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Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's news conference following the High-Level Week of the 77th Session of the UN General Assembly, New York, September 24, 2022

Sergey Lavrov: There will be no opening remarks. I have just made a statement at the UN General Assembly, in which I set forth our position.

I would like to comment without any delay on some statements that were made in Washington, London, Brussels, and other Western capitals regarding the referendums that are being held these days in the Donetsk and Lugansk people's republics and in the liberated areas of the Kherson and Zaporozhye regions of Ukraine.

The hysterics we are witnessing are highly indicative. A direct expression of will by the people has long ceased to be a way of establishing control over this or that territory the West can accept or support. I would like to remind you about Vladimir Zelensky's interview in August 2021, during which he stated that these were not people who were living in eastern Ukraine, but rather "creatures", and that those of its residents who regarded themselves as Russians, wanted to speak Russian and wanted their children and grandchildren to have a future, should ship out to Russia. It was Vladimir Zelensky who started the process that made life of ethnic Russians in Ukraine intolerable and has ultimately led to referendums on the accession of these territories to the Russian Federation. As President Vladimir Putin said, we will certainly respect the results of these democratic processes.

Question: When the referendums are completed, will Moscow consider the areas that are controlled by Ukraine as occupied territories?

Sergey Lavrov: The referendums are being held by decision of local governments. The terms of these referendums have been made public. Based on their outcome, Russia will respect the will expressed by the people who have suffered for years from the neo-Nazi regime's atrocities.

Question: Would you clarify your government's position on the use of nuclear weapons, since President Putin's comments on the use of "everything at our disposal" has led to a lot of interpretation. And would that defence be applicable to the new territories that may be incorporated into Russia after the referendums?

Sergey Lavrov: As you know, it has become fashionable to use methods that have come to be known as cancel culture. Our Western colleagues are actively using them not only against any country, politicians, or public figures, but also against historical facts and events. For example, in 2014 our Western colleagues told us that they would never accept the "annexation" of Crimea and asked us why we did that. We replied, "Let's recall how it all began." With a government coup and very many people killed. The putschists showed complete disregard for the guarantees provided by Germany, France, and Poland, seized government buildings, and hounded the President. They physically chased after him trying to catch him. The first statements made by the putschists were: cancel the regional status of the Russian language and get Russians in Crimea packing. Armed groups of people were headed to the peninsula to storm its Supreme Council. Only after that did the people in Crimea respond by holding a referendum, while the eastern regions of Ukraine reacted by refusing to recognise the results of the government coup. But our Western colleagues' analysis begins with those events in Crimea. There was no other option for us by that time but to support the sincere expression of the will of the Crimeans, 95 percent of whom voted unequivocally for returning to Russia where they had lived for centuries.

We also see this cancel culture in the current narrative regarding nuclear weapons. Nobody remembers any more that in February 2022, before the start of the special military operation, Vladimir Zelensky said in one of his statements (he made and continues to make many statements) that Ukraine's renunciation of nuclear weapons following the split of the Soviet Union was a big mistake. He said this in connection with a settlement of the problem in Ukraine. After the special military operation began, French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian said publicly that Russia must remember that France has nuclear weapons too. That statement was not provoked in any way. We never as much as mentioned this subject. It was Vladimir Zelensky who started speaking about it. All of you remember what Liz Truss said when asked if she would be ready to push the nuclear button.

As for Russia, President Vladimir Putin and other Kremlin officials have said on numerous occasions that we have a doctrine on the Basic Principles of the State Policy of the Russian Federation on Nuclear Deterrence. It is a public document and clearly sets out everything in this connection. I suggest that you take another look at circumstances under which we would use nuclear weapons, which are absolutely clearly outlined.

Question: In your remarks at a meeting of the UN Security Council you, for the first time, openly said that the Western countries are parties to the conflict in Ukraine. Does this mean that we now regard them as potential enemies? Will this change the structure of relations with these countries? Josep Borrell has said that, so far, the EU is not considering sending troops there.

