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News conference following Russian-French talks • President of Russia

44-56 minutes

President of Russia Vladimir Putin: Mr President, ladies and gentlemen,

It is a pleasure to welcome you to the Kremlin and to host the President of the French Republic, Mr Emmanuel Macron in Russia.

It appears symbolic that our meeting is taking place on February 7 (it looks like it will end on February 8, Moscow time), the day when a fundamental treaty between Russia and France was signed 30 years ago. That vital document provided a reliable foundation for the development of bilateral cooperation based on partnership and mutual respect for decades to come. Our talks with President Macron today were held in a business-like atmosphere and were substantive and meaningful.

It is clear to us that Mr President has come to Russia primarily to discuss the current issues of European and global security, for which our countries bear special responsibility as permanent members of the UN Security Council. In addition to this, France is holding the presidency of the Council of the European Union.

See also

During the talks, we continued to exchange views on the proposals regarding long-term legally binding security guarantees, which Russia has made to the United States and NATO. I would like to remind everyone that these proposals include three key points: NATO's non-expansion, non-deployment of offensive weapon systems near the Russian border, and the return of the bloc's European capabilities and infrastructure to the 1997 level, when the NATO-Russia Founding Act was signed.

Regrettably, the replies from the USA and NATO, which we received on January 26, disregard these concerns of fundamental importance to us. Moreover, our Western partners once again said that all states have a right to freely choose their security arrangements and to enter into any military blocs and alliances. Well, we never questioned this principle. On the other hand, it is also obvious that these blocs and alliances have no obligation to admit any country that wishes to join them.

This open-door policy, which we have discussed with many of our partners, including with President Macron today, is very liberal. We believe that only the United States and possibly several other NATO members are benefitting from this interpretation of the fundamental principle of equal and indivisible security, which has been set down in many European documents and includes, as we all know, a pledge not to strengthen one's security at the expense of the security of other states.

The reference to the open-door policy, which I have mentioned, is questionable as well. I would like to repeat (I have said this on numerous occasions, including in this very room during a recent news conference following Prime Minister of Hungary Viktor Orban's visit) that according to Article 10 of the 1949 North

Atlantic Treaty, the member states may, by unanimous agreement, invite any other European state in a position to contribute to European security to accede to that treaty. But this does not mean that the bloc is obligated to admit any country, as I have said as well. All right.

However, I would like to point out that they continue trying to placate Russia with deliberations that NATO is a peaceful and purely defensive alliance. People in many countries, namely Iraq, Libya and Afghanistan have learned the truth of this statement the hard way, and this is also true about the large-scale military operation against Belgrade waged without a UN Security Council sanction, which is definitely not an operation that could be waged by a peaceful organisation.

In addition, we cannot overlook the fact that the 2019 NATO Military Strategy openly describes Russia as the main security threat and an adversary. NATO has designated Russia an adversary. Moreover, while advancing its military infrastructure very close to our border, NATO and its member states believe that they have a right to teach us where and how we can deploy our armed forces. They consider it acceptable to demand that we do not hold planned drills and exercises and present the movement of our troops on our own – I repeat, our own – territory as a threat of a Russian invasion, in this case the invasion of Ukraine. They claim that the Baltic states and our other neighbours feel threatened as well. In any case, this presumption is being used to pursue an unfriendly policy towards Russia.

As for the NATO member-countries themselves, they continue to pump Ukraine with modern weapons to this accompaniment, allocating substantial financial resources to modernise

the Ukrainian army, and sending military specialists and instructors to Ukraine.

Mr President and I have certainly spoken about this. As you can see, it took us a rather long time: the discussion went on for nearly six hours.

For our part, we have made a point of drawing Mr President's attention to the reluctance of the current Kiev authorities to meet their commitments under the Minsk Package of Measures and the Normandy format agreements, including those reached at the summits in Paris and Berlin.

In my opinion, it is clear to everyone that the current authorities in Kiev have set a course for dismantling the Minsk accords. There are no shifts on such fundamental issues as constitutional reform, amnesty, local elections, and the legal aspects of a special status for Donbass. The well-known Steinmeier Formula – well-known to specialists, at any rate – when we have approved certain amendments to the Minsk accords and made definite concessions, is yet to be included in Ukrainian legislation. But even these items presented by the current President of the Federal Republic of Germany – at that time, he was the German foreign minister – are not being implemented. Kiev is still disregarding all opportunities for a peaceful restoration of the country's territorial integrity via direct dialogue with Donetsk and Lugansk.

