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**Briefing by Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman Maria Zakharova, Moscow,
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Diplomatic Worker's Day

Tomorrow, on February 10, our country will celebrate a professional holiday – Diplomatic Worker's Day. It was instituted by order of the President of the Russian Federation on October 31, 2002.

I would like to recall (we already mentioned this and speak about this every year but it's better to do so and keep the tradition) that the date of this holiday is linked with an earlier documented mention (on February 10, 1549) of the Ambassadorial Prikaz, Russia's first government body responsible for foreign affairs.

During the previous briefing, we informed you about planned events with

the participation of the ministry's executives. It includes a holiday address by Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov to the employees of the ministry (the Central Office and our foreign missions) and other events devoted to this holiday.

Follow our website and accounts on social media – look for the section Diplomatic Worker's Day and related hashtags we mentioned. We will keep you posted.

Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's forthcoming talks with British Foreign Secretary Elizabeth Truss

On February 10, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov will hold talks with British Foreign Secretary Elizabeth Truss, who will be in Moscow on a working visit.

Topics of discussion planned for the meeting include the status and prospects of bilateral relations and current international and regional affairs with an emphasis on European security and the issue of developing long-term legally binding guarantees of Russia's national security.

Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's forthcoming meeting with OSCE Chairman-in-Office, Polish Foreign Minister Zbigniew Rau

On February 15, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov plans to meet with OSCE Chairman-in-Office, Polish Foreign Minister Zbigniew Rau.

The agenda of their talks includes a broad range of OSCE activities and plans for the current year of 2022.

Russia is consistently advocating the need for the OSCE to become more effective and revive the Helsinki spirit it once had. It is essential to restore the trust between its member states, the practice of seeking compromise and many other wonderful traditions that were established at that time. It is vital for Russia to make sure that OSCE members interpret in the same way the principle of the indivisibility of security, which was enshrined in the documents of the OSCE summits – the 1999 European Security Charter and the 2010 Astana Declaration. In this context, Russia insists that the OSCE members duly fulfil their commitments not to enhance their own security at the expense of the security of others.

The officials plan to review the role of the OSCE in facilitating the settlement of conflicts in eastern Ukraine, Nagorno-Karabakh and Transnistria, and its participation as a co-chair in the Geneva discussions on security and

stability in the South Caucasus. The Russian representatives will lay emphasis on the problems in the work of the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission in Ukraine and the Contact Group, in the framework of which Russian and OSCE representatives are helping the parties of the conflict – Kiev, Donetsk and Lugansk – implement the Minsk Package of Measures.

In addition, the officials will discuss a number of current bilateral issues of the Russian-Polish agenda after a break of many years.

I will say more a bit later about one issue related to the activities of the OSCE Secretariat and how member countries are doing on meeting the goals set for them.

Forthcoming Russia-Brazil meeting in the two plus two format

On February 16, Moscow will host the first Russia-Brazil meeting in the two plus two format. Russia will be represented by Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and Defence Minister Sergey Shoigu; Brazil by Foreign Minister Carlos Franca and Defence Minister Braga Netto.

During the upcoming consultations, the ministers plan to conduct a substantive exchange of views on a broad range of global and regional issues, bilateral cooperation in the UN and its Security Council, of which Brazil is a non-permanent member in 2022-2023, and our joint actions in BRICS and other international associations.

The ministers will review individual aspects of the Russia-Brazil strategic partnership, including the consolidation of bilateral military-technical cooperation.

Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's upcoming meeting with members of the ASEAN Moscow Committee

On February 17, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov will meet with the ambassadors that are members of the Moscow Committee of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

The participants will focus on implementing the decisions of the Russia-ASEAN summit in October 2021, which was devoted to the 30th anniversary of Russia-ASEAN relations. They plan to discuss steps on building up the strategic partnership with ASEAN on political, trade and economic, and socio-cultural issues. Special attention will be paid to joint responses the current challenges and threats, including epidemic-related issues. They will exchange views on a

number of current international and regional issues, including the strengthening of the role of ASEAN-centric associations in the Asia-Pacific Region.

Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's upcoming talks with Foreign Minister of the Hellenic Republic Nikolaos Dendias

On February 18, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov will hold talks with Foreign Minister of the Hellenic Republic Nikolaos Dendias who will pay a working visit to Russia.

The ministers will discuss the implementation of the agreements reached during the talks between President of Russia Vladimir Putin and Prime Minister of Greece Kyriakos Mitsotakis (Sochi, December 8, 2021) and the telephone conversation between Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin and his Greek counterpart on December 22, 2021. Primary attention will be paid to trade and investment, energy, transport, tourism and epidemiological safety of our citizens.

The ministers will conduct a detailed exchange of views on international and regional issues with emphasis on the Russian proposals on the indivisibility of security. Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov set forth Russia's approaches on this issue in his letter to the heads of foreign ministries and departments of a number of states, including Greece, on January 28 of this year. We are looking forward to a response from our Greek partners.

Attention will be also paid to the Cyprus settlement process, the situation in the Eastern Mediterranean, the Middle East and North Africa, the Balkans and the South Caucasus, as well as various aspects of cooperation at multilateral platforms.

Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's forthcoming participation in the annual conference of the Valdai International Discussion Club on the Middle East

On February 21, the Moscow-based Valdai International Discussion Club will host the 11th annual Middle East conference on the subject "Russia and the Middle East: Strategic rapprochement and intertwining interests."

Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov is expected to attend the conference.

The opening ceremony of the Russia-ASEAN Year of Scientific and Technological Cooperation

On February 14, the Russian Federation and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) will conduct a ceremony to open the Russia-ASEAN Year of Scientific and Technological Cooperation. The event will be held via videoconference with the participation of senior officials from the Russian Ministry of Education and Science and the related agencies in the ASEAN Ten.

The decision to hold the cross year was adopted by the Russia-ASEAN anniversary summit in 2021 at Russia's initiative. During this year, Russia and ASEAN states will sponsor a number of conferences, workshops, roundtables and business dialogues on medicine, peaceful use of nuclear energy, power engineering, digitalisation, education and environment. The projects will be aimed at promoting Russia-ASEAN cooperation in innovations, high technology and science-intensive industries. Implementing this highly eventful programme will help to strengthen the existing industry-specific ties and bring Russia-ASEAN strategic partnership to a new level.

Ukraine update

February 12 will mark seven years since Kiev, Donetsk and Lugansk, with the Russian and OSCE mediation and the assistance of the Normandy format, signed the Package of Measures, which has become the only basis, one that has no alternative, for the settlement of the internal Ukrainian crisis. After being approved by UN Security Council Resolution 2202, it has become part of international law, binding for all parties involved.

I would like to remind you that seven years ago, the parties to the conflict agreed to observe a ceasefire, withdraw their forces from the line of contact, grant Donbass a special status within Ukraine and an amnesty for its residents, carry out a constitutional reform with a focus on decentralisation, restoration of socioeconomic ties, and exchange of detained persons. Regrettably, none of this has been implemented. Kiev continues to sabotage its commitments, often demonstrating this in public with the tacit consent of its Western patrons.

Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmitry Kuleba has made a number of notorious statements recently, declaring that "there will be no special status, as visualised by Russia, no veto right." He has also alleged that the Minsk accords do not envisage a dialogue with Donetsk and Lugansk. I would like to inquire whether he can read. The Minsk accords are not some oral commitments; they exist as a text, this text is available, and it can be perused. Instead of claiming anything of the sort, Ukraine had better reread the Package of Measures.

I would like to respond once again to what he said, I quote: “There will be nothing of the kind, as visualised by Russia.” Russia visualises it exactly as it is written down, and it would be fine if the other parties to and signatories of the agreements, and the participants in the process itself proceeded from the text rather than their vision. Basically, it is a wonderful practice for all those who profess law. It is better to rely on the spirit and the letter of the law rather than engage in interpretations thereby sinking back into the times about which our common Russian-Ukrainian proverb says: “Every law has a loophole.” No! This text was not bequeathed to us by the past generations, with which we are no longer in contact because of the centuries that separate our epochs. The whole thing was done by the active and now living participants in the political process. It was recorded by TV cameras and explained after the signing by Ukrainian officials, among others. It would be good to show to Mr Kuleba, in particular, the video with comments by President Petr Poroshenko and his Foreign Minister Pavel Klimkin, who were speaking about a “breakthrough” Ukraine had achieved on the diplomatic track by signing these documents. They also explained in no uncertain terms what was written in the documents and how to interpret them, i.e., exactly as it was committed to paper. So, shall we look for the Poroshenko-Klimkin video or will you find it on your own? We don’t mind sharing. So, once again, returning to the Package of Measures: it states directly the need to discuss and coordinate with Donbass the issues concerning its future.

Unfortunately, we know who is encouraging Ukraine’s disdainful attitude towards the Package of Measures. This is being done by those who are actively operating, rather than merely standing behind Kiev’s back. Of course, we are talking about US handlers. US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said the other day that it was possible to implement the provisions of the Minsk agreements only if their due order of priority was selected. It is strange that the United States is trying to find an order of priority in a document that clearly sets forth the entire sequence of all the parties’ steps. What is the point of looking for this order of priority? It is necessary to read the document that stipulates everything. These statements, especially their synchronised nature, show one thing: the United States is in favour of revising the Package of Measures, and this may wreck the peace process. All this inspires the Kiev regime to continue treating its own population in a negative manner in the first place, and to continue disregarding international law and common sense, and so on. Unfortunately, we do not hear an adequate response to statements by Ukrainian leaders, including those on the part of the US Department of State, from Germany and France, our

colleagues in the Normandy format.

