

Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's interview to Komsomolskaya Pravda newspaper and radio

Moscow, May 31, 2016

Question: Let's grab the bull by the horns. We have received hundreds of different messages and questions. Many of them show outright concern in connection with a very difficult situation regarding this country. They have tried to crush us with sanctions, NATO is moving closer to our borders, and a missile defence system is being developed. Our country is undergoing unprecedented demonisation by international media. They don't want to hear us. The United States is leading this process. US President Barack Obama said that the American nation is exceptional, and other countries must play by the rules set by the United States. The role of a vassal is clearly inappropriate for us. Are we doomed to eternal rivalry and conflict with the consolidated West led by the United States, which at any moment could slip into confrontation, not to mention a darker scenario? The people are increasingly saying that there will be war. How substantiated are these concerns?

Sergey Lavrov: There will be no "world war". President Putin said this in Vladimir Solovyov's film World Order. I am convinced that responsible politicians in the West will not allow this to happen either, because they still remember well the horrors of the First and the Second World Wars. Russia suffered the greatest losses during the war in Europe, China suffered the greatest losses in the Pacific as it fought Japanese militarism. Again, the politicians cannot let that happen.

Of course, we can rely on others, but above all, we need to think about us being prepared to prevent another war. Such attempts are being made in regard to building excessive military capabilities and in violation of international treaties.

You mentioned the air defence system. In 2001, the United States withdrew from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty. Back then, US President George W. Bush said, in response to concerns expressed by President Vladimir Putin, that Moscow need not to worry about it, as it is not aimed toward Russia, and the United States understands that Russia will be forced to respond. He also said that Moscow could take any steps and do what it wants. Our peaceful neighbours from Eastern Europe should also keep this in mind. We are issuing calm warning messages that we will take retaliatory steps if NATO military infrastructure moves closer to our borders. They tend to forget about this and blame Russia.

We, as a matter of course, are being blamed for the Ukraine crisis and the Syria crisis. They keep telling us what we should and must do. Now they want us to provide assistance with regard to the Libya crisis. Soon, perhaps, we will be accused of what's happening in Yemen. This is a premeditated policy, I have no doubt about it. Frankly, from the beginning of the 20th century, and even earlier, from the time of Ivan the Terrible, no one wanted to see a

strong and confident Russia. Throughout the last century, the British and the Americans have done their best to prevent Eurasia from maintaining its integrity, meaning the Russian Empire, the Soviet Union and what is happening now in terms of the efforts to promote integration processes in the post-Soviet space. All of this fits into the concept that the American political scientist Zbigniew Brzezinski outlined in his book, *The Grand Chessboard*, where he directly set the task of not allowing the barbarians to unite. That's how he phrased it. Clearly, this is a figure of speech, but it shows clearly enough the underlying train of thought.

Now, as for what we need to do. Clearly, Russia is being demonised, and that's okay, because we should have gotten used to this: with rare exceptions, our partners have never been open with us throughout history. Remember the Fulton speech delivered a few months following the end of World War II, after the great victory of the Allies? During the war, Winston Churchill publicly admired Stalin, saying the Soviet Union was a solid partner and ally, and then made remarks that started the Cold War. I'm not even talking about information for which I could be accused of paranoia. In the wake of the G7 meetings in Hiroshima and as part of President Obama's visit to Japan, our media and public had major discussions about the reasons behind the decision to drop atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. It is known that President Truman seriously considered consigning about 20 Soviet cities to the same fate.

Let me repeat that it is necessary to be friends and have good relations with everyone. This is our principle. Russia's foreign policy is multi-directional and we are open to partnership and cooperation with all those who are prepared to work together on the basis of equity, mutual advantage and consideration of each other's interests. However, in promoting this policy we should remember that our main allies are still the Army, the Navy and now also the Aerospace Forces.

Your question was very expansive – it touched on many things. As for sanctions, in the context of what I have said Ukraine was only a pretext to ratchet up sanctions. The policy of containing Russia began much earlier. As soon as they understood that President Vladimir Putin taking office in 2000 meant Russia wanted to be independent in foreign affairs, domestic affairs and economic policy, they started looking for ways to contain us. After all, the Magnitsky Act was adopted long before the events in Ukraine. A lot of facts have been revealed, including in documentaries that are banned in Europe for some reason. These films and the facts they depict show that Sergey Magnitsky's death is the result of a huge scam by William Browder who is nothing but a sleazy crook, which, I am sure, many people who have dealt with him know. Sanctions were imposed. Later President Barack Obama cancelled his visit to Moscow on the eve of the G20 summit in St Petersburg in September 2013 because he took offence over Edward Snowden, who had fled from the US National Security Agency and asked Russia for asylum. We had to grant it out of humanitarian considerations – one of the reasons was simply his lack of a passport – he did not have the documents allowing him to leave Russia. They also took offence, started bullying and threatening us albeit not as strongly as in Ukraine's case.

We perceive the current economic restrictions imposed on us as a window of opportunity that we should make the most of in order to strengthen our food and technological security, continue diversifying the economy and foreign economic ties and finally create alternative effective financial mechanisms and payments systems.

I would say it is not so important for us when the anti-Russian sanctions are lifted – we haven't imposed them and won't discuss any criteria or terms for their removal but only how we can maximise our current position in the interests of our own economy and development.

Question: Why would a country that won the war beg a country that lost the war to sign a peace treaty? We should give Japan half of Russia's territory to get it to sign a peace treaty with us? Why do we have to surrender the Kuril Islands and beg Japan to sign a peace treaty with us?

Sergey Lavrov: We do not need to do this, we are not doing this, and will not do this in the future. We are not surrendering the Kuril Islands, nor are we begging Japan to sign a peace treaty. As a reliable and responsible power and the successor to the Soviet Union, Russia at some point confirmed that we are committed to all obligations assumed by the Soviet Union. These obligations include the Soviet-Japanese Declaration of 1956, which was signed and ratified by the parliaments of the Soviet Union and Japan. The declaration states that the parties undertake to conclude a peace treaty, and only after that, the Soviet Union, as it had pledged to do back then, may, as a gesture of goodwill and based on expectations of the Japanese people, transfer the Japanese islands of Shikotan and Habomai to Japan. Above all, this move is predicated on our Japanese neighbours unconditionally recognising the outcome of World War II. Unfortunately, not only in connection with the islands, but more likely, regardless of it, our Japanese partners are not willing to do so. Japan remains, in fact, the only UN member country that has not confirmed the provisions of the UN Charter that says everything that was done by the victorious powers is immutable.