I have directed Mr President's attention to the widespread and systematic violations of human rights in Ukraine. Dissenting media are closed in the country and political opponents are exposed to reprisals. Incidentally, when Mr Poroshenko was the President of Ukraine, I told him that Russia was ready to grant

him political asylum, if he faced problems in the future. He was highly ironic in this regard at the time, but today I would like to reiterate my offer. Despite our serious differences regarding this matter, I mean the settlement in Donbass, as well as the fact that, to my mind, he has made a lot of mistakes in this area, his persecution as a state criminal is also, in my view, an exorbitant 'bid for success' on the part of today's leaders. Russia is ready to grant asylum to Mr Poroshenko and persons like him.

What worries me most of all is that they are adopting legislation that discriminates against Russian speakers, who have been denied the right to be recognised as a core nation in what is, properly speaking, their homeland, and the right to speak their native language, which is quite odd because this is in no way reflected in the approaches adopted by the European countries.

We hope that Mr President intends – at any rate, he said so earlier today – to discuss what we have discussed today as regards European security and stability guarantees at his meeting with the Kiev leaders tomorrow.

We also touched upon other topical international and regional matters.

While reviewing the situation around Nagorno Karabakh, we noted the positive role of the Russian peacekeepers who are ensuring compliance with the ceasefire regime and helping the region return to peaceful life. We reaffirmed the great significance of efforts by the OSCE Minsk Group's co-chairs in addressing topical humanitarian and socioeconomic matters in the region, among other things. The President of France informed us of the results of his recent videoconference meeting with President

of the European Council Charles Michel, the President of Azerbaijan and the Prime Minister of Armenia.

We reviewed the situation around the Iranian nuclear programme and efforts to resume the full-fledged implementation of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, adopted in 2015 and approved by UN Security Council Resolution 2231. We agree that it is necessary to continue diplomatic efforts and to assist in the coordination of compromise solutions in the interests of preserving this highly important document. We agreed that our positions are very similar here or, as the diplomats say, they match.

Naturally, we did not overlook topical matters of bilateral relations, primarily those regarding economic interaction. Despite the complicated situation caused by the Covid-19 pandemic and volatility on the global markets, we underscored and noted that mutual trade grew by 71 percent in 11 months of 2021. French investment in Russia exceeds \$23 billion. Over 600 French companies are operating successfully on the Russian market.

Overall, we agreed to continue our mutually beneficial cooperation in politics, trade and the economy, as well as in other spheres, including cultural and humanitarian ties.

To conclude, I would like to thank Mr President for his efforts and the efforts of France to resolve a highly acute matter linked with our relations with NATO in general, matters linked with maintaining security, creating a situation of stability and mutual trust on the European continent and, of course, resolving the crisis in southeastern Ukraine.

We have already met in Paris, and I know that, despite numerous

problems facing any state leader, especially the leader of a major European state, Mr President deemed it necessary to come to Russia and to exchange opinions on how we should act in the future. I believe that, although it is still too early to talk about some of his ideas and proposals, it is possible to make them the foundation of our future joint steps.

Let us see what Mr President's meeting will achieve in Kiev. We agreed that we will speak on the telephone after his trip to the capital of Ukraine and exchange opinions on this matter.

Thank you.

President of France [Emmanuel Macron](#) (retranslated): Thank you very much, Mr President. Thank you, Vladimir.

Mr President, you have reminded us of Russia's views on the situation regarding the North Atlantic Alliance, Russia's security interests and the Ukrainian issue. You have touched upon the most diverse issues. Indeed, we are now marking the 30th anniversary of establishing diplomatic relations, of this bilateral agreement you mentioned.

I will not discuss relations between our two countries in greater detail at present because we now realise that the situation is serious, and all of us should find a way, a peaceful path, a path towards stability in Europe. We still have the opportunity and the time to do this. The historical and strategic dialogue that we have developed over the past years can help accomplish this. We have decided to meet in precisely this context in Moscow today.

We held very substantial, to-the-point talks. We focused on current

areas of tension and on options for de-escalation, to facilitate stability and security on our continent.

Mr President, you have reminded us of Russia's views on the situation regarding the North Atlantic Alliance, Russia's security interests and the Ukrainian issue. You have touched upon the most diverse issues.

We can see that you have a very strong position, which does not always coincide with the European and Western position. It is necessary to underscore this. We have different views, and we need to understand and accept this. We discussed this in great detail. I believe in Europe and European unity, and this is a fundamental matter.

