

## Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's address and annual news conference on Russia's diplomatic performance in 2014

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*Moscow, 21 January 2015*

Ladies and gentlemen,

Welcome to our annual meeting on Russia's diplomatic performance.

The situation last year was more complicated than previously, as new dangerous seats of tensions complemented several smouldering chronic conflicts. Especially alarming was the situation in the Middle East and North Africa, where extremist and terrorist threats were growing and spreading to other regions and to which Russia consistently tried to attract the attention of its partners. The risk that religious and societal divides will grow has not diminished. The global economic situation is far from clear.

We believe that the developments of the past few years show convincingly that global security issues can only be resolved through concerted efforts. But cooperative actions by the international community are hindered by a number of negative trends. The most important of them are fundamental differences between the objective process of the decentralisation of power in the world and the development of a more democratic polycentric world order on the one hand, and persistent attempts by the "historical" West to preserve global leadership at all costs and to enforce its approaches and values, including through the use of force on the other participants of international relations, on the other hand. The situation in Ukraine is a perfect reflection of this policy.

I won't speak in detail about our views of what happened in this neighbouring fraternal state, because you know them very well. I will only say that Russia has been firmly advocating a comprehensive and exclusively peaceful settlement of the Ukrainian crisis. The Minsk agreements, which were achieved in part thanks to the proactive stance of President Vladimir Putin, offer practical grounds for settlement. The current urgent need is to start an inclusive dialogue in Ukraine to discuss in detail and coordinate the constitutional system of Ukraine as a stable and safe country for all Ukrainian citizens without exception. We are pleased that our Western partners are coming to see, as far as I can tell, that this scenario has no alternative. I hope that our future contacts at different levels and in various formats will promote movement towards this goal.

Only the people of Ukraine without any foreign interference must determine their future. Direct contact between Kiev and the self-proclaimed Donetsk and Lugansk people's republics are of fundamental importance in this context and taking into account the acute crisis in southeast Ukraine. All other formats involving external players, including the Normandy and many other formats, as well as the OSCE activities, must be aimed at assisting a direct and sustainable dialogue on issues that need to be resolved to settle the crisis. For its part, Russia will continue to assist the creation of favourable conditions to settle Ukraine's formidable problems in this spirit.

Our Western partners have said repeatedly that they need to continue to contain Russia. US President Barack Obama said as much in his state of the nation address yesterday. But these attempts will fail. Despite this policy of our Western partners, President Vladimir Putin clearly said in his address to the Federal Assembly that Russia would never enter the path of self-isolation, suspicion and the search for enemies. We are pursuing an active foreign policy and are consistently upholding our national interests. However, we are not set on confrontation but are willing to make reasonable compromises based on a balance of interests. We have been trying to influence the international situation in order to improve it and to strengthen security, and we have been advocating a peaceful and future-oriented agenda. We firmly believe that only collective

efforts will produce answers to the threats and challenges facing all of mankind. But while doing this we should rely on international law and the central coordinating role of the UN.

Last year, Russia worked actively in different formats, including the G20, BRICS and the SCO, which will hold their summits this year in the Russian city of Ufa. We will use the opportunities offered by Russia's presidency to give a fresh impetus to these formats. The focus in BRICS will be on coordinating crucial economic documents such as a strategy for economic partnership and a roadmap for institutional cooperation. There are plans to sign an agreement on cultural ties and to open new cooperation tracks. We will also inaugurate a virtual secretariat for BRICS.

The signing of the Treaty on the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), which became effective on 1 January 2015, was a major step towards closer integration in the post-Soviet space. Armenia became a full member of the EAEU on 2 January. Kyrgyzstan will complete the accession process in the near future. The interest of many of our partners in this process is truly indicative. We welcome the intention of many countries to cooperate with the EAEU. A score of countries have expressed a desire to start consultations on the possibility of signing a free trade agreement with the union.

Last year, Russia as the CSTO president focused on strengthening the efficiency and the quality of response mechanisms and the peacekeeping potential of the organisation.

As for Russia's relations with Europe, Brussels has adopted a stance regarding the Ukrainian crisis that has resulted in a substantial decline in relations with the EU, as a number of challenging political and economic issues emerged on our agenda. We believe in systematic efforts to overcome these issues based on equality and mutual respect. We remain committed to the idea of progressively advancing, equal and mutually beneficial cooperation with the European Union. We have been calling on our partners for several years now to begin work on promoting the "integration of integrations initiative," by which we mean taking consecutive steps to establish a single economic and humanitarian space from the Atlantic to the Pacific based on the principles of indivisible security and broad cooperation. We submitted this proposal to the OSCE as part of its second basket and did not see any opposition. I hope that we will be able to begin working along these lines. It is our belief that agreeing on such strategic objectives will ensure the harmonious development of all countries within Greater Europe, regardless of whether they participate in various integration organisations or not. The first step in this direction would be to launch talks on the creation of a free-trade zone between the EAEU and the EU. President Vladimir Putin put forward an initiative to this effect in January 2014 during the EU-Russia Summit in Brussels, and this proposal remains relevant.

On the American "frontline," relations between Moscow and Washington have come under serious strain. The US administration has withdrawn from bilateral dialogue on most issues. We call on our US partners to resume constructive relations both on bilateral, as well as global issues, where our countries bear special responsibility. Equal footing and taking into account each other's interests are prerequisites for making such a dialogue possible.

Following in the US' footsteps, a confrontational stance has prevailed within NATO. The Alliance has taken an absolutely political decision to suspend cooperation on military and civil projects, and almost all projects have been frozen. This was not our choice. We do not want and won't allow a new cold war to unfold. Our Western partners should understand that in today's world it is impossible to ensure security by taking unilateral actions and pressuring partners, which undermines joint efforts.

We are continuing efforts to further promote Russia's integration with the Asia-Pacific region. Russian President Vladimir Putin has stated on numerous occasions that Russia views relations with the APR as a strategic priority in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, which is important, among other things, for developing regions in Russia's Far East. At the same time, we have always stressed and still reiterate that these efforts are not meant to be an alternative to relations with Europe and the

West in general, but to go hand in hand with stepping up ties with our European partners, if they are willing to engage in such relations, naturally.

Russia's relations with China have also been expanding consistently. During the visit by President Vladimir Putin to China in May last year, some 50 agreements were signed, and you have received extensive information on all of them. Russia's partnership with China has become a major factor in international relations for ensuring global and regional stability and security.

Russia has also stepped up strategic partnerships with India, Vietnam and other APR countries, expanded Russia's involvement in the APR's multilateral mechanisms. We continued to promote relations with the Latin American and African countries, emerging regional integration bodies and regional organisations.

Russia was proactive in facilitating a settlement in various conflicts. Syria's demilitarization has been successfully completed with active input from Russia – there was actually a Russia-US initiative to this effect, which proves that guided by basic interests, not opportunistic considerations, it is possible to overcome oneself and find ways to ensure productive joint efforts. We undertook consistent efforts to bring about political settlement of the Syrian crisis by creating conditions for facilitating direct dialogue between representatives of the Syrian government and all major opposition groups.

The Islamic State has been the biggest threat in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. Russia views counterterrorist efforts as one of its priorities, and we proposed to have the UN Security Council conduct a comprehensive analysis of the threats the MENA region is facing. No one opposed this proposal. We will continue to implement this crucial initiative.