We are willing to look for ways to cooperate with our Japanese neighbours. Japan is a great country, a great nation that has a complicated history, including a history, to put it mildly, of bad relations with its neighbours. However, we are all interested in having the Japanese and the Russian people, as well as the people of all other countries, live in harmony and benefit from cooperation. Talking about a mutually acceptable solution to the territorial dispute without recognising the outcome of World War II is impossible. This is what we keep telling our Japanese partners every time we talk with them. We are also saying that there are many opportunities to improve this situation. In particular, during the last round of consultations, we proposed considering the historical aspect of this issue, so that everyone is clear that World War II put an end to the story of these islands changing hands.

We do realise that the graves of the relatives of Japanese people are on these islands. Some people who used to live on these islands are still alive. We have special visa-free travel programmes for Japanese people visiting the South Kuril Islands. The residents of the Sakhalin Region, by the way, can also go to Japan as part of visa-free groups. We have for a

long time now been inviting our Japanese neighbours to engage in economic activity on these islands together with us. They can make investments and create special economic areas. They can do all of this. I hope that our Japanese colleagues will focus precisely on these activities. At least, we have made such invitations available to them. I think that this will clear many issues from the agenda. If what matters is that these islands are open to Japanese visitors and businessmen, Japan-sponsored humanitarian actions, then everything else is probably not as fundamental.

Question: What is the essence of the new approach to the so-called “northern territories” issue, which was spelled out by Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in Sochi not long ago?

Sergey Lavrov: There is nothing in it that has not been discussed before. This, in fact, means that our dialogue is returning to the track outlined back in 2003 during a Russian-Japanese summit and reaffirmed in 2013 when Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe was in Russia on an official visit.

The idea is that in order to address any problems that emerge or old problems, we need to step up our partnership in all directions and make it fully fledged and strategic. This concerns trade and economic ties, particularly the investment field (mutual investment) and the humanitarian exchanges that are strongly desired by our peoples. And this relates in no small part to our cooperation in matters regarding security and strategic stability. We would very much like our Japanese colleagues to set their foreign political course on their own.

Question: Who are harder to deal with, Western or Eastern diplomats?

Sergey Lavrov: As for what it’s like to deal with Western and Eastern diplomats, if by Eastern you mean Asia and Africa, I would say that everything depends on the person. There are Western colleagues who pretend to be unaware when they have nothing to say, or act very straightforwardly, and there are our Chinese or Japanese partners, who are more well-versed and better prepared. It all depends on the person.

The style of diplomacy in Asia slightly differs, of course, from that in the West. It is more delicate, subtle, refined and less rude. Earlier, only the United States dictated its will to everyone and still does. Not long ago, US President Barack Obama said that the United States should determine all global rules by itself, while the rest, including China, which he singled out (but evidently Russia as well), should obey those rules. Unfortunately, this long-standing disease will be hard to cure, but it will pass. Regrettably, Europe is following suit, resorting to similar methods and adopting similar habits, going straight to sanctions at the first sign of trouble. Earlier, this was characteristic only of the US. It will all sort itself out over time.

Question: One fifth of the more than a thousand questions we have received from our audiences concerns Ukraine. The Minsk process was launched over a year ago. Many believe that it is slipping and will not produce any positive results. Is there any hope for the Minsk Package to be implemented?

Sergey Lavrov: Of course, there is still hope. Moreover, we must demand its implementation, just as we have been doing. The Minsk Agreements were coordinated through very difficult top-level talks and were subsequently signed by Kiev, Donetsk, Lugansk, Russia, France and Germany. They are the only documents that spell out the conflicting sides' obligations and the guarantees of Europeans and Russia. We must not allow these agreements to follow the path of the agreement signed by Viktor Yanukovich, Arseny Yatsenyuk, Vitaly Klitschko and Oleg Tyagnibok the night of February 21, 2014, in the presence of and witnessed by representatives of France, Germany and Poland, only to be violated the very next morning. Our French, German and Polish colleagues shamefully kept silent. If we allow those who staged the state coup and currently constitute the primary political force in the Ukrainian establishment to follow suit with the Minsk Package, all of us will lose face, including the UN Security Council, which approved the signed Minsk Agreements in their current form, without suggesting any amendments.

President of Ukraine Petr Poroshenko and Foreign Minister Pavel Klimkin make conflicting statements regarding their commitment to the Minsk Package, saying one thing to their people and trying to act more constructively at meetings with their foreign partners. We hope that at least part of these statements will be acted upon. The situation is very simple. They are again debating what came first, the hen or the egg, and what steps should be taken next. Security has unexpectedly become the key issue for President Poroshenko. He is now talking not only about the ceasefire but also about some international forces ensuring security throughout Donbass. The latter is not stipulated in the Minsk Agreements. Donbass will never agree, and under the Minsk Agreements, absolutely all steps towards a settlement must be coordinated with Donbass.

Regarding security on the dividing line, we stand firmly for strengthening the role and responsibility of the OSCE mission, for increasing the number of its observers so that they oversee the creation of a safe distance between the conflicting parties, as was agreed, and also monitor the sides' permanent sites where heavy weapons are stored. Ultimately, you can delay the process indefinitely by talking endlessly about insufficient security. Kiev insists that political reform will only begin when security is maintained at 100 per cent for several weeks or even months. This is unrealistic. Nothing of the kind has ever been achieved in any other conflict, without first settling all political aspects. Regarding the political aspects, all the proverbial balls are in Ukraine's court. I am referring primarily to the special status of Donbass, which was set forth in the Minsk Agreements and which now needs to be formalised in a law and protected by the constitution. There is also the issue of amnesty, because amnesty must be part of the settlement now that the tide in the conflict has turned. A law on amnesty has been drafted and adopted by the Verkhovna Rada (parliament), but President Poroshenko has not signed it. I don't know why. We are told that amnesty can only be approved based on the 1996 law, under which all suspects are to apply for amnesty individually and their applications will be heard by Ukrainian courts individually. This is not what we have agreed upon, and this will certainly prevent the implementation of the Minsk Agreements. And lastly, elections are to be held after Donbass's special status is formalised in the constitution in

keeping with the law on amnesty. All these issues – the elections, the law on this special status and the amendment to the constitution in keeping with the Minsk Package, which clearly stipulates this – must be coordinated with the conflict-affected areas in the Donetsk and Lugansk regions.

None of the above has been done, despite the efforts made within the Contact Group where direct dialogue between Kiev, Donetsk and Lugansk is only possible, and within the Normandy Format, which cannot replace the Contact Group no matter how much Kiev, or even Berlin and Paris, may want this. We are aware of their mood and have heard proposals that the four parties – France, Germany, Russia and Ukraine – negotiate a settlement, after which Russia will be expected to convince Donbass to join the negotiations. When we explain that a direct dialogue between Donbass and Kiev is what is needed, a German representative asked cynically and rather insolently, why do we insist on direct dialogue if it would take Russia 15 minutes to bend Donbass to its will. This is precisely what he said.

