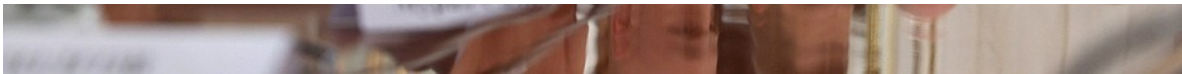


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# Meeting with war correspondents

94–119 minutes





3 of 9

Meeting with war correspondents. From left: Yekaterina Agranovich (Katrussyia Telegram channel), Vladimir Putin, Andrei Filatov (Russia Today), Ilya Ushenin (NTV Television Company), Dmitry Steshin (Komsomolskaya Pravda), Alexander Sladkov (VGTRK).

**Yevgeny Poddubny:** Good afternoon, Mr President.

Thank you very much for finding the time to meet with us.

**President of Russia Vladimir Putin:** I am very happy to see you all.

**Yevgeny Poddubny:** Our previous meetings have all taken place in an atmosphere of trust. Our conversations have always been sharp and frank, and we are very grateful to you for this.

**Vladimir Putin:** I feel you won't be able to do that if the cameras are on; everyone wants to fire up the audience when the TV cameras are on.

**Yevgeny Poddubny:** No, we will keep things in hand.

We are hoping this talk will also be honest and open, and we are all counting on this.

**Vladimir Putin:** It will be on my part, I promise.

**Yevgeny Poddubny:** On our part – as well.

**Vladimir Putin:** Excellent, this is what it will be.

**Yevgeny Poddubny:** You have said more than once that all the goals that you set personally for the special military operation

will be achieved. The special military operation has lasted a fairly long time. The situation is changing, the position is changing, and probably the goals and tasks of the special military operation are changing as well. Can you tell us how they have changed if at all?

**Vladimir Putin:** No, they are changing in accordance with the current situation but of course overall we are not changing anything. Our goals are fundamental for us.

All of you here are very seasoned professionals, especially people like you who have been under fire for more than a year. Your mentality changes. I know this from my own experience even though I haven't crawled under flying bullets like you have, I have known this since the time I flew in a helicopter with tracer fire around us. You know, all this changes your mentality. So, what is the point of our actions? We will have to take two steps from the centre of the field. After all, we wanted and still want to have the best possible relations with all our neighbours after the collapse of the Soviet Union. This is what we are doing. We have accepted that what happened, happened, and now we must live with it.

And you know, I've already said that, no secret here, we did offer every option to our Western partners, as I used to call them, we thought we were one of them, we wanted to be in the family of so-called civilised nations. I reached out to NATO suggesting that we look into that possibility, but we were quickly shown the door; they didn't even bother to consider it. I also suggested creating a shared missile defence system.

We are aware that the events of the 1990s – early 2000s stem

from a bitter historical legacy in the Caucasus, for instance. Who were we fighting there? Mostly, Al-Qaeda. And what did our “partners” do? They supported them by providing financial, information, political and even military support. They did not give a damn about the fact that they were helping Al-Qaeda as long as they were able to rock our boat. Everything they did fit the paradigm of rocking Russia. We left no stone unturned in our efforts and finally agreed that NATO would not be expanded. We came up with every option we could. Still no. Why? It is just because the country is too big: no one needs a country that big and with such great potential in Europe. Everyone tries their hand at gradually breaking Russia into pieces.

Ukraine is part of the effort to destabilise Russia. By and large, this should have been kept in mind when decisions were made on breaking the Soviet Union up. But then, apparently, it was expected that our profound relations would be decisive. But due to a number of historical, economic and political circumstances the situation took a different path. We tried everything on this path as well. In fact, we have, for decades, if not fed, but sustained their economy – you are aware of this, since I have written and talked about it – with cheap energy, other things, loans and so on. To no avail. How did it end eventually? They started killing our supporters in the streets and eventually staged a coup d’etat.

Look, this is not the first coup. How did Yushchenko come to power in Ukraine? Was it as a result of a legitimate procedure? Do you want me to show you how he came to power? We are aware of it. They came up with a third round of elections. What was that about? This was not enshrined in the Constitution. It was a coup, but at least a relatively peaceful one. And we did

communicate with them. I went there and they came to us, no problem. But eventually, they pushed it to a bloody coup. That is, it became obvious that we were not given any chance to build normal relations with our neighbours and the fraternal Ukrainian people. Not a single chance.

Then they pulled themselves together, and events immediately started unfolding in the southeast, in Donbass – after the coup d'état, they realised that we would not be able to just leave Crimea – we simply could not leave it, this was impossible, it would have been a betrayal on our part. But we didn't touch Donbass. Yes, our volunteers were there, but the Russian state had nothing to do with it at all – I assure you of this – none at all. I'm perfectly open and honest – we had nothing to do with it, our involvement was zero. Yes, there were people from Russia there. They tried to support the local population and so on.

Eventually, we were compelled to act in defence of these people. We were simply compelled to do this. Nine years! We genuinely tried to agree – difficult as it was – on somehow keeping Ukraine's southeast as part of the country, we were sincerely working for this. Now we know that our so called partners simply cheated us – they swindled us, as people say. They never planned to fulfil any of the agreements, as it turned out, and so it all came to the current situation.

Moreover, they put bastards like Bandera on a pedestal. They don't want communism. Fine, who wants that today? They are throwing the founder of Ukraine – Lenin – off his pedestal. Okay, this is up to them, but they are putting Bandera up there instead, and he is a fascist. I am totally surprised at how a person with Jewish blood, the head of the state of Ukraine, can support neo-

Nazis. It simply beats me. After they basically annihilated the civilian Jewish population, Bandera and his supporters have been elevated to the rank of national heroes. Now they are marching with those posters. So, we will never accept historically what is happening there.

We continuously raised this issue during our negotiations, including in Istanbul. And in response, we were asked, “We don’t have anything to do with neo-Nazis, what do you want from us?” We at least want certain restrictions to be introduced into the law. Incidentally, on the whole, we also agreed on this during that round of talks – before our troops moved away from Kiev because afterwards they threw all our agreements away.

Demilitarisation. We are dealing with this gradually, methodically. What are the Armed Forces of Ukraine fighting with? Do they produce Leopards or Bradleys or the F-16s they haven’t received yet? They don’t produce a thing. The Ukrainian defence industry will soon cease to exist altogether. What do they produce? Ammunition is delivered, equipment is delivered and weapons are delivered – everything is delivered. You won’t live long like that, you won’t last. So, the issue of demilitarisation is raised in very practical terms.

The same applies to protecting people in Donbass. Yes, unfortunately, the shelling continues, and everything else too. But overall we will be working towards this methodically and we will resolve this. I am sure we will resolve it.

So, by and large, our principles and thus, our goals have not changed since the beginning of the operation. There has been no change.

**Dmitry Kulko:** Good afternoon, Mr President.

Dmitry Kulko, Channel One.

Ukraine's counteroffensive is underway. You provided your comment on the situation five days into the counteroffensive. Some time has passed since then. You receive operational updates every day and, as we can see, not only from the special military operation command, but you make direct phone calls to the front line as well.

**Vladimir Putin:** Yes.

**Dmitry Kulko:** Is there anything you can add to your previous assessments?

**Vladimir Putin:** Yes. This is a large-scale counteroffensive, which uses, as I recently said publicly, reserves that had been stockpiled to this end. It started on June 4. It continues to this day and right now as we speak.

I listened to the most recent report about the latest developments. There was an attack in the Shakhtersky direction this morning. Up to 100 troops, four tanks and two armoured vehicles [from the Ukrainian side]. In the Vremevsky direction, there are several tanks and armoured vehicles as well. The attack is proceeding in several directions. Several tanks and armoured vehicles have been destroyed, and Ukraine suffered military personnel losses. They failed to reach the front line.

Overall, though, this is a large-scale offensive: they started out on the Vremevsky ledge, in the Shakhtersky and Zaporozhye directions. It began precisely with the use of strategic reserves and continues as we speak: right now, with us gathered here

and discussing it, there is a battle going on in several combat areas.

What can I say? The enemy was not successful in any sector. They suffered big losses. Good thing for us. I will not give the number of personnel losses. I will let the Defence Ministry do it after it runs the numbers, but the structure of losses is unfavourable for them as well. What I mean to say is that of all personnel losses – and they are approaching a number that can be called catastrophic – the structure of these losses is unfavourable for them. Because as we know, losses can be sanitary or irretrievable. Usually, I am afraid I may be off a little, but irretrievable losses are around 25 percent, maximum 30 percent while their losses are almost 50/50. This is my first point.

Second, if we look at irretrievable losses, clearly, the defending side suffers fewer losses, but this ratio of 1 to 10 is in our favour. Our losses are one-tenth of the losses of the Ukrainian forces.

The situation is even more serious with armour. During this period, they lost over 160 tanks and more than 360 armoured vehicles of different types. This is only what we are seeing. There are also losses that we don't see. They are inflicted by long-range precision weapons at masses of personnel and equipment. So, in reality Ukraine has sustained heavier losses. By my calculations, these losses are about 25 or maybe 30 percent of the equipment supplied from abroad. It seems to me they would agree with this if they count objectively. But, as far as I know from open Western sources, it seems that this is what they say.

So, the offensive is on, and I have described the latest results.

As for our losses – let the Defence Ministry talk about other



indicators and personnel – I said they lost over 160 tanks and we lost 54 tanks, some of which can be restored and repaired.

**Dmitry Kulko:** Thank you.

**Yekaterina Agranovich:** Good afternoon,

Agranovich Yekaterina, blogger.

I have a question about the Kakhovka Hydroelectric Power Plant. A tragedy has occurred and we still have to evaluate the environmental and social consequences. But here's my question: who is to blame for this in your opinion? Will they be punished? And a third question: what assistance can people from the affected territories expect?

**Vladimir Putin:** It is clear who is to blame – Ukraine was working at this.

You know, I am not going to say things that I am not one hundred percent sure of, but by and large, we did not record any big explosion just before the destruction. At any rate, this is what was reported to me. But they had targeted the Kakhovka HPP with HIMARS many times. That's the whole point. Maybe, they placed munitions there – I don't know right now, or maybe they undermined the structure with something minor and it triggered the break.

But as far as we are concerned, we are not interested in this now because there are arduous consequences for the territories that we control and that belong to Russia. This is the first point.