All these double standards of our European colleagues were confirmed this week. Our European colleagues voice their readiness to facilitate a peace settlement and speak about a certain de-escalation. They are urging everyone to do anything, but, in reality, they are providing Kiev with weapons and ignoring the sufferings of Donbass residents. On February 7 and 8, the foreign ministers of Germany, Austria, Slovakia and the Czech Republic visited the line of contact. This appears to be a noble mission, and the process, advocated by us, has apparently got underway. We are saying all the time that they should go there, see the situation, speak with the people and form an unbiased opinion without the help of their own media outlets, which they themselves provide with all kinds of methodological recommendations and theses. And so, helmeted Western diplomats clad in bulletproof vests rode towards the line of contact. But there is one problem and nuance: they visited an area controlled by Kiev and, for some reason, did not go any further. And I would say that the most tragic, if not interesting, developments are taking place there. Although many international experts, including OSCE observers, are working in the region, Western representatives are painstakingly turning a blind eye on what is happening in Donbass. They simply don't see these developments and avoid visiting Donetsk and Lugansk. But, if they were in the vicinity, why didn't they use this opportunity and speak with the people? I had a conversation with Western journalists the other day, and I asked the same question as Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov. During his interviews and news conferences with Western journalists and while replying to their question about the domestic Ukrainian crisis, he asks them why they don't go to Donbass. Why do they ask indirect questions, and why do they describe the situation without any first-hand knowledge? What is the problem? We have heard a lot. One of the most surprising and widespread replies is that it is dangerous there.

Our British colleagues compared Russia's current alleged escalation of the situation regarding Ukraine with the situation in the North Caucasus in the 1990s. I recall that period quite well. They deemed it possible to draw analogies with those developments. Consequently, we should remind them that quite a few journalists, politicians and activists from these countries in Western and Eastern Europe and the United States visited the counter-terrorist operation's zone then. That was fraught with real, not hypothetical, dangers because terrorists and militants abducted those journalists and public activists and demanded a ransom for them. I am talking about numerous, rather than isolated, incidents. Tremendous ransoms were paid, and journalists later described their own

treatment in their books. You should read those books. I read them and was deeply impressed. If the British party considers it possible to draw such analogies, then it would be appropriate to do the same in other areas. We should ask why Western society does not speak with Donbass representatives, why it does not discuss human rights, and why its news reports do not begin with headlines about a humanitarian disaster in Donbass. I believe that it is high time this was done. They are interested in all the regions of the world to which the countries of their accreditation do not belong. Indeed, it is a noble business to cover the situation in all corners of our planet. Those living in the United States are concerned about the Uyghurs, and UK residents always ask questions about Myanmar. But there is one little nuance here: the UK and Ukraine are located on the European continent. One way or another, they are neighbours in terms of common European space, rather than geographic proximity. Why is London concerned about the human rights situation thousands and tens of thousands of kilometres away from the UK, and why do they begin their news reports with human rights matters? They forget about these human rights when this concerns their direct neighbour on the European continent and a country that has accepted all Western values. Does this not also concern Germany, the Czech Republic and other countries? Please don't be afraid. The line of contact is not a red line for you, and you should cross it, you should pay attention to local residents and show respect for these people who have been suffering for many years because you once inspired Ukrainian politicians to stage an unconstitutional coup.

The West continues to supply weapons and military equipment to one of the parties to the conflict – Kiev. Earlier this week, Sweden and the Netherlands joined the list of countries supporting the Kiev regime's aggressive, militarist approaches and principles. As you may know, if one is for peace, one is pumped full of weapons. On February 8, the Armed Forces of Ukraine (VSU) launched nationwide command-and-staff exercises, Metel-2022 (Snowstorm-2022). (I hope they will not end in the same way as Alexander Pushkin described in his short story "The Snowstorm.") So, the troops will be trained to use the NLAW and Javelin antitank missile systems supplied by the UK and the US, respectively, as well as Turkish Bayraktar drones.

We are certain that the de-escalation in Ukraine, which our Western partners have been discussing so much, can be achieved very quickly. For this, they should stop weapon deliveries to Ukraine, withdraw their military advisers and instructors, discontinue joint VSU-NATO exercises, and pull out all earlier supplied foreign armaments to locations beyond the Ukrainian territory. Since the Western world is focused on Ukraine, it should start with the implementation

of the Minsk agreements.

To strengthen regional security in the broad sense, NATO ought to announce that it is renouncing its open-doors policy. Kiev, for its part, should return to the neutral, non-bloc status enshrined in the Declaration of State Sovereignty of Ukraine of July 16, 1990. The need to implement this Declaration is sealed by the Act of Declaration of Independence of Ukraine of August 24, 1991. The now effective 1996 Constitution of Ukraine contains a provision to the effect that in approving the Fundamental Law the Verkhovna Rada was guided by the said Act.

We call on everyone to stop the artificial fomenting of tensions in and around Ukraine and take practical steps aimed at achieving a real de-escalation and settlement of the Donbass conflict on the no-alternative basis of the Package of Measures. We hope that today's online meeting of the Contact Group and the upcoming contacts between the political advisers of the Normandy format leaders will lead to positive shifts in the process of peaceful settlement of the internal Ukrainian conflict.

Permanent Representative of Ukraine to the UN Sergey Kislitsa's statements

We have commented on this character's remarks many times before, but what he has said over the past 24 hours makes one question his mental condition and competency. In particular, Ukraine's Permanent Representative to the UN Sergey Kislitsa gave an extensive interview titled "Is Russia falsifying its UN and Security Council membership?" These musings are underpinned by a historical legal basis to the effect that supposedly Russia, as a country, failed to go through a procedure that it were supposed to go through, which all new members supposedly went through when they joined the UN, and that supposedly there are no documents corroborating it. Mr Kislitsa said the following: "What I can state is that I have never seen a decision that anyone has, in principle, ever voted for Russia's membership either in the Security Council or the UN General Assembly." Absurd statements of this kind abound. What can I say to that? First, indeed, following the process (I mean the end of the Cold War era) that swept through Eastern Europe, many states underwent changes and changed their borders and political systems. Many new countries appeared on the map. All of them became members of the UN. Why? Because they were brand new states. The vast majority of them were not bound by any commitments with the countries that they seceded or were formed from.

But this does not apply to Russia. The fact is that our country is the successor to the Soviet Union. There are many documents covering this matter, such as Article 67.1 of our Constitution. I would like to cite three documents. First, the decision of the Council of Heads of the CIS States of December 21, 1991 (by the way, he cited this in his interview), but failed to mention that the Commonwealth states supported Russia in continuing the Soviet UN membership, including permanent membership in the Security Council and other international organisations. One might assume it was a third-party document for Ukraine, but this is not the case. Ukraine is a CIS member. I will come to this document in more detail. Mr Kislitsa conjured up a story whereby Permanent Representative of the Soviet Union Yury Vorontsov made a verbal statement at a Security Council meeting in late December 1991 to the effect that he had been instructed to make public a letter by President Yeltsin stating that he would now be permanent representative not of the Soviet Union, but Russia, and that was the end of it. This may have been the end of it from the point of view of the current Permanent Representative of Ukraine to the UN, but there were documents as well, namely, a note dated December 26, 1991, in which the Russian Foreign Ministry notified the UN Secretary-General that Russia retained in full responsibility for all the rights and obligations of the Soviet Union at the UN. Certainly, this document notified the UN of the decision that was taken by the CIS Heads of State Council on December 21, 1991, that is, five days before this note was sent. First, heads of CIS states made a decision, and then the UN Secretary-General was notified of the relevant decisions by a note. The third document is a circular note dated January 13, 1992, that is, a little less than a month later, in which the Russian Foreign Ministry notified heads of diplomatic missions in Moscow that “the Russian Federation continues to exercise the rights and fulfil the obligations arising from international treaties concluded by the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics.” In this regard, the Foreign Ministry issued a request for the Russian Federation to be considered a party to all existing international treaties in lieu of the Soviet Union. Did Ukrainian diplomacy receive nothing, as always? They can go through their archives and see for themselves.

Now, I would like to read out in full the document that I cited, namely, the resolution by the CIS Heads of State Council of December 21, 1991. It is really worth it. Here we go, “Resolution by the CIS Council of Heads of State: referring to Article 12 of the Agreement on the Establishment of the Commonwealth of Independent States, based on the intention of each state to fulfil its obligations under the UN Charter and to participate in the work of this

Organisation as full members, considering, that the original members of the UN are the Republic of Belarus, the Soviet Union and Ukraine, the participants of the Commonwealth express satisfaction with the fact that the Republic of Belarus and Ukraine continue to participate in the UN as sovereign independent states being determined to contribute to the strengthening of international peace and security on the basis of the UN Charter and in the interests of their peoples and the entire international community decided as follows:

1. The states of the Commonwealth support Russia in continuing the Soviet membership at the UN, including permanent membership at the Security Council and other international organisations;
2. The Republic of Belarus, RSFSR and Ukraine will provide support to other CIS states in resolving issues related to their full membership at the UN and other international organisations.

Drawn up and signed in the city of Alma-Ata on December 21, 1991 in one copy in the Armenian, Azerbaijani, Belarusian, Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Moldovan, Russian, Tajik, Turkmen, Ukrainian and Uzbek languages.

In other words, the Permanent Representative of Ukraine does not need to worry about the integrity of his mind. He can read this document in the Ukrainian language and thus not betray his motherland.

“All texts are equally valid, with the original copy kept in the archives of the Republic of Belarus, which will send a certified copy of these minutes to the high contracting parties.” The signatures of the CIS heads of state follow. Next comes the question: what does Ukraine have to do with it? Even though the document is signed by [President] Leonid Kravchuk for Ukraine.”

I think that this figure is familiar to the permanent representative of Ukraine, as is the attitude of Ukrainian officials regarding failure to fulfil their obligations (we have just talked about the Minsk agreements).

The same footprint and the same handwriting: first they put their signature, and then start running around and pretending that, first, they hadn't read anything about anything and, second, they hadn't heard anything about anything, and third, they don't think they have any obligations to comply with. But this is not true, it is a lie. You must do and honour everything that is signed by the individuals who, according to the Constitution and the laws of your country, Ukraine, have assumed corresponding obligations on behalf of the people of that country.

By all means, I promise, we will publish more material about the legal grounds for our country's UN and UNSC membership. We will make references

to all the relevant documents to make sure that not a single permanent representative of Ukraine will dare to utter this kind of lie anymore.

Russia's 2021-2023 chairmanship of the Arctic Council

Russia took over the Arctic Council chairmanship at the 12th ministerial meeting in Reykjavik on May 20, 2021. To date, 32 events have taken place – out of more than a hundred planned – in our priority areas of high latitude cooperation:

- improving the living standards of the region's population, including the indigenous peoples of the North;
- environmental protection and adaptation of Arctic ecosystems to climate change;
- stimulation of social and economic development;
- strengthening the Council and its role as a key international management mechanism in the Arctic.