Russia's efforts within the P5+1 contributed to certain advances in the settlement of the Iranian nuclear program issue. Although certain difficulties have yet to be addressed, the work goes on and we have every reason to expect these efforts to yield results.

Protecting the rights and interests of our compatriots living abroad, as well as expanding international humanitarian and cultural ties remain among Russia's priorities. We were proactive in assisting Russian businesses operating on foreign markets, attracting new exporters of goods and services, and bringing Russian products to new markets. We also paid special attention to media efforts by developing contacts with media outlets and foreign publics to shed light on Russia's foreign policy.

All in all, we did our utmost to facilitate Russia's comprehensive development and make Russian citizens more prosperous – these are priority objectives according to Presidential Executive order No. 605 dated 7 May 2012 On Measures to Implement Russia's Foreign Policy and Russia's Foreign Policy Concept. Under these instruments, the Ministry of Foreign affairs is required to create the most favourable environment for facilitating all-round development of the country, making its population more prosperous and secure at the international level.

With this, I would like to complete my opening remarks. I'm ready to take questions.

**Question:** Normandy format negotiations are expected to resume in Berlin this evening. Meanwhile, all of the past week we have witnessed the intensification of shelling in southern Ukraine, while the previous round of negotiations, which took place on 12 January, did not bring any desirable results. Precisely what disagreements have prevented the sides from coming to terms? What are Moscow's expectations of today's meeting in Berlin?

**Sergey Lavrov:** We are deeply concerned by the latest outbreak of violence in southeastern Ukraine. It was preceded by menacing statements from Kiev and President Petr Poroshenko's announcement of new waves of mobilisation, starting from 100,000 men. During the relative calm that remained until recently, new weapons, military hardware and military contingents were redeployed to the southeast. In other words, preparations for another attempt to quell the resistance by force and abandon the political resolution of problems that resulted from the coup in Ukraine on 22 February last year were "in the air." When a "spark" was struck and the current

round of confrontation again turned into a military phase we did all we could to end the bloodshed. We are still firmly committed to this. It is vital to stop trying to take control of one town or another. The most important thing is to stop the bombing and shelling, including with heavy artillery, of residential areas, including Donetsk and other big cities in the region.

I am confident that our foreign colleagues (be it journalists from foreign media, and there are quite a few of them here, and especially diplomats who work in Moscow) are definitely watching live reports on Russian television, including Rossia-24 and other networks, from areas that are being shelled. It is impossible to ignore the horror of what is going on! I realise that not all TV companies and other media outlets risk sending their reporters to such hot spots, but a live picture is available on Russian television. Let's show more truth.

We will press for an immediate ceasefire. We will discuss this as the chief priority today in the Normandy format so that our Western partners – in this case France and Germany, which are participating in these negotiations together with Russia and Ukraine – raise their voices and once again urge the Ukrainian leadership to stave off a military scenario. This is the most important goal.

Next, it is essential to take steps to guarantee the non-resumption of hostilities. To that end, it is necessary, above all, to get the sides to withdraw their heavy weapons from the line of contact. An agreement to that effect was reached in Minsk. After that, at the request of Ukrainian President Petr Poroshenko, a joint Russian-Ukrainian coordination and control centre was established, which includes both our and Ukrainian officers and with which representatives of the self-defence forces and the OSCE are cooperating. These are professionals who were to coordinate concrete steps “on the ground” to ensure the withdrawal of the sides’ heavy weapons. For a long time that goal was elusive because the line of contact, as recorded in the Minsk Memorandum of 19 September (2014), differs from the de-facto line “on the ground.” Certain tracts of land behind the Kiev government’s line are controlled by the self-defence forces. The focus at these negotiations was on bringing the actual line of contact “on the ground” into conformity with what is written in the appendix to the Minsk agreements.

Considering that these attempts failed (for objective reasons, among others), as well as the fact that we are attempting to resolve the conflict while preserving Ukraine’s territorial integrity and ensuring the rights of the people in the southeast as part of the Ukrainian state (this calls for a political process) and also proceeding from the general recognition of the need to restore Ukraine’s territorial integrity, Russian President Vladimir Putin proposed avoiding further disputes about the line of contact for now and withdrawing heavy weapons from the line as indicated in the Minsk agreements, not from the de facto line. It is difficult to argue with that. Incidentally, if that happened, the situation “on the ground” would normalise. Ukraine insists on the line as recorded in the appendix to the Minsk Memorandum of 19 September, and we support this position.

We have used our influence with the DPR and LPR leadership and they also agree with this. So this is precisely what we should work on now. We will raise this matter today at the Berlin meeting so that both Germany and France, as well as the EU, support this approach. Judging by the initial verbal reaction from Ukrainian President Petr Poroshenko to Russian President Vladimir Putin’s message of 15 January this year, we feel that he is in principle willing to discuss this, but is raising certain questions some of which are of a technical character and lend themselves to coordination “on the ground” by representatives who are working at the Joint Coordination and Control Centre.

However, in a conversation with Russian Ambassador to Ukraine Mikhail Zurabov, President Petr Poroshenko apparently mentioned that in his message Russian President Vladimir Putin urged the sides to withdraw their heavy weapons without specifying from what line. That is not true. The line was mentioned as concretely as can be. It is the line of contact that the Ukrainian side recognises and insists on. The self-defence forces also agree with it; we have actively worked to ensure that. Nobody is calling it into question, so it will not be difficult to withdraw heavy weapons

from that line now. Everything else has been agreed upon: by how many kilometers artillery, multiple launch rocket systems, etc., will be withdrawn. This will be one of the most important matters that we will discuss in Berlin today. Naturally, this is not about the concrete military aspects of the issue but about the need for Kiev to make a political decision to support this approach.

We will also address issues concerning the political aspects of the settlement, which we always bring up in various formats. Constitutional reform is a priority goal on which the Ukrainian authorities are dragging their feet contrary to the repeated promises they have made. There are also issues described in the Minsk agreements, such as a special status for the self-proclaimed DPR and LPR republics. Work is underway on all these issues and we have our proposals to the sides. This is not an easy task, considering the high politicisation and emotional background around everything that is going on. Nevertheless, we will work consistently to address this set of issues as well, because political reform is the only way to ensure peace in Ukraine and resolve the crisis.

**Question:** The Polish authorities believe that Poland should also take part in the process of political settlement in Ukraine, probably even as the fifth participant of the Normandy team. Do you think this is possible? Could this give a positive impetus to the talks?

**Sergey Lavrov:** This is not up to me to decide. We'll support any format that both Kiev and the self-defence fighters will accept. Creating new formats is not that important. I don't object to the potential increase in the number of negotiators. It is important to understand what added value each of them will bring.

During other conflicts, proposals on new formats are made when one of the sides feels ill at ease in the existing configuration. The main point is to prevent proposals on changing formats from being used to divert attention from the essence of the problem: the need for Ukraine to overcome this deep crisis that was caused by the coup d'état. We feel the consequences of this crisis up to this day.

It is also important for Ukraine to become a united nation. This is a very difficult issue. This is why we are continuously talking about constitutional reform and attracting attention to the root causes of this crisis.