Now the second point. Unfortunately, I will say a strange thing now but nevertheless, this unfortunately ruined their counteroffensive in this direction. Why unfortunately? Because it would have been

better for us if they had launched their offensive there – better for us because it would have been a bad offensive position for them. But that didn't happen because of the flooding.

The Emergencies Ministry is working very actively there; the military is working actively, and the local authorities are working. I recently talked with Acting Head of the Kherson Region [Vladimir] Saldo, and he says, "I will tell you honestly, we are surprised. We have never seen such well-coordinated work." Let this be true, although there are certainly problems.

There are people who refuse to leave, to be evacuated. To be honest, this happens here too. I remember a flood on the Lena when people were sitting on their roofs and refused to leave because they were afraid to leave the house, they were afraid that it would be plundered, etc. This is how things go. There may be other considerations of a different nature. In any case, everything that can be done is being done: the Emergencies Ministry is working very actively, and again, the local authorities, the Healthcare Ministry and the Federal Medical-Biological Agency have also joined the effort.

Now we must approach the issue of environmental safety and sanitary safety very seriously, because cattle burial sites and cemeteries are underwater. This is a serious problem, but it is solvable. We will need to use the chemical protection troops: the Minister has already reported to me, he gave the command. Together, by joining forces, I think we will be able to solve all the problems, including with water supply.

Today I spoke with Marat Khusnullin. He says we will have to deal with water availability there, build new wells, etc. But the work is

already underway. As the water levels decline, and it is already gradually dropping, everything will be resolved as the problems appear. Of course, much livestock and wild animals died, unfortunately. We will need to organise all this, to clean up the area.

As for the people, everyone will receive assistance in accordance with Russian law and standards. All these conditions are known, they are envisaged in our laws. Everything will be done in the same way as for any other citizen of the Russian Federation, for every household. I have already told Minister [of Emergencies] Alexander Kurenkov to take an active role in assessing property damage, both movable and immovable. So, we are doing everything we can.

**Yekaterina Agranovich:** Thank you.

**Alexander Kots:** Mr President, my name is Alexander Kots, Komsomolskaya Pravda.

The question may be unpleasant, but people often ask us about it.

**Vladimir Putin:** There are no unpleasant questions here.

**Alexander Kots:** Our readers and viewers often ask us the same question – about the enemy’s activity in our rear.

Hardly a week passes without news of drones either trying to hit or hitting infrastructure facilities. Surely, there is an acute issue regarding our border area, especially the Belgorod Region.

My question literally goes like this: how does it happen that enemy drones reach the Kremlin? And, having started to liberate Donbass, why are we now forced to evacuate our population from the border areas, which are already being entered by Polish

mercenaries, and the Polish language is heard on our territory?

**Vladimir Putin:** Polish mercenaries are indeed fighting there – you are absolutely right, I agree with you – and they are suffering more loss. In fact, they are trying to hide them, but their losses are serious. It is a pity that they hide this from their population too. Mercenaries are being recruited – right in Poland, and in other countries, by the way. They are sustaining losses. That's first.

Second, concerning drones. You probably know, and your colleagues also know, at one time we had a situation at Khmeimim when drones flew in and, unfortunately, dropped several grenades, and we lost personnel there. But we rather quickly learned to deal with this, in various ways, with various means. It is sometimes difficult, but it is a solvable task.

Apparently, the same is true here: our relevant agencies need to make the necessary decisions, because the traditional air defence system, as you surely know, is calibrated for missiles, for large aircraft. As a rule, the drones you are talking about, and you are also aware of this, they are made of modern lightweight materials, made of wood, and it is quite difficult to detect them. But they are being detected. Although, it is necessary to carry out corresponding work, detect them in time, and so on. And this, of course, is being done, and will be done for sure, as far as Moscow and other major centres are concerned, I have no doubts about it whatsoever.

And yes, we must properly organise this work. And of course, it would be better if this had been done in a timely manner and at the proper level. Nevertheless, this work is being carried out, and, I repeat once again, I am sure that these tasks will be

solved.

As for border areas, there is a problem, and it is connected – and I think you understand this too – mainly with a desire to divert our forces and resources to this side, to withdraw part of the units from those areas that are considered the most important and critical from the point of view of possible offensive by the armed forces of Ukraine. We do not need to do this, but of course we must protect our citizens.

What can be said here? Of course, we need to strengthen the border, and if any of you work there, you surely can see that this process is moving quite quickly, and this task of strengthening the borders will also be solved. But the possibility of shelling our territory from the territory of Ukraine certainly remains. And there are several solutions here.

First, increasing effectiveness and counter-battery combat; but this does not mean that there will be no missiles flying at our territory. And if this continues, then we will apparently have to consider the issue – and I say this very carefully – in order to create some kind of buffer zone on the territory of Ukraine at such a distance from which it would be impossible to reach our territory. But this is a separate issue, I am not saying that we will start this work tomorrow. We have to see how the situation develops.

But in general, nothing like that is happening in the Belgorod Region or anywhere else; both border guards and the Armed Forces are now working there. Of course, there is nothing good in this: in fact, it was possible to assume that the enemy would behave this way and, probably, to prepare better. I agree. But the problem will be solved, either this way or the way I mentioned.

**Yevgeny Poddubny:** Mr President, I am Yevgeny Poddubny, VGTRK (All-Russian State Television and Radio Broadcasting Company). In continuation of Alexander's topic.

**Vladimir Putin:** Yes, Yevgeny, please.

**Yevgeny Poddubny:** The enemy's special services agents are openly working on our territory, openly in the sense of not even denying that they are hunting leaders of public opinion in Russia: the murder of Daria Dugina, the murder of Vladlen Tatarsky, the assassination attempt on Zakhar Prilepin. As a matter of fact, it is clear that the Ukrainian special services are conducting terrorist, sabotage activities in Russia.

How will the Russian state fight the enemy's agents and the enemy's special services operating on the territory of Russia?

**Vladimir Putin:** Your question is very similar to what Alexander has asked, because these activities are essentially equivalent. We must fight, and we are fighting, we are, and some results of this work are becoming public, and the public is familiar with it: the detention of agents and special services officers of a neighbouring state. The work is ongoing.

But I want to point out that we, unlike Ukraine's current authorities, cannot employ terrorist methods: we still have a state, a country, while it is a regime there. They operate, in fact, as a regime based on terror: they have a very tough counterintelligence regime, martial law. I don't think we need to do that now. We just need to improve and expand the work of law enforcement agencies and special services. And in general, it seems to me that the tasks in this regard are also solvable.

You have analysed the tragedies you have mentioned and you see what has happened. Someone brought something in, the car was not looked at, there was no inspection.

Dasha, a good person, was killed, and it is an enormous tragedy. Was she a militant or something like that, did she fight with a weapon in hand? She was just an intellectual who expressed her point of view, her position. But, unfortunately, no one thought about security, and they just planted an explosive device under the bottom of the car, and that was it. By the way, this once again reaffirms the terrorist nature of the current regime in Kiev. We need to think about that. With regard to those people who might be the targets of these terrorists, of course, both law enforcement agencies and these people themselves must think about this and ensure security.

But in general, introducing some kind of special regime or martial law across the country does not make any sense; there is no such need today. We need to work more carefully on some issues.

On this, I agree with you.

**Maxim Dolgov:** Mr President, I am Maxim Dolgov, Readovka.

During the shelling, people can lose all their belongings: houses, property and so on. It is very important that our border regions, such as Kursk, Bryansk and Belgorod, help our people promptly and quickly. But the question is, will the regions have enough of this assistance?

**Vladimir Putin:** And we keep count: we are in almost constant contact with the leaders of these regions, and I talk to them. They formulate their needs, put them on paper and send them back to us.

Just this morning I spoke with Mr Mishustin; we discussed a number of issues for quite some time, including, by the way, this issue, and with Marat Khusnullin, too. We are sending the Belgorod Region – I may be a little off – but basically, I believe, 3.8 billion rubles have been sent to assist people. And some of these funds, I believe, 1.3 billion or so, or 1.8 billion, have already been sent to the Belgorod Region. So this is a fact.

Thank you for bringing this to our attention. Of course, people need help, and we will provide targeted assistance: for each family, for each household; we will definitely do this. This also applies to new housing, rebuilding lost buildings, and of course we have enough funds for this. The funding will come; it is already coming from the Government Reserve Fund. It has been set aside.

**Mikhail Dolgov:** Thank you.

**Andrei Rudenko:** Mr President, Andrei Rudenko, Rossiya TV channel.

Today, the medical sector of Donbass is under a lot of pressure. Hospitals are accepting not only civilians, but also military personnel. But at the same time, there is a huge shortage of both personnel and medical equipment; there are not enough MRI or CT machines. Today, appointments for these diagnostic procedures can only be made four months in advance, that is, if a person needs this scan today, they have to wait four months. Can this be solved in these territories?

**Vladimir Putin:** Of course, it is possible and necessary.

After all, these CT scanners and MRI machines are missing not because of our operation, but because they were never available there in the first place. Do you understand? It had just never



happened. In the Donetsk Republic, as far as I remember, when we discussed this with the Healthcare Ministry, with Tatyana Golikova, there were two MRI machines in total.

**Andrei Rudenko:** Two MRI machines, 1.5 Tesla.

**Vladimir Putin:** You see, I remember this. And one scanner is being assembled. In the Kherson Region, there are no scanners at all. If they need to scan a patient, they have to go to Crimea. Well, in Crimea there were none for a long time too. Now everything is better, more equipment is appearing there. There is still too little and not enough, but, nonetheless.

We have adopted a programme, I believe until 2030, with considerable funds set aside under it. This is on record; we will not cut anything. Some Russian regions, that have taken the new territories under their patronage, are helping in many ways. And this help is sizeable, I think the regions are donating over 17 billion. There are also other funds from federal sources. So, we will be doing everything we can.

This includes a programme for restoring preschool facilities. I think, 1,300 buildings must be restored. About 1,400 schools are to be restored or built. Medical facilities too. All that has been included in the respective development programmes for these regions. We will certainly bring them up to the average level in Russia. This also includes wages; we have already introduced higher pay for some job categories, and this will be carried on.

Of course, I know that you are definitely right when you point this out. One of the most pressing issues is lack of capacity at [medical] facilities. This is exacerbated because they are admitting those who have been wounded in the course of combat

action – both civilians and service personnel. At some point certain healthcare facilities were absolutely overcrowded.