Question: It would be better if they bent Kiev.

Sergey Lavrov: This is exactly what I planned to say in conclusion of my answer to your question. I believe that not only the Germans, French, many others in Europe and the United States see that Kiev is avoiding the commitments made by the President of Ukraine.

Question: I have been working in Donbass since the beginning and witnessed the May 11 referendum. It is very hard to explain to people why the Crimea referendum was recognised and not the referendum in the Donetsk and Lugansk republics that was as fair and sincere as in Crimea and took place in the presence of journalists.

We have received phone calls on this subject:

Why has Russia been paying less attention to Ukraine's southeast? Is devastated Donbass not as good as the blossoming Crimea?

I'm calling from Donetsk. Don't give up on Donbass. This is Russian land where Russian people live. We are facing a hardship, and are waiting for your help. We won't survive without it. Please, don't give up on us.

Why doesn't Russia make a statement to the effect that if Ukraine continues to sabotage the Minsk Agreements, Russia will have to officially recognise the Donetsk and Lugansk people's republics and enter into treaties with them, as with Abkhazia and South Ossetia?

Sergey Lavrov: First, we haven't given up on southeast Ukraine, and always remember it. We are proactive in supporting it, and not just politically. These efforts include humanitarian aid and initiatives to resolve economic issues and to ensure adequate living conditions, including issues that France and Germany had promised to address. They offered to make the banking system operational, but were unable to do so, and acknowledged it. This goes to say

that you should put your trust in partners, but rely on yourself. Russia is involved in resolving this and other issues related to the living conditions in Donbass, and will continue doing so.

Among the provisions of the Minsk Agreements on special status for Donbass, there is the right to direct and unrestricted economic and other relations with the Russian Federation. This is a key component that enabled both Russia and Donetsk to support the Minsk Agreements.

As for the referendums, you are aware of the conditions in which the referendum was held in Crimea and how it happened in the Donetsk and Lugansk regions. After the Donbass referendum, the leaders of these self-proclaimed republics did not refuse to have a dialogue with Kiev. It was this dialogue that led to the Minsk Package.

Question: They were talking about independence.

Sergey Lavrov: Let me reiterate that they have never refused to talk to Kiev. It is true that they proclaimed independence, while saying that they were open to negotiations. Russia, Germany and France supported this conversation, which paved the way for the Minsk Agreements. You can slam the door and follow the example of those who threaten recognition, sanctions and the like while being unable to use diplomatic and political tools. I strongly believe an approach like this to be counterproductive. This would provide a pretext to the West to stop pressuring Kiev, be it very moderately. Kiev is under pressure. They are not eager to say so in public, but when they talk to Ukrainians behind closed doors (we know this for sure), they are quite tough in demanding that all the agreements reached in Minsk be honoured.

I think that it is very important to ensure that the documents that were signed and approved by the Security Council are implemented, even if it serves no other purpose than discipline. We are in a unique situation. There is currently no way that this document can be challenged by anything else, and no one is trying to counter it with any other document. It cannot be contested. If we now say that our patience is up and that we'll go the other way, they will just say: fine, go ahead. In that case, the West would stop exerting pressure on the Ukrainian authorities.

Donbass is not the only reason for pressuring Ukraine. The OSCE mission mandate extends to all of Ukraine. Russia regularly insists that the mission issue reports not just about Donbass and the demarcation line, but also on other Ukrainian regions. Horrible things are happening there. Even though our OSCE colleagues make things look better than they actually are, they still acknowledge violations of minority rights, including of Hungarians, and mafia permeating regions like Transcarpatie. In many cases Verkhovna Rada MPs are behind the organised crime, even though the reports fail to mention it.

It is for that reason that we need to preserve this legal and international framework and safeguard it in all possible ways from attempts to undermine it from within or from the outside.

Question: I would like to continue about Maidan. I worked in Ukraine for eight years and saw the Maidan events unfold with my own eyes. I think it was an outright failure as far as Russian diplomacy is concerned. Back in April 2013, Komsomolskaya Pravda wrote that the general mood in Galicia was to go to war against the Russians. They did nothing to conceal their plans. We wrote about it, but nobody paid attention. All pro-Russian political observers that worked in Ukraine back then said that they were unable to influence in any way Russia's Ambassador to Ukraine Mikhail Zurabov or meet with him. Meetings with the Ambassador are held once a year, on June 12, during Russia Day celebrations, usually accompanied by vodka and bears. There are no other opportunities. Russia was not ready when Maidan broke out, and just lost out in this situation. We have received many questions on why Russia's Ambassador to Ukraine Mikhail Zurabov is still in office.

Sergey Lavrov: I don't think that this is a matter that can be discussed in public.

Question: Why not? It concerns Russia's international diplomacy.

Sergey Lavrov: Ambassador Mikhail Zurabov can and will report to the Russian Foreign Ministry and the State Duma of the Russian Federal Assembly. I'm not sure that I understand the essence of your question.

Question: What I want to say is that we were not ready for Maidan.

Sergey Lavrov: This is what I'm talking about. You say that we lost at Maidan. If you are so sure about this and if it is often said that Russian diplomacy failed, what alternatives are implied? What should we have done, if people are so sure that this was our failure?

Question: The US Embassy did not scrimp on propaganda against us and paid for sites costing a thousand dollars each (peanuts for such a large country as ours). These sites trashed our reputation for a decade. The Americans did not conceal that they spent \$5 billion for propaganda against Russia and ostensibly for freedom of speech. Our embassies lack initiative in general. The voice of an American ambassador is always heard and the voice of ours is always silent – with few exceptions. I can cite Lebanon as an example where Russian Ambassador Alexander Zasytkin is doing a great job. The situation in Lebanon changed dramatically when he was there because people continuously listened to his interviews. Our ambassadors and embassies are like bunkers; they live in their own little worlds and do not leave.

Or take another example. The current Ukrainian ambassador to Croatia simply “raped” the local media. He was even given a column in a newspaper where he smears Russia on a daily basis.

Our people do not speak out. Where are they? Why are they hiding? Why don't they offer to do interviews? This is a big problem. I work in all kinds of countries and everywhere I go I

am told about gatherings devoted to Alexander Pushkin and Pyotr Tchaikovsky. Who is interested in them now?

