



Министерство иностранных дел
Российской Федерации

28.01.2022 21:43

№ 122-28-01-2022

Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's interview with Sputnik, Echo of Moscow, Govorit Moskva and Komsomolskaya Pravda radio stations, Moscow, January 28, 2022



Question: Will there be a war? We sent them our proposals, we waited for their response, and we got their response. Their answer did not suit us, which was to be expected. Before that, we said and made clear through different representatives that if their response does not suit us, we reserve the right to respond and protect our interests forcefully. Can you explain what that means and what are we going to do? We aren't going to make McDonald's illegal after all, are we? If I may quote my subscribers, they frame this question as follows: "When are we going to hit Washington?", "Will there be a war?", "How long are we going to procrastinate?", "Will there be a war?"

Sergey Lavrov: If it depends on the Russian Federation, there will be no

war. We don't want wars, but we won't allow anyone to trample on our interests or ignore them, either. I cannot say that the talks are over. As you are aware, it took the Americans and their NATO allies more than a month to study our extremely straightforward proposals that are part of the draft treaty with Washington and the agreement with NATO. We received their response only the day before yesterday. It is written in that typically Western style. In many ways, they are confusing the issue, but also providing kernels of rationality on secondary issues such as intermediate- and shorter-range missiles which were quite important for us at some point. When the Americans destroyed the INF Treaty, we urged them to listen to reason. President Vladimir Putin sent a message to all OSCE members suggesting that they join our unilateral moratorium when agreeing on verification measures. It was ignored. Now, it has become part of their proposals. Similarly, our initiatives that were introduced by the General Staff of the Russian Federation to conduct military exercises further away from the borders on both sides, to agree on a critical safe distance between approaching combat aircraft and ships, as well as a number of other confidence-building, deconflicting and de-escalation measures, were ignored. All of that has been rejected during the past two to three years. Now, they propose discussing this. That is, the constructive approach in these proposals has, in fact, been borrowed from Russia's recent initiatives. I think that now, as we say in Russia, "we are getting somewhere." To reiterate, most importantly, we should figure out the conceptual pillars that underlie European security.

In 2010 in Astana, and before that in 1999 in Istanbul, all presidents and prime ministers from the OSCE countries signed a package that contained interrelated principles to ensure the indivisibility of security. The West "ripped out" just one slogan from this package: each country has the right to choose its allies and military alliances. But in that package this right comes with a condition and an obligation on each country, to which the Westerners subscribed: not to strengthen their security at the expense of the security of others. With its mantra that the NATO open door policy is sacred and no one can say "no" to Ukraine joining the Alliance and that it's up to Ukraine to decide, the West is, deliberately and openly, refusing even to acknowledge the second part of the commitments. Moreover, when Josep Borrell, Antony Blinken and many other colleagues of ours talk about the importance of sticking to agreed-upon principles in the context of the Euro-Atlantic security architecture, none of them ever mentions the Istanbul Declaration or the Astana Declaration. They mention the Helsinki Final Act and the 1990 Charter of Paris for a New Europe, in which there is no obligation not to strengthen one's own security at the expense of

others. Russia insisted on including this commitment in subsequent OSCE documents.

Today, as I made clear earlier, I am sending official requests to all my colleagues asking them directly to clarify how they are going to fulfill, in the current historical circumstances, the obligations that their countries have signed onto at the highest level. These are the matters of principle. Before we proceed to discussing individual practical aspects of European security, we want to see the West wriggle out of it this time.

I hope they will give an honest answer about what they have in mind when they implement these agreements in an exclusively unilateral manner that benefits them – again, completely ignoring that fact that the right to join alliances directly hinges on recognising that it is unacceptable to strengthen the security of some states at the expense of the security of others. Let's see how they respond.

Question: If they give us the answer many experts are discussing, it will most certainly not suit us. Can it lead to a breakdown in relations? Everything we have been hearing recently from the Americans, and they are going to introduce sanctions against the leadership of our entire country, even against you...

Sergey Lavrov: What do you mean “even”? Are you saying I am not worthy of them?

Question: It has never happened in history. There has never been talk of sanctions against the Foreign Minister and the President. This is beyond the pale. Look at what is happening with our diplomats against this backdrop. Yesterday our Ambassador to the United States said that ultimately this might lead to something close to severing relations. As Anatoly Antonov said, our diplomats are simply being expelled although this is presented in a somewhat different way. What should we do? How will it look?

Sergey Lavrov: This is a multilayered question. I will start with the main point: What will we do if the West does not listen to reason? The President of Russia has already said what. If our attempts to come to terms on mutually acceptable principles of ensuring security in Europe fail to produce the desired result, we will take response measures. Asked directly what these measures might be, he said: they could come in all shapes and sizes. He will make decisions based on the proposals submitted by our military. Naturally, other departments will also take part in drafting these proposals.

Now the interdepartmental analysis of the responses received from the US and NATO is underway. Practically everyone knows what these responses are. I

have made some remarks. I will note in passing that the American response is all but a model of diplomatic manners compared to NATO's document. NATO sent us such an ideologically motivated answer, it is so permeated with its exceptional role and special mission that I even felt a bit embarrassed for whoever wrote these texts.

Our reply will be prepared. The proposals contained in our reply will be reported to the President of Russia and he will make a decision. We are developing our line at this point, including the steps that I mentioned.

As for the threats of imposing sanctions, the Americans were told, including during the presidential meeting, that the package you have just mentioned, the one that includes completely cutting off Russia from the West-controlled financial and economic systems, will be equivalent to severing relations. This was said directly. I believe they understand this. I don't think this is in anyone's interests.