Let me reiterate: we will be stepping up efforts within this programme until 2030, including healthcare. Again, this includes wages. In this area we will need – no, we will definitely do it – raise them to the Russian average and to the country's standards. For example, some employees, including in healthcare, must be paid the average wage like the rest of Russia. We will be moving towards this step by step.

**Andrei Rudenko:** Mr President, hospitals have become targets for Ukraine's armed forces, the strikes don't stop. Doctors constantly risk their lives. It would be good to grant them the status of SMO participants as well as other categories of people who are working towards this, I mean towards victory.

**Vladimir Putin:** We have to carefully look into this. Those who have been fighting since 2014... We need balanced social justice; it is one thing when a person is on the frontline, and it is a different matter when they run these risks but are not on the frontline.

But you are certainly right that this aspect of risk must be taken into account in terms of salary. We will think about this by all means.

**Andrei Rudenko:** Thank you very much.

**Vladimir Putin:** Thank you for the question – it's a very sensitive matter. I understand.

**Yekaterina Agranovich:** I have one more question.

**Vladimir Putin:** Please go ahead.

**Yekaterina Agranovich:** The West constantly accuses us

of destroying and stealing everything, from monuments to children, in Ukraine.

**Vladimir Putin:** Monuments? What monuments? They are the ones who tear down monuments. We could build a park of the monuments that were destroyed in Ukraine.

Do many people subscribe to your blog?

**Yekaterina Agranovich:** Relatively speaking, yes, but fewer than to Rudenko's blog.

**Vladimir Putin:** All right, it does not really matter. Suggest sending all the monuments to Russia. In Odessa, they demolished a monument to Catherine the Great, the founder of the city. We would gladly take it.

**Yekaterina Agranovich:** My question is about something a bit different. The bottom line is that they themselves engage in kidnapping and annihilation all over the world. However, the export-oriented Western picture of what life is like there and how things work there, is idealised. People in Russia and Ukraine fall for this propaganda. This issue is particularly acute in the new territories, because for eight years, since 2014, people there have been constantly surrounded by Ukrainian flags and things looked nice and good, and they constantly exerted influence on them. So, when we liberate these territories, many people disagree, and everyone has the opportunity to express their disagreement. If you go online you will see them freely uploading videos from, for example, cities in the Zaporozhye Region showing how they are longing for Ukraine now that they have to live under occupation.

Here is my question. How do we plan to influence the minds

of children, teenagers and adults? Clearly, Russia is a free country where we all freely express our opinions. But in combat conditions, this becomes, first and foremost, a matter of security.

**Vladimir Putin:** You are right. Of course, with hostilities ongoing, we should put limits on certain things. However, we must not forget that what you just said is, of course, to a large extent, the work of the opposite side, the opposing side. The information space is a battlefield, a crucial battlefield.

So, if someone uploads or writes something and provides an address, this is one thing. However, if there is no address and it is not clear who is writing or speaking, this is a completely different story. You and I are well aware that you can post things online using well-known technical means, and you can make it look like millions of people have seen these videos and commented on them when in fact there is just one person behind it who simply uses modern technology to replicate it endlessly. But, of course, there certainly are people who have a certain frame of mind, and they can express their point of view.

What can we do to oppose this? I think this audience will know what I mean. This can and should be countered not so much by restrictions or administrative or law enforcement constraints, but by effective work in the information environment on our part. And I am really counting on your help.

**Alexander Sladkov:** Mr President, Alexander Sladkov, VGTRK TV company.

I have four questions for you. The first one is about rotation.

**Vladimir Putin:** Who is the moderator?

**Alexander Sladkov:** Mr President, I am the moderator.

**Vladimir Putin:** You are too close – on the line of contact.

**Alexander Sladkov:** I am close to the decision-making centre.

**Vladimir Putin:** No, you are close to the line of contact, and it looks like what was coming from Ukrainian territory got into your system.

**Alexander Sladkov:** We got drunk on it.

**Vladimir Putin:** Oh, yes. That spirit of the lack of freedom. And you are abusing your position as moderator.

**Alexander Sladkov:** I confess, I am.

**Vladimir Putin:** Go ahead.

**Alexander Sladkov:** First, the painful question about rotation.

We have sent our mobilised troops to the front. We trained them and sent them there. They are fighting now with dignity and giving all they have to this fighting. Their wives, mothers and families are wondering how long they will be away. Until victory? When is victory? A difficult path lies ahead of us. Do you not think the time will come when they will have to be rotated and replaced?

And by the way, many are sure these people will mostly return to the SMO zone, because they are committed to fighting to the end. But when there is no limit in sight, it is very hard to maintain psychological stability. I am talking about families now.

My second question is about contract soldiers that we are recruiting now. General Yevgeny Burdinsky is doing an excellent job. He is a true professional, deputy chief of the General Staff. But we are living in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Is it not time for us to change

the system or make it an integrated one? We are waiting for the people to respond to the offer. We invite them but is it not time for us to go to the people who can help us and make a plan based on military specialties where we know the number of machine gunners, grenade launcher operators, drivers, signallers or intelligence officers, so that we stop taking people in en masse under a contract but take only the ones we need.

My third question is about conscripts. In connection with the events where conscripts acted as dignified members of the Armed Forces in the Belgorod Region and repelled enemy attacks, their families are wondering what their status is. I am aware that a certain federal law is planned to be adopted, but will conscripts continue to participate in hostilities?

And the fourth question is about mobilisation. Will there be another round of mobilisation?

That concludes my questions.

**Vladimir Putin:** These are indeed very serious questions, therefore we must talk about them, of course. First of all, the mobilised soldiers, the rotation, when they should be replaced, when it will end.

You know, I will just turn to the law: the law does not specify the duration. We have to proceed from the availability of personnel, from the situation on the frontline, from the progress of the special military operation itself.

You know that in fact, and also at my suggestion, we took a decision on regular leaves.

**Alexander Sladkov:** Yes, twice a year. You announced that

in your Address to the Federal Assembly.

**Vladimir Putin:** The service members took the leave. Amusingly, some people doubted whether they would return: practically everyone returns with very few exceptions, due to illness or unexpected family circumstances. But overall, over 90 percent, 99 percent go back.

**Alexander Sladkov:** Yes, that's true.

**Vladimir Putin:** This is the first part of the answer to this question.

The second one – and I started with it: of course, we will have to gradually bring people back home, and the Defence Ministry is certainly discussing this relevant issue. It will depend on how the fourth question you asked will be decided, whether new waves of mobilisation are needed and so on. I am getting to it.

Contract soldiers. I talked to Mr Burdinsky recently, the work is generally moving forward, it is really going very well. He is in charge of recruiting contract soldiers. One of the deputy defence ministers is in charge of training.

**Alexander Sladkov:** Yevkurov.

**Vladimir Putin:** Yes. He is in charge of training, which is all set. I don't know if you have been there. If not, you can go.

**Alexander Sladkov:** Of course, we have.

**Vladimir Putin:** Things are getting better and better there now. There are probably still some problems, but the equipment is coming to them, they are working. There is no limit to perfection. Naturally, there are always problems wherever one looks, but overall, the situation is changing for the better. Do technologies need replacing? Perhaps, this must be considered. What is

the point? The point is that – you are right, you are absolutely right – we must have targeted recruitment.

Now, regarding conscripts. As before, we will not send them to the special military operation zone that passes through Novorossiya and Donbass. The same is true now. Although, of course, these territories belong to the Russian Federation, the special military operation is ongoing there, and, as the Defence Ministry reports to me, there is no need to send them there. That said, they are traditionally deployed in the Belgorod and Kursk regions. They are ensuring security there, they are present in these locations, and in case of a threat, they must fulfil their sacred duty to the homeland and defend the Fatherland.

I must say that I talked to a battalion commander that fought in the Belgorod area. I asked him how many of his soldiers were mobilised and how many were conscripted. He said they were all conscripts and he had no mobilised soldiers at all. He is a battalion commander. I asked him how they acted. He said they were brilliant – nobody flinched, not even one. That said, there was a brief moment when Lieutenant-General Lapin was fighting with his service weapon together with his soldiers.

**Alexander Sladkov:** We watched this scene with alarm.

**Vladimir Putin:** Yes, yes but these guys were doing the best they could.

So, I think I answered your question. Of course, they will stay there as well as on other territories of the Russian Federation.

The Defence Ministry is not planning to send them into the zone of hostilities, and there is no need for that now.

Indicatively, this battalion commander – I was very pleased to talk



with him, I think his name is Nikitin – spoke so confidently and warmly about his soldiers. He spoke very well about them. He said: “Nobody flinched at all. They were very focused and did a good job.”

Now about the need for additional mobilisation. I am not following this closely but some of our public figures claim that there is an urgent need to mobilise a million or even 2 million. This depends on what we want. But at the end of the Great patriotic War, how many...

**Alexander Sladkov:** Ten.

**Vladimir Putin:** No, maybe there were ten million during the war overall but I think at the end of the war we had 5 million in our Armed Forces. I may be wrong – I don't remember how many exactly.

I remember some things precisely – sorry to get side-tracked – but the RSFSR accounted for about 70 percent, or 69 percent of all losses during the Great Patriotic War – this is close enough, but I digress. The number does not matter but they were many. It depends on the goal.

Look, our troops were outside Kiev. First, we reached an agreement, which turned out to be a good agreement about how to resolve the current situation peacefully. Even though they tossed it, nevertheless, we used this time to get where we are now which is practically all of Novorossiia and a significant portion of the Donetsk People's Republic with access to the Sea of Azov and Mariupol. And almost all of the Lugansk People's Republic, with a few exceptions.

Do we need to go back there or not? Why am I asking this

rhetorical question? Clearly, you do not have an answer to it, only I can answer that. But depending on our goals, we must decide on mobilisation, but there is no need for that today. This is my first point.

Second, the thing that I will say at the end as part of my answer to your question, I am not sure I mentioned it before. Since January, when we began concluding contracts with contract soldiers, we have recruited over 150,000 of them and, together with volunteers, this number adds up to 156,000. The mobilisation gave us 300,000 recruits as we know. Now, people are coming voluntarily of their own free will. In fact, work began in February with 156,000 people and continues to this day with 9,500 contracts signed over the past week alone.