Sergey Lavrov: I cannot agree with this because Russian ambassadors in the United States, Lebanon, Iraq and Syria and Russia's special envoys at the UN in New York and the UN Office in Geneva are known as not just people who regularly appear on TV but who work extremely hard.

You should understand one thing: appearing on the front pages of newspapers, television and radio is far from all they do, and in most cases it's not the main part of their work. You mentioned paying for different sites. As for the US Embassy in Kiev, there were not just payments but a whole floor of the security service was and is still occupied by FBI or CIA employees or both plus the National Security Agency.

What was the alternative? Were we also supposed to pay political scientists for working on some sites? When the thugs showed up on the Maidan we demanded that they obey the Ukrainian Constitution. They didn't want to and as a result reached an agreement with Viktor Yanukovich through opposition figures. This agreement was signed on February 21 and actually required that Yanukovich give up his presidential powers to use force and his monopoly on the use of force, and agree to early elections. In other words, had this agreement been carried out, he would have been removed democratically a long time ago (needless to say, he wouldn't have been re-elected as everyone assumes), and similar people would have been in power now but without so many victims and so much destruction. What are you suggesting? When these thugs began to commit excesses on the Maidan, should we have sent in troops or what? Please explain.

Question: We were holding all the cards.

Sergey Lavrov: What do you mean?

Question: A duly elected president fled to Russia. A military coup took place in a country that is close to us, a friend of ours. The president asked us to help. We had every right to help get things under control.. A bunch of thugs seized power – this is an armed coup. Why didn't we do this?

I will tell you why – because we keep clinging to a theory of state sovereignty that binds our hands. The Americans have devised a theory of humanitarian intervention, which implies an obligation to intervene. Meanwhile, we keep talking about sovereignty and have already become entrapped by it. We do not produce ideologies. We also have the right to intervene.

Sergey Lavrov: Let us avoid jargon. Tell me directly, do you think we should have sent in troops?

Question: Yes, we should have. It was our duty to get involved, through humanitarian intervention.

Sergey Lavrov: I disagree. Do you want war between Russians and Ukrainians?

Question: It wouldn't be war.

Sergey Lavrov: War against their own people was engineered by those whom the coup d'état brought to the top. I think that Russians and Ukrainians are a single people. If you think we should make war on our own people, I categorically disagree.

Question: It wouldn't be unleashing war, but dealing with a gang that seized power.

Sergey Lavrov: Now this gang has the support of a huge number of people, some of them wearing military uniforms, others not; suffice it to mention the national battalions, whatever you might think of them. There are tens of thousands of such people. So you are suggesting that we deal with tens of thousands of Ukrainians?

Question: They gathered tens of thousands only after we gave the matter up and let things take care of themselves.

Sergey Lavrov: The army swore allegiance to the new regime, and the new regime might have ordered this army to fight the Russian Army? That's an awful idea, I can't even bring myself to imagine it.

Question: There was news last week, which alarmed many of our readers and listeners, concerning Nadezhda Savchenko. Readers ask what you think of the release of a criminal who killed our journalists. They think she will snatch every opportunity to provoke Russia. Have we done the right thing?

Sergey Lavrov: I think we have. We had to bring our citizens back, and we did. It is our principled position to exchange all for all, not only in such situations as that of Savchenko and our citizens, but also, and more importantly, for the implementation of the Minsk Agreements. I think it should be Ukraine's own headache if Savchenko plays dirty tricks on us (but then, who would not play dirty tricks on us in Ukraine? There are practically no Ukrainian politicians left who would speak with us normally).

Question: It's true.

Sergey Lavrov: She is a very particular woman. She looks well-nourished, for that matter. I think everyone sees now what her hysterical hunger strikes were worth. She wants to become president, make war on us, and she wants something else too.

Question: Meanwhile, she walks around everywhere barefoot.

Question: All countries of the Middle East are closely monitoring the Russian-Turkish confrontation. Local political experts remember well Russian President Vladimir Putin's warning that they "would not get away with tomatoes." Now, however, things have taken an unexpected turn. A few days ago we were the first to say that we would like to resume contacts. This might be very Christian but what about the principle of "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth?" My Eastern friends and political experts ask the following. You were not the one who began the war with Turkey and you are not to blame for it. The Soviet Union would never have let anyone go unpunished for one of its planes being shot down. Why are the Russians now the first to offer the olive branch? Oriental political scientists see this as Russia being humiliated by Islam.

Sergey Lavrov: Let's not take this any further. It is like scoring a goal on yourself. You or your correspondents make assessments that are fundamentally untrue, and proceeding from their own error, draw conclusions on how to evaluate our actions.

We have never said that we would offer Turkey the olive branch or anything else. Why would we? We said that Turkey should apologise and compensate the losses incurred as a result of this criminal act, this military crime. When President Vladimir Putin was asked whether Turkey was taking any steps, he said that they are advancing along different channels.

Question: Are we ready to restore relations?

Sergey Lavrov: No, President Vladimir Putin said that we are ready to review the possibility. But, first, Turkey should do what it's supposed to do. But why is this brought up out of context?

If you only want to see a panicky, defeatist mood among Russian leaders then it'll be a difficult conversation. See, you don't have to be insulting to show that you disapprove of your partner's actions, and this is what was done. And, of course, they didn't just get away with a tomato ban; there is much more to it. So now they are trying to contact us through various secure channels and are suggesting that certain committees be established. In December, when the Turkish Foreign Minister met with me in passing at the OSCE, he suggested that we establish a committee or a group that would include diplomats, military experts and intelligence officers, and I don't know whom else.

Question: Have they made any headway over the past six months?

Sergey Lavrov: Of course not. So our stance remains unchanged.

Question: We are demanding three things – an official apology, liability for those responsible and compensation for damages, right?

Sergey Lavrov: Of course.

Question: Regarding Syria, I have visited Syrian Kurdistan. Syrian, Iraqi and Turkish Kurds want to know whether Russia has come to stay or whether this will be a temporary operation. They want Russia to stay, so a second centre of power can emerge in the Middle East. Are we there to stay?

Sergey Lavrov: A centre of power has already been established in the Middle East. I don't know whether this is the second or, maybe first centre of power. You see, the US-led coalition which is perceived by many as the first centre of power is simply marking time. I spoke with US Secretary of State John Kerry the other day and asked why they have stopped bombing the terrorists and why they have not flown a single combat mission to prevent the illegal shipment of oil to Turkey.

Question: And what did he say?