I recalled several quotations when preparing for today's news conference. Immediately after the coup d'état one of the first decisions, if not the first one, of the new Verkhovna Rada (to be more precise, "the old one," because they ousted some MPs and prevented others from attending the meeting) was to endorse the law on languages. It was adopted, but Rada Speaker Turchinov, who acted as president at that time, did not sign it.

When we say that all this – the coup and the actions against Russian and other languages – stirred up the country and aroused resistance to those involved in the coup, we are told that this law has not entered into force. Formally this is true, but an aftertaste remains. This initiative by the Verkhovna Rada demonstrated what these authorities want: a unitary state in the toughest form. On 1 March (2014) Dmitry Yarosh, who now attends Rada sessions as an MP, the leader of the Right Sector and one of those involved in the coup (his militants committed atrocities and burned Berkut policemen on Maidan Square) said: "We are against the Russians in Crimea. They won't glorify Stepan Bandera or respect the Greek Catholic Church, the rebel history and our language. It is impossible to assimilate the Russians. Hence, if we want Ukraine to prosper, Russians should be destroyed or ousted from Crimea." These are the words of one of the heroes of "the revolution" supported by our Western colleagues. I don't want to strike any national chords but Bandera is notorious for his public calls to destroy the Poles, the entire male population of Poland.

The main point is not who will sit at the negotiating table. In this context we are ready for any formats that are acceptable to Kiev and representatives of Ukraine's southeast. The main issue is

what we are going to discuss. Ukrainian President Petr Poroshenko said recently that his main goal is to restore Ukrainian identity on the entire territory of Ukraine. We'd like to understand what Ukrainian identity he is referring to. Is it what Yarosh is talking about, or something else? Because he also made other statements, for instance on the events in South Ossetia in August 2008: "I must note that the Caucasus, Ukraine, Belarus, the Baltic republics and all of Eastern Europe are doomed to permanent tensions as long as 'the Moscow Empire' exists. The only earnest for the civilised development of nations that are rebuilding their life near Russia is the complete elimination of 'the empire' and the establishment of national state formations in its territory."

I do not want to attract too much attention to this man and advertise him, but I have to do this because when we warned our "enlightened" Western partners against connivance at the Right Sector or Svoboda (Freedom), the leader of which Oleg Tyagnibok publicly advocated for an "ethnically clean Ukraine, without Moslems and Yids," they said that these people are "a bit nationalist, a bit to the right of the mainstream." This is very dangerous connivance.

Ukraine needs a constitutional reform that would reconcile its highly nationalist west, centre and southeast, which have different views on history, civilisational missions, heroes and holidays. This issue cannot be locked in the old oak chest. But, of course, the main task is to end the bloodshed. We will welcome everything Poland and other European Union countries are able to do toward this end, either as states or EU members (not necessarily as participants in some new format).

**Question:** President Putin will not attend a memorial ceremony to be held at the former Auschwitz concentration camp. Do you believe he should go?

**Sergey Lavrov:** President Putin was not officially invited. There was a notice to the Russian Embassy from the Auschwitz-Birkenau Museum director, or the committee that is in charge of organising the Holocaust commemorative anniversary, stating that such an event will take place and asking how many people would be coming, if they wish to come. An invitation like that does not require a response.

Russia will definitely be represented. We will never forget the tragic and at the same time heroic events of WWII. We appreciate the way Warsaw, and particularly Krakow, recently celebrated the anniversary of our joint struggle, the Warsaw Uprising, and the liberation of Warsaw and other Polish cities by the Red Army. A few years ago, in connection with the previous anniversary, we and our Polish colleagues put together a Russian stand at the Auschwitz Museum, which fully reflects our country's contribution to the liberation of this concentration camp. We are grateful to the museum for its respect for our common historical memory. We will be represented at the ceremony in Auschwitz.

**Question:** Yesterday's State of the Union address by President Obama was not overly optimistic regarding the establishment of a broad-based dialogue between Russia and the United States. What's your take on its prospects, based on your frequent contacts with US Secretary of State John Kerry? Will there be any improvements in Russian-American relations in 2015?

**Sergey Lavrov:** As I mentioned earlier, the Americans have adopted a course for confrontation, and they are absolutely uncritical of their own policies. Yesterday's address by President Obama shows that their philosophy is centered on one thing only: we are number one, and everyone else must acknowledge this. This approach is somewhat outdated and is out of sync with reality. The US foreign policy philosophy is even more aggressive. They want to be not just first among equals, but to dominate the world. I think this will pass, although the change process might take a while. The Americans will realise that their position cannot be maintained indefinitely. They already have to turn to others for help, being unable to resolve a particular problem of their own accord. The United States forms coalitions, as was the case in Iraq and is now happening in their fight against the Islamic State. They tell Europe what to do, including with regard to Russia.

The philosophy of “we are number one” is in their blood. It took many years to form. Therefore, changing this philosophy and their “genetic background” will not be an easy task, either. However, the objective development of the world, the emergence of powerful centres of economic growth and financial influence, and, accordingly, centres of political influence, is, of course, an objective process, which cannot be ignored. I’d like to see all countries adopt the philosophy of cooperation, rather than dictate, which is shrouded in diplomatic forms, but sometimes becomes obvious.

For example, it could be seen when US Vice President Biden said that precisely the United States forced Europe to impose sanctions on Russia, and when President Obama, following his previous State of the Union address, said in an interview that the main achievement of the US foreign policy was the fact that the United States had forced Europe to do what it wanted it to do with regard to our country. I find this statement not quite worthy of a great power.

However, I’m convinced that the logic of partnership and collective actions based not on someone's perspective on the situation, but on developing common approaches, will prevail. We have consistently advocated this approach. When our partners agree to act in this way, we tend to make good progress. The chemical disarmament in Syria and major progress on the Iranian nuclear programme speak to this.

**Question:** The image of the Russian soldier has traditionally been respected in Armenia. However, a tragedy occurred in the city in Gyumri, where a Russian soldier killed an entire family. How was that possible? Has Russia done all it could to resolve this conflict? Has the issue been over-politicised?

**Sergey Lavrov:** First of all, I would like once again to express our profound condolences over the horrible crime that has been committed against the Avetisyan family. Completely innocent people have been killed. Yesterday, six-month old Seryozha also died. I called my Armenian counterpart Edvard Nalbandyan regarding this, and once again expressed our feelings.

Importantly, the perpetrator has been arrested and has already confessed to the crime. Our countries’ presidents have been in contact by telephone. Alexander Bastrykin, the head of the Russian Investigative Committee, went to Yerevan and yesterday met with Armenian President Serzh Sargsyan. We confirm that a joint, maximally open judicial investigation and trial will take place in Armenia. I am confident that the court will quickly deliver an objective verdict that will be proportionate to this horrible crime.

As for the general context of our relations, I will say this: “There's a rotten apple in every barrel.” This is precisely the attitude that is being shown today by all military servicemen and commanding officers at the Russian military base in Armenia. I will not cite examples of people going mad for totally incomprehensible reasons and doing the unthinkable. There are plenty such examples in other situations and in other countries.

We are seeing attempts to politicise this situation that are coming not from the Armenian or Russian leadership. There is no shortage of those willing to use this tragedy to obtain some geopolitical advantages. This is disgusting, unacceptable and unworthy of the proud Armenian people who, I am sure, will never fall for this kind of provocation.