**Alexander Sladkov:** Half a corps.

**Vladimir Putin:** 9,500 people. Given this, the Defence Ministry says there is no need for mobilisation.

Things that are happening took even me by surprise: after all, 156,000 people volunteered. You know, as we say, Russians saddle slow, but ride fast. People are volunteering to defend the Fatherland.

**Alexander Sladkov:** Thank you.

**Anatoly Borodkin:** Mr President, Anatoly Borodkin, Zvezda TV channel.

You said earlier that Western countries are flooding the Kiev regime with the most advanced weapons systems.

**Vladimir Putin:** They are.

**Anatoly Borodkin:** In this regard, I have a question: what are we

going to do to expand our defence industry in order to prevent, first, a lag in terms of quantity and, above all, to overtake the enemy substantially and to provide our Armed Forces with sufficient numbers of modern weapons systems. We are aware that a Coordinating Council has been created. By the way, what do you think about its performance?

Frankly, so far, it appears that we have problems. The supply chain that goes from the defence order, manufacturing application and mass industrial production to shipping products to the frontline is sagging. What needs to be done to make it work as quickly as possible?

**Vladimir Putin:** You know, this is a fundamental question, absolutely fundamental. When we say – I said it, and you repeated it – that the West is flooding Ukraine with weapons, this is a fact, nobody is hiding this; on the contrary, they are proud of it. By the way, there are some problems here because, to a degree, they are violating certain aspects of international law by supplying weapons to an area of conflict. Yes, yes, yes, they prefer not to pay attention to this, but they are doing it. Never mind, they will keep doing it anyway, and it makes absolutely no sense to reproach them because they have their own geopolitical goals concerning Russia, which they will never attain, never. They must realize that, after all. But I think the awareness of this will come to them little by little.

Regarding weapons and MIC development. You see, we would have had no capability if we hadn't unveiled and started implementing the MIC upgrade programme about eight years ago – you might recall when it happened. You remember, yes, many of those here must have taken note of it. It was probably

about eight years ago, maybe even earlier; we launched a programme to upgrade the military industrial complex. We allocated very large funds at the time, and piece by piece began to upgrade our enterprises, build new ones, deploy modern equipment and so on. Thereby, a very significant back-log was created.

Of course, during the special military operation it has become clear, that we do not have enough of many things. This includes high-precision munitions, communications systems...

**Anatoly Borodkin:** UAVs.

**Vladimir Putin:** Yes, and aerial vehicles, drones and so on. We do have them but unfortunately, the numbers are not sufficient. Even now, as I speak with the men on the frontline, they say that they need ZALA drones, counterbattery assets, and more of them, smaller and more effective. Although our big drones are fairly effective, there are not enough of them and they are harder to operate.

I said now that in the areas where the Ukrainian army is trying to attack, several tanks have already been destroyed, I think with kamikaze drones. They are used very effectively, probably more effectively than the enemy's drones, but we do not have enough of them. We do not have enough Orlan drones, and their quality must be improved, although they perform their function. That is, we need a lot of things. We need modern anti-tank weapons as well as modern tanks.

The T-90 Breakthrough is the best tank in the world by 100 percent. It is now possible to say the T-90 Breakthrough is the best tank in the world – as soon as it takes its position, there is nothing

anyone else can do. It strikes longer and more precisely, and it is better protected. One commander told me – unfortunately the tank man died – but the T-90 Breakthrough was blown up by a land mine. Apparently, it was thrown up, and this man was wounded in it – not by a shell; he was simply thrown around inside, and that was it. The tank remained in working order. That is, there is enough of everything... No, on the contrary, not enough of everything but a lot of the groundwork has been done. Now the task is to build it up.

I mentioned the groundwork, and I should talk about what is happening now. During the year, we increased the production of our main weapons by 2.7 times. As for the manufacture of the most in-demand weapons, we increased this by ten times. Ten times! Some industrial companies work in two shifts and some in three. They practically work day and night and do a very good job.

As we say in such cases, I would like to use this opportunity to thank our labourers and engineers that are working day and night. Many of them go to the frontline to adjust equipment right in the zone of hostilities and do a very good job.

So, when we are talking about one of our main goals – demilitarisation – this is exactly how it is being achieved. They have less and less of their own equipment – almost nothing is left of it. They have some old Soviet plants where they try to repair hardware but the number is constantly decreasing because when we get information on what is taking place and where, we try to deal with it. Meanwhile, our production is growing and the quality is improving. The specifications – the range and precision – are being improved. If we did not have this special

military operation we probably would not have understood how to upgrade our defence industry to make our army the best in the world. But we will do this.

**Anatoly Borodkin:** Thank you.

**Irina Kuksenkova:** Good afternoon, Mr President,

Irina Kuksenkova, Channel One.

I have a question on an issue that is worrying me – rehabilitation – because this is what I am involved with. This is no less important than combat or supplying the troops. Honestly, I know this for sure.

Thank you very much for creating the Defenders of the Fatherland Fund. Now it is hard to even imagine how to resolve this host of issues without it. The men that gave up their health for the interests of our country should not feel any offense or injustice.

The problem is that our regions are different not only in their budgets but even in their capacity for organisation, whereas assistance must be equally effective in all regions. But they vary and so this assistance also varies. What do you think about this?

**Vladimir Putin:** It's a sensitive issue, I understand. And that's good. Someone said there would be different questions including very sensitive ones, and what you said about that was right. But they are all important issues. This one is also very important, I understand.

I had the the idea of establishing the Defenders of the Fatherland foundation after meeting mothers and wives of the lads who are fighting and some of whom, regrettably, have already given their lives for their homeland. I met with them in Novo-Ogaryovo several

months ago. Some women, a mother of a wounded soldier, said: It is hard on me, honest, because it is a deep wound, and it is hard on me. Then they said: We need some sort of a state support system. That's how this idea emerged – to set up a foundation for the support of the defenders, the SMO participants. I hope the foundation is being launched and is working more and more actively. It is very good that it employs people who are, in one way or another, connected with the special military operation – either family members or former participants, there are such people as well.

I would like to say in this connection that first, the state guarantees are the same for everyone. And everyone earns the same amount – 196,000 at the beginning and later all the things related to monetary allowance. Social guarantees with various payments from government sources are the same for everyone, too.

But you have a point – when it comes to payments by the regions, they are voluntary social payments made by the regions, nobody makes them do it, they are doing it extra. This circumstance has an effect here, which you mentioned: regions have different approaches – they are trying, some of them arrange extra payments, some help families. For example, free school meals for children, priority admittance to colleges, which is a general rule in Russia; they do much for families in the pre-school institutions.

Yes, there is a problem here as every region has its own approach. It is pretty hard to make it uniform because it is the regions' prerogative. Yet we have to consider this, I understand.

**Irina Kuksenova:** The issue is not financing, not wealth but the fact that some approach this in an organised way and put their

heart into it. As an example, we handle rehabilitation, introduce amputees to Paralympic sport in the Tula Region. I know for sure that it is well organised there, I see it. We finished a rotation just a few days ago, and it brought everything into focus. Meanwhile, I see that in some other regions there are issues. How can we build this organisation so that people take it seriously, with feeling?

**Vladimir Putin:** You know what I was just thinking? I was thinking we need to take the best practices and recommend them to other regions. We can't force them, and there is no need for that. I just firmly believe that heads of the regions, governors, do things differently than their neighbours not because they are opposed but because they are simply unaware, they don't have the information. And it should be disseminated.

Give us this information – I am serious – and we will try, no, we will do it via the Presidential Executive Office and plenipotentiary envoys, we will introduce this across the country.

**Irina Kuksenkova:** Thank you.

**Vladimir Putin:** Thank you very much. It is very important.

**Semyon Pegov:** Mr. President, Semyon Pegov, WarGonzo project.

Though I am not a moderator, but I am red-headed and bold, I will ask you two questions.

**Vladimir Putin:** But not all redheads are bold. (*Laughter*).

**Semyon Pegov:** Well, this is not about me.

Mr President, first question. As we know, at all times personnel is key to everything, especially in the army, especially during the war.



**Vladimir Putin:** Stalin said so, didn't he?

**Semyon Pegov:** I think so.

Unfortunately, the existing bureaucratic system is set up in such a way that those who are good at serving on the parquet floor and are able to play up to their superiors in time are the ones who rise up the career ladder. But now there are new Rokossovskys being forged at the front, new talented guys. By the way, a big hello to you from the Donbass commanders, from Somali, from OBTF [separate battalion tactical formation] Kaskad, from Sparta, but this is not only about them.

There are a lot of talented people now, good daring guys, but the system prevents them from rising the top. How can we resolve this issue so that we get new gems in our military affairs and in the art of war? And there are some, believe me.

The second issue, also a sensitive one, concerns payments to the wounded, as well as, unfortunately, for the deaths of servicemen. Some questions are being resolved by Turchak's working group on a person to person basis, but there is, for example, the question of payments for the equipment that has been destroyed. I personally do not know anyone – the guys will not let me tell a lie – I do not know a single soldier who has received a payment for a tank that has been destroyed, or for a destroyed fortification. Although it has all been announced, everyone knows it and the guys are even kidding around with each other: why was it promised, but it has not happened. And again: the guys will not let me lie – this really is true.

Thank you.

**Vladimir Putin:** It is more a call to action than a question.

As for staffing, this is the first part of the story. It is a very important question. Before the special military operation, of course, as in any government agency, there were a lot of carpet knights. You know, before the pandemic, there was only one situation in healthcare, but as soon as the pandemic started, there were people who could be equated with military personnel, although they were civilians. We know when people fearlessly entered these dangerous zones not knowing how this would end for them. The same is in the army environment: the special military operation was initiated and they quickly began to realise that carpet knights, and there are more than enough of them in any army in the world under peacetime conditions everywhere, are ineffective, to put it mildly.

On the other hand, and you are absolutely right here, Mr Pegov, there started appearing people who seemed to be in the shadows – they were not visible and not heard, but it turned out that they were very effective and in great demand. Unfortunately, such people are the first to go, because they do not spare themselves – that is the trouble.

Nevertheless, we must certainly... I hope that this does happen and will continue to happen. We have to watch it. I will tell you why: because we are of the same mind on this issue. I fully share this position, completely and utterly. Such people should be sought out – sought out and helped to rise to the top, trained, promoted and trusted more.