Now a few words about their treatment of our diplomats. When I was in Washington several years ago, or, to be more precise, in December 2019, a deputy US Secretary of State under Michael Pompeo told my deputy in passing, before saying goodbye, that they were thinking of ways to streamline the functioning of our diplomatic missions on a reciprocal basis. He said American diplomats work abroad for three years. Then they are replaced, sent to a different country or returned to the central office in Washington. So they decided that our diplomats should also observe this term of three years and that's it. We asked why we were told this on the sly and whether we were the only ones to hear it. We asked whether they had similar thoughts as regards other states, the answer was "no." No other country was supposed to be subjected to this experiment, just the Russian Federation. This is when we started yet another round of our diplomatic tit-for-tat. We said okay, you have a practice of sending diplomats to serve abroad for three years, and we have a practice of not hiring local personnel to work in our embassies. The Americans hired over 400 people (nationals of Russia and other countries, mostly CIS).

You probably followed this discussion. They started moaning and groaning "How come? Are you 'unplugging' us?" You wanted to be guided by the principle that you can do everything and impose on us what you think is right. We will do the same. This is yet another escalation of the crisis that was triggered by Barack Obama who revealed his genuine character. Three weeks before his departure from the White House, he decided to bind Donald Trump's hands before slamming the door on the way out. He deprived us of five diplomatic properties and expelled dozens of diplomats who had to pack up all

their staff with their families in three days. This was the beginning of it all.

We spoke about this again with Antony Blinken in Geneva, completing our conversation on European security. It is necessary to get back to normal in some way. We suggested starting from scratch and resetting everything to zero, beginning with this disgraceful, piddling move by Nobel Prize winner Barack Obama and everything that followed after it. Let's wait and see. Another meeting is supposed to take place in the next couple of weeks. The Americans are now in a bargaining mood. They are telling us that they need 12 people serving the ambassador alone. They argue that we must therefore exempt them from the quota that we establish on a reciprocal basis. We have explained to them that the agreed-upon quota is 455 people, both for them and for us. On our part, this is a gesture of enormous goodwill. The figure of 455 includes not only the employees of the bilateral diplomatic missions: the Embassy and two general consulates but also 150 people who work at our mission at the UN, which has nothing to do with our bilateral ties or any sense of balance. This was a goodwill gesture. However, we warned them that if they continue their obnoxious behaviour (I don't know how else to describe their statements that if we don't accept the guards for their ambassador immediately, they will ask Mr Antonov to leave the US), we still have the option of truly equalising our diplomatic presence.

Question: You know perfectly well that my questions are largely based on our radio listeners' questions. Since we are talking about Russia-US relations, our listener Michael McFaul of California, a Stanford University professor, has sent a question for you. Why didn't Russia try at least to get UN Security Council authorisation for the use of force if needed in Ukraine? Doesn't Russia believe in the UN Security Council any longer? Why hasn't Russia recognised the self-proclaimed Donetsk and Lugansk republics if they are facing the same risk as South Ossetia and Abkhazia in 2008?

Sergey Lavrov: To be honest, the questions are absolutely ignorant. Take the question about the UN Security Council. Did I get it right? Why didn't (past tense) Russia go to the UN Security Council for authorisation to use force if necessary? I will not even try to explain the futility of the phrase. The word "if" does not belong in the diplomatic practice in any country.

Regarding recognition, I think Mr McFaul, who had made a tremendous contribution to destroying anything constructive in Russian-American relations, just did not have time to read the Minsk agreements approved in February 2015. They are about preserving the unity and territorial integrity of Ukraine. The Donetsk and Lugansk People's Republics had already declared independence

several months prior to the Minsk meeting. Germany and France, who endorsed the text of the Minsk agreements with us and the Ukrainians, begged us, with Pyotr Poroshenko joining those requests, to persuade the leaders of the two republics to sign the Minsk agreements thus, in essence, changing the results of the spring 2014 referendum in Donbass. Mr McFaul should probably learn the contemporary history of the region. The issue of recognition must be considered in the context of our firm line to get the West to compel Kiev to abide by the Minsk agreements. Then everything will be all right, just as envisaged by this document endorsed by the UN Security Council.

Question: I think that the document we delivered to the United States surprised many of those who read it. It left many, myself included, feeling that Russia won in some kind of a war, while America lost. What I mean is the radical proposals contained in it like returning to NATO's 1997 borders, etc. My question is, what was all that? It is obvious that the arguments must be really strong for the Americans to return to the 1997 terms or withdraw from countries where they feel so good, confident and comfortable? By all means, you clearly had something in mind. What was that, and what kind of a response did you expect to this letter? After all, the withdrawal must be swift. They were required to respond quickly.

We did our math. You are now working with your fourth US administration, since you became Foreign Minister during George W. Bush's presidency. Are there any major differences between these teams? Can specific individuals actually make a difference in history as we were once taught, or not? Which of your counterparts did you work better with, and how are you getting along with the current "guys" compared to the previous administrations?

Sergey Lavrov: The proposals we delivered to the United States and NATO on December 15, 2021, may seem excessive only if the expert assessing them proceeds from the premise that "the Americans have already taken away everything there was all around you, so it is too late to make a fuss about it. Just accept it and try to keep the bare minimum they left you."

What we want is fair treatment. I cited the commitments we all accepted at the highest level within the OSCE. Let me emphasise that presidents, including the US President, signed under these commitments promising that no one would seek to bolster one's security at someone else's expense. The United States claims that the right to choose alliances is sacrosanct. But we say, provided it doesn't worsen the security situation for any other country. This is what you signed, my dear sirs.