Sergey Lavrov: He said they were doing this. They are once again guided by the faulty logic that terrorists are mixed with friendly opposition forces, that you hit this friendly opposition, while attacking terrorists, and that this should be avoided. But I reminded him that, in late February, they had pledged to us that units considered patriotic and loyal by them and cooperating with them would be removed from positions occupied by Jabhat al-Nusra. Over three months have passed, and nothing has been done. They have now asked us for several more days before their plan, under which everyone who has not joined the ceasefire is a legitimate target, regardless of whether they are listed among the terrorists or not, swings into action. They asked for several more days in order to respond, and these several days expire this week.

At this point, the coalition is almost idle, with militants and equipment continuing to move via the Turkish border. An offensive which is banned by various agreements and UN Security Council resolutions is obviously being prepared. They are telling us that the so-called "good" units are ready to stop violating the ceasefire but that a political process should be launched for this purpose. Members of a delegation that has been established primarily with Turkish support – the so-called High Negotiation Committee – are saying that they cannot take part in the talks because Syrian President Bashar al-Assad has not resigned. This circus act has been dragging on for a long time.

I told my colleague that, honestly, in our opinion, they are simply trying to mislead us. He swears that this is not so, and that the military authorities will, at last, start coordinating their operations. I repeat, we have already told them straight that this doesn't suit us, and that we can no longer listen to these stories. We have obligations with the legitimate Syrian Government and authorities, we are there at their request, and no one invited the coalition. The US-led coalition was invited to Iraq, and it was not invited to Syria. But Syrian leaders have said (and the US was informed about this) that, if the coalition coordinates its operations with the Russian Aerospace Forces, then they would not officially protest and would consider

them to be our partners in the fight against terrorism. To be honest, this is the only, although fragile, legal foundation for the coalition's presence.

Everyone admits that the initial Russian operation and its first few months drastically improved the situation. Turkey and our Western colleagues want this tide to stop and probably to reverse itself. They don't want to see Syrian President Bashar al-Assad remain in power simply because they said five years ago that he must step down, and they now care nothing about the people of Syria. But everyone now understands that there will be no political process without al-Assad. The UN Security Council resolution and various decisions on Syria, adopted since 2012 with our proactive involvement, contain no demand or hint that Syrian President Bashar al-Assad must resign. On the contrary, they say that the people of Syria alone have a right to decide their future, and that the political process should involve all forces of Syrian society without exception, including ethnic, political forces, religious denominations and all opposition groups.

Two months ago, President Vladimir Putin announced a decision to scale down Russia's military presence in Syria after objectives, aiming to prevent the state's gradual disintegration that was leading to the seizure of Damascus by terrorists, had been mostly accomplished. I assure you that there are enough forces and resources in the country to neutralise the current terrorist threats. We are addressing this issue. It is only important that our US colleagues comprehend their responsibility. I believe that we are seriously pressing them against the wall. But it is true that they are capable, crafty and evasive people.

If you watch news reports about the deployment of Russian military units there, you will see that they did not just arrive, pitch tents, do some shooting, remove their tents and leave. This should answer your question as to whether we have come to stay or not.

Question: So is US Secretary of State John Kerry able to give you an answer to our president's question: "Do you realise now what you've done?"

Sergey Lavrov: You know I've spoken to him quite a lot about it. US Secretary of State John Kerry is a very nice person to talk to. Since January, we have had over 30 telephone conversations and met four times in person. I am sure there will be more meetings and telephone talks.

But when we have the opportunity to discuss the situation in Syria, he insists that something has to be done now. I in turn need to remind him of the steps taken thus far: in June 2012, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, European, Chinese, Arab and Turkish representatives and I signed the Geneva Communiqué. The document stipulated the need to launch a transitional political process to form a joint government-and-opposition structure based on their mutual consent. Then Russia brought this paper to the UN Security Council for approval but the Americans declined to sanction it because it didn't contain a provision allowing them to oust Syrian President Bashar Assad or introduce sanctions against him if he fails to leave. I asked him: "Was it supposed to be included? We spent seven hours in Geneva discussing it?!" Then

the Americans bluntly refused to approve the Communiqué. A year later, the chemical weapons threat turned up. We helped to resolve the situation and insisted that the resolution establishing the Russian-American plan, with the consent of the Syrian government, to remove and eliminate chemical weapons should include a section approving the Geneva Communiqué. Now they say Syrian President Bashar Assad is violating the Communiqué. It is exactly like in Donbass – a principle of direct dialogue. But they prefer to avoid it. In Donbass, the authorities evade the dialogue while here the opposition avoids it. This is our Western colleagues for you.

During the discussions with US Secretary of State John Kerry, I asked him why they were making the same mistakes as they did in Iraq in 2003. He said he was a senator then and voted against the move. Great, fine. Barack Obama also voted against. Yes, Iraq was a mistake. And what about Libya? It was under Hillary Clinton and was also a mistake. They violated the UN Security Council's mandate that sealed the airspace to prevent air strikes – but they still bombed the country from the air and eventually brutally murdered Libyan President Muammar Gaddafi, no matter what sort of person he was. This was also a war crime. And now Libya is flooded with terrorists supplying militants, weapons all the way up to Mali, the Central African Republic and Chad. But the mistake was, Kerry said, not in violating the UN mandate but in failing to deploy land troops in the wake of the air strikes, to consolidate the situation and suppress the terrorists. I reminded him of how troops were brought into Afghanistan and Iraq earlier to combat terrorists and how they had to pull out, leaving these countries in disarray, as Zhvanevsky would say, like a woman who has been left in distress. Afghanistan and Iraq were abandoned in a far worse situation: the former is on the brink of disintegration, while the latter has been torn apart by the civil war. The Americans agree it was a mistake but prefer to let bygones be bygones. They want us to follow their agenda but we also have our own agenda in Syria. It is clear that we must try to coordinate our approaches with at least some respect for the lessons history has taught us.

Question: The Turkish Kurds have urged Russia to make public its position on the ongoing Kurdish genocide. For example, the city of Diyarbakir has been fully destroyed, along with many other cities. A civil war is underway in Turkey, yet Russia has not interceded.

The Syrian Kurds wonder why Russia is supplying arms to [Iraqi Kurdish leader] Massoud Barzani but not to the Syrian Kurds who are really fighting ISIS. Iraqi Kurdistan is the US playground, and Massoud Barzani is a pro-Turkey politician who has allowed Turkish troops to enter Iraqi Kurdistan.

Guerrillas from the Kurdistan Workers' Party, who are fighting in the Qandil Mountains, have also asked for assistance, at the least by diplomatic means as the Soviet Union did, if we can't help them militarily.

Sergey Lavrov: We are providing this kind of assistance. It is possible that we should speak about this more often, although the Foreign Ministry's spokesperson, Maria Zakharova, regularly mentions the issue of the Kurdish genocide in Turkey during her briefings.