My second question has to do with the doctrine you mentioned. According to it, if the accession referendums are successful, Russia will have grounds to use nuclear weapons in case of attacks at its territory. The United States has warned of an unavoidable – but so far unspecified – strike in this event. Does Moscow regard such threats seriously? Is the conflict in Ukraine moving towards a third world war, as President of Serbia Aleksandar Vucic fears?

Sergey Lavrov: I would not like to make gloomy forecasts now. The entire state territory of Russia that has already been or can additionally be formalised in the constitution of our country will certainly benefit from full protection. How can it be otherwise? All the laws, doctrines, concepts, and strategies of the Russian Federation are applicable throughout its territory.

I haven't heard that the United States is threatening to carry out a strike of any kind. I know that US President Joe Biden has said that Russia can expect new "sanctions from hell" or from any other place if the referendums are held and their results are accepted. If they really threatened an inevitable strike against Russia, I would like to see the text. I didn't know that the United States and Ukraine have become allies linked by this dangerous "chain."

As for the legal aspects of Western involvement in this war, anyone who at least sometimes reads the news knows what is happening. Weapons are being openly pumped into Ukraine. Zelensky demands more weapons every day from either Germany or Israel. He has also criticised Israel for sending fewer weapons than Ukraine has asked for or arguing that it is short on weapons it needs by itself. Kiev is being supplied with satellite intelligence. The West is using approximately 70 military satellites and 200 private satellites to support the Ukrainian armed forces and nationalist battalions. A Ukrainian commander has said recently when commenting on the use of US-made weapons on the battlefield that the Americans have the right of veto regarding targets. What is this if not direct involvement when they target us with lethal weapons and participate in the war?

Getting back to the legal aspect, the United States, NATO, and the EU say that they are not parties to the conflict, which brings us to a certain convention. There are the 1907 Hague Conventions – Convention with Respect to the Laws and Customs of War on Land and Convention Relating to the Legal Status of Enemy Merchant Ships at the Outbreak of Hostilities. They have not been terminated and are still effective. They have to do with neutral powers' obligations during wars on sea and land. These conventions read that the term “neutral states” applies not only to the states that have declared their neutrality for all times, like Switzerland, but any states that are not party to an armed conflict. I would like to remind everyone that the United States and Europe have not declared themselves parties to the developments in Ukraine. In this case, they should act in accordance with Article 6 of the sea convention, which says that the supply by a neutral power to a belligerent power of warships, ammunition, or war material of any kind whatever is forbidden. In other words, the United States, the EU, and NATO, which are sending weapons to Kiev, cannot be regarded as neutral powers that are not involved in the conflict. In addition, one of the conventions says that recruiting agencies cannot be opened on the territory of a neutral power to assist the belligerents. As you know, Ukrainian embassies and consulates general in European and other countries openly posted invitations on their websites to join in the “holy war” against Russia, which can be defined as recruiting mercenaries. Western countries that allowed these activities in their territories violated the convention on neutral states and thereby showed that they are not passive onlookers but rather are directly involved in the conflict. One of the articles forbids the use of communications for military purposes. As I have mentioned, 200 private satellites, including Starlink, of course, are being directly used by the authorities in this war. Starlink has satellites and ground infrastructure. The use of this resource in the war also means that the United States is not a neutral power but a party to this conflict.

Question: Could you please explain why so many Russians are leaving the country?

Sergey Lavrov: Didn't Germany ratify the EU Convention on Human Rights, which has a clause on the freedom of movement?

Question: The joint communique that was issued this week after your BRICS ministerial on Thursday says the following: “The ministers reiterated their commitment to multilateralism, to upholding international law, including the purposes and principles enshrined in the UN Charter as its indispensable cornerstone, and to the central role of the UN in an international system in which sovereign states cooperate to maintain peace and security and advance sustainable development.” Why have you signed on to a communique that so obviously contradicts the Russian Federation’s actions on the ground as it relates to Ukraine. And you also just said in the UN General Assembly that you support Brazil’s and India’s permanent status in the UN Security Council. Why did you not mention South Africa?