The latest example is the best one. As you know, I visited a hospital yesterday, and I presented orders to people, including an officer who commanded quite well on the battlefield during hostilities. I awarded him a Hero of Russia Star. We had a very candid conversation when I spoke with him on the telephone. They

brought the young fellow from the battlefield to the hospital, and they had not yet had time to operate on him. They simply anaesthetised his legs because he had sustained two wounds, including in the tibia. He spoke with me in a rather robust manner, and I asked him how the battle proceeded.

I recalled this yesterday, I believe that this is important, and I will mention this once again. I asked him: “Yury, they told me that you had been killed.” He replied: “Comrade Supreme Commander in Chief, I am not dead, I am alive.” I said: “Now I can see that you are alive. They told me that soldiers had carried you from the battlefield.” He replied: “No, it was I who carried them.” I said: “How did you manage to do that with your wound?” He said: “Yes, I sustained two wounds in the leg.” Yesterday, he told me that the first one was a bullet wound, and a shell splinter hit him later on, when their unit was redeploying. By the way, I said: “How long have you been serving?” He said: “Eight years.” I said: “How old are you?” “I am 24 years old.” I said: “Wait a bit, when did you join the army?” He said: “I enlisted at 18.” I said: “Then it is six years.” He said: “Sorry, I got it wrong because I am feeling jittery.”

*(Laughter)* I said: “I see, you are a Junior Lieutenant.” “Yes, I am.” “Are you a company commander?” “Yes.” You know, I recalled this yesterday, and I asked him to tell me how the battle proceeded. “First, there was an artillery barrage, and no one flinched. All soldiers manned their positions, and tanks moved in some time later. I said: “How did your soldiers act?” “Everyone stayed put, all of them engaged the enemy, and armoured vehicles and infantry units supported us.”

So, how does this differ from the Great Patriotic War? It does not. The situation is exactly the same. People get killed and wounded,

they struggle and fight; everything is the same.

I asked him: “So, you are a Junior Lieutenant, and you command a company. As far as I understand, you were a Sergeant not so long ago.” “Yes,” he said. Incidentally, sergeants are now fighting quite well. This category of junior commander has improved in the past 12-plus months, and they are putting up quite a fight. I said: “Are you a Junior Lieutenant today?” “Yes.” I told him: “I am promoting you to First Lieutenant.” Yesterday, I told him that he should enrol at an academy, of course, we need to look for these young men everywhere.

They are smart, well-educated, well-balanced and brave, and they want to serve the fatherland in the most direct and noble sense of the word. His guys are absolutely the same. You know, I asked him: “Did you take casualties?” He said: “Unfortunately, yes.” “How many did you lose?” “Ten killed and ten wounded.” The guys from his unit were standing next to him yesterday.

Of course, we need to look for people like that. There are many of them, you are absolutely right. The Defence Minister and the Chief of General Staff completely share my position, I have mentioned this issue many times, and they say: “Of course, we must do this.” You are right in saying that, just like in any ministry, they have a multi-layered bureaucracy. Certainly, we need to create social mobility mechanisms, including those that locate such people and elevate them to the required level in the army and society.

I will think about this, and I suggest that you think about it as well: there is nothing special about this. We are not discussing any specialised issues linked with military science; this amounts

to purely administrative decisions. If you have any ideas, feel free to suggest them. All right? This is quite correct.

About the payments. Yes, indeed, there, I do not remember exactly, but, in my opinion, 300 thousand for an aircraft, 100 thousand for a tank should be paid additionally. The fact that they do not pay – this is surprising to me.

**Semyon Pegov:** Unfortunately, this is an absolute fact – the guys will tell you the truth.

**Vladimir Putin:** I am not disputing what you said, I think the fact is as it is. I will definitely be returning to this right away, today, in talks with the Defence Ministry – absolutely, 100 percent.

By the way, the guys are working very courageously, very effectively. I was just saying when we started the conversation that the attack is coming from two directions. Several tanks were hit by the aviation, the helicopters are working very well. By the way, huge thanks to the pilots. Heroes, real heroes! Fighting effectively, really great. And several armoured vehicles and a tank were hit by infantry using modern anti-tank weapons, which are also in shartage. Cornets work perfectly, but we need more of them. We'll make more.

So I will certainly check it.

**Semyon Pegov:** Thank you, Mr President.

**Vladimir Putin:** Thank you for pointing it out.

Anything else, please?

**Ilya Lyadvin:** Good afternoon, Mr President.

Ilya Lyadvin, NTV.

The subject of payments to contract employees was already touched upon literally a question ago. But nevertheless, we would like to expand the regional case a bit, for example Chuvashia pays 50 [thousand rubles], Chelyabinsk pays 50, but there are small extra payments for children, but Transbaikal pays 150–200, Buryatia 200. There is a point: don't you think there is a gap, so to say, in the regions' level of capabilities, so that someone can pay 200?

**Vladimir Putin:** As I said, Ms Kuksenkova asked me earlier, and I have already answered her question. As for the federal payments, they are the same for everyone, no matter where a person joined the Armed Forces from.

**Ilya Lyadvin:** Yes, they are equal.

**Vladimir Putin:** As for the regional payments, they are regionally voluntary – the region does this additionally, and we can't give direct instructions here. We can recommend that they choose some common standard.

You are absolutely right, of course: there is a man who is fighting, maybe standing next to another in a trench, covering the wounded, or carrying them off the battlefield, but one gets a slightly higher bonus from the region and the other a lower one – this certainly looks unseemly.

I repeat: this does not apply to federal agencies – these are purely regional payments, not obligatory at all. Regions could pay nothing at all, but they do it voluntarily. But, of course, it is better to have some kind of common approach here.

I agree, you are right. We will work with the governors.

**Ilya Lyadvin:** Just maybe some kind of general programme so that it really is at the legislative level, perhaps.

**Vladimir Putin:** Mr Lyadvin, we are a country governed by the rule of law, unlike Ukraine. This is not a joke, this is not irony. What am I saying? Regions have certain rights, regions have certain responsibilities, the Federation has certain rights. The Federation, paradoxically as it may sound, cannot in this case give direct instructions in accordance with the distribution of powers. But we can recommend, and I am sure that the governors will respond, but I would like to see an increase, not a decrease. We will work on it.

You are right, I fully support you – fully, believe me. I know this problem – I have mentioned it many times before at various levels, but it is not easy to achieve an equalisation. We will try to do it.

**Ilya Lyadvin:** Thank you.

**Yury Podolyaka:** Mr President, I am Yury Podolyaka, blogger.

I would like to return to an issue that has already been raised: on the repletion of the army with advanced weapons systems.

Unfortunately, it so happened that before the special operation we did not know that a lot of special equipment and weapons would be needed, and today much of this equipment is being homemade. I am raising funds with the Popular Front, and we are now raising funds for electronic warfare, and I will tell you right away: almost – no, not almost – all the equipment that will be purchased with this money will be, in fact, cobbled together.

What is the problem? They prove effective at the front, the soldiers say “yes, this is what we need,” but our bureaucratic system does

not allow them to be quickly introduced and used serially. That is, the opportunities that we have are scanty, we can perhaps buy thousands or tens of thousands, but we need hundreds of thousands, unfortunately.

Perhaps we can do this via the Ministry of Industry and Trade or the Defence Ministry, or fast-track these procedures for the special military operation. This would immediately dramatically improve the efficiency and security of our soldiers. Just for example: an individual drone analyser will save thousands of soldiers' lives. It is not difficult to introduce it, it is not complicated, and we will buy thousands of them, but tens of thousands are needed. And our Defence Ministry cannot do this because there are bureaucratic structures that take months to sort out, and this all affects the lives of our soldiers.

It would be great to solve this problem if possible. Thank you.

The second point later, if I may. If I may ask a second question.

**Vladimir Putin:** Please wait a second. The problem is well-known, I think Anatoly Borodkin spoke about the work of the military-industrial sector. You have just given me a suggestion that I can add in answer to his question.

As you know, in addition to the fact that we have made a good start in the upgrade of the military-industrial complex, and besides the fact that now the production of the most demanded products is growing quite quickly – they have already increased tenfold – there is another very big advantage, frankly unexpected even for me. We have dozens, hundreds of private enterprises that have never had anything to do with the military-industrial complex that have joined in this work: small and medium-sized enterprises. I will not



list them now, because I am afraid that we will attract unnecessary attention to these enterprises.

You know, they made, for example, pipes – and it turns out that you can do something else besides pipes. And so, it is surprisingly simple in many areas. And on the whole, this means a good level of development of real production in general. Yes, yes, we have many problems in microelectronics, but, as it turned out, they were able to pick up speed very quickly and began to develop.

Nevertheless, we have not solved all the problems, and here Mr Podolyaka is absolutely right. Believe me, I have already said what you have just said a hundred times. I will come back to this again and I will try to fix it again.

You see, if there are any ideas how to bypass these unnecessary bureaucratic procedures in order to raise everything to the top, then when I start pushing something, the answer is that, you know, we have to check how effective it is, is it really so? Well, what do you say against it, do you see?

**Yury Podolyaka:** Soldiers at the front say it is effective. And you know, a very good reason that the soldiers give, which will be simply deadly for such officials, is: well, if it is ineffective, give us an effective one.

So, while our Ministry, for example, cannot give them effective equipment, let them have these ones, which for some reason they consider ineffective. If the soldiers think so.

**Vladimir Putin:** Mr Podolyaka, the simplest thing is: give me what you have in mind, and I will try...

**Yury Podolyaka:** Yes, all right, thank you. I will submit separately.

**Vladimir Putin:** That would be the best thing.

**Yury Podolyaka:** Excellent, then I will do that.

**Vladimir Putin:** Then you and I will work out a plan on how to overcome these bureaucratic...

**Yury Podolyaka:** Good. Thank you.

**Ilya Ushenin:** Mr President, I am Ilya Ushenin from NTV.

I have a question about the notorious red lines. Clearly, in the SMO zone, we are at war not just with the Kiev regime, but with the so-called collective West as well. NATO countries are constantly moving and crossing our red lines. We express our concern and keep saying that this is unacceptable, but never come up with actual answers.

Are we going to keep moving our red lines?

**Vladimir Putin:** Listen, is the special military operation itself not a response to them crossing these lines? This is the first and the most important point. We said many times “Do not do this, let’s do that, we are ready for talks.” In the end, they prompted us to try to use force to end the war that they started in 2014. They keep telling us, “You started the war, Putin is the aggressor.” No, they are the aggressors, they started this war, and we are trying to stop it, but we are compelled to do so with the use of the Armed Forces. Is this not the answer to their crossing the red lines? This is my first point.