The overall priority of the Russian chairmanship is to ensure responsible governance for the sustainable development of the Arctic, which includes strengthening the collective leadership of the member countries while promoting the social, economic and environmental dimensions in a balanced way.

The Conference on Recruiting Personnel for the Arctic and a roundtable discussion on implementing the Children of the Arctic International Project have been held as part of the social aspect of the Russian chairmanship programme. The first Forum of Young Leaders has taken place, as well as the first volunteer expedition to the Yamal tundra, Explore Yamal.

Opportunities for developing environmental cooperation in high latitudes and introducing environmentally friendly technologies have been discussed at the International Conference on Bioremediation of Aquatic and Terrestrial Ecosystems of the Arctic Coast, the Green Energy in the Arctic Conference, as well as during the business programme at the interdepartmental emergency drill to protect the Arctic.

The role of sustainable socioeconomic development of the Arctic as a key factor in improving the living standards of the region's population, including indigenous peoples, was the theme of the 3rd Northern Sustainable Development Forum. It was the first time that ways to ensure the indigenous peoples' intellectual property rights to their knowledge, culture and languages in the era of digitalisation have been discussed as part of the Arctic Council chairmanship

programme.

The first plenary meeting of the Arctic Council chaired by Russia was held in Salekhard, bringing together, on site or via videoconference, eight member countries, six permanent participants from indigenous peoples' organisations, and the Council bodies, as well as more than 30 observer states and organisations. In addition to the current and new Arctic Council projects, the participants focused on cooperation between the Arctic regions and strengthening the interaction of the Arctic youth. They also discussed the search for joint solutions in topical areas such as combating forest fires and studying the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on the health of indigenous peoples and other inhabitants of the Arctic. The next plenary session will be held in Arkhangelsk in May 2022.

The Russian chairmanship programme includes a broad range of cultural events, the purpose of which is to draw attention to the unique traditions of the peoples of the region and its tourism potential. The Teriberka Arctic Festival, the 5th Golden Raven Arctic International Film Festival, the Gastronomic Festival of Northern Cuisine, and the Barents Bird Cultural Festival have taken place.

[A review of the events and the latest Arctic news are available](#) in the official accounts of the Russian chairmanship of the Arctic Council, ArcticON, on seven social media platforms in Russian, English and Chinese.

On April 11-13, St Petersburg will host the sixth International Arctic Forum, The Arctic: Territory of Dialogue. It will be held as part of the Russian chairmanship programme this year. Its business programme architecture includes six thematic blocks – economic development, comfortable living, logistics development, the environment and climate, science and education, and also international cooperation in high latitudes. The youth programme at the forum will again include the Youth Arctic Forum in Arkhangelsk. This has already been discussed.

More information is available on the forumarctica.ru/en/ website.

International Safer Internet Day

February 8 marks International Safer Internet Day. Let me remind you that it was established in 2004 in order to draw attention to the fact that it is necessary to use the latest digital technologies responsibly, especially among children and young people. It has also been marked in Russia since 2007. The Week of Safe Runet is timed to coincide with Safer Internet Day. It is held under the auspices of the Russian Civic Chamber with the support of the Russian Popular Front.

The international Digital Security Forum is the centrepiece of the day.

Russia welcomes the varied events held as part of International Safer Internet Day and aimed at improving people's digital literacy and ability to effectively counter online threats to public security, which unfortunately, are becoming more frequent every year. Today Civic Chamber experts calculate that there are at least 22 types of these digital challenges that involve grave social consequences. It is important that this year, there was a focus on the role of internet mediators, such as social media and video hosting sites, in distributing dangerous and prohibited content and on the impact on wide audiences. We fully share the opinion voiced during discussions that it is important for large IT operators and monopolists, giants in this segment of the market, to take the proper share of responsibility for what is happening on their platforms. We proceed from the fact that there is no alternative to their strict compliance with the national law in the countries where they operate, regardless of the jurisdictions where their headquarters are located, and also they need to respect the fundamental principles of freedom of speech. In my opinion, this no longer even needs repetition, although many should be reminded of it.

At the same time we believe that today's digital society can only find an effective response to a lot of challenges through the joint efforts of all states. We believe it important to give serious consideration to developing a universal international legal framework for the activities of internet mediators. Our goal is exactly to create a balanced system for multilateral cooperation in this sphere that would set a just distribution of responsibility between all the players interested in forming a safer online space, existing naturally and harmoniously, based on the principles that are fundamental to the freedom of speech.

Ahead of World Radio Day

February 13 is World Radio Day, officially proclaimed in 2011 at a UNESCO General Conference to mark the first UN Radio broadcast in 1946.

Radio and Trust is the main theme of the 2022 festive events marking World Radio Day in various countries. There are plans to focus on matters that are topical in the sector, including compliance with ethical journalism and radio journalism standards, preserving public trust in the media digitalisation era, accessibility to broadcasting content that meets the interests of all listeners, optimal economic survival strategies for radio stations competing for audiences with online platforms, etc.

In 1895, prominent Russian scientist and inventor Alexander Popov

demonstrated the world's first device showing rapid atmospheric electricity oscillations, also called a radio receiver. Since then, these data transmitters have become an inalienable part of our everyday life, and they have acquired modern hybrid forms, while coexisting with new technologies.

Today, this sphere is facing many of the same challenges as traditional newspaper journalism. They include the need to adapt to new technological realities, to sustain public interest in their programmes, to meet high-quality journalism standards, to fight misinformation, to meet all the criteria and legislative norms that also continue to change and develop at a breathtaking pace on a par with new technological capabilities. Checking and rechecking information is an area where extremely tough requirements are stipulated, especially during the current "info-pandemic." It has been known for a long time that radio broadcasts can seriously impact the masses. It is enough to recall the panic that swept hundreds of thousands of unprepared listeners in 1938 when a radio drama version of Herbert G. Wells' War of the Worlds was broadcast. All these people believed that the Martians had attacked Planet Earth. This seemingly old example remains topical. We have seen a lot, and we know how unverified or specially-leaked information can instantly change the lives of hundreds of thousands and sometimes millions of people. Many things are happening in connection with fake news regarding the situation in Ukraine, and this also influences the lives of ordinary people, as well as financial and economic realities.

On this day, February 13, we consider it important to recall that, unfortunately, radio broadcasters, as well as other media outlets and media professionals, are often subjected to pressure and restrictions by authorities in certain states, which strive to dictate their own rules, to impose strict control over the media space and to force undesirable speakers to fall silent. We have discussed many subjects at briefings, special conferences and regular media events. Here is just one graphic example. Radio PIK 100 FM, one of Latvia's oldest Russian-language radio stations, stopped broadcasting in July 2021 under a far-fetched pretext. A large audience was denied access to this media outlet. The incumbent Ukrainian leaders implement a similar information policy with regard to Russian and Russian-language media outlets, including radio operators. In May 2019, the country's parliament passed a law on the state language, and authorities in Kiev introduced language quotas for television channels and radio stations and ruled that Ukrainian-language broadcasts by national and regional media outlets should make up at least 90 percent of the output.

Numerous congratulations in all languages are being prepared in the run-up to World Radio Day. We are happy to take part. Naturally, we will congratulate everyone involved in radio broadcasts on this day. So, I will not give any congratulations just yet. I think it is important that this professional holiday is announced in advance, just as we do with Diplomatic Worker's Day.

The OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media's remarks regarding the response that Russia had to take with regard to the German state-owned media holding company Deutsche Welle

I cannot but touch upon the situation with the OSCE, which I mentioned when I announced a meeting with the current chair-in-office from Poland to be held in Moscow. Amazing things are happening in the office of the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media. The institution, once effective in responding to events clearly demonstrating an infringement on the reporters' rights and freedoms, has now simply fallen into decay. It appears that this office is overgrown with grass.

On February 4, 2022, OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media Teresa Ribeiro came up with an angry statement about the measures that Russia was forced to take with regard to the German state-owned media holding company Deutsche Welle in response to the ban by the German authorities on the broadcasting activities of the Russian TV channel RT DE in Germany. All this came despite the fact that the title of the corresponding message posted on the OSCE website clearly indicated that the above measures came as a response. As for the text, apparently on purpose, not a word was said about the reasons that prompted Russia to take decisive actions which are fully justified in the current situation created by Germany. Ms Ribeiro ignored the sequence of events and the problems RT is facing. This is a classic example. Wherever RT may be, Ms Ribeiro's mind is invariably in a different place. She doesn't follow it, and she doesn't say anything. All the while, she explains all these things to the Russian side. She is not saying that she will not be interested in this subject in principle. She is saying she is conducting "quiet diplomacy." It didn't work out this time, that is, it turned out the other way round. There was no such thing as quiet or loud diplomacy with regard to RT, but there was an entire statement with regard to Deutsche Welle. Ms Ribeiro ignores everything that has been done in Germany with regard to the RT journalists and the corporation itself. She reacted only to the inevitable consequences, which the Russian side has warned about repeatedly, including publicly.

Surprisingly, we were unable to find a single public statement by the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media in connection with the blatant years-long bullying of RT DE in Germany and other Western countries. We have not heard and are not hearing Ms Ribeiro call for an end to the slanderous campaign which is hurling absolutely groundless accusations and insults against this Russian media source. They were refuted even by the German courts. Ms Ribeiro, check with your assistants what is going on there. One cannot be that (I used to say indifferent) but now I'm saying unprofessional. We do not hear anyone expressing concern about centrally instigated attempts, for example, to block RT DE banking services and the opposition of the German government to licensing this TV channel in EU countries. We were told all the time by Berlin that they had nothing to do with issuing a licence in Germany. However, we know that they did everything in Luxembourg to prevent the RT licence from being issued. Ms Ribeiro couldn't care less about media freedom when, in September 2021, YouTube deleted RT DE accounts without warning or the right to recover, accounts with hundreds of thousands of subscribers. Back then, Ms Ribeiro's commentary included several short general statements. And she made them only because TASS journalists did not give her the chance to remain silent. What was that all about? Ms Ribeiro chose not to fulfil her direct duties when the German authorities actually forced a private French company to cut off the retransmission of the signal from the Moscow edition of RT DE to half of Europe, which was carried out in full compliance with the European Convention on Transfrontier Television. How many OSCE countries are members of this convention? More than 30, 33, I believe. At the same time, Germany is a party to this convention as well. But they probably aren't aware of that.