Sergey Lavrov: Can you say what exactly from the communique, from the language you believe contradicts our behaviour?

Question: I’ll quote the Secretary-General. He says: “Any annexation of a state’s territory by another state resulting from the threat or use of force...”

Sergey Lavrov: You are quoting the Secretary-General. I can only be responsible for what I subscribed to.

Question: You have said that you have signed up to the principles enshrined in the UN Charter. The Secretary-General says you are not.

Sergey Lavrov: The Secretary-General says many things in this regard, and he is commenting the situation around Ukraine on an almost daily basis, while I don’t remember that he was active enough to promote the Minsk agreements’ implementation.

I will explain: the principles of the UN Charter provide for respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity of states. At the same time, they provide for respecting the right of people to self-determination. And the apparent conflict between these two concepts has been subject to many negotiations quite a long time. Soon after the UN was established, a process was started to develop the understanding of all the principles of the Charter. And lastly, the General Assembly's Declaration on Principles of International Law concerning Friendly Relations and Cooperation among States in accordance with the UN Charter was adopted by consensus. It included sections on equal rights and self-determination of peoples, and on territorial integrity. The General Assembly came to the following conclusion regarding the interpretation of the UN Charter. Every state must respect the sovereignty and territorial integrity of any state whose government respects the principle of self-determination of peoples and represents all ethnicities living in its territory. I will laugh if anyone here tells me that after the 2014 coup in Ukraine, after the bans on the Russian language, Russian education, and Russian media, after the putschists bombed the territories where people refused to recognise the results of the coup, if anyone tells me that the Kiev junta, the neo-Nazi regime that adopted laws to legalise the Nazi theory and practices in Ukraine, represents the interests of people in eastern Ukraine. It is obvious to any unbiased observer that this regime does not represent people who regard themselves as native Russian speakers and share Russian culture. I have already quoted Zelensky. He said, anyone who wants to be Russia can head off to Russia. Does this mean he represents the interests of these people?

The Secretary-General has a right to make statements. This is his statement. I signed on to the document that was adopted at the BRICS ministerial. Indeed, it has a paragraph saying that the ministers took note of national positions concerning the situation in Ukraine as expressed at the appropriate forums, namely the UNSC and UNGA. This is what being honest means. We are not speaking in unison; there are different views and nuances. But we respect what each of the five countries says on the international stage.

This is yet another element of cancel culture. You have not cited what I said in full. And I said that we consider India and Brazil as strong international players and to be strong candidates for permanent seats at the UN Security Council, provided Africa's profile is upgraded accordingly. I mentioned India and Brazil for one reason only: they have long nominated themselves. South Africa has not done this. African countries, the member states of African Union are committed to the Ezulwini Consensus, which was adopted many years ago as their collective stand. It is impossible to settle the issue of the UNSC's enlargement without taking Africa's interests into account. I pointed out that the issue concerns exclusively the enlargement of the UNSC through the addition of Asian, African, and Latin American representatives. It would be ridiculous to speak about adding more Western countries for several reasons. Aside from the fact that all of them are hostile towards Russia and China, can any Western country, if made a permanent UNSC member, add anything new to its work? No. They are all acting on the instructions of the US, including Germany and Japan, which have officially announced their aspiration to become permanent members. Just take a look at what they say and do.

Even leaving political positions aside, it is a fact that six of the 15 members of the UN Security Council represent the West. There will be seven of them next year when Japan takes its seat. As you know, its policy is no different from the positions of the United States and NATO.

Question: Allow me to draw some parallels. On the one hand, President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen, in fact, has openly threatened Italy with consequences if the election outcomes there are unfavourable for Brussels. On the other hand, the referendums in Donbass. When they were announced, practically all overseas and European politicians called these referendums illegitimate and began to compete with each other on describing them in unfavourable terms. This is the attitude to the expression of will of the people. What kind of approach is this? What reaction should follow?