They are now trying to present our proposals as an ultimatum, but we are

there to refresh their memories and make sure that instead of equivocating they set forth in all honesty their interpretation of what their president signed up for. If he signed these documents while being confident that Russia would never be able to get what they promised, they must acknowledge that. This will be yet another confession on their part. We already reminded them about the promises they made verbally in the 1990s not to expand NATO, but in response they claimed that we got them wrong, that they did not want to mislead us and had little time to think because there were more urgent issues to deal with at the time. This is how they explained it, literally.

We are on our own territory. Michael McFaul has referred to the UN Security Council where the United States intends to discuss what we are doing regarding Ukraine and why we are not working to de-escalate the situation. This is what we hear from a person representing a country with military bases spread around the world, encircling the Russian Federation and the CIS, a country doing who knows what in Iraq (who invited them there?) and so forth. If the Americans want to discuss troop deployments, there are things to talk about. Everywhere we deploy our military forces, we do so based on a request from the host country. We fulfil the agreements we reach with host countries strictly in keeping with international law. Both Josep Borrell and Antony Blinken have been whipping up hysteria on the topic of escalation in Ukraine, demanding that we de-escalate, which has become a mantra of sorts for them, saying that they do hope that Russia chooses the “path of diplomacy.” I take them at their word. For many years after the end of the Soviet Union, we opted for the path of diplomacy. The Istanbul and Astana arrangements I had mentioned are the major outcomes of these diplomatic efforts: everyone undertook not to reinforce one's security at the expense of others. After all, this was a commitment, a declaration, the supreme act of diplomacy. Use any word you like: compromise, consensus, agreement – anything. If diplomacy is what you stand for, start by delivering on what we already agreed upon.

It is not my intention to discuss our partners on a personal level, though there is much that could be said. Our motto is that we have to work with everyone, and work we do. I can say that I had smooth relationships with all my colleagues. We could always speak candidly with each other at all times even on increasingly divisive matters and on the differences our countries have in their relations with one another.

Question: You are a diplomat. You will never put it the way I'm going to put it right now. But I am a journalist and I can afford to.

Sergey Lavrov: I have said a few undiplomatic things before.

Question: True. But you didn't say those things into a microphone during an interview. It's just that we keep an eye on you and print your brilliant sayings on T-shirts.

We recently saved Kazakhstan. We may have to salvage things between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. We have also preserved the peace in Karabakh and, generally speaking, in Armenia, too. We are endlessly saving our "exes." What do we get in return?

Reporters from Komsomolskaya Pravda – colleagues of editor-in-chief Vladimir Sungorkin who is joining us from their studio – have unearthed a great story. They have investigated school textbooks used in former Soviet republics, including those we continue saving, to find out what they say about Russia, about the Soviet Union and about the Russian Empire. Quite a fascinating story. If you haven't read it, you'll be amazed. Kassym-Jomart Tokayev reports to our President that Russian is widespread in Kazakh schools, and not only in schools. According to our information, this is not entirely true, or rather it is not at all true. Regarding Russians living in those countries, we have many, many harassment complaints. I'm not talking specifically about Kazakhstan, but about the former Soviet republics in general. We have heard many times that the Foreign Ministry is opposed to simplifying the procedure for obtaining Russian citizenship by Russians living in those countries. I know for sure that it is not. I discussed this with you, and I know your position. Moreover, you have recently played an active role in simplifying current laws. Can you tell us how long we will tolerate this kind of attitude towards our people? When will we start returning our people – the way the Greeks, Germans, Jews and many others are taking people back based on their ethnic identity? How will we defend the rights of our people who have found themselves stranded there after their country's collapse, which was not something they wanted?

Sergey Lavrov: This is several questions in one. As for relations with our neighbours, CSTO allies, CIS partners – we have a problem. Nobody is hiding this. It largely stems from the fact that the newly independent states, which left the Soviet Union and which had been part of the Russian Empire before that, have been given the first chance in a long historical period, the first opportunity to build their own national (the key word) states. They sometimes overdo it because they want to assert their national identity as soon as possible. Nobody would deny this. This always happens when great empires fall apart.

The Soviet Union was heir to the Russian Empire. In fact, it was an imperial entity, although softer and more humane than the British, French or other empires.

Some of the imbalances you are talking about would be inevitable in the current historical period. We certainly wish to avoid them and curtail them. This must be done by all means, including so-called soft power, and we need to allocate significantly more resources for it than now. Our ministry is active in lobbying for appropriate Government decisions and streamlining the state's activities on this track. But we are still far below the level that Western countries have reached in this respect. In addition to soft power, apart from diplomacy, bringing these problems up during meetings with our allies and partners – there is also reciprocity, which refers to considering our partners' approaches to matters that are relevant to us when making decisions that affect them. This concerns labour migrants, economic assistance, and much more. Our economic systems are interconnected. The Eurasian Economic Union creates conditions, but it is up to the Russian Federation to make most of them a reality, and much more.

I do not see why this should rule out the development of friendly, allied, and very close – including personal – relationships with the elites of our neighbours. This whole situation is the result of a geopolitical catastrophe, the collapse of the Soviet Union. As Russian President Vladimir Putin said, 25 million people (maybe more) then found themselves abroad, outside their country overnight. We had no borders and no idea how to build ties. It took a titanic effort. Now the situation is more or less back to normal; it is clear who should be responsible for what. This is already a great achievement. But the problems you mentioned – our compatriots' situation – should be addressed on a mutual basis.

