

**Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov makes introductory remarks and answers questions at a joint news conference following talks with his Slovak counterpart Miroslav Lajčák**

*Bratislava, April 4, 2015*

Thank you very much, Mr Minister,

I would like to thank our Slovak friends, the leaders and people of Slovakia for the wonderful and touching ceremony at the Slavin Hill memorial to Soviet soldiers marking the 70th anniversary of the liberation of Bratislava by a joint operation carried out by the Red Army, the 1st Czechoslovak Army Corps, and Slovak partisans. Soviet soldiers, Czechs and Slovaks gave their lives for the freedom and independence of Slovakia, the Czech Republic, and the rest of Europe. Today, we paid tribute to their heroic feat, and this was evident from the ceremony and the speech by Slovakia's Prime Minister, Robert Fico, which highlighted our profound battle-tested ties. We would like to thank the leaders of the Slovak Republic, veteran organisations and ordinary people for preserving historical memory, monuments to the heroes of the war and for taking care of Soviet soldiers' graves.

Slovakia is our longtime partner, and we are building our mutual relations in line with pragmatic and mutually beneficial considerations, while heeding each other's interests. Of course, now is not the best time in relations between Russia and the European Union, due to Ukrainian developments. Nevertheless, we sensed our partners' desire to continue purposeful work that aims to expand our trade, economic, cultural and other cooperation during our talks with Slovak Foreign Minister Miroslav Lajčák, as well as during our conversations with President of Slovakia Andrej Kiska and Prime Minister Robert Fico.

We focused on the need to revitalize trade and to expand investment projects. In this context, we consider the meeting of the Intergovernmental Commission for Trade, Economic, Scientific and Technological Cooperation, scheduled to be held here a month from now, to be highly important. We are also expecting specific long-term results from a meeting of the Russian-Slovak Business Council, also scheduled to take place during this time.

We agreed to conduct an inventory of our contractual-legal framework and to expedite the signing of documents which are important for our relations, and we examined prospects for cultural and educational exchanges. These exchanges are expanding rather quickly for the benefit of our citizens.

We exchanged opinions on the current stage of relations between Russia, the European Union and NATO. Understandably, equitable and mutually respectful dialogue is now seen as particularly important for strengthening stability on our continent. In this context, we drew the attention of our partners to a very old idea (which is apparently widely shared in Europe) on launching specific efforts to create a common economic and cultural infrastructure between the Atlantic and Pacific oceans that would rely on the principles of equal and indivisible security. I am confident that it is possible to expand fully fledged and mutually beneficial

relations between Russia, the EU and NATO only on this agreed-upon foundation, which would outline the strategic and long-term vision of moving towards these goals.

Naturally, we discussed the situation in Ukraine. I am convinced that we have a common position that there is no alternative to completely fulfilling the Minsk agreements of February 12, 2015, including the resolution of acute humanitarian issues and the lifting of the economic blockade of the Donetsk and Lugansk regions. We also agree that the Ukrainian crisis cannot be resolved by military force.

While discussing Russia–EU relations, we noted the useful cooperation between P5+1 countries, currently negotiating with Iran on the latter’s nuclear programme. We are confident that the complete normalisation of relations between Moscow and Brussels will make it possible to ensure the same effective cooperation in other areas of international politics, including the Middle East and North Africa, the situation in Syria, Iraq, Libya and Yemen, and in other areas.

On the whole, we are quite satisfied with the results of our talks. Foreign Minister Lajčák and I have agreed to maintain regular contacts in the future. If I am not mistaken, this is already our fourth meeting over the past 12 months. This energetic pace reflects our interest in expanding relations in every direction.

Thank you once again for your warm welcome and meaningful talks, and of course for the ceremony marking the 70th anniversary of the liberation of Bratislava.

**Question:** How long will the truce in Ukraine last?

**Sergey Lavrov:** As for the truce, it should last forever. This is our common goal. There are incidents, of course, and the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission (SMM) is registering them. There are violations on both sides. Today, we have expressed our common opinion that it is necessary to enhance the efficiency of monitoring, especially compliance with the military segment of the February 12 Minsk agreements. In this context, the SMM should organise the work of its posts on the most important sections of the division line on a round-the-clock basis.

We spoke about this with our German and French partners in the Normandy format. The main point is that, today, Ukraine, representatives of the Lugansk and Donetsk regions, the OSCE and Russia are holding fairly practical talks on what can be done over and above the Minsk agreements. In part, they are discussing the possibility of withdrawing the less than 100-mm caliber weapons. We are actively supporting such talks and will try to help the sides coordinate such accords, which is bound to enhance mutual trust.