Second, not everything may be covered by the media, although there is nothing to be ashamed of. Are strikes on Ukraine’s energy system not an answer to them crossing the red lines?

And the destruction of the headquarters of the main intelligence

directorate of the armed forces of Ukraine outside Kiev, almost within Kiev's city limits, is it not the answer? It is.

We will continue to work selectively. We will not do what these halfwits are doing when they target civilian sites and residential areas. Of course, we will not do this. We will continue to provide selective responses.

**Sergei Zenin:** Mr Putin, since we have people in our midst who are responsible for your life and health, and since this is not a live broadcast, I will first do some manipulations and then say a couple of words.

**Vladimir Putin:** Okay.

**Sergei Zenin:** I have a present for you.

**Vladimir Putin:** A shaman.

**Sergei Zenin:** It is pure and unadulterated alcohol. The best antiseptic there is. You have to bring something along when people invite you over, so here is the present. Here is what it is about. The person who gave it to me lives far from our border and far from the front line thanks to our troops. This is the so-called, not the so-called, but the actually liberated territory, the village of Timonovo not far from Svatovo. He came across some coins in his backyard.

**Vladimir Putin:** Coins?

**Sergei Zenin:** Right, coins, a jar of coins. There are coins from the time of emperors Alexander and Nicholas, and empress Catherine the Great. This is a coin dating back to the times of Emperor Nicholas. The person who gave it to me said, "Look, what kind of Ukraine are they talking about?" He found this coin

in his backyard.

I told you this story because there is an important twist to it. He has a son Nikolai, who, of his own accord, hearing distant explosions dug trenches around the village, small but deep enough for a grown man. He did it all alone with a shovel. He placed anti-tank hedgehogs there, some kind of make-believe machine guns and walks around with a machine gun fashioned from a plank, the ones we made when we were children. I myself used to make such machine guns. He made one himself out of a piece of wood and knocked in a nail to make it look like a sight. He pretends he is guarding the village. He dreams of joining the Russian Guard cadet school. Let's help him, please.

**Vladimir Putin:** Let us. How old is he?

**Sergei Zenin:** He can join this year. He is nearly 12.

**Vladimir Putin:** I will discuss this with Mr Zolotov today, I promise. Give me his details.

**Sergei Zenin:** Thank you very much. Excellent, this is great news.

**Vladimir Putin:** Thank you for your efforts to promote the personnel that the Fatherland needs. God bless.

**Sergei Zenin:** I will give his details to you later.

**Vladimir Putin:** Good.

**Sergei Zenin:** Now that we have lightened up the atmosphere, I would like to move on to two rather acute and important issues.

**Vladimir Putin:** With regard to “what Ukraine are they talking about,” Ukraine, such as it may be, does exist and we must treat it with respect. However, this does not mean that this is a reason

for us being treated without respect. That is what it is about.

If some of the people residing in these territories believe that they want to live in a separate and independent state, their preference must be treated with respect. The only question is why they should live at our expense and in our historical territories? If they want to live in our historical territories, then they should influence their political leadership so that it establishes proper relations with Russia and no one poses a threat to us from these territories. This is the issue. This is what the issue is all about.

I had multiple arguments with Belarus, Lukashenko. Clearly, the president of a country, in this case Belarus, defends his interests as he sees fit, in a consistent and tough manner. We had disputes. But did it ever occur to anyone to start a conflict with Belarus? No one would ever have thought about starting a conflict with Ukraine if we had normal relations as persons. There is not even a need for a Union State. But what they did there was they created an anti-Russia. They created it as a basis underlying their own existence. They created the anti-Russia and began to strengthen it. This is the problem.

There is a NATO issue as well. After all, when Ukraine gained independence, the Declaration of Independence explicitly stated that Ukraine was a neutral state. Who was it that, in 2008, when things were just fine with no Crimean events in sight, suddenly said they wanted to join NATO, and NATO opened its doors to them, declaring at the summit in Bucharest that NATO's doors were open to Ukraine?

Not only did they cheat everyone when they said NATO would not expand to the east, but they planned to have our historical

territories with a Russian-speaking population join NATO. This is totally out of line, is it not? It is. They are aware that they are creating a threat to us, but they are still working to this end despite our attempts to establish proper relations. This is the problem.

As for those who want to feel Ukrainian and live in an independent state, for God's sake, do what you want. It is necessary to treat this with respect, but then don't create a threat for us.

Anatoly Sobchak was right in what he said in his time. People from various political circles have different attitudes towards him, but he was a clever man. I am one hundred percent sure about this because I worked with him for a long time. He said with good reason, "If you want to leave, leave, but take only what you brought here." Meanwhile, in 1645 or 1654, Ukraine did not exist at all. There are letters kept in the archives. People wrote to Warsaw: "We, the Russian Orthodox people, demand that our rights be observed." The same people also wrote to Moscow: "We, the Russian Orthodox people, ask you to accept us into Russian Tsardom." Do you understand this?

Yes, gradually they began to build up lands whereas we were giving it away. For some reason, Vladimir Lenin decided to give up the entire Black Sea Region. Why on earth did he do this?

In strictly historical terms, these are Russian lands. Of course, there was nothing linked with Ukraine there, nothing at all. Ukraine really only appeared in 1922, and this fact was sealed in the Constitution. Huge Russian territories were given away there – just for nothing. And, as I mentioned, I have read papers and letters from the archives. They made a decision at first, I think at the congress or a Politbureau meeting about one republic. What was the name? I think, the Krivoy Rog Republic, right?

**Remark:** The Donetsk Republic.

**Vladimir Putin:** The Donetsk-Krivoy Rog Republic. Yes, it was supposed to be part of the RSFSR. Then the Bolsheviks came from these lands and said, “Why are you leaving us with these villagers?” That is, with the peasants that were considered petty bourgeois. Then again, they resumed the discussion on where to transfer Donbass, this Donetsk-Krivoy Rog Republic.

The people who came from Donbass said: “Why? It has already been decided that we are part of Russia?” They wrote “Mother Russia.” Lenin told them, “It is necessary to reconsider this decision.” So they reconsidered it on their own terms.

Did they go crazy altogether? Who asked the people about this? Was there some referendum or a plebiscite? What was it all about? Okay, they first transferred some territory there and then they separated it. I’m not sure, but I don’t think this ever happened in history before. Okay, now we have to live in this paradigm. But on top of that, they started creating an “anti-Russia” there, creating threats to us. But people do not want to live like that, to live there. They are reaching out towards us. So, what are we supposed to do? Dump these people or what? So, this is the result we have.

As for Ukraine, what Ukraine are you talking about? There was nothing at all there, there was no Ukraine. Ukraine appeared in 1922, as I said. Now the grateful descendants are smashing monuments to Lenin, the founder of Ukraine.

**Sergei Zenin:** These people were waiting for us, and they consider it Russia.

**Vladimir Putin:** Yes, of course.

**Sergei Zenin:** Mr President, please allow me to ask you two

questions. They are fairly pressing because many people at the front are waiting for answers to them. Both concern the so-called private military companies that are supposedly banned in our country de jure but still exist de facto on the frontline. They fight with varying success but sometimes with very good results.

What should be done to get rid of this judicial or legal vacuum and return them to the legal field? You know, we are talking not only with commanders but also with soldiers, and there is some kind of resentment.

**Vladimir Putin:** Yes, I understand. You are absolutely right in this respect. I asked both State Duma deputies and the Defence Ministry to bring everything in line with common sense, the established practice and the law.

Of course, we should not put people in a false position. First, no matter who they are and in what capacity they happen to be on the frontline, all of them are defenders of the Fatherland, and the homeland must respond in full to their readiness to risk or give their lives for the Fatherland. All of them must be in an equal position. But to achieve this, it is necessary to introduce relevant amendments to the law. Work on this is now underway.

To my knowledge, the Defence Ministry is now signing contracts with all those willing to continue their service in the special military operation zone. This is the only way of providing them with social guarantees because if there is no contract with the state, no contract with the Defence Ministry, there are no legal grounds for receiving social guarantees from the state. This must be done as soon as possible.



There are some nuances. I won't go into details now, but it is possible to make adjustments to the law as well. By and large, only private security structures are close to these volunteer formations in the legal sense. But that said, there are many things that must be regulated additionally.

To sum up, the first order of business is to sign contracts with all volunteer formations – otherwise, there will be no social guarantees on behalf of the state. And, second, certain amendments must be made to the law. Both measures will be carried out.

**Sergei Zenin:** One more question about PMCs. It is a very strange situation. On the one hand, these people are often true heroes. On the other, when they return to civilian life, they behave differently. There are situations where people – it is no secret that there are people who got there from prison – go back to their old ways, commit offences, sometimes serious crimes. These guys cast aspersions on the others who are still fighting and shedding blood. They themselves shed blood, too, but go back to their old lives.

How do we separate the good from the bad in this particular situation? They are the same PMC fighters.

**Vladimir Putin:** Remember, Sholokhov's Makar Nagulnov [in the novel *Virgin Soil Upturned*] used to say: he was a good Communist, and everything was fine, but then, pardon me my language, he went rogue and became an enemy of the revolution. Here, unfortunately, things work the same way.

A man is fighting – honour and praise to him, and the state must fulfill its obligations to these people, which we are doing. With

regard to social guarantees, it is important to sign contracts with the state, this is an obvious necessity, otherwise there are no obligations on the part of the state and there will be injustice with regard to the people on the frontline. They receive it immediately. I do sign pardon orders after all.

Indeed, repeated crimes are a fact of life. But then a person must be held accountable to the full extent of the law, no matter what. It was like that during the Great Patriotic War: if a person fought on the front, they were honoured and praised, but if they broke the law, they were brought to justice just like anyone else.

Here is what to pay attention to. Look, overall, leaving the special military operation aside, the repeat crime rate among those who have served their sentences and returned to normal life is up to 40 percent in some cases. Among SMO participants, this percentage is only 0.4 percent.

**Sergei Zenin:** The percentage is very small.

**Vladimir Putin:** Yes, indeed.

**Sergei Zenin:** But it's still a fly in the ointment.

**Vladimir Putin:** Well, this is life. It is a complex and diverse thing. There is nothing you can do about it. It dictates its stern laws to us. To reiterate, recidivism is ten times lower than in general. This is inevitable, but the negative consequences are minimal.