I'll make a couple of points now. The first point is we should be more active and open in discussing human rights within the CIS, including the rights of non-titular ethnic groups – Russians in Kazakhstan, Kazakhs in Russia, Azerbaijanis in Armenia and vice versa (although there are very few of them left there). We have reached the following agreement with our CIS partners. Back when the Commonwealth was being created, its Charter included a provision on the CIS Commission on Human Rights as one of its bodies. However, we never got around to actually setting it up. At first, the idea was simple – the West should see that we also address human rights. But over the past few years, we have proposed materialising this statutory provision. There is a general agreement to launch the commission and an understanding that we will primarily deal with human rights issues in the CIS. It should be up to us, to all CIS countries, to make judgments about the human rights situation in our countries, not to Western agencies or bodies like the European Court of Human Rights,

which has long lost the ability to rely on the principles of justice and which increasingly politicises its decisions every year.

Last year, the number of regional programmes exceeded 80, that is, apart from the federal programme, including in the regions of the Far East and Trans-Baikal Territory which we see as priority areas for those willing to move to the Russian Federation. I listed the major benefits that have been approved. I will say straight away that we wanted more. I believe that one's family, parents and relatives having roots not only in the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic but also in other republics of the Soviet Union must have relevance for being entitled to preferential access to citizenship.

We have to consider a number of issues that we would like to settle as soon as possible. The work has not been finished yet. We have now "capitalised" what we have agreed on at the current stage. The President approved the consensus that was reached. We will continue to work to further improve the process and ease conditions for acquiring citizenship. The more so that at President Putin's direction, the United Russia party, our leading political force, formed a commission on international cooperation and assistance to compatriots abroad. It involves not only helping compatriots come to Russia but also in the sense in which we discussed your first question - so as to make them feel as comfortable as possible upon arrival.

A couple of days ago the Komsomolskaya Pravda newspaper ran an article about history textbooks published currently in the former Soviet republics. I will not comment on what Estonians, Ukrainians, Lithuanians and Latvians are writing in them. However, regarding the CIS countries, we have repeatedly told them that nationalists should not be given pretexts by exploiting difficult moments in our common history. It ultimately helped all the peoples inhabiting this huge geopolitical space to lay the foundation for building their statehood. While we acknowledge the newly independent states' aspiration to self-determination which I mentioned, overheated assessments should be avoided as they obviously, and maybe intentionally, play into the hands of extremists and nationalists.

Last year, a decision was signed within the Commonwealth of Independent States on establishing an international association (commission) of historians and archivists from CIS member states. It will focus, among other things, on discussing the issues of our common history with an eye toward a constructive consideration of all matters. I don't think there will be unified history textbooks, but guidelines will be produced to reflect a consolidated point of view and a variety of perspectives. We have a commission of historians with

Germany, Poland and Lithuania. They release joint documents. I believe that a similar mechanism within the Commonwealth will operate much more constructively in view of our closeness in many organisations – CSTO, EAEU, CIS and SCO.

Question: To follow up on our relations with the United States, you just said that we will continue to work with them. A meeting with Antony Blinken will take place soon. However, now that we have their answer, many analysts, in fact, almost all of them, are saying that the United States and the Alliance members are unlikely to change their position on the main issues. They are saying that “the ball is in Russia’s court now, and we are ready for any scenario.” You are saying our President said that we would respond, and that the response is in the works. The Foreign Ministry is involved in this. Can we have a sneak peek at the direction in which our Foreign Ministry is going to move in order to shoot the “ball” back at them? Is it Latin America? Cuba, Venezuela, Nicaragua? Could it be Europe? Serbia? Maybe we can do something with Iran? Can you give us a hint about what our response should be like for these guys to sit down, use their heads and try to give us different answers to our main questions, rather than secondary ones?

Sergey Lavrov: If they insist on not changing their position, we will not change ours, either. It's just that their position is based on false premises and a flat-out misrepresentation of the facts. Our position is based on things that everyone has signed onto. I don't see any room for a compromise here. Otherwise, what are we supposed to talk about if they openly sabotage and misrepresent previous decisions? This will be a key test for us.

As for the “ball,” we are playing different games. They may be playing baseball, while we may be playing tipcat. What matters is not to try to shirk responsibility, which is exactly what our American and other NATO partners are doing now.

They will not succeed in dodging the question of why they are not complying with what their presidents have signed onto, namely, that it is unacceptable to strengthen one’s security at the expense of the security of others.

Regarding our relations with Latin America, Serbia, Iran, China and many other states that act decently in the international arena, are not trying to unilaterally impose anything on anyone and are always willing to seek mutually acceptable solutions to any issues. Our relations are not subject to the vagaries of life. They are quite comprehensive and cover economic, cultural, educational, and sports contacts. They also include military and defence cooperation in full compliance with international law. I assure you that no matter how

developments unfold with regard to European security, we will continue to consistently expand these relations.

I would like to underscore that we are studying their response and we have already provided our initial assessments. It is not satisfactory with regard to the main issue: the West fails to honour its obligations in terms of indivisibility of security and ignores our interests, although we laid them out in an extremely straightforward and clear way

With regard to issues of secondary importance, they were shocked by us presenting these documents publicly. This helped change their negative attitude towards our previous proposals, including medium- and short- range missiles and working out de-escalation measures during the exercises. This means that the West understands only this kind of language, and we should continue in the same vein that we did when we put forward our initiatives. We are now focused on getting explanations. We cannot accept evasive answers when it comes to the indivisibility of security. The West is shirking its commitments just as it failed to deliver on its commitment not to expand NATO. But then (as it is now telling us) it was a verbal commitment. Now, written commitments are available. Respond to us in writing to our written demands. Explain how you fulfill the written commitments signed by your presidents.

Question: When it is necessary to come to the defence of Russian journalists that are subjected to certain restrictions in the US or Germany, and we know the story with RT, the Foreign Ministry is forcefully intervening and defending them both on and off the record, and not only Maria Zakharova but also at the level of ambassador, deputy minister and at your level. When it comes to the countries with which we have closer relations, your department is quite modest. It is enough to recall the case of the Komsomolskaya Pravda journalists and the end of their news office that is practically closed. Its chief is behind bars.