We are grieving together with Armenia and we will do all we can to ensure that this crime does not go unpunished, that the perpetrator is punished severely and that such things do not happen again. Naturally, it is impossible to ensure a 100 percent guarantee against any inconceivable excesses, but everything that needs to be done will be done. I am confident that Russian-Armenian relations of alliance and strategic partnership will not be damaged.

**Question (unofficial translation from English):** The past several days have seen a surge in violence and a rise in casualties in Ukraine. Russia insists on the implementation of the Minsk Protocol. I would like to ask you what concrete steps Moscow is proposing to ensure its

implementation. My remarks may sound a little critical but is your country prepared to stop the flow of troops and weapons across the Russian border to Ukraine to end the violence there?

**Sergey Lavrov:** Concerning the “flow of troops and weapons,” we are constantly hearing this. Every time I say: “If you say this with such confidence, show us the facts.” But nobody can present them or wishes to present them, just as nobody can present the facts that our partners, primarily our Ukrainian and US partners, allegedly have with regard to the Malaysian Airlines Boeing incident in July 2014. Nobody has ever presented the records of conversations between Ukrainian air traffic controllers or data from US satellites and AWACS aircraft that were in the sky over Ukraine on that day. So, before asking us when we will stop doing something, please show us the evidence that we did it in the first place.

The Minsk Protocol of 5 September 2014 is a framework document that lists 12 general points: ceasefire, the withdrawal of heavy weapons, etc. Each of them requires specification, spelling out. The Minsk Memorandum of 19 September 2014 was meant to spell out the goal of the ceasefire and the withdrawal of heavy weapons from the line of contact. This is not an easy task and there is a reason why the coordination of these matters has not yet been finalised.

However, now we have come to a point where, regardless of the existing disputed section on the line of contact, which the self-defence forces refuse to withdraw from, it is vital to solve the main problem, i.e., to ensure the security of civilians in cities and other residential areas. To that end, heavy weapons are to be pulled out. This is the central point of Russian President Vladimir Putin’s message to Ukrainian President Petr Poroshenko of 15 January this year that I mentioned earlier. This should be done as quickly and effectively as possible. We will be willing to facilitate such agreements and have already enlisted the self-defence forces’ commitment to withdraw heavy weapons, not from the de facto line, but from the line that Kiev insists on. The ball is now in the Ukrainian authorities’ court.

This is what we are doing to ensure the implementation of the Minsk agreements. However, they also contain other provisions, and attempts are being made to put them off “to a later date.” We do not agree with that. This concerns above all the commitment to coordinate a special status for the self-proclaimed Donetsk and Lugansk people’s republics and Kiev’s commitment, as recorded in the Minsk agreements, to start an inclusive nationwide dialogue. This is what we are advocating for.

There are also other aspects that should be addressed, among other things, OSCE monitoring of problematic sections along the Russian-Ukrainian border. It seems that this interests you the most. The OSCE controls two border crossing points and there are also Ukrainian customs officers and border guards there who observe what happens at the crossing points, and inspect humanitarian cargo coming from Russia to the DPR and LPR.

The issue of OSCE monitoring other sections of the Russian-Ukrainian border can also be resolved. If the OSCE is interested in that, it will have to talk to those who currently control the corresponding border crossing points on the Ukrainian side. If that does not work out, then matters relating to the entire Russian-Ukrainian border line, as well as who will control it and how, can only be decided after the final political settlement and the implementation of yet another point of the Minsk agreement, namely that elected DPR and LPR representatives be provided guarantees of a special status for these territories and their security as official representatives of these republics’ people. Kiev should adopt such an act in accordance with the Minsk agreements, but nobody has started doing anything in this regard yet.

The chief priority today is the withdrawal of heavy artillery, the resolution of issues related to the special status, security issues, and of course, the launch of an inclusive process of constitutional reform. This matter is causing concern, because from all indications, the Ukrainian authorities are trying to “talk their way out of it.” Even the mention of words such as “federalisation,” “autonomy” and “decentralisation” are becoming indecent, from the Ukrainian government’s perspective. Meanwhile, there are a lot of examples: South Tyrol, Quebec. There are a lot of examples of

countries resolving issues of statehood with due respect for all the ethnic groups living on their territory. Yet for some reason Ukraine insists on being a unitary state, regardless of the interests of ethnic Russians, Hungarians, Romanians and other ethnic groups living in that country.

**Question:** This year we are celebrating the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of victory over Nazism. What presidents have already confirmed their participation in the festivities on Red Square? You've repeatedly spoken about the need to control manifestations of fascism in Europe and the rest of the world in current conditions. How should the world protect the results of World War II? How should we counter manifestations of fascism and militarism today?

**Sergey Lavrov:** We've sent invitations to the festivities in Moscow devoted to the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the victory to many foreign leaders, including those from the member-countries of the CIS, BRICS, SCO, the European Union, the countries of the anti-Hitler coalition and the heads of a number of international and regional organisations. About 20 leaders, including President of the People's Republic of China Xi Jinping, have already confirmed their participation in the festivities. There is still much time before this event and confirmations of participation continue to come. We'll keep you informed.

As for the broader problem of preventing the revival of fascism and Nazism, it is primarily necessary to preserve the historic memory of how 70 years ago an end was placed through concerted effort on the criminal man-hating ideology that threatened the very existence of humanity. These efforts should be enhanced because the vaccine against the Nazi virus, which was developed at the Nuremberg Tribunal, is starting to lose its effect in some countries, first of all in Europe. I won't name them but, to my great regret, they include a number of EU countries and those who want to join it. They declare that even remaining outside the EU they are upholding European values. I cannot but mention Ukraine. I've already quoted some of its current politicians who called for cleaning that country of "Russians, Moskals and Yids."

Every year, we adopt at a UN General Assembly session a resolution with a complicated, albeit understandable, title, "Combating glorification of Nazism, neo-Nazism and other practices that contribute to fuelling contemporary forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance." Every year, this resolution is adopted by voting. The United States always voted against it. Last year the European Union abstained from voting in solidarity, while Ukraine that used to abstain voted against it for the first time. Thus, four countries – the United States, Canada, Ukraine and Palau – voted against this resolution.

We proceed from the premise that the results of WWII are immutable. They are registered in the UN Charter, in part, in its Article 107. It emphasizes that no decisions of the victorious powers shall be subject to revision. Attempts to call this into question should be curbed with resolve and without delay. In any event the efforts to counter glorification of Nazism will be continued in the UN, OSCE, the Council of Europe and other formats.

**Question:** Are there any prospects for relations between Russia and NATO becoming better, or is the trend exclusively negative? What can our partners and we do to improve our relations? Are there any plans in place to establish contacts with NATO? In particular, is your meeting with NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg and US Secretary of State John Kerry on the sidelines of the Munich Security Conference possible at all?

**Sergey Lavrov:** As I mentioned earlier, NATO has embarked on a confrontational path. The speed with which NATO had severed all its contacts with Russia, having, in fact, put on ice numerous projects of mutual interest under the Russia- NATO Council, goes to show that the Cold War mentality is still there in the heads of our NATO partners. They still see the alliance as a tool to promote unilateral interests. We have repeatedly mentioned this.