It is true that NATO's open-door policy, which is very important, it is an existential matter, was adopted regarding, say, Sweden and Finland. It would be very difficult to suddenly tell them that NATO plans to change its stand.

However, we need to consider the issues you have mentioned, the series of misunderstandings and traumatic events that took place over the past 30 years, and the need to create new security and stability mechanisms in the region. At the same time, I do not think that the creation of these new mechanisms implies a partial revision of the treaties signed over the past 30 years and our fundamental principles, or a restriction of the rights of some European countries that are not parties to the existing treaties. This is an extremely important point.

Having said all this, we, nevertheless, tried to find points where our positions coincided, so as to make headway on them in the near future. Firstly, it is necessary to work very quickly to avoid any

escalation. Tensions continue to rise today, and this exacerbates the risk of destabilisation. This is not in anyone's interests.

Neither Russia, nor the Europeans want chaos and instability now that people on the continent have sustained such heavy economic and social losses from the pandemic and want recovery and tranquillity. This is why we need to come to an agreement on practical stabilisation and de-escalation measures.

We have discussed this together. This should be reaffirmed within the next few days or weeks. The result will depend on the talks and consultations with the United States, NATO and the Europeans, as well as on the outcome of my meeting with President Zelensky tomorrow.

I would like to note that President Vladimir Putin said he is ready to follow this logic and help maintain the balance in these initiatives, including the issue of Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity.

To sum up, the next few days will be decisive and will obviously require intense discussions that we will continue together.

What should be very clear from our conversation is that reliable de-escalation calls for making headway on fundamental matters. We had a lengthy discussion on these matters. We must jointly show the will to work on security guarantees and to build a new security and stability order in Europe. It must be based on the foundation we have created together as sovereign states.

This is the principle of continuity of states. I am referring to Russia, France and the other states that are also parties to these treaties. Therefore, this is the fundamental principle of European security. We have approved them by signing the Paris Charter

and the subsequent OSCE declarations. I am referring to the principle of the territorial integrity of states, the threat to use or use of force, inviolability of frontiers, and non-interference in internal affairs, as well as violations of international law, human rights and basic freedoms.

Whatever the historical interpretations of various crises and incidents may be, to maintain the security of our continent as we have said many times, we must not repeat the past mistakes.

We talked for several hours today. But we also talked about this in the past, several years ago. I understand that opinions can differ and that there can be misunderstandings and even traumatic elements. I know that many EU countries did not have the same experience in the 20th century as France did. We must not forget this experience, which has not faded away over the past 30 years. However, we cannot accept the collective risk of another confrontation between spheres of influence in Europe, another period of instability and unrest. This is creating new grievances and new threats. Starting a conflict is easy but ending it and building a lasting peace is difficult.

Therefore, I do not believe that we must choose between new rules and the absence of rules. This is optimism based on will, as I see it.

Since Russia is committed to the principle of sovereignty and related rights, I am convinced that we will be able to build security and stability in Europe, confirming what we have already achieved within the OSCE framework.

That said, we should also come up with new solutions that should

probably be more innovative, as regards our ability to ensure specific security guarantees. We raised this issue directly during our conversation, respecting the interests of all our European brothers and ensuring their stability and security, as well as with due regard for the security guarantees proposed by Russia, our neighbour and friend.

I have told President Putin that I was concerned about the draft Constitution of Belarus, which is lacking two fundamental principles that were sealed in 1994. I am also concerned about the statement on nuclear weapons made by Alexander Lukashenko in December. I would like to say that President Putin has put my mind at rest regarding this.

I am indeed concerned about these matters, because they are increasing destabilisation. We should work together on practical security guarantees for the EU member states and for the regional countries, namely Ukraine, Georgia, Belarus and Russia. This is the goal we must pursue.

We had a conversation that allowed us to develop a number of proposals. I must say there is common ground between the positions of France and Russia. You were the ones to start consultations with NATO and the United States, and now we will have to continue detailed talks with all partners in the next few weeks with the express purpose of creating these new peace and security guarantees.

Russia has long asked for certain security guarantees, such as restrictions on military deployment and presence of conventional weapons, the transparency of missile defence and on intermediate- and shorter-range missiles. These Russian

proposals correspond to the requirements of European states, the EU states. I am sure that a response can only be collective.

We are Europeans, but we are also allies of the United States. We have already demonstrated that we can work together, including within the framework of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council. Both of us have pointed out that this format can help us make headway on these matters, in particular, on the issues of peace and security, and can help us coordinate common decisions.