I would like to remind you of the murders of journalists. When our journalists were killed in Ukraine, the Foreign Ministry took a very tough, assertive position that was hard to ignore, but it was silent when our journalists were murdered in the Central African Republic (CAR).

Here's a question from our listener Dmitry Muratov from Moscow, a Nobel Prize winner and editor-in-chief of Novaya Gazeta. Without any additional investigation or operational measures, the new ambassador of Russia to the CAR named the murderers of the Russian journalists – the 3R group. The Foreign Ministry is aware of this but their families are not. The clothes of the journalists were burned as evidence, no investigation was conducted and the Foreign Ministry does not make any statements as regards the CAR leaders.

Maybe, the Foreign Ministry should become more active in these cases with respect to both the Belarusian government and the CAR leaders?

Sergey Lavrov: You are right in saying that we must always defend the rights of Russian citizens, and not only journalists but every citizen, and the Americans have simply abducted dozens of them. We must also protect our journalists when there are obvious reasons for doing so.

We expressed our concern over what was happening with the Komsomolskaya Pravda news office. We talked with Mr Sungorkin about this. As I understand, the matter concerns Belarusian citizens and a specific Belarusian citizen. This is a somewhat different story. Any country that allows dual citizenship follows its own laws if something happens on its territory. I don't want to go into details but there are issues that require silence. We did quite a bit to persuade the Belarusian authorities to be understanding. Now their position is what it is, and I cannot argue against it. They are ready to open any news office but its employees have to be citizens of the Russian Federation.

We could also look at how Russian journalists are treated in the West and how their working conditions are dictated there. I think a request to employ Russian citizens in Russian media is not beyond the pale. We believe the rights of journalists must be respected without exception everywhere, including Belarus or any other CIS country. If these rights are openly violated, we will continue to raise questions about this.

As for the CAR, we are willing to convey any information we have to the families of the dead journalists. As for the culprits, as you know, the CAR authorities are conducting an investigation. I don't want to excuse the acts of these murderers. I can only say that journalists should take precautions. If they had at least notified the Foreign Ministry and our Embassy that they were bound for a country with a domestic armed conflict and a terrorist threat, the chances of avoiding this tragedy would have been a bit higher. This was all the more important since they went there as tourists, without declaring the purpose of their visit. Let me repeat again that this is not an excuse but this creates additional security risks in such cases.

Therefore, I'd like everyone to know that we do want journalists to work all over the world, including hot spots. I remove my hat and bow to all those who do such reporting in flak jackets and helmets, and let me say something, in passing, to your colleagues in eastern Ukraine. Once again I am addressing, through you, those who may have some influence on Western journalism and the media. Why do journalists appear sporadically, once every six months, at best, on the Kiev-controlled side of the contact line in Donbass? Why is their

reporting so spotty? It would be very interesting to see them there. On the other side of the contact line, our journalists show the results of the atrocities committed by the Armed Forces of Ukraine that are bombing kindergartens, outpatient clinics and residential areas and killing people. According to the OSCE, civilian casualties on the side controlled by Donbass defenders are five times higher than on the opposite side. This speaks for itself.

Let's return to the Central African Republic. We again sent an inquiry to the CAR government when the information about this 3R group emerged. We will do all we can to bring this investigation to completion. As you know, their government is dealing with this. Let me emphasise once again that we want to know the truth. I would like to impress upon our journalist colleagues and friends the importance of notifying us about trips to hot spots (if you don't trust the Ministry, I cannot force you to do this). Please do it for the sake of your own safety. It will help.

Question: Thank you very much for your support to our service in connection with what happened to Gennady Mozheiko. Our thanks go to Alexei Venediktov for bringing up this issue. Gennady Mozheiko has been in police custody for four months now and not even once has he been questioned. He's just sitting there. I appealed to Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko [for assistance] but, so far, there has been no response.

You were right in saying that it is not only a matter of journalists. Today, according to the Russian Embassy in Belarus, 457 Russian nationals are behind bars in Belarus. This is only what the embassy says, and I suspect the real figure is even bigger. Yesterday, another person – Russian national Vera Tsvikevich – was added to this list. She was detained only for taking, during the protests, a photograph of herself, a selfie, in a beautiful red dress with a patrol in the background. She was taken to prison for that. Judging by the precedents, she will be sentenced to two years in prison. Something needs to be done about this.

As for Belarus, we should have a very different relationship with them, as this is the Union State. Today, our journalists believe their work to be the most difficult in Belarus and not in Georgia or America, or Israel, and so on. We are constantly talking about the Union State, saying that we need to synchronise our legislation. What is in store for us, with regard to what I just said? Do we stand any chance of becoming a true Union State?

Sergey Lavrov: As for the Union State, you know, there are 28 union programmes that were approved last autumn...

Question: They have not been published, which is an interesting fact.

Sergey Lavrov: These are framework documents. They contain no

secrets. They provide for work that has already started to flesh out each of the 28 programmes with specific and direct legal decisions in the economy, financial activities, transport, communications and so on. It is an important step towards consolidating economic assets. According to the two presidents, this work has to be completed in the next two to three years. This means embarking on the path to the Union State with much broader powers.

Yesterday, we saw off the newly-appointed Ambassador, Boris Gryzlov who was leaving for Belarus. I handed him letters of credence signed by the Russian President. This ceremony was attended by Belarusian Ambassador to Russia Vladimir Semashko. I recalled that our joint work also includes efforts to align the rights of the people of the two countries. Much has already been done. I believe 95 percent of rights have been aligned; however, the remaining outstanding issues in some areas need to be addressed as soon as possible. In particular, this includes the terms on which healthcare services or hotel accommodation are to be provided to people travelling privately. This is all very important for the daily life of people.