Sergey Lavrov: This is arrogance, the feeling of all-permissiveness, of one's superiority, and exceptionalism. As if only they are entitled to make judgements. What Ursula von der Leyen said about the Italian elections was marvellous. I cannot recall if any EU leader sunk so low as to make threats of this kind. The EU, in principle, becomes an authoritarian, rigid, dictatorial institution.

Every year we hold many bilateral meetings on the sidelines of the General Assembly. And this year, like in the previous years, we were set to have a meeting with President of Cyprus Nicos Anastasiades. We included the meeting in our schedule at his request and at a time that was convenient for him. The schedules of Russia and Cyprus were published. One hour prior to the meeting, the protocol of Mr Anastasiades reported to our protocol that the European Union will not allow him to go to a meeting with me. I believe this is not the secret anymore. After all, the office of Mr Anastasiades announced in Nicosia on the same day that the meeting had been cancelled due to a necessity to adhere to some EU regulations.

Another three (two countries from the European Union and one NATO member country) wanted to hold meetings with me. They asked hold these meetings in private, without publicising the very fact that they were taking place. I agreed. We never reject any contacts. We will always be ready to accept any format that would be comfortable for our partners. After receiving our reaction, they fell off the radar. We never heard anything from them afterwards.

President of France Emmanuel Macron said in his remarks that “this is not the time for war; it is not the time for revenge against the West or for the West to oppose the East.” We have never placed the West in opposition to the East. All of a sudden, the West declared that it does not want to cooperate with us. “It is a collective time for our sovereign equal states to work together to solve the challenges we face,” Macron said further. These are excellent words. But there is an illustration to this statement. Permanent members of the UN Security Council in New York and, accordingly, in their respective capitals, established a rotation schedule for coordinating functions. From January 1, one country executes the coordinating function for three months, then this role goes to another country for three months. Now, in September, Russia is the coordinator among the permanent members of the UN Security Council. Each time when the UN General Assembly takes place, the coordinating country holds a meeting of ministers of five permanent members with the Secretary General. We, as polite people, have also come forward with the corresponding proposal. We received consent from the Chinese side. The Anglo-Saxons told us that they were not going to talk with us. You can judge for yourself.

Does the West have an interest? You cannot offer mediating services (some parties propose such ideas), while refusing to have any contacts. This is so disgraceful from the standpoint of elementary human decency. We never avoid any contacts. Everything has collapsed and continues to be ruined by, in particular, Washington, London (more actively), and Brussels.

Question: And on the subject of the referendums?

Sergey Lavrov: You have practically said everything. A double standard. We can long recall how the West formalised exceptions out of international principles for Kosovo. Then the International Court said that this is not an exception at all. After Kosovo it was proclaimed that any part of any country is entitled to define its future without the consent of central authorities. "My way or the highway". I will be making specific actions when they are beneficial for me, where they are not – I will act differently.

Question: You just mentioned the participation of Western countries in this conflict. We know that the biggest arms dealer here is actually the United States, which passed several packages to send weapons to Ukraine. Even the foreign policy of the US says that US politicians are now trying to play the "long game." What do you think is the intention of the United States, and is Russia ready for a long game with the United States in Ukraine?

Sergey Lavrov: The Ukrainian "game" has been going on for a long time. Let me remind you that back in 2003, when preparations were underway for the forthcoming elections in Ukraine, Western politicians, officials, foreign ministers, in particular Belgian minister Louis Michel, stated bluntly that Ukrainians should decide whom they side with – Russia or Europe – in the election. This "either-or" mentality, the philosophy has not vanished. Now Russophobic trends are ramping up all over Europe. Europeans and Americans are trying to pull the whole world into their disgraceful policies. Look at the West's actions. In a moment, as if at the snap of their fingers, they started banning everything Russian and encouraging domestic Russophobia. All of this shows that this is racism, which, as it turns out, has not disappeared. It is no longer latent, but blatant. It's being imposed. It all started with slogans urging Ukrainians to choose a side. A few years later there was another election. The winner was not the candidate the West wanted. And everything was done to raise a hue and cry in Ukraine and force submissive Ukrainian officials to take the issue to the Constitutional Court, which is supposed to protect the constitution. The court ordered a third round of elections, which is not enshrined in the constitution. They subsequently elected the candidate the US wanted.