The third element on which we have managed to find converging positions, which President Putin has mentioned in his statement, as I have said, is the Ukrainian conflict. I am going to Kiev tomorrow to meet with President Zelensky. Of course, we are doing this jointly with German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, with whom we coordinated our positions several days ago. I will see him tomorrow afternoon in Berlin. We continue working within the framework of the Normandy format to ensure full compliance with the Minsk agreements and to achieve a complete settlement of the conflict in Donbass.

Serious agreements regarding the ceasefire regime were reached during the recent advisers' meeting of the Normandy format countries, and now we must move forward in terms of practical steps to ensure a clear and full implementation of these agreements. We have made progress on several technical issues during the talks.

I would like to welcome President Zelensky's efforts, the specific obligations he assumed within this format and as regards all of us. In particular, he promised to withdraw the legislation that did not

conform to the Minsk agreements and President Putin mentioned this. This legislation was withdrawn at President Zelesnky's initiative. I have also received detailed explanations from President Putin regarding the rumours about some draft laws also being proposed in Russia. He reassured us that this would not happen if they were not in line with the Minsk agreements. Now that the situation has become clear, we must continue working in this vein. This is important for peace and stability in Europe because this conflict is at the centre of the tension that we are experiencing today. And, of course, Russia and the European Union need to settle this conflict so that we can move forward in our relations.

We also mentioned a number of other matters, in particular, the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Here, I have the pleasure to say that eight prisoners were released this morning. The French crisis response centre provided an aircraft to transport them. Last Friday, Prime Minister Pashinyan, President Aliyev and I conducted a videoconference meeting. We discussed missing persons, refugees, borders, and the communications infrastructure, as well as a number of other issues that are required to ensure stability in the future.

During the talks with President Putin, we both expressed coinciding views on a number of matters. I would like to welcome the role that members of your military played on the border during the difficult period in Armenia and Azerbaijan.

Both France and Russia also play an appropriate role within the scope of the existing Minsk Group agreements.

We also mentioned the Iranian crisis, and the recent US and EU initiatives. Our positions on this score are also similar. I would

rather not talk about it at length, I just want to emphasise that today, at a time that has serious implications for our countries' collective security and peace, we were able to discuss various aspects and understand the differences in interpretation, the divergence of views, but we also found a similarity of positions. This enables us to move forward. I think we both agree there can be no rational and long-term solution without a political and diplomatic settlement.

In the coming days and weeks, there will be opportunities for additional consultations and contacts with all our European partners, with our allies, as well as with Ukraine and other countries in the region.

We will have the opportunity in the next few days to once again speak by telephone and discuss Ukraine and our collective security. We would like to build a framework of trust that would allow us to move forward. We are determined to maintain stability and peace and to restart the mechanisms of trust in Europe. This is our collective responsibility.

I would like to say that France is reaffirming its commitment to move in this direction.

Thank you.

Question (*retranslated*): Good afternoon, President Macron, President Putin.

I have a question for both of you.

Mr President Macron, you have been making steps towards Russia for five years now but you have had fairly disappointing results. This is evident from the crisis you spoke about

and the presence of Russian mercenaries in Mali, which is fuelling anti-French attitudes and even casts doubt on our presence there. Do your actions here make sense?

President Putin, a simple question for you: do you intend to invade Ukraine?

As for Mali, can you say that your government is not connected in any way with the mercenaries in Mali?

Vladimir Putin: First of all, regarding Mali. President Macron raised this issue many times, we discussed it with him, and President Macron is aware of our position on this matter. The Russian government, the Russian state have nothing to do with the companies that are working in Mali. As far as we know, the Malian leadership has no complaints about the commercial activities of these companies.

Following the logic that may be applied to NATO, the current member states and potential members, if Mali has opted to work with our companies, it has the right to do so. However, I would like to point out – I will talk about this with President Macron after this news conference – I would like to point out that the Russian state has nothing to do with this. It concerns the commercial interests of our companies, which coordinate their activities with the local authorities.

We will take a closer look at this, but we have nothing to do with it. This is the first point.

The second, regarding the situation in Ukraine and the issues we have discussed, the issues of concern to us. I spoke about this right here several days ago, during the news conference after talks with the Prime Minister of Hungary. I would like to say this once

again. We are categorically opposed to NATO's eastward expansion through the admission of new members because we see this as an overall threat of NATO's continued expansion towards our border. It is not us moving towards NATO but NATO moving towards us. Therefore, saying that Russia is behaving aggressively is at odds with logic. Have we approached anyone's border? No, it is NATO's infrastructure that has come close to us. This is my first point.