But the question you asked is not about what the Union State will look like in the end. Even if the criminal legislation of the two countries has been unified in full, there will still be Russians detained in Belarus and Belarusians detained in Russia. Our embassy keeps a close eye on the course of legal proceedings involving detained Russian nationals. The law enforcement agencies and prosecutor general's offices of the two countries stay in contact. I haven't heard anything about Vera Tsvikevich. Is this today's newspaper?

Remark: No. It was issued in 2020.

Sergey Lavrov: Why then did you say that she was added to this list yesterday?

Remark: She was detained yesterday. The newspaper is old but she was detained yesterday.

Sergey Lavrov: Is she on the staff of Komsomolskaya Pravda?

Remark: No, she is just a Russian national. I said that about 500 Russian nationals were serving sentence in Belarus.

Sergey Lavrov: Four hundred fifty-seven. So, she will be the 458th. We will be watching what happens to her, the way we do it in any other country. There are questions that require close cooperation between the law enforcement agencies. I would rather not talk about them now in public but such questions do exist. It is important that they are resolved in a manner characteristic of two allies or brotherly nations. We will invariably adhere to this line.

Question: Mine is not a question but an urgent request concerning the

fate of the German RT channel. We have not faced such unprecedented and uncompromising pressure, actually not even pressure but a real ban on work, in any other country, not the US or the UK, as in the Federal Republic of Germany. It is all disguised with hypocritical statements by German leaders at different levels. Supposedly, they have nothing to do with the closure of the German YouTube channel. Even when we gained the largest audience in the history of the English-language YouTube among the world's TV channels, we were not shut down. They didn't dare. But the Germans did. They pressured Luxembourg so as to have our licence denied even though practically everything had been agreed and done there. Ultimately, we were given the licence in Serbia. They pressured the European regulators – so we can't broadcast with that licence either. Titanic efforts of hundreds of people who had been building the channel amid the pandemic, produced shows, won the audience – all that was in vain. The audience was sacrificed to interests. Nobody shows the German people what we show.

The only thing that can affect them (as was the case with the UK) is reciprocity, which you are more familiar with than we are. Deutsche Welle has not even been designated as a foreign agent, even though this status does not entail what it does in the US (criminal charges). In our country it is just a piece of paper and an occasion to shout about it. In fact, it does not entail anything. Foreign agents take interviews, they are invited to Russian President Vladimir Putin's press conferences. To say nothing about shutting down Deutsche Welle here the way they shut us down in Germany. This also concerns other German media outlets. Please, help us.

Sergey Lavrov: You don't need to persuade me. Just yesterday the Russian Embassy in Berlin demanded an explanation. Procedures are underway. This is not within the competence of the federal agency but of the regulator of the German states Berlin and Brandenburg. The embassy's lawyers looked into precedents. The Axel Springer concern had faced a similar situation but they quickly got a licence.

The key here is that the Germans are trying to place their internal regulations, which allegedly prohibit the registration of state-run channels, above their commitments under the European Convention on Transfrontier Television. According to our information, their regulators are using various pretexts to justify the primacy of their national law. This won't do. The result will be the same as the NATO enlargement – this is what they want so they won't do the things they had promised somewhere else. The Germans know that reciprocal measures will follow. I raised this issue when German Foreign

Minister Annalena Baerbock was here on a visit. I think she and her delegation heard it. I am going to have a telephone conversation with her today. I will definitely remind her.

Question: A scandal is unfolding in the United States. CNN published a report citing its own sources. In it, they alleged that the United States and Ukrainian presidents talked on the phone, with Joe Biden supposedly yelling at Vladimir Zelensky in an attempt to explain to him in a raised voice that unless he changes his position on Donbass, Kiev will fall and be pillaged, etc. CNN published this report on its website, but later removed it. Still, the scandal lives on. Both Joe Biden and Vladimir Zelensky are getting questions about this. In this telephone conversation, the President of the United States allegedly requested that the President of Ukraine urgently resolve the special status issue for Donbass.

If Kiev does decide to amend its constitution and grant Donbass a special status, will this affect Russia's policy on Ukraine in any way? To be honest, you cannot trust these people. There are 720,000 Russian nationals there today, and in the future there could be even more of them. We do understand the threats they may face after obtaining a Russian passport. Are we ready for these eventualities? What will be Russia's policy on the people's republics?

Sergey Lavrov: We have always stressed the need to fully implement the Minsk agreements in good faith and following the sequence it sets forth. As my colleagues and I have been saying in our public statements, during the Geneva summit meeting in June 2021 between the Russian and United States presidents, Joe Biden said at his own initiative that he wanted to facilitate the implementation of the Minsk agreements, including in terms of granting an autonomous (this was the word he used) status to Donbass. He understands everything.

This is consistent with what the Minsk agreements say. The special status provisions they set forth cannot be subject to any equivocal interpretations. What needs to be done is clear. US Secretary of State Antony Blinken reassured me that they want to help implement the Minsk agreements. His under-secretaries said that the US would not join the Normandy format but still wants to help. If they do force Kiev (nobody else can do it), this outcome would suit us. So far, I find this hard to believe. They are playing a game by continuing to supply weapons. Some tend to interpret these deliveries as a support for those ready to engage in a senseless armed conflict. This is something many have to factor into their projections. In fact, hardly anyone wants this, but there is still a small group of people who stand to benefit from it, in one way or another.