Ms Ribeiro did not see anything reprehensible or "restricting the freedom of the media" in the decision of the German Commission on Licensing and Supervision dated February 2, 2022 on the complete ban on RT DE activities in Germany, including linear broadcasting on television networks and online.

Teresa Ribeiro pretended she was unaware of the countless public and behind-the-scenes warnings by the Russian side that if the persecution of RT DE in Germany, the actual bullying launched by German journalists, community leaders and politicians did not stop, then Moscow would be forced to take decisive measures, but only in response to the above.

The OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media, Teresa Ribeiro, did not make a single attempt to act as an authoritative international mediator and encourage Germany to seek a constructive solution to the problem that was created not by us, but by Berlin. The artificial obstacles that RT DE TV channel

began to face in Germany, even before its launch – note this, Ms Ribeiro – are the result of the actions undertaken by the German authorities that directly violate freedom of speech and the media. From the outset, this situation has been under Ms Ribeiro’s direct purview. I would like to understand the decision-making mechanism used by this representative’s office to decide which situations to respond to and which ones to ignore. Is there a vested interest, are there any levers of influence or concomitant factors, or some kind of personal stake? It cannot be that the official inquiries that we submitted to the OSCE after our journalists hadn’t received any response from them, are totally ignored. However, our response has caused a flurry of indignation on the part of Ms Ribeiro. There are no other options. So, there must be some kind of leverage on this office. Who is behind it?

Her statement about the response measures taken with regard to the German state-owned media holding company Deutsche Welle is a sudden information flash amid dopey responses to gross violations of the rights of journalists in the Baltic States, Ukraine and Western “advanced democracies.” We were told this is OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media Teresa Ribeiro’s signature style. It clearly manifested itself in January 2022, when hundreds of “peaceful” protesters, as we were told by the West, were ransacking the Almaty offices of the Kazakhstani and international media operators, and took media workers hostage. The information resources of this OSCE institution remained serene. A case of “quiet diplomacy” in action.

Ms Ribeiro calls this unusual approach, which is questionable in terms of impartiality, “quiet diplomacy.” We just want to make sure. Can it be that Ms Ribeiro’s diplomacy has fallen asleep and something needs to be done to wake it up? Maybe that’s why it is quiet? I hope this “quiet diplomacy” is still alive. It remains unclear, though, what the publication of lop-sided and absolutely opportunistic statements has to do with it.

We call on the OSCE institute for media freedom to take the position of an honest broker (although I’m not sure the term “broker” is the best choice in this case), but a genuine manager, employed by members of this organisation, so that these managers monitor the situation. They have a mandate, and it must be complied with. Efforts must be made to resolve the situation regarding the ban on the broadcasting activities of RT DE, it is necessary to help resolve the situation.

I would understand if “quiet diplomacy” involved some kind of negotiating process, but no. We are never even asked to provide materials. We bring everything ourselves, because when our journalists send them, apparently,

they go into the rubbish bin. Nobody is getting any answers. The Union of Journalists handed over an entire message to the German Foreign Minister at a news conference, and then what? Nothing. The OSCE was entirely oblivious to the problems at hand. So, it would be nice to see them wake up or come to their senses.

Redfish channel's planned report on developments in Kashmir

I would like to again confirm Russia's unchanged stance of adhering to the principle of non-interference in the territorial dispute between the Republic of India and the Islamic Republic of Pakistan. We believe that all discrepancies between New Delhi and Islamabad must be settled by political and diplomatic means on the bilateral basis in accordance with the Simla Agreement of 1972 and the Lahore Declaration of 1999.

Events held in Japan to mark Northern Territories Day

On February 6-7, Japan held events to mark the Northern Territories Day. This year, they stood out for their unprecedented lack of restraint. Everything that happened there was supported by the authorities who practically assisted the thugs who tried to disrupt the work of the Russian Embassy in Tokyo with their aggressive actions and megaphone yelling. During one incident, under the passive eye of the police, a group of extremists tried to break through to the embassy territory and created a real threat to the safety of our personnel. A protest has been lodged with the Japanese Foreign Ministry in this regard.

A legitimate question arises: How does this blatant violation of the universally accepted norms of diplomatic practice and disregard for their own international legal obligations to ensure the work of foreign diplomatic missions declared by Japan, including at reputable international platforms, tie in with the country's claim to hold a leading position in global processes?

We demand that Tokyo draw logical conclusions from the incident and take the necessary measures to prevent such incidents in the future.

The 60th anniversary of the US economic, commercial and financial embargo against Cuba

February 3 marks the 60th anniversary of the odious phenomenon in modern history, which, unfortunately, has only worsened in recent years, namely,

the US economic, commercial and financial blockade of Cuba. If previously it was only against Cuba, today sanctions, restrictions and unilateral measures are being imposed by the United States and its “partners and satellites” across the board on multiple countries. Today, I would like to discuss Cuba, which has been living under embargo for 60 years now. A great global power, one of the pillars of the world order, has thus settled accounts with a small country for it wanting to free itself from the colonial grip of its northern neighbour and embark on a path of independent development. Revenge. Exactly the same thing that we are now seeing with regard to Crimea residents who have made their choice. Our country did not turn them away and respectfully accepted their choice. And now they are retaliating with sanctions. There’s nothing new about it.

The entire international community believes that Washington’s anti-Cuban policy is inhumane and illegal. Just think of it: 60 years of sanctions. Then look at the map and compare the size of the United States and that of the island of Cuba. There were the UN General Assembly resolutions, the calls by international public organisations, business circles, and just people with common sense. There were numerous business calculations about self-inflicted damage. At some point there were even hints at common sense prevailing and, on the face of it, nothing seemed to stand in the way of finally embarking on the path of realism. But no such thing. With enviable tenacity worthy of a better cause (not in the sense that sanctions should be imposed on other geographical locations, but in the sense that developing and implementing them in circumvention of the UN Security Council is illegal), throughout decades, almost all US administrations, with an exception only during the “Obama thaw,” stick to the same discriminatory policy with the ever-exacerbating consequences. They are doing so contrary to common sense, in an unscrupulous and hypocritical manner, under the banner of protecting democracy and human rights, and subjugating their every move to domestic political bias and the fleeting and self-serving interests of their “political hawks.”

At the same time, no one in the United States seems to care about the fact that this policy impacts not the Cuban leadership, but ordinary Cubans. It strangles the life-supporting sectors of the economy, creates social problems and deprives these people of those very human rights that the American guardians of global democracy are so worried about in words only. Most interestingly, the economic performance is cited as proof of the inefficiency of the Cuban system. Listen, for 60 years now Cuba has not only survived, but lived and moved forward amid your sanctions. I often wonder what would become of the United

States if similar sanctions were imposed on it for at least a year, or even a couple of months. That would be fun to watch. They would not just forget about democracy, there would simply be nothing left of the United States if at least a tenth of these restrictions had been imposed. Then, we would observe the competition of the systems. Washington is unlikely to run the risk of holding this experiment, isn't it? You know, things like hidden resentment, revenge, delayed decision-making or retribution happen in history. Still, common sense must prevail in humanitarian situations, such as the pandemic. That is exactly what the world has been living through for the third year now.

Notably, many Cubans who live in the United States and other countries of that region have relatives in Cuba who are impacted by the embargo imposed amid the pandemic rather than the theoretical sanctions. However, no one in the United States seems to be worried about that. They are a different kind of "human rights" and do not need to be taken care of. So, instead of uniting efforts in the face of a common challenge and creating some kind of synergy and green corridors, the US authorities did everything the other way round: they tightened the screws by imposing more sanctions on the pharmaceutical industry in Cuba, that very Cuba that helps everyone in the region deal with the impact of the pandemic, and is the first to respond not even to requests, but to developments in neighbouring and outlying countries in connection with emergencies, man-made disasters, etc. Cuban doctors are always among the first responders. Sanctions were imposed on them, and an absurd campaign was unleashed to discredit the assistance that the Cuban health workers are providing to other countries. They even went as far as to call it "human trafficking." However, in case the United States is unaware of what human trafficking is, we can tell them. It has nothing to do with Cuba whatsoever, and it's just a flat-out offence.

Cuba is showing amazing fortitude and courage. It is decisively moving forward along a path of independence as it overcomes hardships and difficulties. It is reforming the economy, optimising production and management systems, and improving the efficiency of state regulation. It is promoting fundamental and applied research and development and attaining world-class achievements in medicine and pharmacology. At the same time, it remains politically active in the international arena, upholding its interests and finding ways to help others, as I have already mentioned, remaining a symbol of the struggle against the remnants of the post-colonial world order, and Cuba simply stands for freedom and independence with all its heart and soul.

This 60 year-old history of the anti-Cuban embargo is the history of the Cuban people's selfless feat, a vibrant expression of national identity, pride and

dignity, which have been honourably carried through generations. We pay tribute to the great fortitude of our Cuban friends. We wish them strength, patience, success, good health and we hope that they find a way to overcome the challenges that life has posed to all of us.

Your cause is just, hence the conclusion: you will come out a winner. In this regard, I would like to remind the audience about what Fidel Castro once said, “We must firmly fight against the blockade, since the blockade is the main obstacle to our progress and is more than a ban on trade with Cuba, but also a symbol of pressure that the United States is exerting on the world at large.”

Desecration of Soviet burial site in Rawicz, Poland

We have to draw attention to a new case of desecration of Soviet military graves in Poland. This particularly cynical act of vandalism took place at the Soviet military cemetery in Rawicz, Greater Poland Voivodeship, where over 1,500 Soviet soldiers who lost their lives in the battle for the city and its suburbs in January 1945 are buried. Unknown perpetrators tore out the marble plaque bearing the soldiers’ names from the base of the central monument. The incident happened on the eve of the 77th anniversary of the liberation of the city by the Red Army, in the early hours of January 22, 2022.

This is not the first act of vandalism at this memorial. In June 2021, it was painted with inscriptions. The perpetrators were not found, and the case, according to the media, was dismissed. It is patently obvious that as long as the Polish authorities look the other way, such acts of vandalism will continue in Poland. It strikes a blow at the image of Warsaw.

Once again, we urge the local authorities of Rawicz to show an adequate response to the repeated cases of vandalism and we demand that the perpetrators must be found and such cases must be prevented. We address not only the local authorities, but the central government as well.