The Russia-NATO Council, which was designed not as a NATO plus Russia, or NATO vs. Russia arrangement, but as a council where each NATO member and Russia have one vote, has,

despite numerous useful initiatives, failed to become a forum for maintaining an equal dialogue. During our meetings, NATO members kept saying the same thing, and Russia reacted to it in one way or another. Yet, we thought that the Russia-NATO Council was useful, as we implemented good practical projects in the sphere of combating terrorism, drug trafficking, training personnel for Afghanistan, Central Asia, Pakistan, law enforcement, security and other good projects. All of that has been sacrificed to ideology. NATO cannot come to grips with the fact that the coup in Ukraine hasn't yet led the whole of the Ukrainian nation to accept those who carried out the coup and still sit in Kiev as a legitimate authority. This is unfortunate and is indicative of the thinking of the 20<sup>th</sup>, even the 19<sup>th</sup> century. We did not break off our contacts.

As you may recall, following the Caucasus crisis, when Mikheil Saakashvili gave a criminal order to attack South Ossetia, thus unleashing a five-day war, Russia, on the first day of that aggression, demanded the Russia-NATO Council to be convened. The then US Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice, told the US permanent representative in Brussels not to agree to hold this meeting. The council's activities were frozen. We were unable to discuss that crisis. Later in the year, NATO acknowledged its mistake, stating that they did the wrong thing, and we would be better off if we had held such a meeting. They even said that the Russia-NATO Council should be an "all-weather" event, especially so in a "stormy weather" when it should convene and discuss particular situations. This time, they have repeated the same mistake by refusing to work together and on equal footing and to discuss all aspects of the situation, including its origins and root causes. This work was put on ice. They have left an opportunity for the ambassadors to meet occasionally in Brussels, but that's all there is to it now.

Russia did not initiate this situation. We believe that with all the global twists and turns and disasters, leading nations that have a decisive influence on the global stability and security cannot afford to stop talking to each other. Therefore, if our partners come to their senses and confirm their readiness to talk with us with respect and on equal footing, we are always willing to do so.

According to our information, the new NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg would be interested in organising a contact on the sidelines of an international meeting. We briefly met in Basel on the sidelines of the OSCE Ministerial Council, if my memory serves me correctly. We just said hello to each other as we walked past each other. We met before, and we will not shun possible contacts and, of course, we will listen to what our colleagues have to say.

With regard to US Secretary of State John Kerry, I meet with him more often than anyone else from among my colleagues, not to mention numerous telephone conversations. Last time we talked late last night. So, if we find ourselves sitting next to each other at some international forum, I do not rule out the possibility of us having another conversation. Most importantly, these conversations must bring results.

**Question:** Evidently, the upcoming Moscow meeting on Syria is not to the liking of some regional and international actors even though they do not always say this out loud. Mr Lavrov, you said a week ago that those who do not participate in this event will lose their positions in the negotiation process. Your opinion is shared by Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Muallem, who said yesterday evening that if the United States wants to fight terrorists from the Islamic State it should cooperate with the Syrian army. Nevertheless, instead, it continues training armed militants to fight against Syria. I would like to hear your point of view regarding all aspects of the Syria crisis.

**Sergey Lavrov:** If we start talking about every aspect of the Syrian crisis then we won't have time to hear from anybody else. You know our position. We lay it out in detail. Russian President Vladimir Putin regularly addresses this topic. I do not wish to repeat myself. The most important thing is the growing awareness, including in the West, that a political process is inevitable, and that, and this is especially important, the top priority today is the fight against the Islamic State.

We have long been saying that eradicating terrorism, preventing Syria from becoming a terrorist state and foiling the plans to create a “caliphate” in the region are incomparably more important than regime change and the establishment of some kind of body just to announce that Syrian President Bashar Assad has quit. Incidentally, in June 2013, the G8 Lough Erne Summit unanimously stated that its leaders urge the Syrian government and opposition to pool their efforts in the fight against terrorism. At that time the Islamic State was not around yet. The G8’s appeal was not predicated on any conditions, to the effect that somebody should leave his post and somebody else should replace him. There were absolutely no preconditions. I find encouraging the understanding that this slogan should proceed to a practical phase.

Revisiting yesterday’s remarks by US President Barack Obama, this point about the fight against the Islamic State was formulated differently. The fight against these terrorists was described as a priority compared to all other goals related to overcoming the Syria crisis. It is a good thing that this understanding is growing. The most important thing is to translate this into the language of practical action as soon as possible. By the way, yesterday’s article in The New York Times concerning the evolution of the US position on the Syria crisis is noteworthy. I advise those who have not yet read it to do so. It is interesting. Perhaps it should be translated into Russian. Maybe Rossiya Segodnya will do it?

As for the Moscow meeting, we have said from the outset that we want to help prepare a new round of negotiations, taking into account the mistakes of previous Geneva events. I believe there were two mistakes. First, only a part of the opposition was invited: the National Coalition, based in Istanbul. All other groups, not only in Syria but also in other parts of the world, were ignored. Second, the event, which took place in Montreux, was held amid a great deal of hype: over 50 ministers and an open discussion in the presence of the media. All that only led to the polarisation of positions and the inevitable logic of confrontation. Meanwhile, there was the need for a calm conversation between the direct participants in the process: the government and various opposition groups, without undue publicity.

The opposition should be representative. In doing that, we are implementing one of the key provisions of the Geneva Communique of 30 June 2012, which says that national dialogue in Syria should involve the entire spectrum of Syrian society. Our goal is for opposition members, who do not always talk to each other, to find themselves in the same room. There will be no official representatives from Russia. Our scholars, who have personally known these opposition members for years, will simply help, offer the floor, but the entire conversation will be conducted by the Syrians themselves. We have some hope that as a result of this conversation (since there are no plans for any document to be adopted), the participants will agree on the fact that they want to live in a sovereign, territorially integrated Syria, where all ethnic and religious groups are equally protected and where there are some additional rules. This should be a very simple statement. There should be no complicated constructions. And then there will be contacts with the government, very informal contacts. If some “chemistry” is established, not literally but in a political sense, then maybe that will help UN Special Envoy for Syria Staffan de Mistura go about organising a more formal process, which should be publicly low-key.

There have been frequent events, for example, the Montreux Conference, which turned out to be a public “bang” that was followed by some contacts, but they led to nothing. The same goes for Annapolis and the Palestinian-Israeli peace process, under US President George W. Bush. The event was conducted with much pomp, with about 70 ministers in attendance, and it also ended in nothing. We are still unable to break the impasse in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

These are the positions from which we will approach the upcoming contacts, hosting them and taking advantage of the fact that Moscow is a venue where most representatives of the Syrian opposition and government are willing to go. There are only a handful of those who have definitively refused to attend. There are also those who have yet to make up their minds. They

still have time to think. I hope that the number of participants will grow and when the lists are finalised we will certainly announce who will attend the meeting.

**Question:** Last month, the United States and Cuba announced their plans to restore their diplomatic relations. Today, a State Department representative is already on an official visit to Cuba. Russia has recently focused on establishing contacts and promoting cooperation with the countries of Latin America, Asia and Africa. Can this step by Washington be an answer to Moscow's strategy and an attempt to retain its influence in the Latin American region?