Why are the Americans the only ones that can force Kiev into compliance? The Normandy format met in Paris at the level of political advisors to the four leaders. Deputy Chief of Staff of the Presidential Executive Office Dmitry Kozak travelled there. They agreed to take two more weeks to understand how they can move forward in carrying out the Minsk agreements.

France, Germany and the European Union name Russia as a party to the conflict. What kind of agreement can we reach in these circumstances? They are saying we must comply with the Minsk agreements. President Vladimir Putin and Dmitry Kozak have repeatedly stated that no one has ever given us an answer to the question of which specific provision we must comply with. The implication is that everything depends on Russia. It's like we snap our fingers and everything will come to pass.

Kiev realised that Berlin and Paris would not insist on it complying with the Minsk agreements. President Zelensky said he didn't like the Package of Measures, but it was nonetheless important, because it keeps Western sanctions on Russia in place. That's all there is to it: nothing but crude cynicism. Ukraine realises that it can do anything now. Vladimir Zelensky and his regime are being used (primarily by the Americans) to escalate tensions and to engage their underlings in Europe, who are playing along with the Americans as they pursue their Russophobic undertakings. The future of Ukraine is not Washington's main goal in this particular case. It is important for the United States to escalate tensions around the Russian Federation in order to "close" this issue and then "deal with" China, as US political scientists are saying. How do they plan to "close" it? I have no idea. If there are any reasonable political strategists still out there, they must realise that this road leads nowhere.

The Americans are using Ukraine against Russia so openly and cynically that the Kiev regime itself is now scared. They are now saying there is no need to aggravate the discussion and are suggesting that the Americans keep down the rhetoric, and are also wondering why evacuate diplomats. Who is evacuating diplomats? The Americans and other Anglo-Saxons (Canada and the UK), meaning they know something others don't. Perhaps, pending a provocation on their part, we should take precautionary measures with regard to our diplomats as well. We'll see about that.

I have already answered the question about how we feel about the recently vocalised idea of recognising the Lugansk and Donetsk people's republics. My answer is straightforward: we must push for the implementation of the Minsk agreements. There's a host of people out there who are ready to grab any excuse to remove blame from Kiev for the sabotage which it has been involved in for

eight years now with regard to the document approved by the UN Security Council.

Question: You said that NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg has lost touch with reality. Maybe you live in different realities? Today, he will give a live interview to Ekho Moskvyy. Do you want to say hi to him or ask a question?

Sergey Lavrov: Serves him right.

Question: I looked through the list of the sanctions approved by the US Congress and Treasury last year. The absolute majority of them are associated with the name of Alexey Navalny, not Ukraine. The OPCW (independent German, French and Swedish labs) found traces of a poisonous substance in his blood, which clearly means that he was poisoned. The Foreign Ministry requested assistance. But Russia did not open a criminal investigation. Germany said in that case there would be no help. We are members of the OPCW. You have seen the report on Navalny. Do you continue to cooperate on this matter? We are in the minority in every single international European organisation. We are saying that the ECHR, PACE, the OSCE and the OPCW are Russophobes. Could it be that Russia is the one that is out of step?

Sergey Lavrov: I'll start off by saying that I watched Euronews yesterday. There was a story about the village of Dvani in Georgia, near the South Ossetian border. It is located in an area that Georgia considers its territory. The reporter said he was in the village of Dvani at the separation line, with the administrative border that Russia keeps fortifying behind him. A house owned by a Georgian "was burned down during the war." The new one "came into the Russian military's surveillance zone." A local resident said that we were "abducting people in unfathomable ways." A Georgian journalist said that he has been "working in the villages near the conflict zone for several years now" and that "14 years have passed since the war that forced the people to live in difficult circumstances ended. They are losing their lands and forest allotments almost daily. People are being kidnapped. Russian troops are detaining them," etc. Then the reporter continued to say that "after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Georgia was the first among the former Soviet republics to experience an escalation of separatism and armed confrontation, and thousands of refugees are still unable to return home."

He didn't say, though, anything about what kind of separatism took root in Georgia even before the breakup of the Soviet Union. Zviad Gamsakhurdia was quite chauvinistic in his demands for Abkhazians to get out or to "georgify." He believed South Ossetia residents did not deserve humane treatment. Nobody is

saying anything about it. Then comes a brilliant phrase: “In 2008, when the conflict entered the hot phase, Russia took South Ossetia’s side.” This is Euronews, which touts itself as a channel of fair news and an epitome of diversity when it comes to presenting diverse viewpoints. They did not even mention how the fratricidal conflict began.

I’m saying this because you asked a question about the OPCW without mentioning the reference points that require clarification. If we state it the way you framed your question, then Michael McFaul and other unsophisticated listeners may get the impression that all of that is true. You are saying we asked the Germans to provide clarifications, and they wanted us to open a criminal investigation before they give us anything. What is that all about? Germany's obligations under the European Convention on Mutual Assistance in Criminal Matters are not dependent on whether a particular country opens a criminal investigation or not. Under our laws, a criminal case can be opened if there is corroborating evidence. This is in no way inconsistent with multiple instances of using this procedure in relations with many other countries. We have a lot of material which we circulate around the world. I’m sure reporters from Ekho Moskvyy and other media outlets have access to it.