City administration has promised to conduct repair works at the memorial. However, it is also essential to find the perpetrators and punish them. Then there will be no need for us to make such statements, for people in Poland to lower their eyes in shame, or for the local authorities to spend money on renovation. It’s as simple as that.

We are going to monitor the repair works and will check the condition of the memorial in the near future.

The 77th anniversary of the end of the Red Army’s Budapest

offensive

February 13 marks the 77th anniversary of the liberation of Budapest, the capital of Hungary, from Nazi forces by units of the Red Army. The goal of the strategic operation was to force Germany's last ally to withdraw from World War II.

On May 13, 1944, the governments of the Soviet Union, the United Kingdom and the United States issued their joint statement urging the authorities of Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria and Finland to reduce their own losses and to facilitate an Allied victory by withdrawing from the war and ending their pernicious cooperation with Germany.

The rapid advance involving elements of the Red Army's 2nd Ukrainian Front forced Hungarian authorities to accept the pre-conditions of a truce with Moscow. The leaders of the Third Reich, who attached tremendous strategic significance to Hungary, were able to instal the pro-Nazi regime of Ferenc Szalasi in the country. A large part of the Wehrmacht's Army Group South (35 divisions), as well as surviving elements of the Hungarian army (190,000 soldiers) were deployed there.

On December 26, 1944, Soviet forces crossed the Danube River, encircled Budapest and presented an ultimatum to Hungary's pro-German authorities, demanding that they surrender. The latter rejected the Soviet ultimatum. At the same time, representatives of the Allied powers and Hungary's Interim National Government that controlled the regions of the country that had been liberated from the Nazis, signed a truce in Moscow on January 20, 1945, despite the continued fighting in Budapest.

Despite desperate enemy resistance, Soviet forces seized Pest on January 18, 1945. The retreating Germans blew up all bridges across the Danube, and the city was virtually demolished. On February 13, 1945, Buda, the remaining section of the city, was liberated. To commemorate this victory, the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet (Parliament) of the USSR instituted the Medal for the Capture of Budapest by its Decree of June 9, 1945. In all, 362,000 soldiers received this award.

On October 27, 1944, the State Defence Committee of the USSR issued its resolution noting that the Red Army did not enter Hungary as a conqueror, but rather as the liberator of the Hungarian nation from Nazi German oppression, and that it had no other goals besides defeating German enemy armies and destroying Nazi Germany's domination of countries enslaved by it.

The liberation of Budapest ended an important phase of the Red Army's

combat operations in Southeastern Europe. Soviet forces had an opportunity to prepare for final combat operations in Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Austria and to conduct them.

Answers to media questions:

Question: Tensions have been growing again between Japan and South Korea after Tokyo's move to recommend the Sado Island gold mines for the UNESCO World Heritage List. How would you comment on this situation?

Maria Zakharova: We have noted the story you mentioned, and we understand South Korea's reaction. Apparently, Japan is taking consistent steps (not only in relation to the Republic of Korea) to erase from the living memory the crimes committed by that country's leaders during WWII. It is difficult to imagine how it is even possible to deny actual historical facts (especially when it comes to the Japanese militarists' atrocities of those years). Residents of the territory that militaristic Japan had made its colony were forced into hard labour in those gold mines on a mass scale. Russia's approach has been consistently in favour of depoliticising UNESCO and its World Heritage Committee. We strongly insist on taking any politicised matters not covered by that organisation's mandate off its agenda.

Question: How would you comment on the possible partnership between the EU and the United States to improve Europe's energy security as announced by European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen?

Maria Zakharova: It is bad enough when a person heading an international body which includes sovereign states or independent actors promotes the interests of their own country, in a national capacity. But this is not the case here. This is an even greater paradox: a person representing an association of major states is promoting the interests of a country that is not even part of this association or of this continent. This is what Ursula von der Leyen's actions look like.

This sudden surge in contacts between the United States and the European Union on the energy track we have recently observed prompts no other interpretations except that certain political groups in Brussels are ready to hand over to Washington not only the EU's and its members' military security, but their energy security as well.

This shows complete disregard for national interests, let alone nations and

peoples. Nobody is asking them. People like Ursula von der Leyen have already spoken for them. The key word here is spoken, not decided. Neither she, nor the European Union members have made the decision; she just voiced it. At the same time, it is clear that the United States is not capable of even partially compensating for the loss of energy supplies to the EU provided by the Russian Federation. Any more or less competent specialist, even without much experience, can prove it in a single note. But nobody cares. They are again citing democracy and human rights that are put at risk. Or perhaps the freedom of speech? What we are witnessing is a crude attempt to take advantage of the political situation artificially created by the Americans themselves and use dishonest methods that do not reflect reality to take over a segment of the EU energy market on conditions that are favourable for the United States but not very favourable for the Europeans, thus gaining maximum leverage on the EU energy policy. At the same time, they can once again show an aggressive attitude towards Russia. They have no concern about Europe's energy security whatsoever.

Russia is the country that indeed supports the EU's and the entire Europe's energy security, for that matter. We have been doing this for several decades, conscientiously and efficiently. Over more than half a century of cooperation in the energy sector, neither the USSR nor Russia (as a successor and independent state) has ever failed their European partners, but has strictly fulfilled all contractual obligations, thus earning a solid reputation as reliable suppliers of energy resources. We continue to do this even now despite all the offensive statements addressed to us, threats, as lowly as blackmail, and endless accusations of things we did not do. We continue to work anyway. We are doing it efficiently and to mutual benefit. We are trying to explain to our partners what a dangerous line they are approaching by heeding the calls of American sirens regarding certain energy projects. We are doing this despite the hysteria unleashed in the West around Nord Stream 2, attempts to link energy cooperation with geopolitics, and creation of geopolitical prerequisites for staging another attack on Russia's energy contracts with European countries.

I would advise our Western partners, who traditionally see themselves as advocates of free trade, to be guided by market laws not only where it suits them, but also in the energy sector. Such as, demand creates supply, or it is indecent and unhelpful to change the rules for the implementation of large infrastructure projects on the go. As for Brussels' and a number of EU countries' tendency to politicise this sphere and consistently bring in elements of pseudo-ideological confrontation – this has nothing to do with reality. An ideological

confrontation was part of the Cold War – a battle of two systems, a life-or-death rivalry, by and large. Even despite this, Russian energy resources reached their European consumers without fail. The Europeans ought to think for themselves. Think about reality, not fantasy. They should attend to their countries' energy security issues themselves, relying, among other things, on the totality of their historical experience and current realities. Things would get easier then.

Question (retranslated from English): What is Russia doing to prevent the domestic crisis in Ukraine from turning into an armed conflict? Today, there are families living in both Russia and Ukraine. The border separates them. What would be the cost, in human terms, of a potential conflict?

Maria Zakharova: For many journalists who were not involved in this issue, “the situation around Ukraine” has emerged now. Meanwhile, it has already lasted for many years. People living in adjacent areas of Russia and Ukraine have been in this situation for a long time. They have lived during the “hot phase” of the conflict since 2014.

It is important to understand that when the events linked with the domestic crisis in Ukraine in 2014 unfolded, it was Russia that accepted enormous refugee flows. I believe India knows what I am talking about. Over a million people came to Russia from Ukraine. This is an enormous figure considering that our population is not as big as India's. About 1.2 million people came on the outbreak of hostilities in southeastern Ukraine. Some of them remained in Russia and received citizenship or a residence permit. Others stayed temporarily. They went back or left for other countries.

For us, this situation did not start today or a month ago. It did not start because of articles in the Western media that mostly described a non-existent situation. We live in this situation daily and this has lasted for seven years. At every briefing, we talk about the amount of humanitarian assistance. It comes from both residents of our regions adjacent to Ukraine and Russia as a whole. Even Moscow (located rather far away from Ukraine) has stations for collecting humanitarian aid (money, medication, books, stationery and heaters) for the residents of Donbass. In addition to donations by people, this aid is also centralised. Russia grants it via NGOs and business communities.

Donbass is practically besieged. Ukraine itself has cut it from the rest of its territory. To receive social payments, Donbass residents have to cross the contact line where even diplomats wear armoured vests and helmets. That said, the Ukrainian military understand that in such moments they must stop shooting. Yet international delegations go there only in protective gear. Ordinary people

cannot do this to receive social allowances. They don't receive them by mail. In terms of logistics, they are blocked there. Russia's humanitarian aid is the only opportunity for them to survive. Other countries also help them but we have provided a vast amount. There is information on the tonnage, range of goods and financial aspects. Don't think that people in the border areas have just started feeling special.

Unfortunately, the world press does not come to Donbass because it's dangerous there. But it is necessary to come and film what is happening there. Russian regions had tent camps that accommodated refugees from Ukraine, from Donbass. All Russian regions allocated special quotas in schools and hospitals for people from Donbass and gave them jobs. This is a long-standing problem.

Now the Western media are fanning hysteria instead of paying attention to two main points. First, why does the Kiev regime not fulfil the Minsk agreements that it signed officially to settle the crisis? Second, this is a humanitarian, human rights problem. People, including children, are being killed there. Unfortunately, children's cemeteries have become a reality for Europe in the 21st century. It is necessary to write about this. But they write about a hypothetical chance of a Russian attack, about some plans. This is sheer nonsense. We are disavowing these allegations, showing that they are not true. We continue supplying humanitarian aid and urging the Normandy format mediators and all those who can influence Kiev, to compel it to fulfil the Minsk agreements.

You asked what Russia is doing to prevent this issue from becoming an armed conflict. This is a domestic Ukrainian conflict between two parts of that country. The Package of Measures was drafted with Russia's participation because we are neighbours and were the same country in the past. We saw what would have been a threat to the people in that region (Donbass) if the Kiev regime had fulfilled its plans. They would have been destroyed. Vladimir Zelensky confirmed this. He said recently that those who did not like living in Donbass, in part, by following Kiev's rules, should get away. They apparently do not need people to live in a united Ukrainian state. They only need an empty territory with resources, free of people who refuse to obey.

Our efforts come down to the conscientious fulfilment of our functions. As a co-mediator in the Contact Group (together with the OSCE), Russia is helping establish a direct dialogue between the sides in the conflict – Kiev, and Donetsk and Lugansk. In the Normandy format (with Berlin and Paris), Russia is drafting recommendations for the Contact Group and monitoring their implementation. We continue to talk about the need to carry out the Minsk

agreements.