The second, why is Ukraine's potential admission into NATO dangerous? The problem does exist. For example, European countries, including France, believe that Crimea is part of Ukraine, but we think that it is part of the Russian Federation. And what happens if attempts are made to change this situation by military means? Bear in mind that Ukraine's doctrines declare Russia an adversary and state the possibility of regaining Crimea, even using military force.

Just imagine what could happen if Ukraine were a NATO member. Article 5 has not been cancelled. On the contrary, Mr Biden, the President of the United States, has said recently that Article 5 is a sacred obligation and will be honoured. This is fraught with a military confrontation between Russia and NATO. I asked during the above-mentioned news conference, "What are we supposed to do? Fight against the NATO bloc?" But this question has a second part: "Do you want to fight against Russia?" Ask your readers, your audiences and the users of online resources, "Do you want France to fight against Russia?" Because this is how it will be.

Our concerns also have to do with common European security.

As for Donbass, Ukrainian leaders first say that they will implement the Minsk agreements and then they denounce them and say they will never do this because “this would destroy the Ukrainian state.” I have only just mentioned this. Well, will they, or won't they? This is the question.

They speak of security guarantees from us. But who will guarantee our security? The Ukrainian authorities have already made two attempts to settle the problem of Donbass militarily. When they failed again, the Minsk agreements were coordinated and endorsed by a resolution of the UN Security Council.

So, will they comply with the agreements or not? Or will they make some other attempt? What should we think? After all, they have tried twice, and who can guarantee that they will not try a third time? These questions require a thorough consideration by all of us.

I am deeply grateful to Mr President for discussing these matters in Moscow today. I believe that these security matters concern not only Russia but also Europe and the world as a whole.

Look, our proposals include not only NATO's expansion, which we oppose, but also a second point: the non-deployment of offensive systems near our borders. If everyone wants peace, tranquillity, well-being and confidence, what is bad about not deploying offensive weapons near our borders? Can anyone tell me what is bad about this?

If NATO is a peaceful organisation, what is bad about returning its infrastructure to the level of 1997, when the NATO-Russia Act was signed? This would create conditions for building up confidence and security. Is this bad?

We can let the open-door pledge be, even though the issue remains on the agenda. It is a key priority for us, and I have explained why. We talked about this for six hours.

Tomorrow, President Macron will fly to Kiev. We have agreed that he will at least put forth his action plan regarding this. I am deeply grateful to him for giving so much attention to this and that he is trying to find a solution to this matter of great importance to all of us.

Emmanuel Macron: To get back to your question, I think that it is first of all France's responsibility to have the strongest possible relationship with Russia. We are two great European nations and great world powers. We are two permanent members of the UN Security Council.

Bilateral relations are of great importance for us, firstly, to have them develop, and to have common decisions on acute international issues. We are trying to do so on the Iranian issue and attempting to find a point of contact on Libya and other matters. We do have disagreements but we still find compromise. This is obvious to me.

Secondly, I think that President Putin and I agree that Russia is a European country. Those who can see Europe should be able to work with Russia and find ways to build the future in Europe and with Europeans. Is it easy? No, but Europe was also created through difficult initiatives that had immediate effects. So, yes, we do have difficulties but we must not give up.

Finally, this is France's mission, it is its role. During these six months we are presiding in the European Union. Our role is to make the voice of the European Union heard and take into

account a variety of complex circumstances in communication with such neighbours as Russia, which plays a decisive role in our security, and listen to all Europeans as well. I have been doing this over the past days. Being here I am trying to be the person who can make a contribution to finding this proper way.

I have a simple conviction. Do we increase our collective capability for making peace without our contacts with Russia? No, we do not. Who do we leave this role for? For others.

We do have disagreements. We realise that. Sometimes we fail to move forward and it is the result of such disagreements. However, we are trying to find compromises. I consider it to be my responsibility. Our task is to make sure that these compromises protect the interests of our partners and allies. This is why in the coming days and weeks we must start this difficult work, find new decisions in order to protect these guarantees while still protecting our basic principles and our neighbourly relations, because our geography will not change. This is why we carry on.

Question: I have a question for the President of Russia. Mr President, what is your assessment of the prospects for a settlement in southeastern Ukraine? I mean, roughly speaking, do you think the Minsk agreements are still alive?

