

**Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's remarks and answers to questions at the
Valdai International Discussion Club's session "Russia and the EU: What
follows the "strategic partnership" that never happened?" at the St
Petersburg International Economic Forum, St Petersburg,
June 16, 2016**

I'd like to thank the Valdai Club for its attention to the urgent issues of world politics.

I think that the authoritative audience that gathered here, just as at the club's previous events, is highly interested in seeking opportunities to improve Russia-West relations.

We have never sought confrontation and have always stood for equitable and mutually advantageous dialogue. As for the European Union, we were ready for the broadest possible strategic partnership, which was even proclaimed in the late 1990s. Now we hear Brussels say that Russia is no longer a strategic partner though still remains a strategic state. We are well familiar with such verbal acrobatics. I think it obviously conceals the EU's inability to comprehend reality.

Naturally, we know the five principles voiced by EU High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Federica Mogherini that determine approaches to relations with Russia at the current stage. We believe these principles do not answer the question of "what to do" but show a solidary EU policy of restricting relations with Russia to the utmost in certain areas, including energy, while at the same time preserving the right to invite us for cooperation when it is beneficial to the EU. Clearly, such policy cannot work. "Business as usual" is ruled out. Brussels and Washington like to repeat this expression, but we have long given up the idea of "business as usual" and are ready to cooperate only on an absolute principle of mutual advantage.

We had several discussions on energy cooperation with the EU. During his visit to Moscow last January, Vice-President of the European Commission Maroš Šefčovič expressed interest in resuming a full-fledged energy dialogue between Moscow and Brussels, but nothing happened. Needless to say, we voiced our readiness for it, but nothing has been done so far. The EU-adopted energy doctrinal documents are directly aimed at reducing dependence on Russia. We understand that a large amount of instructions on curtailing cooperation with Russia are generated from overseas. The Americans have their own economic interests. It seems that the logic of "zero sum games" and demands of taking sides – "Are you with us or with them?" – that were addressed practically to all post-Soviet states eventually led to the crisis that broke out in Ukraine. We are witnessing an attempt to use this situation to put economic pressure on us in Europe and at the same time to patch up NATO's solidarity that simply cannot live on in the absence of a common enemy. Deputy Chairman of the Gazprom Board of Directors Alexander Medvedev can tell us more about the energy industry.

I'm sure that the current crisis should help us and the EU understand how to proceed. We will not take offence or shut ourselves off from the outside world. The EU is our close neighbour, our major trade and economic partner. I'm confident that the development of diverse economic, political, cultural and security ties responds to the fundamental interests of Russia and the countries of Europe.

President Vladimir Putin, in a recent article published in the Greek newspaper Kathimerini ahead of his visit to Greece, reiterated that we see no insoluble problems in our relations with the EU. The most important thing is to abandon the lamentable "zero sum game" and try to rely on one's own national interests, not on the contrived principles of consensus and solidarity, lurking behind which is, essentially, the possibility of blackmail on the part of the Russophobic minority. Let's call a spade a spade. As a result, countries that want to sever Russia's relations with the West for purely political reasons are simply forcing the EU and NATO to start from the lowest common denominator.

As for how to resolve the crises in Ukraine, we can talk about this forever. There are the Minsk Agreements. Attempts to rewrite them are unacceptable and untenable. We hope that our Western partners will influence Kiev, especially considering that the Germans, the French and even the Americans are beginning to get tired of their capricious wards, who have signed a document but do not want to honour it. To repeat, we value the increasing voices in Europe, including within the European business community, which reasonably, sensibly and soberly suggest that an equitable dialogue be established and equal forms of cooperation sought.

A couple of days ago, an article by Confindustria Russia President Ernesto Ferlenghi was published in the Kommersant daily, stressing the need for de facto recognition of Russia's important geopolitical role: "all that remains is to convince the EU that it's impossible to avoid relations with Russia." Imagine the banalities respected people have to pronounce in an effort to reverse an unhealthy trend in our common history.

President Vladimir Putin will soon meet with European Commission President Jean Claude Juncker. We hope that this conversation will help us to start moving in a direction where, I'm sure, everyone should move anyway if we want to uphold the interests of our countries and our people.

Question: Today, you and Mr Juncker stressed the importance of dialogue between Russia and the EU. Evidently, no major decision is expected here yet. Perhaps you should concentrate on small steps? Specifically what measures could be taken at this stage to consolidate trust?