I would like to draw your attention to one important point. Washington and London yell more than anyone about Russia's alleged intention to attack Ukraine. They talk about this every day and, thus, their media are doing the same. In the meantime, President Vladimir Zelensky, Foreign Minister Dmitry Kuleba and Secretary of the National Security Council Alexei Danilov have made several statements thanking the Western public and asking them to stop the hysteria. Can you imagine the distorted world of mirrors we live in? Third countries that are formally not part of the region are saying that a war between our two countries is inevitable. We learn from American newspapers that we are "supposed" to attack Ukraine. Meanwhile, we have a common history with Ukraine. We went through 2014-2015 when we fed millions of refugees and displaced persons, and gave them jobs, housing and allowances. These are not mere words for us. These are the lives of people in an adjacent country, and we have a responsibility to them.

I want you to understand this. We are a country that survived World War II but not in the way the United States survived it – there were no Nazi troops on its territory. In our country, these troops occupied much of the territory, burned down towns, drove people into captivity, destroyed our cities and killed civilians, including women and children. We lost tens of millions of human lives. Peace is priceless to us. Our only goal is to keep it. We are being accused of aggressive actions, moreover, against a country where many people empathise with our common history, for which they are criticised by the Kiev regime and the President of Ukraine. How could Russia be planning any aggressive action, not to mention a full-scale military attack? This is absurd.

But is this the first time we have heard absurd statements from the Western press? In the early 2000s, they were out to convince everyone in much the same way that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. The media came up with dozens of daily reports, fuelling TV hysteria. The news outlets simply did not have anything else to talk about. So what was all this about eventually? The US wanted to attack Iran but it needed an excuse. The information environment turned this into propaganda. Now the whole world knows the truth – the US lied. Former US Secretary of State Colin Powell brought fake evidence to the UN Security Council. It was a planned operation. What they did with Iraq in the early 2000s is very similar to the false story about Ukraine, whereby Russia is being accused of certain aggressive plans. We do not have such plans, but we have a feeling that the US has them.

Question: NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg said the

alliance was considering more longer-term adjustments to its presence in Eastern Europe. What does the Foreign Ministry think of such statements, when in fact NATO has taken advantage of the crisis around the situation on the Russian-Ukrainian border to take exactly the steps Russia has been trying to prevent with its proposals for security guarantees? What does Moscow plan to do next in the light of such statements? Is there anything to negotiate?

Maria Zakharova: NATO's intention to expand and build up its military capacity in the eastern part of the alliance is nothing new. It has been implementing the plan for decades. It is a continuation of the policy line that the alliance chose long ago. The myth of a Russian threat is being vigorously exploited with non-existent evidence thrown into the mix. At the same time, the North Atlantic bloc is stubbornly advancing its military infrastructure, expanding the scale of its exercises, and strengthening contingents in Eastern European countries. These very actions have in fact prompted the question of security guarantees that we put before NATO. The trends are clear; the facts are all there. The words we hear do not correlate with the actions on the ground. The budget for the expansion of infrastructure and the buildup of NATO military forces near our borders is billions of dollars. This also has to do with the arms race, and extends to areas of geopolitics and international relations that have been quite stable. The events of recent weeks have clearly shown that Russia had every right and reason to raise this question. The negotiations should focus precisely on NATO having to stop creating risks for other states. This is one of the key elements of our security guarantee proposals.

It is not Russia expanding west, south, north or east, posting its military, setting up bases and planning hybrid schemes. It is NATO using its usual strategies for expanding and multiplying the armed forces, mostly concentrated around our country's perimeter. But its appetite has not diminished.

In this context, I would like to note that, while hatching plans to strengthen their posture in Eastern Europe, NATO's members should not overlook the Founding Act on mutual relations. Last time we checked, they have not withdrawn or rejected that act that explicitly enshrines NATO's commitment to "carry out its collective defence and other missions by ensuring the necessary interoperability, integration, and capability for reinforcement rather than by additional permanent stationing of substantial combat forces." How else can this be interpreted? These are written words. There are no other interpretations – this says, not by additional permanent stationing of substantial combat forces on the territory of the new member countries. This means, not expanding beyond the

1997 configuration. The Founding Act is in fact the only surviving instrument of military restraint in Europe at the moment. Perhaps it will suffer the same treatment as other agreements that they have ceased to consider as binding. You had better ask them about this.

Question: The Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team concluded in its recent report that terrorist groups have become more active in Afghanistan. Does Russia share this opinion?

Maria Zakharova: The change in the military and political situation in Afghanistan, including the change of power and the end of the foreign military presence, has implications for the security in the country. We share the international community's concern about the risks of terrorist groups stepping up their activities in Afghanistan, as well as spreading their influence beyond the country.

At the same time, we note that the new Afghan authorities show resolve to counter the threat of terrorism. Taliban representatives have noted many times that no threats against third countries' security will come from Afghanistan. Today Kabul is taking active steps to fight ISIS and other terrorist groups in Afghanistan. For example, last month the Taliban eliminated the former leader of the ISIS Afghan terrorist group, Aslam Farooqi, and arrested several members of the Hizb ut-Tahrir terrorist group. On February 6, at least 50 members of ISIS surrendered to the Taliban in eastern Afghanistan.

We call on the Afghan authorities to remain vigilant to the terrorist threat and continue to step up their anti-terrorist efforts.

Question: Unlike German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock who first came to Kiev and the next day went to Moscow, French President Emmanuel Macron held talks with President Vladimir Putin and then met with Ukrainian leader Vladimir Zelensky. Given the order of the visits, does the Foreign Ministry interpret President Macron's actions and France's position as genuine attempts to improve relations with Russia?

Maria Zakharova: The issue shouldn't be approached from this angle and the sequence of visits should not be interpreted that way, either. Prior to this, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken traveled to the region, visited one country, but did not visit the other. On the other hand, he met with Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov in Geneva. This is the third configuration of the negotiating process.

We certainly will not be approaching this matter from this angle. However, I believe that each country is entitled to answer this question from its own perspective. They may have intended to convey a message. But we do not

analyse such things from this angle, unless there is credible information in the form of statements by the relevant party. There's no point in speculating. We have little to no doubt regarding France and President Macron's stance on the need to normalise relations with Russia and his country and government's commitment to do so. There were plenty of verbal statements.

I would like to point out something different. We see President Macron and the Elysee Palace's clear attempts to make efforts to continue the Russia-France dialogue. The French President's attempts to seek common ground in international affairs and bilateral cooperation are obvious. Last year, our respective presidents had nine telephone conversations and three this year, and President Macron's visit to Moscow is one of the outcomes of these conversations.

It is also symbolic that the visit took place on February 7. As both presidents noted, this date marks the 30th anniversary of the signing of the fundamental treaty between Russia and France. This document laid a solid foundation for partner-like and mutually respectful cooperation between the two countries for the benefit of the peoples of both countries for decades to come.

There are deep-seated differences in the way we view many significant international issues, including the crisis in relations between Russia and the collective West, as well as ways to overcome it. In some ways there are elements of understanding, but there are great differences as well. Our assessments of a number of regional conflicts are not alike. Importantly, in difficult periods of international history, the Paris-Moscow dialogue often helped overcome the most acute differences and outline possible solutions in the interests of the two countries and stability in Europe and the world in general. We presume that this time Russia-France relations will play their stabilising role as well.

As a recent historical example, France's stance on US aggression against Iraq is illuminating. It has, in many ways, become a stabilising factor, including for the European continent. France has been extremely active in this regard, especially since it is a permanent member of the UN Security Council. It was important, because the Americans repeatedly tried to push a resolution to send troops to Iraq through the UN Security Council. Paris adopted a constructive and, importantly, long-term approach to it, working to make sure it would indicate Paris' non-participation and the existence of an alternative point of view, which was based on facts, rather than fakes, and to save face for future generations of French politicians in the international arena. At that point we were united in our approaches. We understood the danger of fake international diplomacy, which the Anglo-Saxons were resorting to once again.

They are now saying that Russia's stance is splitting Western unity. Not at all. We are not trying to split anything. We don't need to. First, they are already split even without us. Second, we advocate not just consolidating efforts (it's not worth wasting energy just for the heck of it), but resolving crucial challenges such as international terrorism, drug trafficking, organised crime, and cybercrime. Biosafety has become a practical issue (unfortunately, not a theoretical one) for every household. We see and acknowledge that the Western colossus has long been split on a number of fundamental issues.

We would like to come together around this approach. There are instances of us doing so and being successful at it. Back then, Moscow and Paris' positions were not directed against the United States. This is critically important. All the time they are trying to say that in these scenarios Moscow is against some actors, and Washington is against other actors, etc. Let's proceed from this case. Moscow, Paris, Berlin and many other countries were not against Washington, much less against the American people. We were against a specific decision that was illegitimate, based on fabricated allegations, and was dangerous both for the future of a particular region (I'm not even talking about Iraq), and for the world at large as well. It triggered chaos in Iraq. Then, a terrorist international was built there, leading to the emergence of ISIS which was aided by regional crises during the Arab Spring. Then the world had to face a different evil on a different scale.

This is an excellent example of interaction. Unfortunately, we were unable to stave off those plans. But we managed to show that the world can maintain common sense.

Question: Following the talks, President Vladimir Putin said that a number of President Macron's ideas could form the groundwork for further steps regarding Ukraine and security in Europe. Does this mean that Russia and the West are ready for compromises as they go forward?

Maria Zakharova: I would say the question is framed vaguely.

What follows from what President Putin said is that some of President Macron's ideas may be put to good use in the context of further steps to stabilise the military-political situation in Europe, including ensuring security guarantees for the Russian Federation and ending the domestic Ukraine conflict.

We see that, first, rational-minded Western politicians are coming to understand the need to take into account Russia's red lines, to establish dialogue with us on the issues that concern not only them but us as well, and to address issues by way of negotiations and various diplomatic means, rather than a "truncheon policy" which, like a Swiss Army knife, has different blades:

sanctions (when needed), threats, stop lists, kidnapping, or persecution of Russian businesses. Problems need to be addressed legally and through dialogue. So far, European politicians are only taking the first steps along this path. We will be listening to the words but basing our decisions on actions.