In principle, we often speak about Turkey's position on the Kurds. We only demand one thing – that Turkey withdraw the troops it sent to Iraq allegedly to strengthen Iraq's sovereignty, as former Turkish Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu claimed. This is unacceptable. I believe that what Turkey is doing deserves broader public attention from our Western partners. They believe that the “allies” will settle the problem between themselves. This is not a good position. When Turkey violated Greece's airspace, following which Russia made several tough statements, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg said that “both are NATO allies” who can settle their problem themselves. First, what about Cyprus, which is not a NATO member and whose airspace Turkey regularly violates? Second, what kind of a position is this? Does it mean that you are free to do anything you want if you are a NATO member? The EU has the same problem: EU members are not accountable to the Council of Europe. They say they will only consider human rights violations of the non-EU members because they have a special procedure for violations within the EU countries.

We will continue to insist that Turkey stop its arbitrary activities in Iraq, primarily with regard to the Kurds. Apart from obvious neo-Ottoman aspirations, there are also economic considerations: Turkey is seeking to gain a foothold [in Iraqi Kurdistan] and wait for the outcome of the battle for Mosul in order to take control of its oilfields. And then Turkey will wait for the international community's reaction. Iraq could fall apart by then, but Turkey will already be entrenched there. This is obvious. Therefore, I fully agree with you and your Kurdish dialogue partners.

As for Iraqi Kurdistan, we send weapons to fight against terrorists to Iraq and Iraqi Kurdistan with the agreement and consent of the Iraqi government. This is the only principle by which we operate.

The Syrian Kurds are receiving air support and other kinds of assistance. Frankly, we have been actively, and not entirely unsuccessfully, working to convince the Syrian government to cooperate with the Kurds instead of trying to restrict the Kurds' future role in the Syrian state.

Of course, nobody was happy when the Democratic Union Party (PYD) declared a federal region, but it was the Kurds' reaction to Turkey's position. We have agreed that the Geneva talks on Syria must be inclusive in terms of participants. However, the PYD, which represents 15 per cent of Syria's population, has been banned from the talks because one country – Turkey – vetoed its participation. When we expressed our outrage over the matter, saying that the Kurds should be allowed to attend the talks, our American and other partners and the UN Secretary-General's Special Envoy for Syria, Staffan de Mistura, told us that if the Kurds come to Geneva the Riyadh group (High Negotiations Committee) would leave and stop cooperating. But that group didn't cooperate but walked out of the talks anyway. And Mr Staffan de Mistura did not protest against this, although we had instructed him to hold the next round of talks before Ramadan. He plans to resume the talks in two weeks, or even after Ramadan, because of ultimatums advanced by this wilful party. They thought the Kurds'

presence at the talks would have a negative effect, but the effect was the same even without the Kurds. The [opposition] has shown its true colours.

There has been a second case of desertion: Mohammed Alloush from Jaysh al-Islam has walked out of the peace talks. Jaysh al-Islam is a terrorist and an extremist group. However, attempts have been made to justify its actions, possibly because Jaysh al-Islam's operations were expected to weaken President Bashar Assad's positions. The tactic of using terrorists to attain one's goals and deciding their fate after they have done their bit is a dead-end strategy. Also, several members of the High Negotiations Committee who represented the moderate opposition have left the peace talks, too. I believe that all the radical opposition negotiators will eventually leave the talks. Yet we need to act fast, and the Kurds must participate in the Geneva process. Discussing the constitution or any other structure that should be formed by the Syrian government jointly with the opposition without the Kurds will result in the collapse of the talks.

Question: You are one of the three most respected political figures in Russia. What are your plans for the future?

Sergey Lavrov: To be honest, I have never made plans for my life, rather, things have just happened of their own accord. I was offered work in various places, but all through the Foreign Ministry. First, I had a proposal to work in Sri Lanka, then it was in the Department for International Economic Organisations. When Andrei Kozyrev left for the RSFSR Foreign Ministry, the late deputy minister, Vladimir Petrovsky, offered me the post of head of the UN Department in 1990. After the [August 1991] coup and before the Belavezha Accords, Andrei Kozyrev invited me to join the RSFSR Foreign Ministry and become his deputy. This is not a secret now and I don't think he will mind my speaking of it. I said then that I was not ready for such a move and did not have the desire in any case. He asked me why not. I said that I had only been department head for a year and had brought with me people whom I knew and on whom I could rely. He proposed that I bring them all with me into the RSFSR Foreign Ministry. I said that they wouldn't leave. He asked why not, and I said that they had sworn an oath to serve their country. In quite emotional tones, he said that we were all hiding ourselves behind the Soviet Union's sign, sitting there, scared, with no idea of what might happen next, and meanwhile, he had all these delegations coming. You might recall that various Western visitors were busy doing the rounds for all the Soviet republics back then. I reminded him of the joint agreement between Mikhail Gorbachev and Boris Yeltsin that the Soviet Foreign Ministry would provide assistance to the Soviet republics' foreign ministries. We helped them if they needed interpreters, helped them with their transport needs. The foreign ministries in the different republics were still just tiny at that time and could not cope with all the tasks at hand, but we helped them out.

I left the office. Andrei Kozyrev was upset, unhappy, but even so, no one fired me after those events, and in April 1992, Vitaly Churkin and I were appointed deputy foreign ministers overnight without our having to ask for anything.

The only time that I turned down an offer was when Yevgeny Primakov suggested that I move to Washington. I had already spent 18 months in New York at that moment. He was a great man, but I had no choice but to argue with him then. When I tried to turn down the offer, he said I was politically ignorant and simply did not understand the situation. I asked him why he was so insistent I should take this job. He said he thought I was the best person. I asked him what was so special about Washington that I ought to go there. He said Washington was the most important place. I asked permission to quote Yevgeny Primakov the great thinker, the one who said that “we are seeing the emergence of a multipolar world, which will become a counterbalance to the unipolar world” . I said that this multipolar world was indeed taking shape, but not in Washington, where if you needed to do something, you first had to make an appointment, without being sure that you’d actually get one, but in New York, where you just have to enter the UN building for everyone to come running your way, bringing you information, people you need to talk to and who need to talk to you. There is room to manoeuvre in the UN, because you have 15 people in the Security Council (five permanent members and 10 non-permanent members), and you have the General Assembly, where you can throw ideas around directly, without having to go through someone else first. Yevgeny Primakov really was a great man and he agreed with me in the end and left me in New York.

Question: How can we translate foreign policy successes to the domestic political stage?

Do you think we should erect a monument to Yevgeny Primakov? Perhaps not in Moscow, but in one of the regions, in Perm, say?