In December 2013, a leaked telephone conversation was published between US Undersecretary of State Victoria Nuland and US Ambassador to Ukraine Geoffrey Pyatt, who reported to her which politicians should be groomed for the new government although the elections were still more than a year away. So, they admitted the possibility of an unusual change of power. Victoria Nuland named a couple names that she considered necessary to include among Ukraine's leaders. To which the US Ambassador in Kiev said that one of the named persons was not supported by the EU. Do you remember what she told him? "Fuck the EU." That's the attitude. That's the truth. The attitude is the same now.

Germany, France and Poland had their foreign ministers sign guarantees on establishing a government of national unity, which would prepare for early elections in five to six months. In these elections, the opposition would certainly have won. Rather than respecting the agreements or at least respecting the authority of the European countries that put their reputation on the line, in the morning (they did not even wait very long), they seized the administration building and announced in the square that they could be congratulated, that they had created a "government of victors" (not national unity). There is a big difference. I have seen this many times.

The fact that the US views the current situation around Ukraine as a "yardstick" with which to measure its ability to remain a hegemon is obvious to me. The US carried out its aggressive misadventures in Yugoslavia, in Iraq, in Libya, invaded Syria without any right to do so and Afghanistan. They declared territories over 10,000 miles from US shores as a zone of their interests and wreaked havoc everywhere to "catch" the American "fish" in this "troubled water." At the same time, they were moving NATO eastward.

NATO is a "defensive alliance." When there was the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact, when there was the Berlin Wall (concrete and imaginary between the two blocs), it is clear that they were defending themselves, as they thought, against the "aggressive" Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact. But then there was neither the Soviet Union nor the Warsaw Pact, and they were already defending themselves hundreds and thousands of kilometres from that line, which was clear to everyone. They simply decided that they would now defend themselves here. They announced that NATO is now, as a defensive alliance, responsible for the security of the Indo-Pacific region. That is NATO's next defence line, the defence line will be the South China Sea. I have no doubts whatsoever. I talked about this in my remarks to the General Assembly today.

I will not venture to guess how long this situation might last. President Putin was asked about this. He replied that we are working to achieve the stated objectives.

Question: We've heard Russia's explanation for its invasion of Ukraine. But could you tell us what the endgame is? Is the endgame to overthrow the government in Kiev? And how much pressure is Russia coming under from China to end this war?

Sergey Lavrov: The goals of the operation have been set in President Putin's statement on the 24th of February.

Imagine for a second that Ireland prohibited English in schools, in communications, in movie theatres, or that Belgium did the same to the French language, or Finland to the Swedish language. Can you imagine any of these developments? I can't. But it would have been considered outrageous immediately, and there would have been a scandal and action – I have not the slightest doubt – not to allow this to happen.

But in the case of Ukraine, for long, long years, the policy to eliminate anything Russian never drew any attention from media outlets in the West, and not only media outlets. We have been presenting these cases and calling for some action in the OSCE, the Council of Europe, the UN, in relations between Russia and NATO, which at that time existed, and in our contacts with the EU. Zero. Just like in the previous decades after the Soviet Union disappeared, our insistence that the EU must end the discrimination of Russians in Latvia and Estonia, was not heeded at all. We have a very deep conviction that our Western neighbours have racist instincts vis-à-vis Russia as a country and Russia as a nation. If you have any fact which will disprove what I am saying about the discrimination of Russians in Estonia, Latvia and Ukraine, where legislation was passed prohibiting everything, then, of course, we can discuss what analysis you might offer.