**Sergey Lavrov:** I hope not. I hope that the United States is based on its national interests, not a desire to annoy someone. Although there are such examples. I just remembered when in the autumn of 2014, US President Obama made a sudden stopover in Estonia on his way to a NATO summit. Then, a representative of the US administration stated that Obama's stopover is a signal to the Russians that their behavior is unacceptable. Can you believe how they offended Estonia, if they stopped there only to do dirt on the Russians! Sorry about the language. Therefore, I hope that this episode will never be repeated, and the United States, especially its President, will talk with other countries not to spite someone, but in the interests of their partners.

With regard to the breakthrough "thaw" in relations between Cuba and the United States, we've been saying for a long time that the policy of isolating Cuba is pointless and counterproductive, and is not in the interests of those who carry out such a policy. Good thing the United States changed its mind and took such a decision. We welcome it. This was done on a parity basis. The Cuban side hasn't sacrificed anything that is important to its statehood. I believe that this is a mutually beneficial and mutually acceptable process, which is already underway. Steps are being taken, contacts are being prepared, and specific issues involved in restoring diplomatic relations are being discussed, etc. We don't see anything wrong with that. On the contrary, it's good for the Cuban people. This will in no way adversely affect the Russian-Cuban strategic partnership. This was stated by the Cuban leaders at all levels, we can feel it in our daily contacts.

**Question:** Last year, you signed a Treaty on the Border between Russia and Estonia in Moscow. So far, it has not been ratified. The State Duma told us that the current political environment is not good to do so. When do you think it will be ratified?

**Sergey Lavrov:** I'm sure that the treaty will be ratified. Estonia hasn't completed the ratification process either. The way I see it, your MPs are also watching what the State Duma is doing. Our process involves a decision by the Government, which submits the materials to the State Duma. I hope that we will begin the process soon. Of course, our MPs are right when they say that the political atmosphere in our relations is not too good. But I believe that no one is questioning the border issue. Therefore, we will start this process and see how things go. Estonia's previous Foreign Minister Urmas Paet, who went to work at the European Parliament, and I planned my visit to Tallinn for an exchange of instruments of ratification – which is what I really want to do – but my visit heavily depends on the political environment.

**Question:** At a time when relations between Russia and the West are fairly tense, is Russia sharing intelligence with the Western countries to fight terrorism? In particular, everyone is talking about the recent terrorist attacks in France. Does Russia cooperate with France to help find the perpetrators of this crime? Yesterday's arrest of Russian citizens in France caused great interest.

**Sergey Lavrov:** We are looking into the details of the arrest of five people who are, apparently, Russian citizens. I will not go into the details. Our special services maintain contacts with their French colleagues. This is also how things are in our relations with other countries that are interested in cooperating with us through special channels in combating terrorism, organised crime, drug trafficking, etc.

**Question:** Recently, the attacks on the Russian companies operating in Ukraine, such as Lukoil, Transneft, and Rosneft have become more frequent. Do you think the attacks on these companies are political or economic? Or is it about some private interests where certain individuals want to use military operations in Ukraine as a front to grab certain assets? Will the Russian Foreign Ministry protect the interests of these companies in any way?

My second question is about the Iranian nuclear programme. Earlier, Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif said that the next round of talks could take place on 6-7 February. Can they immediately be taken to the ministerial level?

**Sergey Lavrov:** No, this can't happen at the ministerial level right away. Perhaps, what the Iranian Foreign Minister had in mind was that the Munich Security Conference will be held at that time, which, coincidentally, will be attended by the ministers of the six countries and Zarif himself. I also plan to be there. But sitting down and talking just because we found ourselves in one place at one time is probably not a good idea. Let's see how the political directors do by that time, and how the ministers' meeting will be instrumental in pushing certain issues that remain unresolved, so that their technical decision receives a political and practical impetus. So far, no one has taken such a decision.

With regard to the Russian companies in Ukraine, they were faced with major challenges even in their best times. We have repeatedly raised the issue of a discriminatory and sometimes even raider-like attitude to our companies with the government of Mykola Azarov and Yulia Tymoshenko. These issues were left hanging for years. Most haven't been resolved. On the other hand, when I talk with my colleagues in Ukraine, including those who are privy to these issues, there is an understanding that they are the most logical partners. Ukrainians and Russians have worked together for a while now, and they share a mutually acceptable problem-solving experience. At the state level, we will provide full support to the Russian companies operating in Ukraine or any other country, for that matter. But you're right, in Ukraine they are currently faced with a particularly difficult situation.

I believe it is important to nurture and grow the sprouts of cooperation in the economic sphere in every way we can. They are now becoming available in the wake of the agreements signed by President Putin and President Poroshenko, primarily in the sphere of coal, gas, and electric power. This work must be continued, including by promoting the resumption of the economic ties between eastern Ukraine and other regions of that country. We must consolidate the coexistence foundations in that country, while adjusting the ideas that President Poroshenko expressed as he expanded on the Minsk agreements regarding a special status, including economic, of these regions. The denser the economic cushion, the easier it will be to find common ground on the political issues in a common state.

**Question:** You are always saying that there are no Russian troops in Ukraine and that Russia is not helping insurgents in Donbass. How can you explain the presence of modern Russian arms systems, including heavy weapons, that are killing Ukrainian citizens on our soil? They could not have been seized or purchased, because Russia is not exporting them.

Ukraine says that Donetsk Airport should belong to it according to the division line, while Russia says it should belong to the insurgents. Why, after the truce, have the territories controlled by pro-Russian insurgents increased by such a huge number of kilometres? How will you rehabilitate the phrase, "the Russian World" after Russia's actions in Donbass, when it has shown the entire planet that in reality these words mean death and war?

**Sergey Lavrov:** I have nothing to say about arms. President Vladimir Putin has said more than once that there are no other weapons in Ukraine except Soviet and Russian ones. This has been the case until recently, when some of Ukraine's neighbours from NATO and EU countries started supplying arms to it. In our view, arms supplies to conflict areas contradict the codes of the

European Union and the OSCE. Let me repeat that only material evidence, and nothing else, will prove this if there is intention to talk seriously.

What evidence do you need of what is happening with civilians in Donbass? There are media representatives here whose colleagues work there under a hail of bullets, shells and rockets. This is not a subject of dispute, but a dispute is going on. They are saying this is not the case: the terrorists are shelling themselves. I won't go into detail about Donetsk Airport, but I mentioned what has been agreed upon and what has not been rejected during practical business-like military contacts between representatives of self-defence fighters and the Joint Control and Coordination Centre. This is common knowledge. In this case all closed addenda should have been published. Probably, someone did not want to do this for reasons I am unaware of. If this is some secret diplomacy, we are not in favour of such secrets. It would be better for people to know the truth: whose airport is it? Who controls it at this point? Is this correct? Have the sides agreed on this or not? It is necessary to put to work the Joint Control and Coordination Centre, established at the proposal of Ukrainian President Petr Poroshenko? It employs professionals. Ukrainian army servicemen were embarrassed. They felt politically uncomfortable about talking directly with self-defence fighters. We were asked to set up this centre, which functions as a kind of a drive belt. The centre employs our officers and we've also involved the OSCE in its work.