Sergey Lavrov: As far as combining and interlinking foreign and domestic policy goes, the priority is to guarantee security and the best possible economic conditions for Russia’s development. This is our Foreign Policy Concept’s main priority and we are keeping this same objective in place in the new draft of the Foreign Policy Concept that we are currently preparing on President Vladimir Putin’s instruction. This means that we must ensure an environment in which our business does not face discrimination and our citizens can travel around the world without fear of discrimination or unlawful acts against them. Sadly, we do not always manage to guarantee this. The Americans, for example, literally ‘steal’ our people in violation of the laws of the countries on whose soil these abductions take place. This was the case of Viktor Bout, Konstantin Yaroshenko, Roman Seleznev and dozens of other people ‘snatched’ from Europe and other countries.

But I am sure that this work will bring results, and indeed, we are already starting to see the fruits. If some cybercriminal is arrested, we would be the last to try to protect him. After all, these people steal money in Russia and abroad. But he should be put on trial here. We have the Russian-US consular convention and other agreements that provide for the reciprocal transfer of suspects in criminal cases. But this has become a big problem now. We are concerned in general for the safety of our citizens travelling abroad for tourism or simply on private business. This is an important aspect of our work.

Another aspect of our work is to do all we can to ensure that governments in countries where we have interests treat Russian business with goodwill and fairness. We also have some concrete results in this area. Of course, this must be reciprocal and business has to be active in these efforts too. Rosatom, for example, works very actively in many parts of the world and has a record number of orders. This immediately helps to create a long-term, stable and solid base for developing strategic relations with the country in question. The nuclear energy sector is a long-term sector involving big projects and covering construction, training, and storage and treatment of spent nuclear material.

We see in this work a chance to make use of our capabilities and our possibilities for helping with domestic reform, but of course, it is ultimately not the Foreign Ministry's job to carry out domestic reform and development.

As for Yevgeny Primakov, we already have a project for erecting a monument to him. We started thinking about this idea immediately after the sad event of his passing. In addition to the decisions President Vladimir Putin has already taken about immortalising Mr Primakov's memory (there is the Yevgeny Primakov medal and the Yevgeny Primakov scholarships for study at the Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO) and Moscow State University, and his name has been given to the Institute of World Economy and International Relations), we think that it would be good to raise a monument to him, and I plan to make this proposal to the President.

As for where to do this, Mr Primakov was prime minister, director of the Foreign Intelligence Service, foreign minister, and an academician. There is the building where he lived, but we would rather see a monument on Smolenskaya Square, in the square between the Belgrade Hotel and the Foreign Ministry building. This is a place where people would always be to see the monument and pay Mr Primakov's memory their respects. As I say though, this matter has not been examined yet. This is the first time I have formulated this proposal out loud. Perhaps it would have been better to make the official proposal first.

Question: Do you have presidential ambitions, or do you swim with the stream?

Sergey Lavrov: I feel at ease in a job that is entrusted to me. This may sound arrogant, but I try to answer questions honestly.

Question: You have been given the right to smoke wherever you want to at the UN. Can you do the same at the Russian Foreign Ministry?

Sergey Lavrov: I cannot violate Russian laws, but I would say that these laws are somewhat in excess of what is done in this area in Europe and comparable countries. There are many ways in which you can indulge in this harmful habit without creating any problems for others. I believe this should be stipulated in our legislation.

Question: Do you want to smoke now?

Sergey Lavrov: No, I don't. Actually, I don't smoke often.

Question: Today is World No Tobacco Day, which has been approved by the UN. When will you quit smoking?

Sergey Lavrov: I haven't smoked today. I smoke only rarely. I do sports and play football.

Question: Do you enjoy rafting? Will you be able to go rafting this year?

Sergey Lavrov: I really hope so.

Question: We would like to see Russian diplomats without double or triple chins and dressed in modern suits. After all, they represent a great country. Can you order them to take up sports?

Sergey Lavrov: I don't like making anyone do anything. But I know that there is a very good gym in this building, where our employees play tennis, volleyball, basketball and five-a-side. We also have a swimming pool. By the way, this project was suspended. Construction began back in 1986 and was completed just a couple of years ago. But now we have everything we need to get rid of "double and triple chins."

Question: Do you swim?

Sergey Lavrov: No, I prefer team sports. I play football and go rafting, which is a very demanding sport. I also work out in the gym. In short, I try to do different sports.

Question: The Foreign Ministry's spokesperson, Maria Zakharova, has danced to the Kalinka folk song. Did you see her performance? If so, did you like it?

Sergey Lavrov: Yes and yes.

Question: Do you dance?

Sergey Lavrov: No, I'm not a dancer.

Question: Diplomacy is good, but we are all made of flesh and blood. Have you ever wanted to punch someone during your meetings with your Western partners?

Sergey Lavrov: This is more or less what Ivan Urgant asked me when I came to his show three years ago, when it was just getting off the ground. He asked me if I ever wanted to swear at any of my colleagues. I answered this question then.

Question: What is the best way to teach a child to be a responsible person? How did your parents teach you when you were kid? Did they spank you or did they try to explain things to you?

Sergey Lavrov: They never spanked me. As for explaining, some words were like a carrot, but other words were like a stick. It's inevitable.

Question: Many people have bought T-shirts with your portrait and a caption "We love Lavrov." What do you think about this "political fashion"?

Sergey Lavrov: We are all human, and, of course, this is flattering. One of my old friends back from school days has even asked me why I don't register the copyright and receive revenues.

Question: Who ruffled you at that famous news conference?

Sergey Lavrov: I wasn't ruffled. I later watched the video and saw I was sitting unperturbed.

Question: But you did let the word slip out, didn't you?

Sergey Lavrov: Sorry, but I'm not the only one caught in a situation where you think the mike is off when it's on. UK Prime Minister David Cameron and US President Barack Obama both have had their microphone slips. One of Obama's mic slips had to do with ballistic missile defence.

Question: Do you have any food preferences regarding national cuisines? Do you enjoy good food?

Sergey Lavrov: No, I can eat almost anything. If I go to a country with a distinctive cuisine, for example China, Japan, Italy or Hungary, I enjoy tasting their national dishes. I'm omnivorous.

Question: If you could send a letter to yourself as a child, what would you say?

Sergey Lavrov: "Seryozha, you have an interesting life ahead of you."

Question: You have been Russia's foreign minister for a long time. Would you like to spend one day as the foreign minister of some other country in some other age?

Sergey Lavrov: This could be interesting. There are several countries that have been annoying us. I'd like to get there for a day to stop this outrage.