We will closely follow the evolution of Ukraine's approaches to resolving the conflict in Donbass. The beginning of full-fledged, constructive dialogue between Kiev and Donetsk and Lugansk will be the key sign to us. We also continue to await a written response by France and other Western countries to the letter sent by Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov on possible ways to implement the principle of indivisibility of security in international relations. Let's continue with our practical work.

Question: The spokesman for British Prime Minister Boris Johnson said on the eve of UK Foreign Secretary Elizabeth Truss's visit to Moscow that London was going to assure Moscow that NATO does not pose a threat to Russia because it is a defensive alliance. What does the Foreign Ministry think about this statement and what can it say if London takes this position?

Maria Zakharova: I think comments on the results of the talks should be made after the talks are over. They will take place tomorrow. Let's wait.

As for the words, we have heard surprising things today. Current and former Western politicians, journalists and the analysts at their service have started saying in unison that, first, there were no written commitments on NATO's eastward non-expansion. Second, when they were shown transcripts of talks, statements and memoirs that are historical evidence because what is said at talks is an official rather than personal position and is said on behalf of a country, they began to explain that they were misunderstood or meant something else and so that's it. What comes next? How can we be guided by verbal statements from now on? This is a past stage, all the more so since these words have been disavowed. They have just renounced their own words and then urged us to listen to their assurances. Not anymore. Now everything must be done in writing, on paper, divided into clear-cut items so that it is possible to understand whether something is violated or not. In addition, it is also necessary to be clear on definitions and notions. We have already seen an amusing game where they started saying that every country interprets "indivisibility of security" in its own way. What does "in its own way" mean? Does each signatory of the same document understand it "in its own way"? No, this cannot be true. The EU says they have a common foreign policy but every EU country claims it interprets the document it has signed as a national entity "in its own way." We must find the

underlying cause of this as well. Moreover, even representatives of the countries you mentioned maintain that in defining indivisibility of security they proceed from the initial OSCE documents rather than its latest papers. When we play cards, we need to understand what game is being played. We need to know how many cards are in the deck. Each game has a certain number of cards and the players assume they are not marked. When the game ends, the rules are important because they can prevent a situation where the players say they were playing a completely different game from what was announced in the beginning.

Question: Chairman of the Munich Security Conference Wolfgang Ischinger called on the West to contain Russia saying that strengthening the Ukrainian army could be an element in preventing the war. I believe Mr Ischinger is an OSCE mediator in the Ukraine conflict. Can a mediator appeal for restraint or a strengthening of the army? The conference will be held on February 18-20. Will Russia be represented?

Maria Zakharova: To date, the Normandy Four and the Trilateral Contact Group are the central formats for multilateral consultations to resolve the domestic Ukraine crisis in Donbass. These interconnected tracks are faltering as a result of an outright sabotage by the official Kiev regime which refuses to honour the obligations assumed under the Package of Measures arising from the Minsk agreements.

I have no knowledge about Chairman of the Munich Security Policy Conference Wolfgang Ischinger being involved, in any capacity, in the activities of the above mechanisms. If he said this in his capacity as an expert, then he should provide the results of an expert analysis or an assessment of the forums which would give us an actual picture, not the forums that are formed to suit the interests of the people sitting in the front rows of the Munich Conference, so that they can just sit there and smile contentedly. This is how the activities of this once respectable institution have been structured in recent years. Mr Ischinger's public comments about the crisis in eastern Ukraine are irrelevant to the practical aspects of the ongoing negotiating process designed to achieve a diplomatic solution and have nothing to do with the actual state of affairs.

With regard to the quality of the expert analysis, I would like to spend a moment discussing it and reminding you of the Munich Conference on Security Policy held in February 2020. We all went there. It was already clear that a new virus was raging in China, and the WHO was covering it widely. Pockets of this virus were spreading across Europe at an out-of-this-world speed going straight to Germany and Munich, where the Munich Conference was being held. I had no doubt that one way or another, these discussions would revolve around the

future of our planet amid the looming new reality. If you think I am having a fantasy in hindsight, I am not. I gave a live interview on the sidelines of this forum to TV channel Rossiya, I think. I pointed out the fact that China was fighting a novel virus variant. I remember seeing a news ticker on the screen saying that tourists in Paris had been found in an extremely serious condition, and the new infection was suspected. Italy was engulfed by the disease and was ablaze. Nothing in the audience or on the stage, replete with the infrastructure for discussions, indicated that this was of any concern to anyone. It was business as usual: the economic expansion of China, which must be stopped, and Russia, which must be contained. As is customary. As if the world hadn't begun to crumble before your eyes, and as if habitual life was not bidding you farewell. Where are the experts? Where are the analysts? Where are the people? This is not just a security policy in the context of armaments and defence cooperation. It is a conglomerate, a synergy of two things, a matter of biological safety, something that has always been at the top of the agenda. During the briefings, I constantly talked about US biolaboratories around the world with their unchecked and obscure activities. For three years in a row, speaking from this podium, every measles season, I warned our tourists about this disease raging in Europe. We saw the scale of it and wanted our people to be mindful of it. Here we have hundreds of local experts in uniform, all wearing orders and medals. Everyone is talking about everything, but not about what's most important. That is why the level of expertise is so low. Then, on several occasions, the assignment was clearly changed. It's no secret that many thematic panels were prepared to fit orders issued by the political forces from respective countries in order to provide them with political bonuses at home. At some point, environmental protection and climate warming came out of the blue, but next year there is no such thing as environmental protection or climate warming. We are done playing this card. It's either Ukraine, or Poroshenko with bricks, or with pieces of trolleybuses, if we are speaking of expert analysis. After all, these are not bureaucrats who are doing their jobs through inertia, but experts who are united by interest and deep knowledge in this area. In early 2020, the novel coronavirus infection left the Munich Conference participants unfazed. So much for analysis and forecasting.

According to the Foreign Ministry, Russian officials will not take part in the upcoming meeting of the Munich Conference on Security Policy on February 18-20 for a variety of reasons. Regrettably, in recent years, the Munich Conference has been increasingly morphing into a purely transatlantic forum and losing its inclusiveness, objectivity (which I just mentioned using a specific

example) and equidistance with regard to the speakers. Moscow's interest in this event has noticeably declined. We know that the same thing is happening in other non-Western capitals. Provided it's willing to do so, the MSC organising committee can fix this in no time, but it is up to them to decide.

Question: EU High Representative Josep Borrell said he was in charge of coordinating the EU member states' response to Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's letter regarding security issues. Was this letter addressed to the European Union as well? Or are Wolfgang Ischinger and Josep Borrell demonstrating examples of people's diplomacy?

Maria Zakharova: Reading other people's letters is not polite. That is to say that no such letter was sent to him.

On January 26, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov sent messages to 37 of his counterparts in NATO and the EU, as well as Switzerland, with a request to clarify how they plan to implement in practice their high-level OSCE commitment to ensure indivisible security and not to strengthen their security at the expense of other countries, or to explain why they have no plans to do so.

This letter was not addressed to EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell, which is not surprising. We made our position clear. The above commitments have been assumed by the respective countries in their national capacity, not as members of military blocs, integration associations or discussion forums (in the context of Mr Ischinger's statements, to whom this letter was not sent, either). If you want to find out why they took the trouble of commenting on this, then you should contact them.

With regard to people's diplomacy, I don't want to implicate the names of these people in this good and noble cause and get ahead of myself. Clearly, we have a history of monitoring the EU's behaviour, which clearly shows that every time Brussels tries to unify the EU members' positions on the Russian track, it invariably ends in the triumph of the EU anti-Russian minority backed by the big brother, who himself is not part of the EU integration association. This minority group triumphs because it is backed by the US and the UK. The UK stopped being an EU member, but its strong influence with the Baltic States is no secret. An attempt made by the EU leadership under the banner of a strategic review to reinvent the destructive EU approaches that prevailed on the Russian track in 2014, which were embodied in Federica Mogherini's notorious "five guiding principles," alone speaks volumes. It ended with the publication in June 2021 of a report by Josep Borrell in which these "principles" were solemnly reaffirmed (instead of reworking them, they toughened them even more). In fact, the EU policy towards Russia has been reduced to a confrontational triad: rebuff,

incapacitate and interact. Needless to say, these “exercises in Euro solidarity” do not add positivity to the already troublesome Russia-EU relations, which at some point were among significant pillars of the security and cooperation system in Europe and around the world. Solidarity can only be voluntary. When it’s not, it becomes submission, violence, or blackmail, but not solidarity. Solidarity shows itself without pressure or coercion. Solidarity is something that manifests itself proactively, even without the manifestation of convictions. We stand in solidarity, we help, and we welcome. What kind of solidarity is that? Some members are already shouting at the top of their lungs that they are not happy with this arrangement, because it is damaging to them in their national capacity, as it shuts the door to mutually beneficial cooperation with our country. To that, they are being told that since there are three or four countries insisting on that, they must comply. So much for democracy behind the scenes in the EU. Everything here looks spectacularly beautiful, like a shop window: lovely, wonderful, fashionable, up-to-date and attractive. The snag is they don’t wear the things they showcase. That is the problem.

That is why, we think, the Europeans will be better off if they approach this response independently and responsibly, and remain guided by their national interests, so that afterwards they won’t have to say that they “came under pressure” or that they had to comply “under duress” and that this is a “discipline of the rod.” We often hear them say this during talks, when the EU and NATO members cry on our shoulder telling us how they were “coerced” into doing what they did. There is a wonderful saying, “Moscow does not believe in tears.” In the context of international relations, I would now put a full stop after that and then add “any more.” They need to realise that the reduction of military risks and the prevention of the final degradation of the situation in European security are at stake. This is not a game of who will come up with a more scathing answer or who will cheat whom. These are the pressing issues of de-escalation, security guarantees, peaceful coexistence and trust. How many times have you heard our Western partners talk about the loss of trust? Lots of times. We confirm that. That is these answers are designed to build a trust-based system, but this time with approved written guarantees.

Question: Our question is linked with Azerbaijan’s transfer of eight detained soldiers to the Armenian party and an agreement that Armenia should publish data on missing Azerbaijani citizens and the mass graves where they are buried. What does Russia think about this ongoing process of repatriating Armenian service personnel? Is Russia prepared to provide possible assistance in finding out what happened to people

who went missing in the first years of the Karabakh War?