As for the question I've already mentioned, after the signing of documents on the contact line (self-defence fighters continue insisting they have not signed these documents but this is not important), self-defence fighters are ready to regard this line as a point of departure for withdrawing heavy weapons. Hostilities still continued, and the real truce was established much later. Some time passed in the interval between the Minsk memorandum and the onset of more or less real silence. During this interval, self-defence fighters established control over a certain area. This is Ukrainian territory in any event, and in this context President Putin suggested to Poroshenko accepting the line registered in the addendum to the 19 September Minsk Memorandum. Regardless of who withdrew from this Kiev-recognised line and to which side, it is necessary to remove from heavy weapons from it, including multiple launch rocket systems. The sides agreed on the distance. That's all. Once this is done, making confrontation much less lethal, the sides may start talking about political and economic matters. I hope that after this it won't matter at all who moved the line and in what direction, because everyone will be busy with recovering economic life and developing the political process. Municipal elections should be held, and we'll support them. There are grounds for agreement between the Ukrainian authorities and regional leaders.

**Question:** How close are we to the return to a large-scale conflict in Ukraine? How critical is the situation?

**Sergey Lavrov:** It depends on what you consider a large-scale conflict. It was enough for me to see on TV bombings of Donetsk yesterday and the day before yesterday to understand that this cannot be allowed to continue anymore. I hope common sense, the instinct of self-preservation and simply humanity will prevail. We are doing all we can for this to stop. Tonight we'll talk with Ukrainian Foreign Minister Pavel Klimkin. I hope he will convey our deepest concern over the recent events through his own channel.

**Question:** Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has developed close relations with Russian President Vladimir Putin. After Abe's party election victory, he will be able to retain the position of prime minister for another four years. What opportunities for consolidating bilateral relations are opening up in this context? How will the two countries develop their diplomatic contacts in 2015? Is the alleviation of sanctions a term for President Putin's visit to Japan?

**Sergey Lavrov:** We cherish very much our relations with neighbouring Japan and the Japanese people. Our history is complicated but our prospects are very good. Entrepreneurs of our two

countries are demonstrating mutual interest in implementing large, useful and interesting joint projects. We are united in many areas: by cultural and humanitarian exchanges, annual festivals in Japan and Russia and scientific and technical cooperation. Regrettably, last year these relations were a bit frozen, primarily because Japan was also compelled to join anti-Russian sanctions, albeit they were not as aggressive as in the case of some Western countries.

Contacts at different levels fell victim to Japan's forced involvement in anti-Russian sanctions. The heads of our states met on the sidelines of different events, but the exchange of visits was suspended. The same applies to the visit, coordinated long ago, of the Japanese foreign minister to Russia, that was due in April 2014 but has not taken place until now. We are calm about this, although we'd like to resume the work of the Inter-Governmental Commission. We had a two plus two format. We'd like to receive the Japanese foreign minister but this is not up to us.

You've asked whether the abolition of sanctions is a term for Putin's visit. Since we are polite people, there is only one condition: to receive an invitation. It has been extended to President Putin in principle and he has accepted it in principle. We'll react as soon as the invitation is followed by specific dates for the visit.

**Question:** Israel again bombed Syrian territory the other day, which is qualified as aggression under the UN Charter. It targeted military experts from Lebanon and Iran, who are helping the Syrian government forces to counter the terrorist group Jabhat al-Nusra in the Syria-controlled area of Golan Heights. Israeli Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman is about to pay a working visit to Moscow. Will this problem be raised and what other subjects do the sides plan to discuss?

And one more question. Yesterday Russian Defence Minister Sergey Shoigu paid a working visit to Iran, during which a number of agreements were signed. Tehran reported that most probably supplies of S-300 systems to Iran would be resumed. This is a sensitive issue for Israel. Will it be discussed with Mr Lieberman? What do you think about the prospects of relations between Russia and Iran? Can these relations be described as a strategic partnership?

**Sergey Lavrov:** As for counter-terrorist struggle, it should be conducted exclusively on the basis of international law. Bombings of sovereign states, including those that are conducted under the pretext of destroying terrorist groups without the consent of the state in question or a direct sanction of the UN Security Council are illegal. Moreover, only the UN Security Council is authorised to qualify a group as terrorist, if we want this qualification to be mandatory for all states. The sovereignty of Syria and Lebanon must be observed, whether the matter concerns the struggle against Jabhat al-Nusra or the ISIS that the US-led coalition is conducting in Iraq with the consent of the Iraqi Government and in Syria without such consent.

We're convinced that this should be discussed. As for Syria, the Syrian Government is a natural ally in the anti-terrorist struggle.

It is possible to reach an agreement very quickly. It will be efficient and fully conform to what I've already mentioned today – the decision of the G8 summit in Loch Erne that was adopted upon the initiative of British Prime Minister David Cameron regarding the need for the Syrian Government and the opposition to unite in combatting terrorism. In this case, a new player – the coalition – has appeared, so these forces, in all evidence, should be united. Let me repeat that the Syrian Government is a reliable ally in this respect. There are no grounds to say that we cannot cooperate with the Syrians, inasmuch as Syria's chemical demilitarisation has proved that the Syrian Government is highly responsible with regard to its international commitments and can be a reliable and capable partner. This lame excuse no longer works.

We will discuss many issues, including the situation in the region during the visit of Israeli Foreign Minister Lieberman to Moscow. There are many countries in the region, the situation in which requires better understanding, discussion with partners and exchange of information. We'll talk about the Palestinian-Israeli settlement that is in a deep impasse now.

I'd be interested to know the views of our Israeli colleague, including his opinion on what I think is the long-standing need to resume the work of the Quartet and abstain from further unilateral actions.

Iran is our neighbor. We are developing very close bilateral economic and military-technical cooperation with it in the areas that are not covered by the UN Security Council resolutions. We are upgrading our humanitarian and educational ties and cooperation on Caspian issues.

I haven't heard reports about the discussion of S-300 systems during the visit to Tehran. This issue has its own history and is a subject of our bilateral relations with Iran. We are going to review it in this context. In general, we will develop these relations.

Iran is a large country with a rich history. It is impossible to reach the long-term stable settlement of the region's problems, including those in Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan, without Iran's participation. The sooner this idea is accepted by the participants in developments surrounding these countries and in the region as a whole, and the sooner they are guided by practical considerations of utmost efficiency rather than ideology-motivated views, the more successful our common efforts to reach stabilisation in this key area will become.

**Question:** This question may not be on Russia's agenda, but it remains relevant for Azerbaijan. I'm talking about an ethnic Azerbaijani, Dilgam Askerov, a Russian citizen, who was detained on Azerbaijan's occupied territory and is still held in an Armenian prison. Why has Russia shown no interest in the fate of its citizen? Why has Russia failed to make a single statement calling for Askerov's release?

**Sergey Lavrov:** You mean that he is a Russian citizen who was detained by Armenia? If so, we will discuss this issue with Armenia. A number of Russian citizens are detained in various countries. We are constantly monitoring what's happening to them. Taking into account that we need to receive information on the reasons that led to the detention and based upon these data, our assessment of the gravity of accusations against Russian citizens, as well as understanding the conditions in which they are being held and the plans of the country regarding Russian citizens it holds in detention, we take the necessary decisions through channels that exist to this effect within the framework of Russia's bilateral relations with the relevant country.

**Question:** The High Representative of the Union for foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Federica Mogherini, stated that it was necessary to leave a chance for talks with Moscow despite the continuing sanctions. Nevertheless, many in Brussels spoke against this. What prospects for renewed dialogue with the EU do you see?