And a similar question to the President of France. As far as I understand, you have decided to spend the night in Moscow before flying to Kiev tomorrow morning, where you are scheduled to meet with Vladimir Zelensky. What message are you conveying to Kiev, given Ukraine's recent statement about the Minsk agreements' potential to destroy Ukrainian statehood if implemented, and France, as we know, is the guarantor

of the Minsk agreements?

Thank you.

Vladimir Putin: Concerning the Minsk agreements, if they are still alive and if they have any prospects at all, I believe there is simply no alternative. I repeat once again, one day Kiev says that they will comply, and the next day they say the agreements will destroy their country. The incumbent President recently stated that he does not like a single point of the Minsk agreements. Well, like it or lump it, you have to fulfil them. It will not work otherwise.

They do not want to talk with representatives of Donbass directly, when clauses 12, 9 and 11 directly list the matters that should be “discussed and agreed upon with representatives of these territories.” Discussed and coordinated with them. How else can this be done? No other way. So just pluck up the courage, acknowledge what is written, stop saying that black is white and white is black and get to work.

After all, the current government’s campaign promise was to resolve the Donbass crisis peacefully.

I really do hope that this will eventually be done, when the realisation comes that it is impossible to do otherwise.

Poroshenko is also being slammed now for signing those agreements, even accused of treason. Yes, he signed the agreements, so what? The country accepted it. This was confirmed by a resolution of the Security Council.

I was not joking when I told him, you know, there will come a time when we will be granting you political asylum for humanitarian reasons. Not because we really like or liked his policy, but

for humanitarian reasons. I knew it would be like this, as if I had second sight, and this is what happened. He is under investigation there now.

But all these things have to do with internal politics. I urge you to take the high road and think about the historical and strategic prospects for Ukraine's development, its interaction with Russia, and think about creating stable security conditions for everyone, equal for all participants in international affairs.

Emmanuel Macron: To reply to you I will say a few things.

First, today President Zelensky is the President of a country on the border of which there are 125,000 Russian military. So, yes, he is nervous. And this only became news in the past few months. This was not the case in early 2021. So, regardless of everything, since you quoted his recent words, I want to say that I still think Mr Zelensky is displaying self-control in the context of international comments and this should be welcomed.

Second, when the Minsk agreements were signed, Russia's military presence on the border was not as intensive and this is a major change in the situation. This is why this is a very important aspect of our discussion with Mr Putin. We are talking about this when we mention de-escalation. I am referring to the Russian and Belarusian borders.

Obviously, there can only be a political solution to the Ukrainian issue and the Minsk agreements are the only foundation for it. The Normandy format is the right format. Let me repeat that Ukraine, Russia, France and Germany sit at the table in this format. These agreements provide for initiatives and progress. They should move forward in the next few days and weeks. Our

advisors met in Paris recently in this context. A joint communique was issued for the first time in several months. Now, the process is back on track. Some very sensitive issues on constitutional reform, on elections are now under discussion and will be developed in the near future.

I told Mr Zelensky and Mr Putin that the Minsk agreements alone can really achieve progress and settle the crisis in Ukraine. I will discuss this with President Zelensky tomorrow.

Question (*retranslated*): Good afternoon, Messrs Presidents.

Mr Macron, you have come to Moscow and are you speaking on behalf of France or on behalf of Europe? Mr Scholz is now in Washington. Would it not make sense to come to Russia together, as Hollande and Merkel did in 2015, to show European unity?

President Putin, is Mr Macron your only dialogue partner in Europe? You said he was a good conversationalist. Do you consider him as an intermediary to convey your message to the Europeans?

Mr Macron, could you also answer the question about PMC Wagner's presence and whether Russia is involved in that in any way?

Vladimir Putin: I have already covered this issue.

I have already made it clear that the Russian state has nothing to do with this. I am saying this quite responsibly without any hidden agenda. Local authorities invite them at the state level, thank them for their work, and so on.

With regard to the first part of the question, I want reiterate, I have

said this before, but I would really like you to hear me this time and convey this message to your readers, viewers and internet users.

Do you realise that if Ukraine joins NATO and decides to take Crimea back through military means, the European countries will automatically get drawn into a military conflict with Russia? Of course, NATO's united potential and that of Russia are incomparable. We understand that, but we also understand that Russia is one of the world's leading nuclear powers, and is superior to many of those countries in terms of the number of modern nuclear force components. But there will be no winners, and you will find yourself drawn into this conflict against your will. You will be fulfilling Paragraph 5 of the Treaty of Rome in a heartbeat, even before you know it.