**Dmitry Kulko:** Mr President, a follow-up on the counter-offensive.

**Vladimir Putin:** Go ahead.

**Dmitry Kulko:** Sooner or later, the Ukrainian counter-offensive will get bogged down, or rather, our troops will force it to bog down

with their heroic efforts. Clearly, no matter what losses Ukraine suffers, the Western countries will continue to supply weapons to it.

**Vladimir Putin:** This is debatable.

**Dmitry Kulko:** In any case, the question is what will happen next? Will we gear up to repel another offensive or are we going to advance? If so, how far are we willing to go this time? Is it to Russia's new borders, or as far as we will be able to go?

**Vladimir Putin:** Mr Kulko, I can only say this face to face. *(Laughter)* Well, everything will depend on the potential that is left at the end of this so-called counter-offensive. This is the key question.

I think that, being aware – I say this with good reason – of the catastrophic losses, the leadership, whatever it may be it has a head on its shoulders, should think about what to do next. We will wait and see what the situation is like and take further steps based on this understanding. Our plans may vary depending on the situation when we deem it necessary to move.

**Dmitry Kulko:** Mr President, our troops are burning NATO equipment, but still with regard to future weapon supplies...

**Vladimir Putin:** That includes NATO equipment. Like I said earlier, losses include over 160 tanks and 360 infantry fighting vehicles. This is not all NATO equipment. It also includes Soviet-made armoured vehicles. As we anticipated, Bradleys and Leopards burn just fine. You may have seen the ammunition inside the tanks blow up and everything fly in all directions. Like I said: 25–30 percent of the supplied equipment has been destroyed.

**Dmitry Kulko:** Mr President, now, two countries are about to supply shells with depleted uranium. The US media reported today that, following the UK, the United States will supply them as well. We saw in Serbia how they contaminate soil and cripple people. It turns out that Ukraine will contaminate the territory of the Russian Federation with this ammunition.

Given this, are we not being forced to act proactively? How are we going to respond to these challenges?

**Vladimir Putin:** There is no need to act preemptively. We have a lot of ammo with depleted uranium. If they use it, we reserve the right to use it as well. We have it in stock. We just do not use it.

**Alexander Sladkov:** This is interesting.

**Vladimir Putin:** No, to be honest, there is nothing interesting or good here. If we need to, we can do this; I can say that we are capable of doing this. But there is no need for us to do this today.

Do you know what else is going on there? I have talked about this; it's no longer a secret. The Ukrainian army fires 5,000 to 6,000 large-calibre (155-mm) shells a day, and this number has probably increased by now. The United States manufactures just 15,000 shells per month, while the Ukrainian army spends 5,000 to 6,000 shells a day.

The United States is planning to manufacture more shells. All this information is from open sources, and there is nothing secret about it. First, they talked about 75,000 shells, and now there are plans to manufacture even more. I don't know, but they are planning to manufacture about 75,000 next year, in late 2024. However, if they spend 5,000 to 6,000 shells a day... I believe they are now using even more because this is typical of offensive

operations, using more ammunition.

They simply have no shells, but they have depleted-uranium shells in warehouses. It appears that they have now decided to use these shells for the time being. They have swept the warehouses clean, and only South Korea and Israel have these shells left. But these shells are US property, not Israel's or South Korea's. They can ship those shells from there to Ukraine. However, this will also run out soon. Apparently, they still have depleted-uranium shells at warehouses, and this is the simplest option, because to expand production costs a lot of money and effort.

They are forcing the Europeans to expand production in the Czech Republic and elsewhere. In any case, these countries have parliaments. They can build a new plant, but what happens next? What can they do with it? Europe has its own problems in healthcare, transport, education, there are many problems there, and they are forcing the Europeans to build a munitions plant.

This is why nothing is simple, considering the fact that the economic problems are snowballing. According to the IMF, the Federal Republic of Germany, the main driving force of the European economy, is facing an incipient recession – its GDP is expected to drop by 0.7 percent this year. By the way, Russia's GDP is expected to increase by at least 1.5 percent or even 2 percent this year. But the main driving force of the European economy is in a 0.7-percent slump and an upcoming recession. Inflation is on the rise there.

In Russia, inflation stands at 2.3 percent, and the Central Bank predicts that it will reach about 5 percent in late 2023. Well, this is good; very low inflation is not very good for Russia, but this level

will be quite acceptable. Their inflation levels are over 7 percent, that is, about 7.5 percent. I don't remember exactly, but the Eurozone is posting 5 percent inflation, and, to the best of my knowledge, the Federal Republic of Germany is at 7.4 percent. Unemployment continues to increase, and it has become quite exorbitant in southern Europe. Russia has minimal unemployment, an all-time low.

So, it is not so easy to produce everything there, and even more difficult to expand production and build new facilities. This will come in handy for us, because Russia has a special situation. We must build up our armaments; we will have to, and we will accumulate strategic reserves in warehouses. And where will they keep them? Why the hell would the Czech Republic want some kind of strategic reserve? What will they do with it? Where will they put it? It's not so simple. Well, if they want to, let them.

But then, the Americans behave very pragmatically, and everything they do is in their own interests alone; they do not care about the interests of their allies. They have no allies; they only have vassals. And their vassals are beginning to realise what role they are destined for. In fact, they do not really like all this, at the level of public consciousness. Some of my friends say the situation there is like in the Soviet Union. I say, "What do you mean?" It's like at work: at a company, in the office everyone sits and discusses Russia, but when they go home, everything is quite different in the kitchen. Probably, people who say this sympathise with us and they probably exaggerate a bit. But that's the trend.

So, as regards depleted uranium shells, it can be explained like this: there are simply no other shells left. And when they say they will start producing this or that: well, please go ahead. Things are

not so simple during a recession. And then, there are also opposition parties that are using the situation; they are rocking politics there, analysing the real situation in the economy.

The safety margins of the European and the American economies are very large. This is obvious and understandable. They are high-tech, the structure of the economy is very developed, and it is powerful; but still there are many problems.

I think this is what dictated the desire to supply shells with depleted uranium. The cheapest approach is to do nothing. There are such shells in warehouses, they can send them to Ukraine, and that's it. And they do not care what happens there. They behave like this everywhere. Remember what they did in Yugoslavia? And what did they do in Syria or Iraq? They did the same thing: they do not care. They have nothing but their own interests, and the interests of their allies do not interest them at all.

Speaking of the economy, they made a lot of decisions and lured companies to the United States from Europe. Everyone understands this, everyone sees it, but they cannot do anything about it. They have taken away the order for nuclear submarines from the French. And what did they do in response? Nothing. Moreover, we know, they whispered in the Americans' ear: we must make some public statements, publicly quarrel with you – and then we will quietly crawl away, please do not be angry with us. That's all. They are not as decisive as we here in Russia. There is no passion there, these are fading nations; that's the whole problem. But we have it. We will fight for our interests, and we will achieve our goals.

**Dmitry Kulko:** Thank you.

**Dmitry Steshin:** Dmitry Steshin, Komsomolskaya Pravda.

Mr President, a journalist on the frontline doesn't always ask questions – he is often asked questions because he kind of represents the world in general.

Since October, fighters have been asking me questions about the so-called grain deal. I couldn't explain many things about it. I simply understood that it was a strong irritant and a blank spot for them. I told them that this deal was also based on our interests – grain exports to the West and the interests of the poorest countries that were supposed to receive this grain. But I realise that our interests in this deal are not being observed. Plus, there are concerns that weapons will be brought in via the security corridors and these corridors will be used for attacking the Black Sea Fleet, and so on.

In fact, I am redirecting this question to you. Do we need this deal? And, if our interests are not being considered, maybe it should be severed?

**Vladimir Putin:** Frankly, this is a surprise question for me. I did not expect to hear it. But probably those who are fighting on the frontline don't understand why we let Ukraine ship this grain. I understand, and I agree.

You see, we are doing this not for the sake of Ukraine but for the sake of friendly countries in Africa and Latin America because this grain should primarily be sent to the world's poorest states. That said, we were promised that our grain would not be subjected to reprisals, if I may say so, that there would be no obstacles to exporting it. Unfortunately, we were cheated once again.



Nothing was done to facilitate our grain supplies to external markets. I am referring to chartering vessels, their insurance, payments, including connecting Rosselkhozbank to SWIFT. There were many terms that the Westerners were supposed to fulfil under UN guidance, but nothing was done.

Nevertheless, we have extended these agreements several times – and I'd like to repeat it again – in the interests of friendly countries. It is obvious to everyone that it is also in our interests to maintain good, trustworthy and stable relations with the part of the world that does not support the aggressive anti-Russia actions of the West and its satellites in Ukraine. This is our interest – to maintain good relations.

Incidentally, I don't know whether this was announced or not but the leaders of several African states are expected to visit Russia soon – in the near future. We agreed to discuss current issues and will certainly talk about the grain deal. We are primarily motivated by these considerations.

But it turns out that, as I have said many times, only a little over 3 percent of the total volume of Ukrainian grain went to the poorest countries. The figure fluctuates a little: 3.2 to 3.4 percent, because it changes a little depending on where the next dry cargo ship with grain goes, but in general it is somewhere around 3.5 percent. More than 40 percent goes to the prosperous countries in the European Union. They are the main recipients of Ukrainian grain: it is cheaper, they get it, and they feel good, and Ukraine got paid for it. Today, I could be wrong, but it seems to me that this is the main source of foreign exchange revenue for Ukraine now.

Everything else has practically collapsed there. I am not talking

about industry, but everything is stopping there. I do not know what they still produce there. There used to be agricultural production and the metallurgical industry, the pipes. The metals sector is almost stopped since there is no electricity there. Machinery manufacturing has stopped. Shipbuilding collapsed long ago, even before the special military operation. The aviation industry collapsed before the special military operation. Engine production has collapsed.

The main sources of revenue were the metallurgical industry, which no longer exists, and the agricultural products they export, in particular grain. We understand this, but we deliberately went for it, I repeat, to support developing countries, our friends, and in order to achieve the lifting of sanctions on our agricultural sector. We were deceived once again, as I said. This is the first thing.

Second, regarding the African countries, they get almost nothing, too. This is why we are now thinking about how we can get out of this grain deal. Moreover, the corridors for these cargo ships are constantly used by the enemy to launch naval drones.