You call it aggression. You call it annexation. It's your right. My answer is very simple: Don't try to judge from your office or from New York. Go to Crimea, talk to the people. Nobody does it except for some brave politicians who are not in the system's elite. Go to the east. Any of you, did you go to Donbass during the eight years of the war, when the Minsk agreements were raped every day? No. The Russian television was broadcasting the situation on the Donbass side of the line of contact. The daily life, and the damage to the civilian infrastructure, the killing of the peaceful population was broadcast daily. And we have been asking why Western journalists don't do the same on the Ukrainian side of the line of contact. Because on the Ukrainian side of the line of contact the damage was inflicted only by return fire. And it would be seen immediately.

I understand that you want to ask a question that would allow you to write that I couldn't answer your question. I was just asked by our Chinese friend about the military endgame and the goals of the operation. You should read Putin more often and more carefully. He announced everything on the 24th of February.

Question: And what about China, pressure from China to end the war? Your president said last week that President Xi raised concerns about the war with President Putin.

Sergey Lavrov: Did he say, "pressure from China?"

Question: He said "concern." Are you coming under any pressure?

Sergey Lavrov: You asked me how we feel under pressure from China. You may tell your readers, listeners, viewers that I avoided answering your question. You mean you don't understand Russian? High time to learn.

Question: You have had numerous meetings with your African colleagues on the sidelines of the UNGA. Have you discussed the situation around exports of Ukrainian grain and Russian fertilisers from European ports that our Western ex-partners have been refusing to give to other nations, including poor countries? Have any new tracks or directions opened during your discussions with our African friends? What was your dialogue like today?

Sergey Lavrov: Yes, we have spoken with many of our African colleagues. We talked first and foremost about our bilateral relations. With each and every African nation, our trade and investment have been steadily growing, although the numbers still lag far behind European and Chinese companies in absolute terms. But the prospects look promising. There are many projects and plans. We are preparing a large package of agreements for the 2nd Russia-Africa Summit, which we plan to hold in mid-2023.

Naturally, food security is everybody's concern. Everyone supports efforts to eliminate the barriers in the way of Russian fertiliser and grain exports put up by the EU, London and Washington. Everyone welcomed the package deal struck at the initiative of UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres in Istanbul on July 22 of this year. It forced Zelensky to finally demine Ukrainian ports, which he had been refusing to do since March, when Russia and Türkiye proposed he let through the vessels he was holding hostage in exchange for Moscow and Ankara ensuring security over the international waters up to the Bosphorus Strait. On July 22, this arrangement was approved, and the grain was released. Only a fraction made its way to the poorest nations on the UN World Food Programme list, however, and, at that, just to Burkina Faso and one other country. We drew the Europeans' attention to the fact that almost half of this grain was going to them, and they told us they would later redirect the grain to African countries. Still, the scheme is operational, more or less.

As for the Russian part of the deal, neither food nor fertilisers are subject to US and EU sanctions. There are other things there, however, including a ban on Russian vessels entering European ports and foreign vessels entering Russia's. Sanctions have been imposed on Russian Agricultural Bank, which is Russia's largest agricultural bank servicing the lion's share of all deals with fertilisers and food. As the West dishes out all kinds of threats, the insurance rate on Russia's vessels has increased fourfold. In the part of the July 22 agreement pertaining to Russian grain, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres pledged to get the EU and the US to remove these hurdles. I met with him on September 22, and he confirmed that there was still a lot to be done in this respect. He said publicly that obstacles remain, but some promises had been made.

It's all the choice of the hegemonic powers, who are trying to shift their responsibility on us. There was no famine when the US was bombing Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya for years and Syria now, and when a war is going on in Yemen. Did it have any impact on the markets? Not at all. Back then, it was the "generals" who revelled in their sense of supremacy without accountability. This time, someone has risen to prevent these same Americans from putting their boots at our borders, destroying Russian culture and language, and chasing Russians away. This is the difference here. This time, they responded with sanctions like none seen before, used with no consideration for whether developing countries would be impacted by the actions of the US and their satellites in the manner that they now are.