Sergey Lavrov: We have taken stock of our relations with the EU. The result was an impressive "non-paper" material. We expect to hand it over to our colleagues and propose taking stock together.

As a matter of fact, our dialogue has almost never halted. Experts continue to meet in the majority of industry-specific areas. Expert contacts continue, albeit not on the ministerial level. Recently, we had a regular round of dialogue on migration. This is also a sphere of our common interests. By committing to paper the facts that characterise the present state of affairs, the way we see it and the way the EU sees it, we hope this will help start a business-like conversation, casting aside all geopolitical considerations and unscrupulous political rhetoric, because these political games come at too high a price.

Question: Mr Minister, US Secretary of State John Kerry said a few days ago that the United States is losing patience with the way the efforts to reach a settlement in Syria are going and with regard to President of Syria Bashar al-Assad's fate. True, the State Department later said that this statement was not a threat. Could you comment?

Sergey Lavrov: I saw the statement, and I was very surprised. John is usually a restrained politician. I do not know what happened to provoke this. I also saw the clarifications the US State Department spokesperson gave later. It would probably pay to be a bit more patient, of course, all the more so as US President Barack Obama has said repeatedly that his administration is following a policy of "strategic patience."

As for the substance of what got US Secretary of State John Kerry so upset, he said that they are losing patience because we are not doing what we are supposed to do with President of Syria Bashar al-Assad, though we have no obligations to anyone and made no promises to anyone here. We agreed that everyone taking part in the efforts to reach a settlement in Syria will respect the agreements reached by the International Syria Support Group, which were enshrined in UN Security Council resolutions. I remind you that these agreements set out a comprehensive strategy that concerns concrete steps that must be taken in the military area (cessation of military hostilities and transition to a ceasefire), in the humanitarian area, and regarding the political process, of course. The cessation of hostilities has not been 100 percent effective, but it has nonetheless helped considerably and tangibly to reduce the level of violence.

Regarding the humanitarian area, last year, only two or three besieged areas had access to humanitarian aid, but this year, 15 out of 18 such areas are receiving humanitarian aid. The Syrian government's constructive position has played a huge part in this work. Yes, it is true that they do not immediately accept everything the UN proposes, and they suspect that some of this aid might go to the regime's opponents. It is understandable that the Syrian government is reluctant to agree to something that could be used against its own interests.

But to reiterate, there is progress. The only area where there is no progress is the political process. I have just met with UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon and Special Envoy of the UN Secretary General for Syria Staffan de Mistura, and we had a frank discussion about this. Political dialogue with the participation of all Syrian sides has yet to begin, although the resolution requires that the delegation be inclusive. Turks do not allow Kurds to participate, while the so-called High Negotiations Committee refuses to recognise members of other

opposition groups as equal in status and demands recognition as the only chief negotiator, although the resolution states that all Syrian groups should be represented at the talks, including the Riyadh group, the so-called High Negotiations Committee, and the Moscow and Cairo groups. It has not been possible to get all these people to sit down at the negotiating table, in keeping with the UN Security Council's clear-cut mandate. This, however, is through no fault of our own, but through the fault of our US partners who for some reason cannot or do not want to put pressure on their allies in the region. Meanwhile, these allies have adopted ultimatum-like positions.

As is known, Turkey is not allowing the Syrian Kurds' Democratic Union Party to the negotiating table. It makes no secret of this and, in my opinion, even flaunts the fact. The group that calls itself the High Negotiations Committee says it will not sit down at the table with the Syrian government as long as airstrikes continue against the positions of the regime's opponents who wish to join the ceasefire.

I would like to recall that in February, when the ISSG had a meeting, none other than US Secretary of State John Kerry publicly announced the decision to begin the process of involving the opposition and the government in the ceasefire regime. This does not apply to Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIS. So groups that are based in the same areas as Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIS and that do not wish to be the target of strikes should physically dissociate themselves, on the ground, pull out of these areas so that the fight against Jabhat al-Nusra may continue effectively and so that these groups are not affected. Mr Kerry said this in early February. In late February, we had high level contacts with representatives of the US intelligence community. We reminded them that they had promised to get the regime opponents who cooperate with the US pulled out of Jabhat al-Nusra's positions. Our colleague requested a couple of weeks. Three months have passed since then. Now the Americans tell us they are unable to remove these "good" opposition members from the positions that are held by Jabhat al-Nusra and that they need another two or three months. I get the impression that there's some kind of game going on and that perhaps they want to preserve Jabhat al-Nusra in some form or another and then use it to overthrow the regime. I asked Mr Kerry bluntly about this. He swears that this is not the case. Then it is important to see why the Americans, with all of their capabilities, are unable to get the detachments that cooperate with them to leave the territory controlled by bandits and terrorists.

