on the western

side of the demarcation line. They only show this section when a helmeted Vladimir Zelensky sporting a flak vest arrives for his latest acting job, and that's it. It's a shame.

When the migrant crisis was in its hot phase, Polish authorities did not allow journalists to work from the Polish section of the border, although journalists were quite eager to go there. This has something to do with freedom of speech and access to information. Nor do Ukrainian authorities want any journalists to work in the western section of the demarcation line because this would dispel the myth that self-defence fighters have shelled everything to the ground and wiped out civilians.

Vladimir Solovyov: How can someone speak about the Minsk Agreements and demand that they be fulfilled if Russia reads the Minsk Agreements differently from the other parties?

Sergey Lavrov: We read them literally as they are.

Vladimir Solovyov: Yes, but we are the only party that reads them literally as they are. The Americans, French and Germans support Ukraine's stance.

Sergey Lavrov: Still, the Americans are taking a different approach. During the meeting between the US President and the Russian President in Geneva, Joe Biden said that they want to help fulfil the Minsk Agreements and they do not want to interfere in the existing formats (which they also did not do when Donald Trump was president: there was a parallel dialogue between Vladislav Surkov and Kurt Volker) but they are ready to help. Joe Biden said that he understands that fulfilling the Minsk Agreements entails granting a certain degree of autonomy.

Vladimir Solovyov: But Vladimir Zelensky did not understand him. Is this why US media are now pressuring Zelensky? He is facing strong criticism from the media, which was not the case before.

Sergey Lavrov: Yes. Vladimir Zelensky acts recklessly quite often. They are afraid of this recklessness because simple foolishness (which the Western media are increasingly pointing out) may start a conflict that nobody needs.

Vladimir Solovyov: The UK said honestly that if anything starts in Ukraine they will leave immediately.

Sergey Lavrov: Evacuation. What else are the armed forces for?

Vladimir Solovyov: They will leave fast.

Sergey Lavrov: About the Minsk Agreements. It is the height of cynicism when our stance is presented as Russia's attempt to interpret the Minsk

Agreements in its own way and demand that Kiev fulfil Russia's interpretation.

Vladimir Solovyov: But who hears us?

Sergey Lavrov: Everybody. They just pretend they do not.

Vladimir Solovyov: If they are pretending what should be our next step? De facto, we do not want any meetings with them. We tell them to do what they committed to doing.

Sergey Lavrov: God is truth.

Vladimir Solovyov: I often hear people say this, especially people in the military: "God is not power. God is truth."

Sergey Lavrov: Because Alexander Nevsky was not only a diplomat but a military commander as well.

Vladimir Solovyov: Does it mean we will keep telling the truth consistently?

Sergey Lavrov: We must absolutely insist that the Minsk Agreements not be violated.

Vladimir Solovyov: Can we impose sanctions on the other parties? Russia has not even imposed a proper package of sanctions on Ukraine. Even when we announce them, we do not adhere to them.

Sergey Lavrov: That is a separate matter. Russia does not support sanctions. What is happening now is that diplomacy, the culture of dialogue and compromise are being completely replaced. Whenever the West does not like something, they go for sanctions and the European Union apes America's methods.

Vladimir Solovyov: We are also looking for new measures. Russian diplomacy has become aggressive and offensive this year, as we have wanted it to be for a long time. You shifted away from your signature polite and ironic style and toward a much more forceful way of asserting Russia's position. You released correspondence with your Western partners to catch them in a lie.

Sergey Lavrov: It is not an aggressive manner.

Vladimir Solovyov: I mean, compared to traditional diplomacy. You no longer restrain yourself from saying it like it is.

Sergey Lavrov: We never really restrained ourselves before. We were rather firm about the things that, as we believe, must be fundamental in negotiations between Russia and the West.

Vladimir Solovyov: But the Minsk agreements can collapse. How long are we going to wait patiently?

Sergey Lavrov: Russia is not interested in this. We are not going to

destroy them, but if someone else does, they will have to accept the consequences.

Vladimir Solovyov: That is, Russia will agree to meet in some version of the Normandy format?

Sergey Lavrov: Provided that they stop any funny business with us. This is what our partners are doing now, allegedly working with Kiev to persuade Ukraine to fulfil the agreements from two years ago. Everyone agrees to meet before they implement the Paris Summit decisions. We say, you implement the decisions first, and then we meet, because the other way around, the decisions of the Paris Summit and other leaders' meetings will be completely devalued.

Vladimir Solovyov: Is this Russia's position now? Not a step back?

Sergey Lavrov: Not a step back from the Minsk agreements. We have already taken a few steps back. First, even the Minsk agreements were a concession on our part. It was with great difficulty that we persuaded Donetsk and Lugansk to sign them, because it meant giving up eventual independence if the Minsk agreements are to be followed to the letter. Secondly, the Steinmeier formula was another huge concession, but we agreed. It was debated, and Petr Poroshenko refused to sign off on any special status before the elections there, cynically saying that if they elect the wrong person, why give them special status. It is revealing how a person treats their signature under the Minsk agreements. The formula implied that the status would be agreed in advance, and would take effect on election day, in a preliminary format, and become permanent from the date the observers release a final report confirming that the elections were honest and fair. This is all fine.

Vladimir Solovyov: Will you meet with the German Foreign Minister at some point?

Sergey Lavrov: I had a short telephone conversation with her.

Vladimir Solovyov: Will she come here?

Sergey Lavrov: Yes. We invited her. She said she would come.

Vladimir Solovyov: Did the conversation go well? She had made some harsh statements before.

Sergey Lavrov: We are polite people, despite what you have been saying about Russian diplomacy lately.

Vladimir Solovyov: Polite yet persistent.

Sergey Lavrov: When Vladimir Putin instructed me to represent the President of Russia at the G20 summit, I had a chance to talk to Olaf Scholz who accompanied Angela Merkel. She made such an unusual gesture – invited him to

meet the G20 members.

Vladimir Solovyov: But he has a different position.

Sergey Lavrov: The German system of governance has its own idiosyncrasies. I have read their programme concerning relations with Russia. It affirms the deep and diverse nature of ties with the Russian Federation, and interest in constructive cooperation. But then there is also the “annexation,” Crimea, civil society, human rights, added into the mix. An inherently eclectic programme by definition. We’ll see. It will all depend on the specific steps.

Vladimir Solovyov: We seem to be ramping things up again. Sometimes I have an urge to just say, guys, come on, it’s New Year’s. Let's party.

Sergey Lavrov: What are we ramping up, exactly?

Vladimir Solovyov: No, not us. Everything that is happening around us.

Sergey Lavrov: They don't celebrate the New Year. They had some champagne on December 25, and on January 1, they take a stroll along the river maybe and that's that. Our holidays begin on December 25 and end on January 13.

Vladimir Solovyov: We party on a grand scale.

Will the year 2022 be peaceful? Will it be a year of diplomacy or could it be a year of war?

Sergey Lavrov: I hope it will be a year of diplomacy (as if it is our choice). A results-oriented diplomacy that brings together the key countries with influence over the most important matters, determined to actually reach an agreement, not drag feet endlessly.



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