Of course, the President does not want to see developments unfold in this way. I do not want it, either. That is why he is here and has been tormenting me for six hours now with his questions, guarantees, and solutions.

I believe his is a lofty mission, and I am grateful to him for his efforts. For our part, we will do our best to find compromises that suit everyone. There is not a single point that we consider unachievable in the proposals we sent to NATO and Washington.

There is also the ongoing issue related to the situation in Donbass. The President said that Russia is conducting exercises and has amassed a large group of forces. But has Ukraine not amassed them also? They have the same 100,000 or 125,000 troops concentrated in Donbass.

To reiterate, they have tried to resolve the Donbass issue through

military means twice, and they did not conceal this as they used equipment and aviation. Who will give us guarantees that this will not happen? This is also a legitimate question on our part. This is a complex entanglement, which is why the talks took so many hours.

I hope that tomorrow the President – yes, I do understand that there are no easy questions there, he will have a hard time in Kiev, – but we agreed that after consultations with the leadership of Ukraine, we will have a telephone conversation and get some feedback about what the current Ukrainian leadership believes is acceptable or not acceptable, and how it plans to move forward. Depending on this, we will work on our own path forward.

Emmanuel Macron: First, I would like to put your mind at ease. We have very good coordination with Chancellor Scholz. I was in Berlin two weeks ago, and have exchanged views with him several times since then. We will talk as soon as we return – he from Washington and I from Moscow.

As the President of the EU Council for a six-month period, I exchange views with all my colleagues, those whom this situation primarily concerns and who are particularly concerned about it. There have been many consultations in the past few days, including two with Britain and two with the USA. The consultations were very intensive. The Chancellor will also come next week.

What I am doing now is very different from the situations in 2008 and 2014. Not a “real war,” as was the case in Georgia and Ukraine, but very serious tensions that have happened very rarely in the past few decades. As you understand, this is largely an issue between Russia and NATO. This matter concerns our

collective security. We are launching this process but it is very different from the situations you are talking about. Therefore, we will extend these consultations and, based on today's discussion, will move forward, and try to launch a new mechanism. This is because the situation is new and the response is very different.

As for the Wagner group, the President's reply is very clear. France only recognises states and the fight against terrorism. Therefore, we make decisions on counterterrorism struggle as regards sovereign states and in close coordination with the region. In this case, we are consulting ECOWAS and the African Union.

Question: If I may, I would like to return to the topic of security guarantees. You mentioned it, but the general impression is that after NATO and Washington replied to Russia's proposals, the subject has gone quiet. As they say in Russia, it has been played for too long and has become stale.

In this context, I would like to ask you Mr Macron, do you think the issue of giving Russia guarantees is closed for the Europeans? What ways of resolving this problem do you see?

Mr Putin, I would also ask you to clarify something. Russia has received a response. What will you do next?

I would also like to return to your words – you cited one of the arguments quoted by our partners regarding the alliance, its peaceful nature. I would also recall another argument – that NATO is a political rather than a military organisation. And one more argument – that decisions in NATO are made by consensus. So, if a number of alliance members are against Ukraine's entry, it is not going to happen. What do you think about these arguments? What

are your apprehensions in this situation then?

Thank you.

Vladimir Putin: With regard to the military or non-military nature of the organisation, I think I have already covered that.

The bombing of Belgrade, Iraq, Syria, the early phases of the operation in Afghanistan, and so on... Is that not military? In fact, it is as military as it gets.

Regarding the fact that a number of NATO countries are against Ukraine or Georgia joining the alliance, we are aware of that, and we have heard this many times. I have a question in this regard: if this is the case, why did these countries sign a document in Bucharest in 2008, under which they open the doors to NATO for these countries?

You know, we have tried to talk to them about avoiding certain actions for 30 years now. What we get in response is total disregard for our concerns, demands and proposals.

Yes, the President said during our conversation – I hope Emmanuel will not be angry with me for saying this – he basically said, “You yourself violated territorial integrity. You have assumed a number of obligations since 1975, including the Helsinki Act and so on, and the most recent document was adopted in Astana in 2010. It covers equal security for all. You cannot create a secure environment by violating the security of others. You yourself have violated territorial integrity. This is a pressing issue for Ukraine.”

Not quite so, or not so at all. Have we carried out any operations in Crimea or anywhere else against a regular country or a regular government? No. We have never done that. We did not even think about doing it. Why did the Western countries support the coup?