This is a vicious circle. The group that calls itself the High Negotiations Committee says it will not sit down at the negotiating table with the Kurds and the government until the airstrikes end. And ending them means strengthening it even more, with the smuggling of arms, military equipment, ammunition and militants, all of which keep flowing from Turkey to Syria. We point all this out to the Americans. We have daily video conferences between the Russian Hmeymim base and the US coalition command in the capital of Jordan.

A 24/7 joint Russian-US ceasefire monitoring centre has been created in Geneva. Incidentally, all these channels are working effectively. There is no hysteria there, unlike in the public space, where we are accused of every sin imaginable. We present hard facts and terrain

imagery, showing who is positioned where, where a ceasefire regime can be declared and where this is simply unacceptable because it will play into terrorists' hands. That said, I hope this detailed description of our relations will help improve understanding that impatience directed toward us is inappropriate.

Question: Former French Foreign Minister Hubert Vedrine was absolutely right to suggest we will now have to crawl out of the “trap” in Russia-EU relations. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker actually said the same thing.

Could you give some specific examples of what can be done right now? What are the first steps that might get us out of the trap?

Sergey Lavrov: First, I would like to tell you that the Ukrainian crisis is becoming a touchstone. Let's remember how the sanctions were first imposed even before the Minsk agreements. I do not like to talk about them, but in this context, I am not saying this to show that they are not something we like or would ever accept, but to convey the idea that these discriminatory things can be used against us. Logically, I think, this confrontation nests in far earlier events that took place before the Ukrainian crisis. They suggest that the policy of containment against Russia had been started a long time ago. A large batch of EU sanctions was imposed almost immediately after the Malaysian Boeing was hit over Ukraine. No one went on to explain that the incident had to be investigated first. Only we alone insisted that the UN Security Council adopt a harsh resolution which outlined requirements to conduct an open and responsible investigation according to international standards and to update the UN Security Council on how it was progressing. No one presented a report to the UN Security Council. A self-created group comprising Dutch, Australian and Ukrainian investigators did not even care to invite Malaysia at first, even though it was a Malaysian plane that was shot down. That country joined the investigation in December, nearly six months later, but the sanctions were adopted quickly. We all had a feeling that there was a reason and an excuse for those sanctions.

The next block of sanctions was adopted in September 2014, three days after the first agreements were signed in Minsk and hailed by everyone. At the same time, the President of the Council of Europe, then Herman Van Rompuy, issued the order – in a hush-hush manner, without consulting the heads of state and government – and that order is still in effect. I know that even some of the heads of state and government expressed to him in private their extreme disappointment with his arbitrary decision that is eroding relations between Russia and the EU.

The sanctions were extended again as soon as the second Minsk agreements were signed. I think the EU has long since begun looking for a formula that will make it possible to break this vicious circle. And they thought they had come up with a very good option: sanctions will be lifted when Russia fully fulfils the Minsk agreements. We have just heard from those who read the relevant documents that it is Ukraine that should fulfil the Minsk accords in the first

place. The greater part of 13 paragraphs is addressed to Kiev, including one on decentralisation that was written personally by German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President Francois Hollande. There is nothing even to think up in this regard: just take these formulas and put them into a relevant law. The idea that sanctions will be lifted when Russia complies with the Minsk agreements fully suits those in Ukraine who do not want to do anything at all. They don't want decentralisation, amnesty or any special status. They are subverting the implementation of all political sections of the Minsk accords and insist that sanctions should be extended because Russia is unable to make the separatists lay down their arms. In this case I'd like the participants in the discussion of this issue to remember that those who are called separatists signed the Minsk accords, which confirm Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity. It is wrong to call them separatists.

During yesterday's meeting of the Contact Group, our Ukrainian colleagues said again that Kiev will fulfil its commitments on the political sections of the Minsk agreements only if there is not a single violation of a complete, unconditional ceasefire for three months. This is simply unrealistic. There will certainly be someone, maybe on the Ukrainian side, that will shoot somewhere a couple of times, and they will suggest starting a new count of these three months. I'd like our colleagues to understand this, although most Europeans that are following this process do understand it. I hope that they mention this at their meetings with Ukrainian leaders. I believe it is high time to stop publicly subverting the Minsk accords, and to launch direct dialogue between Kiev and Donbass, which is written in black and white in these Minsk documents. The Minsk accords state directly that the law on a special status as well as amendments to the Constitution must be agreed upon with this region.