**Sergey Lavrov:** We are not prejudiced against the European Union. On the contrary, we are interested in relations characterised as a strategic partnership corresponding to this term. It is sad that the EU has chosen, to a certain extent, the path of confrontation and followed the US in promoting sanctions against the Russian Federation. More than that, in response to the European business community's complaints and calls to back out, the EU leaders said that in relations with Russia over the Ukraine crisis the EU proceeded from the assumption that politics should prevail over economics. It's a striking statement that speaks volumes!

We know that there are different points of view in the European Union, but the current stage, when nearly a half of the member states are in favor of lifting the sanctions, shows that these delayed-action decisions based on joint responsibility and accepted at the instigation of their US partners are difficult to reverse. Let me remind you of a Russian saying: "Measure thrice and cut once." In all evidence, the EU, at an early stage in the Ukrainian conflict, decided to cut once and measure later.

We won't agree to calls for coordinating certain criteria that would enable the EU to judge Russia's behavior and ease or otherwise curtail the sanctions. It's a non-serious proposal and those in the EU, who are presenting it, clearly lack experience in working with Russia. We are for

continuing the dialogue even under the present-day circumstances. We are not avoiding this; it is the EU that has frozen many areas of cooperation. But the dialogue can only be resumed on an equitable basis.

We know, of course, what was said at the EU Foreign Affairs Council meeting and what was leaked to the press in the run-up to this event. If the EU decides that the absence of a normal dialogue on sectoral issues – energy, agriculture and so on – is not right, we'll not argue with the EU. But if it wants, as became manifest during the Green Week, to retain the sanctions and convince Russia to make certain exemptions from Russian agriculture protection measures, primarily with regard to Russian bank credit, we won't accept this one-sided relationship either. This must be clearly understood. The discussion within the EU is useful and it is in any case important for the EU itself to finally understand what it wants.

We can't impose anything on our European partners; they need to proceed from their own interests rather than from the prevalence of politics over the economy. Otherwise it won't work for either side. But we are losing a lot in the area of politics as well, such as effective interaction on a number of real, not imagined, threats. We are facing common challenges from the south, and much else.

And, of course, it would be of some interest for me to know where the EU stands on freedom of speech. When the official Ukrainian authorities make no bones about declaring in public that they are closing down Russian TV channels and the head of the relevant oversight agency in Ukraine says that it's not necessary for the Ukrainian audiences to watch a different point of view, the EU, for some unknown reason, keeps silence, as do the Americans. But when there was a scandal in connection with Sony Pictures and "The Interview" (let me leave aside the plot chosen for this film that inspires no respect whatsoever and lacks tact or taste), the Obama administration brought pressure to bear on the movie company to proceed with the screening in some format. So, freedom of speech for a political provocation like "The Interview" should be secured, but no one among the free speech defenders are doing anything about Russian TV broadcasting in Ukraine.

**Question:** As was announced earlier today, President Putin will pay an official visit to Hungary on 17 February. How do you estimate the role and importance of Central European countries in Russian foreign policy in the context of the current problems between Russia and Europe? I mean the Ukrainian crisis, the scrapping of South Stream and the EU sanctions.

**Sergey Lavrov:** Yes, we have an invitation – it has been accepted. The visit is being planned. We are coordinating the details.

We don't divide countries into "big," "small," or "medium." We respect all our partners. With Hungary, we have longstanding relations of friendship, although there have been difficult periods in the past. But both sides feel mutual sympathy and understand that these relations are promising and mutually beneficial.

Not so long ago, I received my Hungarian counterpart, Minister of Foreign Affairs Péter Szijjártó. We are also in contact over the telephone on different aspects of the Ukrainian situation and South Stream. But we discuss these up to a point because there are ministers and company heads, who handle these things directly. The South Stream situation is utterly clear: the project, regrettably, has been cancelled – primarily because of the European Commission's discriminatory stance. The exemptions from the Third Energy Package (TEP) that were made for other projects confirm that, given the political will and elementary willingness, all the barriers could have been removed.

In 2013, the European Commission released the Trans Adriatic Pipeline from TEP requirements in what it called third-person access to infrastructure and tariff regulation. Incidentally, Azerbaijan's oil company, Socar, that is involved in the trans-Adriatic project as a gas exporter has bought the Greek Desfa and become Greek gas network operator, which is prohibited under the TEP. But they made an exception as they did for maritime sections of a number of other

pipelines in the Mediterranean, such as Transmed, Greenstream, and others. There were many cases, in which the European Commission made exceptions from the Third Energy Package, but not for Bulgaria. I won't go into detail – South Stream has been cancelled. We had definite obligations and couldn't delay it any longer, while they actually were pulling the wool over our eyes. An alternative project has been suggested, the Turkish Stream, which Europe has shown an interest in. Discussions are in progress. I hope that it will be implemented and will help increase Europe's energy security by protecting it from problematic transit states.

Where Hungary is concerned, we are ready to promote our bilateral relations in various areas. Energy is just one of them. We have plans for investment and hi-tech cooperation. I'm convinced that all of this will be discussed during the upcoming presidential visit and will yield solid results.

**Question:** President Putin said in a recent statement that NGOs should contribute to solving social issues. Our youth organisation has been working in this vein. In particular, we work with compatriots and attend international fora. Should we continue doing this, and how can young people help in view of the latest geopolitical events?

**Sergey Lavrov:** Young people can help irrespective of any geopolitical events. Whatever the situation in the world, young people are the future of our country and humankind. We want you to continue to develop relations with your colleagues abroad very actively, know each other better and understand the traditions, customs and culture of other people. Otherwise there will always be the risk of conflict between societies and cultural divides.

As for our compatriots, we have a Government Commission on Compatriots Living Abroad, which I was entrusted to head. Sergei Pospelov, head of the Federal Agency for Youth Affairs, has recently been included in the commission. In December 2014, we created an interdepartmental council for youth affairs at the commission on his initiative. If you are interested, you can apply for a seat on the council, and I'm sure this would be done or you would be offered some other form of cooperation. This would only strengthen and support us. We are all for it.

**Question:** You attended a republican march against terrorism and for the freedom of the press in Paris. But after one more cartoon of the Prophet Muhammad was published in France, Russia rose in protest against Charlie Hebdo, specifically in Chechnya. Do you support these actions? What do you think about the publication of Prophet Muhammad cartoons in France? Have the French journalists pushed too far?

**Sergey Lavrov:** There are several aspects to this situation. First, terrorism is unacceptable in any form irrespective of motives, guise and so on. This is the position of international law that has been sealed in many UN Security Council resolutions. There is no justification for terrorism. I think this is all we can say about terrorism in this particular case.

Second, regarding cartoons and journalists' attitude to religious issues in general, personally I think that the cartoon was tasteless. There is also the issue of the international legal situation as described in a number of conventions, including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. It says: "Any advocacy of national, racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence shall be prohibited by law." It also says that the exercise of the right to freedom of expression carries with it special duties and responsibilities. The exercise of this right may therefore be subject to certain restrictions, which must be provided by law to ensure respect of the rights or reputations of others, the protection of national security, public order, public health or morals.

So I don't agree when my colleagues tell me that there can be no restrictions on the freedom of expression. There are restrictions, and, as I said above, they directly concern the unacceptability of statements that can incite religious strife.

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