Question: Can you please elaborate on the role of the Saudis and the Turks in easing this crisis? They showed the will to join forces to help solve this crisis happening between the two nations? Can you tell us if they are communicating with each other before trying to give any help to the Russians.

Sergey Lavrov: We have many offers of mediation services. Türkiye played a crucial role when it invited representatives of Ukraine, Russia, and the UN to Istanbul after which the deal I referred to was concluded.

We are now expecting the Secretary-General and the Turkish side (since they are parties to the agreement) to make the Europeans and the Americans lift the impediment I mentioned for us to implement our part of the deal.

Russian grain occupies an immeasurably larger share on world markets and plays an immeasurably more important role than Ukrainian grain. I have not yet mentioned that 300,000 tonnes of our fertiliser are held up in European ports. A month and a half ago we said that our companies were ready to forego the rights to this fertiliser so that it could be quickly sent to the developing countries who need it. A lot of people want it. The EU has been thinking for a month and a half and cannot decide anything. The fertiliser is no longer our property, it belongs to the European Union. They should give it to the countries that are on the World Food Programme list.

As for Saudi Arabia, it was announced that Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman was involved in negotiating the details of the exchange. Many people offer us mediation services, but we want to see what will grow out of this. We agreed with the Ukrainian delegation at the end of March this year, without any intermediaries, on the principles of the settlement that they themselves had formulated. We accepted them without any changes. And a day later, “amendments” began. They said that this was not the case here, but that it was different. Then there was the provocation in Bucha. When Russian troops withdrew from there as a goodwill gesture, the mayor returned there. For two days he appeared on TV, telling how life was getting back to normal there. And on the third day they showed a wide street with dead bodies. For the mayor and his team to be in their city for two days and to find this on the main street only on the third day is outright ridiculous.

I would like you to also "influence" the Ukrainians and their friends. We have been asking for months, since everyone insisted on a thorough investigation of the events in Bucha, to tell us the names of the people whose bodies were shown on television and the Internet. There is silence in response. I said so at the UN Security Council meeting and asked UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, in a personal meeting, to look into it. How can you explain it? They created a scandal, used it for another package of anti-Russian sanctions, and demanded an investigation. The first step of the investigation is to at least identify the people who were allegedly brutally murdered there by the Russian army.

Recently there was a case in the city of Izyum, with reports of graves, mass graves of "tortured" Ukrainian residents. They showed a cemetery, where there really were graves, but not mass graves. Each grave had a Christian Orthodox cross. People were buried. The Ukrainians began to dig them up. Several foreign journalists found an interest to go there and see for themselves. The Ukrainian leadership wouldn't let them in and no one writes anything about Izyum anymore. Please, pay attention to this. Now is the time when people are avid sensation seekers, but the responsibility of those who distribute them without thoroughly checking the facts increases manifold under the conditions we are currently experiencing.

Question: You have spoken in detail about NATO encroachment. Do you see perhaps after this war ends (whether you call it a war or not it seems to be one) any kind of talks with the United States to make Russia feel more secure about what you call NATO encroachment?

Sergey Lavrov: I have already spoken about this today, and I'll repeat it once more. We are not saying no to talks. When such proposals come in, we agree. If our partners wish to meet quietly so that no one finds out about it, then fine. It's always better to talk than not to talk. But in the situation we are in today, Russia is not going to take the first step.

Everything was destroyed back in 2014 after the EU severed all contacts, demolishing the extensive architecture of our relations. We have let them know they can get in touch if they have something to discuss. If we are interested in discussing this, we'll see. Just as we were discussing the future security architecture in Europe, NATO expelled almost all of our staff at Russia's mission to NATO except eight people including a driver and other support staff. This is just not serious. We closed down that office. Or, at the very least, suspended work there.