Question: The idea deserves a Hollywood movie.

Sergey Lavrov: Why a Hollywood movie? We've learned to make good films too.

Question: Do you ever go to the movies?

Sergey Lavrov: Hardly ever. But I watch films regularly.

Question: What was the last film you saw, and what do you remember from it best?

Sergey Lavrov: Nothing seems to come to mind. I'd like to watch Flight Crew, but it hasn't come out on DVD yet.

Question: Can Mr Sergey Lavrov go to the movies?

Sergey Lavrov: I used to go from time to time. The last time I watched a movie at the Khudozhestvenny cinema, but it was a long time ago.

Question: Mr Lavrov, it is common knowledge that you write verses and are the author of the official anthem of MGIMO University. Do you still write verses? Are you preparing a new book of verses for publication?

Sergey Lavrov: No, I used to write verses. But I haven't written a meaningful verse since my appointment as foreign minister. I wrote verses for informal parties and my friends' birthdays. But I have very little time since my appointment. On the other hand, my time in New York wasn't a walk on the beach either.

Question: Some people wonder if you sleep at all.

Sergey Lavrov: I do sleep at night.

Question: And when your plane lands, it's already morning.

Sergey Lavrov: I try to live by the local time of a host country.

Question: It must be hard to adjust to a new rhythm of daylight and darkness.

Sergey Lavrov: I manage. I don't know how, but people are different.

Question: Good. Another of your hobbies. We have a call.

For the benefit of our listeners, I can say that Mr Lavrov is sitting against the backdrop of our corporate KP banner. I understand why it is red and white. Presumably, this is a hint at your football preference. And now here's the call from our listener: "Hello, Mr Lavrov. It's no secret that you're a football fan, a Spartak Moscow man. Today there'll be a Board of Directors meeting at our favourite club. It will become clear who'll be the next coach and

what the club's development strategy will be. Do you have your own ideas on the matter? Perhaps you'd like to give some advice to club management or even join the Board?"

Sergey Lavrov: Frankly, I didn't know about a board meeting today. After the most recent coaching change, I try to look on from the sidelines. I have no opinion here. I haven't been invited to join, but I know most of its members. We meet regularly, including at the stadium, when Spartak plays in Moscow. I can't predict or second-guess the choice. I firmly believe that Spartak's coach should be a person who symbolises Spartak, at least for my generation. There are quite a few such people, including Dmitry Alenichev.

Question: But in your opinion as a fan, yes or no?

Sergey Lavrov: I just said no, didn't I?

Question: By the way, Mr Lavrov, there's something I've been meaning to ask you. There's a famous photo of you talking on a mobile phone with the Spartak logo on the reverse side [of the phone].

Sergey Lavrov: This i-Phone was a present from my daughter. There's a "tuning company" in Moscow that can put any logo on the back cover.

Question: Is it still working?

Sergey Lavrov: Yes, it is.

Question: Mr Lavrov, the search for Russian identity is a pressing issue today. What helps you personally see yourself as a Russian: the language, culture, education or something else?

Sergey Lavrov: All of the above. I believe there's simply no getting away from the language. The same goes for culture and education, because education is a tool for your immersion into the language and culture – what's more, the kind of immersion that makes you feel as much at home as a fish in water.

Of course, it is essential to look, see and feel your country in the flesh, so to speak. I liked hiking a lot. When I was at school, after Grade 7, we regularly went hiking, first with a teacher and then on our own. In my university years, there were student construction teams in the summer: Khakasia, Tuva, Vladivostok, Yakutia. During the winter holidays, we went skiing in the north: Karelia, the Arkhangelsk Region. I have the greatest memories of this. There are abandoned villages, houses in Karelia, because logging companies closed up and people moved elsewhere. We picked up a dog there, put together a box, mounted it on a sled, and the dog pulled the heavy stuff for us. Details always come up in such reminiscences. They're precious. So it's vital to see and get to know your country.

It's a very good thing that the Russian Geographical Society prioritises this, and a special TV channel has even been created. President Putin supports this effort and sets a personal example. Being a member of the Russian Geographical Society, I try to make a useful contribution to their work.

Question: How important is the development of ties between sister cities today? Are these ties still alive?

Sergey Lavrov: Very much so. To be sure, there are some extreme cases, like when Kiev and certain European cities have abandoned the programme – mostly new NATO and EU members. I hear that a couple of cities have by way of protest terminated or frozen their ties with their sister cities in Russia. However, we actively support these programmes. We aren't into micromanagement. They have direct contacts. This is allowed by all our laws. They do this based on a document in which they directly coordinate their economic exchanges. For the most part, sister cities do not engage in economic activities (this is the domain of interregional ties) but maintain cultural, humanitarian and educational exchanges. I believe this is a wonderful form of cooperation. In certain cases, it helps overcome problems that impede communication in the event of crises and conflict. For example, there's the Organisation of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation. It's a club of Black Sea cities. The organisation's statutory documents include no bans, for example, on Sukhum's participation. Generally, at the unofficial, grassroots level, at the level of these cities and population centres, a lot of things can be dealt with far easier than on the level of official representatives of the organisation's member states. Sometimes, new approaches can be found within the framework of sister cities that will lay the groundwork for the resolution of some serious political problems.

Question: Thank you for your comments. There's another little request from a KP reader. We can't help but read his question: "I'm Alexander Anuchin. I'm 16. Next year, I'll be in Grade 11 at School No. 1414, the former No. 607 that you went to. Could you visit our school on September 1 in honour of its 80th anniversary?"

Sergey Lavrov: First of all, I'm pleased that this question went on the air. Indeed, it's a wonderful school. I try to help it, although perhaps not always as well as I should. Nevertheless, we regularly meet with our schoolmates. Next year, we'll be marking the 50th anniversary of finishing school. The school has set a special day in February for an alumni reunion and this is when we meet. As for September 1, I can't commit to this because I've been signed up for an annual presentation at the MGIMO University. But I will definitely visit the school for the February holidays.

Question: Mr Lavrov, we agreed with our readers that the person who asked the most interesting question would receive a gift from the Foreign Ministry. Which question was the most interesting to you?

Sergey Lavrov: I liked the question about which foreign ministry I'd like to join for a day. It was the most stimulating.

Question: The author will receive a special diplomatic umbrella and a photo with the minister's personal signature.

Mr Lavrov, for our part, on behalf of the KP publishing house, we'd like to give you a set of 25 CDs with the best Soviet and Russian singers/songwriters. We all know that you like songs accompanied by guitar around a fire.

Sergey Lavrov: I'd like to send my best wishes to all KP readers and radio listeners.

Source: http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/2298019