Maria Zakharova: We welcome the transfer of service personnel from Azerbaijan to the Armenian party on February 7, 2022. It is important that this irritant in Armenian-Azerbaijani relations be eliminated as soon as possible, and that detainees are exchanged under the all-for-all formula.

We would like to recall that, since December 2, 2020, 146 people have been repatriated, including 127 to the Armenian party and 19 to the Azerbaijani party, with the mediation of Russian peacekeepers.

We consider it important to exert simultaneous efforts to find out the fates of people who went missing during the conflict. We will facilitate this process in our national capacity and through the co-chairs of the OSCE's Minsk Group.

Question: On February 7, Azerbaijan said that in response to the return of the eight soldiers, the Armenian party should provide Baku with information on service personnel and civilians, killed during the First Karabakh War and presumably buried in mass graves, as well as information on the location of such graves. What does Russia think about the fact that, instead of returning all prisoners of war under the November 9, 2020 trilateral agreement, Baku is continuing to voice various pre-conditions not stipulated by this agreement? And what is being done to repatriate all Armenian prisoners being held in Azerbaijan?

Maria Zakharova: I have just replied to this question, and I have nothing more to add.

I have discussed our terms, the actions of the parties and the need to complete this process under the all-for-all formula. I can say that, for our part, we have been trying hard, and we continue to do our best in this sphere and all others. We understand that the uncertain fate of detainees is a major problem for their families and friends who know nothing about their condition. This is a high-priority matter. We prioritise this matter, and this is how we perceive it.

Question: On February 3, Culture Minister of Azerbaijan Anar Karimov announced the creation of a working group which will work to change the identity of Armenian religious and historical and cultural monuments that came under Azerbaijan's control, their "albanisation" by destroying the inscriptions in the Armenian language in Armenian churches. How does Russia feel about such inscriptions and what does it plan to do to prevent this cultural genocide? I would like to remind you that after the tripartite statement was signed in November 2020,

Russian President Vladimir Putin spoke about the need to preserve and protect Armenian historical and religious heritage sites in the Karabakh conflict zone.

Maria Zakharova: The preservation of cultural and historical heritage is regularly discussed during our contacts with official representatives of Baku and Yerevan. We are in favour of organising a UNESCO mission to the region as soon as possible. We also work through the Co-Chairs of the OSCE Minsk Group. A joint statement issued on December 7, 2021 by the Foreign Ministers of Russia, the United States and France calls on Armenia and Azerbaijan to continue cooperation under the auspices of the OSCE Minsk Group Co-Chairs to achieve real progress on humanitarian issues, including the protection of historical and cultural sites.

Question: President Alexander Lukashenko said in an interview with Vladimir Solovyov that Armenia would inevitably join the Union State of Russia and Belarus. How does Russia treat such statements? And are there any negotiations underway with Yerevan on the possibility of signing an agreement on establishing the Union State of Armenia and Russia?

Maria Zakharova: There was no such a statement in the interview. Mr Lukashenko was not talking about the Union State; he was talking about possible integration processes and associations in the field of security and economy. He described his vision as the President of Belarus and a politician concerning the development of integration processes. Therefore, I cannot answer your question the way you worded it, the way you see it. Mr Lukashenko did not say this.

If I don't answer the question as you worded it but simply talk about the Union State outside the context of the statement, then I can say that the Union State is not a closed association and provides for the possibility of other states joining it. This is well known information. There are no secrets. Once again, I would like to draw your attention to the fact that much of this interview was devoted to the current state of integration processes. At the same time, the President of Belarus spoke about his vision, based on the geopolitical situation, of the development of world processes in terms of how the new space of these integration associations will, should and can be built.

Question: The Russian media reported today that Director General of Deutsche Welle Peter Limbourg wants to discuss the possible resumption of his company's operation in Russia. How would you

comment on the current situation with Deutsche Welle in Russia, in light of his recent interview?

Maria Zakharova: We will gladly support this. I'm sure you are aware that we are in contact with all journalists without exception and we listen to them. We don't know how we can protect the Russian journalists who are being persecuted in Germany. How many times have we talked about this publicly? It is all there in our briefings, videos, and the printed version. How many times have we urged them to change their strategy and stop this persecution campaign against Russia Today and against journalists in Germany? Nobody would listen. When we want to discuss this, they don't seem to want to talk – in fact they seem to ignore us as if they can't hear us. When similar things happen in relation to representatives of the West causing their discomfort (anyone from the West, not necessarily journalists, but officialdom as well), there is immediate panic. Wait. We are all people, and you are all journalists. You must abide by more or less the same professional ethic. You know what accreditation is, what it takes to get a visa or to open a bureau, and lockdowns and the pandemic make our work even more difficult these days. Why do you divide your community into good and bad journalists? Worthy of a normal attitude or unworthy of it? Remember how we reacted after we spent three years asking the UK to resolve the problems with the TASS correspondent's accreditation? We proposed two or three journalists, but they were all rejected. So we reacted. And then it all began. Remember how unpleasant the situation was? It will always be like this, I can assure you. When our people face discrimination, unreasonably, and not just once, but over a long period of time, when we realise that we are out of options, after we have been denied even the opportunity to discuss the problem, we will act in response. If anyone from the German side would like to mediate – Deutsche Welle, the German Federation of Journalists (whose behaviour has been very ugly, as if it were a propaganda bureau, not a union of journalists), the German Foreign Office, public organisations, volunteers or whoever – to help us find a solution, we are always ready for dialogue. I will always find the time (round-the-clock if necessary) to sit down and talk, not only to discuss problems, but also to find a way out of them. Only this should be a solution, a two-way street, not another lecture on what we should do or a warning on what they will continue doing to us, just like that. Therefore, I will be happy to speak with the Director General of Deutsche Welle, with any representative, with the German Embassy, and with highly respected German diplomats, in any format, form, or context. Let's meet and discuss. I hope they would not come empty-handed, but with specific proposals, when they are ready.

Let's now consider the concept behind the mirror metaphor. A mirror reflects what you do. You smile at it, and you see a smile. You grimace, and you see a grimace. Isn't this how you explain it to children? Maybe it's a good idea to act decently, at least once, stick to the professional ethics and existing laws? Maybe you will see the same treatment in response? We will never deceive you. Journalists working in Moscow, including those from Deutsche Welle, are perfectly aware that we are always ready to meet them halfway. Even despite the entry coronavirus-related restrictions mandated by our Emergency Response Centre. In humanitarian situations, we have helped journalists resolve logistics problems because we knew they needed to report from the neighbouring countries as well, not only from Russia, where they are accredited. Many media outlets, including German media, have opened their bureaus in Moscow, but they also work across all post-Soviet countries. We were helpful and responsive, and resolved a huge number of problems. I don't even want to mention information openness. I think you can see it. And then we face this attitude.

Question: Specifically, in this case, how might the situation unfold to lead to such a meeting?

Maria Zakharova: They would need to do something, I suppose – at least make some kind of proposal. If they have any concerns, if there is something they would like to change, they need to tell us. We will listen and offer our vision. We told them, if you do not like this situation, if you want to resume a normal and respectful relationship, then let's do it from both sides, and look for solutions. We talked about it. How can this be?

If there was nothing besides the licence situation, we could maybe assume that the German regulator just denied a licence, probably for some subjective reasons. This would not seem like a consolidated policy.

But we saw the bank cards, too. They just closed our accounts.

Dozens of stories published every month, media reports criticising Russia Today, saying how bad they are; video hosting platforms blocking their accounts; statements from the German Federation of Journalists, so outrageously ugly it just blows one's mind, demanding that Russia Today journalists be expelled and kicked out of Germany, as if they were afraid of direct competition, seeing the growing number of viewers.

The German government seems reluctant to touch on this topic. Okay, I agree. In some lands far, far away, the media might be really separated from the state – no state funding, no licensing, nothing. But Germany provides state funding for television channels and other media. The country also has international obligations not to restrict freedom of expression or access to

information, which is something they have assumed and signed on to. Here, too, one can't stop wondering how this can be – on international platforms like the OSCE, we hear Germany advocate openness and freedom in its statements. No one should interfere with the dissemination of information. Only when it comes to the situation back home, Germany suddenly has no international obligations. Wait, the German Federation of Journalists or the local media regulator that issues licences do not represent Germany at the OSCE. It is the German government that makes statements there – the Federal Chancellor and the Federal Minister for Foreign Affairs. Other government members represent Germany on other platforms where they officially reaffirm their commitment to freedom of speech and non-interference with access to information. This means they have signed on to this and have national obligations. But when they return home, they seem to forget it all and no longer care. We can see a systematic approach here.

Let them think and contact us. We will discuss this. We will hear them. And they will hear us, I hope. We are ready for dialogue. We have been asking for this dialogue here as well as during the Russian ambassador's meetings with the German side in Berlin. And we have also talked with the German ambassador. Not me or my colleagues, but senior Foreign Ministry officials spoke directly about this, including publicly to the German side. This matter has been raised in the course of recent contacts with the Minister of Foreign Affairs, but to no avail, as if we hit a brick wall. And now that this has happened, everyone has suddenly noticed. We are ready for dialogue.

Question: Kiev has asked Washington to deploy its Terminal High Altitude Area Defence (THAAD) missile systems near Kharkov. According to Presidential Press Secretary Dmitry Peskov, this move would become yet another step towards destabilising the situation in the region, and Russia disapproves of this. What does the Foreign Ministry think about this prospect? Is there any additional information?

Maria Zakharova: I believe that you should, first of all, address this question to the United States and Ukraine, mentioned in the report. Let them present their own official versions of the situation, and we will subsequently comment on them.

Regarding the deployment of all kinds of weapons, instructors and militants in Ukraine, the delivery of weapons, gear and other types of equipment, we unequivocally interpret this as an arms buildup that destabilises the situation in Ukraine, does not help resolve the Ukrainian crisis and creates tensions on the European continent.

Question: The compatriots would like to say a few words. Please accept our heartfelt congratulations on your professional holiday. At this difficult time, we can see Russia's active efforts to defend its national interests and the interests of its peoples on the diplomatic front. We are proud of you. Every day, we also try to explain Russia's peace-loving and honest policy in our places of residence and on social media networks and to tell the truth about our Russia. Thank you.

Maria Zakharova: Thank you so much.



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