Over these past few days, I've told all prospective mediators who have offered their services (there were numerous proposals): listen to Vladimir Zelensky. He said Ukraine will finish Russia off, liberate all territories and that his peace plan does not provide for a neutrality status. Which is a hint that his country must become part of NATO.

Do you know what the US thinks of Europe? Ukrainian nationalists have long chanted "Ukraina – tse Evropa," (Ukraine is Europe). I think the United States is ready to start another chant: "Evropa – tse Ukraina," that is Europe is Ukraine. When asked if Ukraine wanted to join NATO after Vladimir Zelensky said there was no place for neutrality in his peace plan, Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmitry Kuleba responded by saying that it was NATO which would be joining Ukraine, not the other way around. I think it opened a lot of room for interesting political satire.

Still, if they get in touch, we'll look into it. We won't initiate contacts. We've learnt our lesson. They are absolutely untrustworthy and selfish to the bone. They always put themselves and their interests first, and won't look for a balance of interests or keep it.

Journalists from Reuters, a journalist from Germany asked me questions, and the nature of these questions, their wording show that the Western elites are intent on continuing to demonise Russia. Their questions showed no interest in what you asked about, namely, if there can be dialogue. If they get in touch, we'll see.

Question: This week we have listened to heads of state and heads of government repeatedly call for an end to this conflict in Ukraine, which had global ramifications. We also heard military experts saying that there seems to be no desire on either side to negotiate because they believe that they can win militarily. How would you respond to both those views?

Sergey Lavrov: I have already responded. But I will repeat. Soon after the beginning of our special military operation, the Ukrainian side proposed holding talks to find a way to settle the situation. We agreed to do this. Several rounds of talks have been held, first in Belarus and later online. The Ukrainians couldn't explain their proposals. On March 29, a meeting was held in Istanbul, where they presented a document with principles for a settlement. We accepted it without changing any of those principles. We put those arrangements on paper and forwarded it to Ukraine. And then there was Bucha, which I mentioned. We still demand to know the names of the victims, and we will continue demanding this. And then the Americans told Ukraine that they shouldn't accept any agreements with Russia, that they must win more victories on the battlefield. Josep Borrell, the chief EU diplomat who should act diplomatically, said the conflict must end on the battlefield with Ukraine's victory. In the past, you listened to Boris Johnson. Now you are listening to Liz Truss. All of them are saying approximately the same, both NATO and all others, that Crimea must be taken back. What talks can you speak about in this situation? The last contact we had with the Ukrainians ended with our acceptance of their principles for a settlement. After that, they entered a completely different path. Just listen to Vladimir Zelensky, who said here on September 21 that there would be no compromises, that their peace is war, and so on. I don't know what there is to talk about.

A group of mediators from a respected international regional organisation, with whom I had a meeting here, said they would go to Kiev and asked what message we would give them. I replied that Ukrainians know everything, that I have told them everything, and that they themselves had broken off the talks. President Putin was asked in the middle of last summer why Russia refused to negotiate. He replied that we don't refuse to talk, but those who refuse should know that the longer they do so the more difficult it will be to negotiate. We showed goodwill once again, but the other side doesn't want to act likewise.

I asked the mediators who were planning to visit Kiev soon if they are talking with the Americans in terms of their mediation efforts. This stopped them in their tracks, and they said that their mandate only covers Russia-Ukraine talks. Why? This is not serious. Doesn't any reasonable person see that Ukraine is controlled by the United States and, increasingly more, by London. Everyone knows this. Journalists from Europe, Britain and the United States ask why we are not ready for contacts. But they themselves have prohibited them. I have told you how the President of Cyprus was not allowed to hold talks with me. A representative of one of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council, and a representative of another respected country have asked timidly and even surreptitiously for a secret meeting with me. I said they would be welcome. And they just disappeared from the radar, just as one more prime minister did. So, don't paint us as the evaders.



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