I’d like to emphasise that it is not enough to talk about the duration of the talks because the Minsk agreements are much more comprehensive. It is very important to strictly follow the succession of their stages that were approved by the presidents of Russia, Ukraine and France and the German Chancellor.

The need to follow these stages is largely called into doubt by the relevant law of the Verkhovna Rada on the special status of some districts in the Lugansk and Donetsk regions. This law contradicts the Minsk agreements, but we are hoping that it won't wreck these major documents that are now the main support for the efforts to reach a peaceful settlement of the crisis. I'm confident that the control mechanism at the foreign-ministerial level that the leaders of the Normandy four have agreed to establish will analyse the current events and express their opinion on this departure from the letter of the Minsk agreements to prevent their collapse. We will do everything to avert this.

**Question:** You said you are expecting the representatives of the Czech Republic, Greece and even Slovakia to arrive in Moscow for the celebrations of the 70th Victory anniversary. Where did you receive such information and have you coordinated with Robert Fico his arrival in Moscow?

**Sergey Lavrov:** As press secretary of the President Dmitry Peskov said recently, the list of invitations to the celebration of the 70th Victory anniversary in Moscow and those who accepted them will be ready by the end of the month. You will have an opportunity to see it.

**Question:** Today, self-defence fighters have asked Paris and Berlin to influence Kiev with a view to increase its involvement in the settlement process. What do you think the West could do to exert such an influence? What measures should be taken to speed up the settlement process?

**Sergey Lavrov:** To influence the settlement process in the direction set by the Minsk agreements, it is necessary to continue directing the need for this to the sides during our contacts with our Ukrainian colleagues and, of course, during our contacts with the Lugansk and Donetsk representatives, in part, via the Contact Group mechanism. Now, this group is working in practice on the Moscow-initiated proposal to form sub-groups on various aspects of the Minsk accords.

I'm convinced that this would make more dynamic and steady the negotiating process attended by all of the conflict parties – Kiev, Lugansk and Donetsk. Thus, it is essential to exert influence on these parties daily and compel them to strictly abide by the documents endorsed by the four leaders at the top level.

**Question:** What steps could Russia make to improve the status of Crimean Tatars? What can you say about the Russian authorities' refusal to issue a broadcasting license to the Crimean Tatar TV channel? Several days ago, Turkey announced its decision to send a mission to Crimea to monitor the status of Crimean Tatars.

**Sergey Lavrov:** First, a law has been adopted on the rehabilitation of all Crimean ethnicities, such as Crimean Tatars, Germans, Greeks and many others. There were no plans to adopt a similar law when Crimea was part of Ukraine.

Second, we've adopted a decision on the so-called land amnesty. This issue was not resolved either during the entire period of Crimea being part of Ukraine. Upon their return to the

peninsula, Crimean Tatars occupied lands without any permit and settled there, but the problem remained outstanding. Now, we have resolved it.

Third, Crimean Tatars are represented in all of the government bodies of the Republic of Crimea. They are fully entitled to the right to speak their native tongue in their everyday life, in the education of their children and while using all services. The law that proclaims Crimean Tatar, Russian and Ukrainian the official languages of the Republic of Crimea has been adopted for the first time. In addition, the Federal Government-approved targeted programme to develop Crimea and Sevastopol as new regions provides for special allocations to maintain the culture and activities of Crimean Tatars.

As for media registration, it is essential to observe the rules of relevant law's requirements. If this is done, there are no registration problems. We know about the intention of Turkish representatives to visit Crimea.

Turkish President Recep Erdogan told President Vladimir Putin about this several times, in part, during their personal meeting last December. We actively supported the idea of the visit. If they want to come, we are prepared. The only obstacle to this visit that was scheduled to take place two months ago was the stubborn desire of the unofficial Turkish delegation to go to Crimea via Ukraine.

Understandably, if the request to help organise this visit was addressed to the Russian Federation, the delegation should take a different route – the one that is appropriate for this visit. We've explained our position to our Turkish partners. I'm confident that if they are really interested in seeing what is happening there they will be able to come, just as many politicians did before them, including former Prime Minister of Japan Yukio Hatayama and representatives of European political parties.

We have no secrets to hide. We are pleased to welcome journalists as well. This would allow them to see for themselves what is happening in Crimea rather than make long-distance assumptions about the republic's events, including the status of Crimean Tatars.