I don't know if the Ministry of Defence released this information or not: just yesterday, or the day before yesterday, our ship, which was guarding the TurkStream, the gas pipeline that runs to Turkey, was attacked by four semi-submersible drones. Three of them were destroyed, and the fourth lost its way and was finished off later. Immediately after that, four more drones appeared. At that same time, we saw an unmanned aerial vehicle belonging to US strategic intelligence hovering high above, in the neutral zone. Apparently, it was correcting the movements of these drones.

The United States is getting more and more involved in this conflict, almost directly involved, provoking serious international security crises. Correcting the movements of drones that are attacking our warships is a very serious risk. This is very serious, and they should know that we know about it. We will think about what to do with this in the future. In general, this is how it is.

So, as far as the grain deal is concerned, we think about terminating our participation in it. This is the first thing.

And second, we will be ready to deliver the amount of grain that the poorest countries received – I repeat, it was a little over three percent – free of charge. But this needs to be discussed, including when our friends from the African states arrive: soon, very soon. I would like to hear their opinion as well on how to proceed.

**Dmitry Steshin:** Thank you very much.

**Murad Gazdiyev:** Mr President,  
Murad Gazdiyev, RT TV Channel.

First, our Editor-in-Chief Margarita Simonyan asked me to give you her letter. She has done a lot to make our meetings possible – both officially and unofficially.

Mr President, I have several questions. Considering that you said you are not going to reveal all your plans, I still have a question on a peace settlement. Everyone – besides Russia and Ukraine – has their own view of how to settle this conflict.

**Vladimir Putin:** Why? You are wrong here. Why did you say “besides Russia and Ukraine”? We also have one. Moreover, we reached an agreement in Istanbul. I don’t remember his name and may be mistaken, but I think Mr Arakhamia headed Ukraine’s

negotiating team in Istanbul. He even initialed this document.

**Murad Gazdiyev:** But I am saying that besides Russia and Ukraine, other countries also have their own view of how to settle this conflict.

**Vladimir Putin:** Oh, pardon me, I apologise. Yes.

**Murad Gazdiyev:** The United States, the Europeans – but it's like the US, Saudi Arabia and even African countries have expressed willingness to mediate to help settle this conflict. Obviously, apart from peace, they are also pursuing some of their own interests.

Now my question, Mr President. Which of these versions are you leaning toward? Are you leaning toward any of them at all? Is there anyone to negotiate with and does it make sense to?

**Vladimir Putin:** First, we have never refused – as I said a thousand times – to participate in any talks that may lead to a peace settlement. We have always said so. Moreover, during the talks in Istanbul, we initialed this document. We argued for a long time, butted heads there and so on, but the document was very thick and it was initialed by Medinsky on our side and by the head of their negotiating team – I think his name is Arakhamia but I don't remember exactly. We actually did this but they simply threw it away later and that's it. This is the first point.

Second, you said the Europeans have their approach and the Americans also have their approach. But, you know, it's like in every joke about the Europeans versus the Americans. Point one – the Americans are always right. Point two – if the Americans are not right, see point one. So, that's why there isn't anyone to talk to especially.

Overall, the Western approach boils down to standing with Ukraine and its interests, we are aware of that. Speaking of Ukraine's interests, there is point three: if the interests of Ukraine are not in sync with point two, see point one, because ultimately it is about the United States' interests. We know that they hold the key to solving issues. If they genuinely want to end today's conflict via negotiations, they only need to make one decision which is to stop supplying weapons and equipment. That's it. Ukraine itself does not manufacture anything. Tomorrow, they will want to hold talks that are not formal, but substantive, and not to confront us with ultimatums, but to return to what was agreed upon, say, in Istanbul.

Ukraine's security issues are spelled out in great detail there. In fact, much of what is written there makes us wonder whether we should agree to it. To reiterate, it was initialed by both sides.

Therefore, if they want to get back to it, we are ready to talk to them. But for now, they want to defeat Russia and to achieve success in their counteroffensive operation. I just reported to you about the status of this counteroffensive operation.

**Murad Gazdiev:** Mr President, you are saying they just need to stop the flow of weapons going to Ukraine, but they do not. They do the opposite: first there were tanks, now it is depleted uranium.

**Vladimir Putin:** There is no depleted uranium yet.

**Murad Gazdiev:** There is coming from the UK. We have already seen articles in various neo-conservative organisations – there was a widely covered one that insisted on making tactical nuclear weapons available to Ukraine. The question is: is the United

States not afraid to endlessly escalate the situation and raise the stakes?

**Vladimir Putin:** They pretend not to be. In fact, there are many people there who think clearly and are unwilling to lead the world into a third world war in which there will be no winners; even the United States will not come out of it as a winner.

**Irina Kuksenкова:** If I may, I have one more question about space, or rather, about space reconnaissance.

**Vladimir Putin:** It is time to wrap up.

**Irina Kuksenкова:** Yes, of course. According to open data, up to 100 military satellites are out there working for the enemy. They can see our troops and movements. Our space group is not as strong.

**Vladimir Putin:** Yes.

**Irina Kuksenкова:** What can we do about it and how should it be dealt with? This is a systemic issue, correct? Will it take years to improve things?

**Vladimir Putin:** Of course, it is not a secret. Without a doubt, we should have been engaging in space activities in a different manner in previous years. But we did not plan – I think this is clear – we did not plan either the events in Crimea, or the events that are taking place now.

I have said on numerous occasions, including at this meeting, that we have been trying to end this armed conflict. Regrettably, we were forced to take military action, but we did not begin it. These are long-term projects that are planned for years ahead and subsequently implemented in accordance with the plans we

made five to seven years ago. But today we are adjusting our actions. As you know, we have launched a spacecraft recently. We will increase this group.

Incidentally, Russia has the fifth largest satellite group in the world. Overall, it is a good group.

**Irina Kuksenova:** We are fighting against the first one.

**Vladimir Putin:** Yes, of course. We must adjust this work accordingly. We will certainly do this. But until then we need something to take its place. What might this be? Different-purpose unmanned aerial vehicles. Our colleague has rightly said that we must increase the number of different drones, including strike and reconnaissance ones, which takes time.

I agree with you, you are right, we must do this.

**Dmitry Zimenkin:** Dmitry Zimenkin, Izvestia and Ren TV.

I am grateful to Mr Sladkov for giving us this chance and to you for listening to us. I think that the issue raised in the trenches and by the soldiers' wives is important. It has to do with the status of participants in the military operations.

Here are three examples. The Belgorod Region, border guards and the mobile warfare department, who repel the enemy onslaught, even though it was a diversionary attack, do this together with conscripted servicemen before the arrival of Defence Ministry forces.

**Vladimir Putin:** They do.

**Dmitry Zimenkin:** The Lugansk police who fought in the Kharkov Region last year, and their colleagues from the Kaskad tactical group who are fighting in the Donetsk People's Republic now, do

not have this status either.

I received a phone call from a field medic today. He has been working behind the line for four months.

**Vladimir Putin:** Behind the line?

**Dmitry Zimenkin:** Yes, behind the line, which means that he is fighting. He has moved 70 men from the battlefield and has had four concussions. I hear that he began stammering after the fourth one. He serves in Unit 31135 but is allegedly not fighting. He cannot even receive an order for this reason.

**Vladimir Putin:** I don't see why not.

**Dmitry Zimenkin:** He said they are not regarded as taking part in the hostilities. I don't know what the problem is. That's what he told me personally.

**Remark:** They are not regarded as participants.

**Dmitry Zimenkin:** Exactly.

**Alexander Kots:** They are not registered as fighting in the special military operation zone but as serving in their permanent deployment areas.

**Remark:** The same goes for the border guards.

**Dmitry Zimenkin:** This aspect must be clarified. I think it's not fair, and the point at issue is not the additional payment, which is not that big.

**Vladimir Putin:** Good. Mr Zimenkin, I have heard about such problems. I have taken note of them.

I am aware of them, and Mr Bortnikov and Mr Kolokoltsev have been asking these questions. But it is the first time that I have



heard this about military medics. I will certainly take a look at this problem. It must be a technical problem in some places. If a military medic is actually working behind the line, I do not understand what is happening. I will look into it. Where exactly is he working?

**Dmitry Zimenkin:** He is registered in the Belgorod Region, but he worked near Svatovo. Our crew took the footage.

**Vladimir Putin:** Write this down for me, please.

**Dmitry Zimenkin:** I will do this right now.

**Vladimir Putin:** I need a concrete example.

As for the other categories of military personnel, especially border guards and partly the police, this issue must certainly be addressed.

I understand this and agree with you, and the heads of these agencies have raised this matter as well. I have issued instructions to the Security Council, which is preparing proposals.

**Murad Gazdiev:** And a few words about the situation – not in the liberated territories, not in the new regions, but in Russia proper.

Our fighters often manage to read the news, even at the frontline. To put it mildly, they are outraged to hear of another scandal where a civil servant or a university professor almost openly tries to sway young people to a pro-Ukraine position. That is, by and large, these people have no caution, they aren't afraid of fines.

All right, I know, and you have been very clear that we will not act like the Ukrainian regime: a bag over the head and the person disappears forever. But, given that we are not like them, we are

fighting against this, is it not a betrayal of our values to just leave the situation as it is?

**Vladimir Putin:** Leaving it like this verges on betrayal. That's the first point.

Second. I think it was Semyon Pegov who spoke here about the need to promote the fighters, especially those who have proven themselves well on the battlefield, to promote them to higher ranks in the Armed Forces, but not only that. They can be promoted to law enforcement or special services. We need to look for such people – in terms of their consciousness and their understanding of justice – and entrust them with investigating the rogues you mentioned.

In the same vein, we appointed the Investigative Committee of Chechnya to investigate the public destruction of the Quran. And, as stated by the Minister of Justice, [Nikita Zhuravel, who burned the Quran outside a mosque in Volgograd] will serve his sentence in a penitentiary institution in one of the Russian regions with a predominantly Muslim population.

As to the rogues you mentioned, we need to devise something similar. You were absolutely right to raise this question. I'll think about it.

**Murad Gazdiev:** Thank you very much.

**Vladimir Putin:** Thank you very much for your question.

**Murad Gazdiev:** If I may, I will give the letter to my comrades from the Federal Guard Service.

**Vladimir Putin:** Yes, of course.

Thank you very much.