We are still waiting for an answer to our question about who flew in to pick up Alexey Navalny. Why the plane that flew to Omsk to pick him up was chartered the day before he fell ill. Why are there no answers to the purely specific and factual questions asked in the German Parliament: how come the pilot, who did not want Maria Pevchikh to take the bottle onboard, eventually let her do so? There was also a sixth passenger. These questions were asked at the Bundestag. Why is it impossible to question Ms Pevchikh? The Germans say she did not communicate with the blogger and did not visit him at the hospital. She wrote that she did. The bottle she brought along has not been shown to anyone. Our requests to run a joint examination of it are rejected. Allegations that illegal poisonous substances were found in Mr Navalny’s body began after no CWC-prohibited substances had been found by the Charité clinic, which is a civilian hospital. All of that was “discovered” at a clinic operated by the Bundeswehr in a matter of just three days. Before that, a similar scenario unfolded with the Skripal family. We insisted that the investigation must be grounded in hard facts, not “highly likely” assumptions. We cited facts that there are almost 150 patents for the infamous Novichok in the West, in particular, the United States. It was developed in Europe as well. Then Germany, France, Sweden and many other countries swore that they did not have this technology. Without the technology, it is impossible to detect this substance in the human body in three days. Any more

or less experienced chemist is aware of that.

At first, the Germans told us that they would not give us the materials, because they constituted “classified military information.” How’s that? We are being accused of murder or attempted murder, and the information is classified. By definition, they should not have access to this technology if they are bona fide participants in the CWC. Then they began to say that they could give it to us, but Navalny says no. What's next? At the same time, his lawyer criticised Dmitry Peskov for accusing the blogger of collaborating with the CIA and demanded proof. What kind of proof? US intelligence officers came to see him at the hospital, which Dmitry Peskov mentioned. We are demanding proof behind the accusation of attempted murder, but we are then told that he does not want to.

We asked the OPCW to provide the results but were told that they could do so only with the permission of the Germans. The circle closed. Read carefully the paper released by the OPCW. It says that some substances were discovered that are similar in composition to other substances that are on the OPCW’s banned chemicals list. Not a word about Novichok. Neither the Germans, nor the French, nor the Swedes gave us the formula. It’s classified. The formula is the proof of whether this is true or pure deception and lies.

I am inclined to believe that so far the West has no grounds to accuse us. This is done for the purpose of instigating a provocation. I mentioned the day when a special flight was chartered to fly to Omsk to pick up Mr Navalny. The day before the poisoning, the Germans (according to the OPCW report) asked The Hague for assistance in conducting the investigation of this case. Then they said it was a typo, and everything actually happened later. There are many interesting things there. In early September 2020, the Germans contacted the OPCW. The OPCW Secretariat concealed this from us for several days. In hindsight, they confessed that the Germans allegedly asked them not to tell anyone. Doesn’t it all look suspicious? It does to me, and suspicions run deep. I encourage Ekho Moskvyy and other radio stations’ listeners to go the Foreign Ministry’s website and read the [material](#) containing a vast number of legitimate questions that remain unanswered by the West to this day.

Question: The most popular question: will there be a war with Ukraine?

Sergey Lavrov: This is what we started off with. If it’s up to the Russian Federation, there will be no war. I do not rule out the possibility that someone out there would like to provoke hostilities.

According to the West, there are about 100,000 troops on the line of contact. The Kiev regime does not control most of these armed men. A

significant portion of the units that are stationed there include the former volunteer battalions, current territorial defence units, and militia. MANPADS are already being handed out to them. The media are reporting this information. They are encouraged to bring along hunting rifles with them, because there aren't enough MANPADS for everyone. This is a militaristic frenzy. I cannot rule out the possibility of someone losing it, just like that soldier who shot and killed five of his fellow servicemen.

Question: Why aren't we talking with Vladimir Zelensky? He is one of us, a former Komsomol member with a background in Channel One.

Sergey Lavrov: He is also a "piano player." President Vladimir Putin answered this question. If President Zelensky wants to talk about normalising bilateral relations that were damaged by the unilateral actions of his regime, actions to which we responded, Russia stands ready to do so. Let him come to Moscow, Sochi, or St Petersburg, wherever they may agree. But if he wants to discuss Donbass – please go to the Contact Group, which, according to the Normandy format's decision, is in charge of all settlement issues directly between Kiev, Donetsk and Lugansk. When he says he won't talk to us, this bodes ill for the domestic Ukrainian crisis. If he has something to offer in order to restore bilateral relations, the destruction of which Kiev, Vladimir Zelensky and his predecessor initiated, we are ready to consider his proposals. President Vladimir Putin has stated this in no uncertain terms.

Question: Another meme for a T-shirt from Minister Lavrov: "Please go to the Contact Group."

Question: Are we going to evacuate our staff from Kiev as well?

Sergey Lavrov: We discussed this bout of insanity that is being fomented in Ukraine, primarily by the Anglo-Saxons and some Europeans. Dramatic claims that everyone must leave the place are part of this insanity. People who came there to tend to their business are urged to leave. Diplomats and their families are being taken home and non-core staff is being cut.

We cannot let it go unnoticed or turn a blind eye to it. If they are doing this (even though the Ukrainians haven't asked them to), could it be that the Anglo-Saxons are up to something? The British particularly have a long track record in this area.

Question: This happened after you said something during a meeting with US Secretary of State Antony Blinken. What did you say or show to him? Immediately after the Geneva meeting, he started saying that diplomats should be evacuated. You must have done something.

Sergey Lavrov: You are mistaken if you think that I have lost the ability

to understand what is happening around me. I didn't say anything to him. In a one-on-one conversation (I hope this will not offend him) he told me that if something happens, their people would be there... It sounded rather strange to me. That's what I told him.

Take my word for it, we discussed nothing but security guarantees. Then I raised the issue of the unacceptable state of affairs with our diplomatic missions. I made a proposal which we eventually agreed upon. In a couple of weeks, another meeting between experts will take place. I can assure you that no threats were uttered. However, we cannot leave things without analysis. We are analysing them to see what stands behind the Anglo-Saxons' actions.



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