In this context I believe it is always necessary to understand the roots of events, and they appeared long before the Ukrainian crisis. We can recall the reaction of our American friends to what happened with Edward Snowden, when they demanded that he should be returned immediately, a gesture that would not be very humane or humanitarian. When we explained to them politely why this cannot be done, US President Barack Obama cancelled his visit to Moscow that was planned on the eve of the G20 summit in St Petersburg. Can you imagine the level at which the grievance is expressed and the excuse for it? I haven't even mentioned the Magnitsky Law, which was adopted long before the Ukrainian events. Now that an independent producer has made a film about how the Magnitsky case was created and used, the European Parliament has banned the film. There were attempts to ban it in the United States as well. This is freedom of speech for you! We have many proverbs: about a guilty mind that betrays itself or that sometimes we "have a finger in the pie".

I think everyone should understand that competition will not disappear and that large countries will always influence events more than mid-sized powers. The United States will probably always proclaim the need to be stronger than all others in everything as its *raison d'être*. This is in its genetic code, but realism should still prevail. I'm even ready to quote former British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, who said: "Americans will always do the right thing, only after they have tried everything else." He did say this. If a lot of wrong things

were done in Iraq and Syria, there is hope (if Churchill, may he rest in peace, was right) that in Syria, things will be better.

Question: The EU has proposed five principles of relations with Russia, which I interpret as inability to look into the future. The EU is stuck in the present. Will Russia respond with its own five principles? If so, what would they be?

Sergey Lavrov: I have seen these five principles, just as most other people. When I met with Federica Mogherini, the EU High Representative for Common Foreign and Security Policy, on the sidelines of the OSCE Ministerial Council in Belgrade in the autumn of 2014, we talked about the need to determine our relations. She said she would prepare a creative agenda for the EU-Russia relationship and that she hoped it would be approved at the EU Foreign Affairs Council meeting. We know what happened. She only drew a rough sketch of the current situation.

If I remember correctly, Russia is only mentioned in one of these five principles. More to the point, they call for enhancing their energy security, reducing their dependence on external factors and promoting the Eastern Partnership, which is not at all a harmless idea. I know about attempts to make this project constructive, but a desire to act contrary to Russia and to make friends with our neighbours to spite Russia have gained the upper hand. One of the principles provides for selective engagement with Russia and for investing in young people, which not only the EU is doing.

This is a programme for the EU rather than for its relations with Russia. This is the EU's vision of its geopolitical role and objectives. In response, we advanced an initiative which I mentioned in my previous comment: we suggested surveying the current situation and the instruments we have created, starting with summits. Russia was the only partner of the EU with which it held summit meetings twice a year. We wondered back when our relations were good whether we needed to meet so often. Let's decide whether we need these summits at all. If we do, then how often should we meet: once a year, once every other year, or three times a year?

We have the Russia-EU Permanent Partnership Council (PPC), where the foreign ministers of Russia and the EU analyse all spheres of activity within the framework of the Russia-EU Partnership and Cooperation Agreement. As for the quality of our relations, the PPC did not meet even once when Catherine Ashton was the EU High Representative for Common Foreign and Security Policy. We only met in passing, and Ms Ashton talked about the Middle East or some other crisis, but she never analysed our relations, although analysis is the key function of this council.

We will soon be meeting with President of the European Commission Jean-Claude Juncker, and I hope President Putin will urge him to conduct a joint inventory and consider all sectoral dialogues to see whether we need to conduct them or not.

Yevgeny Vinokurov, Director of the EDB Centre for Integration Studies, spoke in his remarks about the large number of functions – about 140 – delegated to the supranational level. The figure is even larger in the EU, but the European Commission would like to increase it. Our colleagues at analytical companies have not mentioned this fact, but tensions are running high because of the Commission's desire to become involved in bilateral talks, even talks between corporations. I believe the EU should review its position.

Russia has been accused of trying to cause a split [in Europe] because it is not dealing with the EU but wants to deal with individual countries that feel sympathetic to Russia. What else can we do? We cannot part ways with Europe, which is our closest neighbour and largest partner. Since the European Commission has frozen its relationship with us, we have to talk directly with national governments.

* * * * *

Source:http://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/2321176?p_p_id=101_INSTANCE_cKNonkJE02Bw&_101_INSTANCE_cKNonkJE02Bw_languageId=en_GB