From that moment on, for us, the coup, not the people's will, is the source of power in Ukraine. Indeed, there have been iterations, including elections and re-elections, but originally the power was seized by force and blood was shed. Given the circumstances, we were forced to protect the residents of Crimea. Could we do anything else? Why put us in these circumstances?

After all, representatives of several European countries were there in 2014, put their signatures under the document and issued guarantees for the peaceful course of the political process. Three days later, power was seized forcefully.

They do not comply with anything, while expecting us to comply with everything? Let us not play this game, it is a bad sandbox. We do not like this game.

I agree though, now we have what we have. We must look for a way out of this situation. This is what President Macron and I have been discussing for several hours. We plan to continue working towards this end.

With regard to what we will do next. We will now prepare a response to the document that we received from Brussels and Washington (I informed the President about this in general terms), and send it to Washington and Brussels. There are things that we can discuss. True, they are of a secondary nature, but nevertheless. However, we will be seeking answers to key questions.

For some reason, our partners asked us not to publish their response to us. Let us face it, this sounds strange, does it not? If we sent our questions openly, why hide their response from the public in our respective countries? I am not going to discuss

every item, but none of the key issues, such as the non-expansion of NATO, the non-deployment of assault systems near our borders, the rollback of NATO infrastructure to where it was in 1997, were answered even with a simple yes or no.

The impression is that we did not even raise these questions. They simply let them go unnoticed. What we see there are political clichés and proposals concerning minor issues.

I do not think our dialogue will end with that. We are going to draft an answer, our vision, and send it to Washington and Brussels. President Macron was duly informed about where we stand.

Emmanuel Macron: The President's opening remarks and his answer illustrate the existing differences, misunderstandings, and the different views that NATO and Russia have had on this issue in the past few decades. This is a fact. Because the Paris Charter that we are discussing also states clearly, in black and white the need to respect sovereignty, territorial integrity and human rights. These principles were also violated, and not by NATO. Therefore, it is obvious that neither NATO nor the USA can accept all of Russia's demands in the context of the very significant military pressure on the border with Ukraine, as I have already said. This is further aggravated by the daily appearance of news about the start of hostilities.

I heard the President's words and I see his willingness to move forward and find a political solution, but the tensions are very high. Therefore, searching for common ground and a political solution does not mean that we have to agree on everything. It simply means that the process has gotten underway.

Is exchanging letters sufficient to find a solution in such

a complicated process? I think we have exhausted its potential. Is it possible to resolve everything by settling the issue with NATO? No, I do not believe that, either. This is a very important issue but there are also other issues that we must resolve to guarantee our collective security. We spoke about this today.

I am convinced – and this is why I am here – that we must work together so that Russia, the United States, Europeans and their allies can, first of all, leave behind the misunderstandings of the past as much as possible because they do exist, deal with our traumas because they strongly influence our views on the path Europe has taken in the past 30 years and lead to diametrically opposed conclusions, and, most importantly, find useful solutions. To me, it is abundantly clear what that means – military stability in the short term. Not a single provocation or escalation must be allowed. This is why I came here, to Moscow, and will arrive in Kiev tomorrow.

It is necessary to continue dialogue on this basis with all sides – NATO, the USA, and the EU – with a view to finding a short- and mid-term solution. What is the goal? The security of all, because there is no security for Europeans if there is no security for Russia.

This is what I heard when talking to my colleagues in Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia, Poland and other countries. They have the same apprehensions. They also feel the same treaties were violated. These treaties did not envisage troop deployment, but it happened.

This is why processes based on transparency and de-escalation are needed. We should do this together because we live on both

sides of our shared borders. We must devote the next few weeks to these issues. In seeking security, we must also respect the sovereignty and independence of states that are not EU or NATO members but that are located in the region. This applies to Belarus, Ukraine, of course, Georgia and Moldova – the countries whose sovereignty and independence must be respected because that is also part of our collective security. We must also take this into account.

As for Ukraine, yes, we know what the framework for resolving security issues is – the Minsk agreements and the Normandy format. That said, it is also necessary to discuss openly other issues as well.

Stability and creating conditions for de-escalation will involve the development of new mechanisms based on our values and on what we agreed to over the past 30 years. However, at the same time, looking at our current differences and the existing situation, we must also find new joint solutions for maintaining stability and security.

President Putin and I reviewed several options. I will work on them, and I know he will also work on them in his replies to NATO and the United States.

We will continue and intensify this dialogue. We will talk again in a few days. We will draft new initiatives together with all participants and parties involved. I am sure we will achieve results. It will be difficult, but I am convinced it will work.