

Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's remarks and answers to questions during the Government Hour at the State Duma of the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation, Moscow, January 25, 2017

Mr Volodin,
Members of the State Duma,

Thank you for inviting me to speak as part of the Government Hour in the State Duma of the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation.

The Foreign Ministry appreciates the interest you take in foreign policy matters. We have always viewed parliamentary diplomacy as an important and effective asset for implementing Russia's foreign policy, enhancing trust and mutual understanding in international affairs. The Foreign Ministry is interested in stepping up cooperation with the Federal Assembly.

These coordinated efforts are especially relevant at this point in history. The situation across the world remains challenging, as President of Russia Vladimir Putin has said on a number of occasions, including in his Address to the Federal Assembly and during his annual news conference in December 2016. The burden of mutual distrust narrows the opportunities for finding effective solutions to the challenges the international community is facing.

The current state of international affairs is to a large extent attributable to the determination by adepts of the obsolete concept of unilateral hegemony to maintain their global dominance at any cost and impose pseudo-liberal values across the board without taking into account the cultural and civilizational diversity in today's world. Never before have the principles of self-determination and respect for human rights been used so cynically as a cover for political and economic expansion.

At the same time, the world is rapidly changing. We are witnessing the redistribution of economic power and of the political leverage it brings. The process resulting in the formation of a sustainable multipolar system has become an objective reality.

Russia's vision is reflected in the updated Foreign Policy Concept that was approved by President of Russia Vladimir Putin in November 2016. Based on the rule of international law and the central role played by the United Nations and its Security Council, the document highlights the need to combat terrorism and extremism. The Concept stresses Russia's proactive participation in multilateral frameworks, including the Union State of Russia and Belarus, the EAEU, the CSTO, the CIS, BRICS, the SCO, and the Group of Twenty, while stipulating continuity with fundamental principles such as Russia's commitment to a

pragmatic, independent and multidirectional foreign policy that have proven effective.

The larger part of the international community calls for making international life more democratic. This explains growing support for the non-ideological approaches to multilateral and collective work proposed by Russia. An increasing number of countries view Russia as the guarantor of stability and the centre of attraction for those who want to choose their future themselves.

Russian diplomacy continues working to protect Russia's interests and create the most favourable external conditions possible for ensuring Russia's security and boosting its development and the prosperity of its citizens. This is an absolute priority for us.

As for pressing issues of the international agenda, our attention is focused on the Middle East and North Africa, for understandable reasons, because a dangerous vacuum of power has developed there as a result of the export of democracy. A huge region from the Atlantic to Afghanistan nearly perished in the black hole of lawlessness. The essence of measures that are being taken by Russia in cooperation with other countries is well known. I will not speak about them in detail. I will only say that the fight against terrorism cannot be effective without restoring stability in the Middle East and without finding an effective peaceful solution to the numerous conflicts there, including in Syria, Iraq, Libya and Yemen. We are strengthening our cooperation with Turkey, Iran and other countries in the region for dealing with the acutest aspects of the Syrian crisis. Our coordinated efforts, primarily those of our militaries, have helped liberate Aleppo from the extremists and then to introduce a ceasefire based on the December 29, 2016 agreement.

The Astana meeting between the delegations of the Syrian Government and the armed opposition yesterday and the day before was held to promote a political settlement in keeping with relevant UN Security Council resolutions.

We continue to be alarmed by the situation in eastern Ukraine. The biggest obstacle to the settlement of the internal Ukrainian crisis is the stubborn unwillingness of the Kiev authorities to honour the commitments they made in Minsk nearly two years ago. Moreover, Kiev continues to stage military provocations on the contact line and has not abandoned its militarist retaliation rhetoric.

Contacts with our foreign partners, including the Normandy format countries and the United States, point to a common understanding on the lack of alternative to the full implementation of the Minsk Agreements. However, this goal cannot be achieved without a direct dialogue between Kiev, Donetsk and Lugansk, which is stipulated in UN Security Council Resolution 2202.

We are focusing on post-Soviet integration processes. We are helping establish the foreign ties of the Eurasian Economic Union in the context of implementing President Vladimir Putin's initiative on establishing a broad partnership in Eurasia.

A free-trade agreement between the Eurasian Economic Union and Vietnam has entered into force. Talks on concluding an agreement on trade and economic cooperation between the Eurasian Economic Union and the People's Republic of China are picking up momentum. Work is underway to integrate the development of the Eurasian Economic Union and the Silk Road Economic Belt. During the May 2016 summit in Sochi, ASEAN members actively supported Vladimir Putin's idea on developing a broad Eurasian partnership. The Eurasian Economic Commission now cooperates with over 12 countries and integration associations. On the whole, about 50 states have voiced their interest in cooperating with the Eurasian Economic Union. This helps involve Russia in Asia Pacific integration processes, which is in Russia's long-term national interests and advances the tasks of comprehensive development of Siberia and the Far East.

The policy of strengthening the strategic partnership between Russia and China remains unchanged. We see these relations as a model for responsible major powers in the 21st century. Our foreign policy cooperation, including at the UN, has asserted itself as an important factor in maintaining global stability.

We continue to focus on deepening our strategic partnership with India, Vietnam and Laos and on expanding ties with other Asia Pacific states. Relations with Japan received a new impulse in virtually all areas as a result of President Vladimir Putin's first official visit in the past 11 years.

Dialogue with the United States and the European Union can only be based on the principles of equality, mutual respect and consideration of each other's interests, as well as dialogue with all other partners. It is clear that time and serious efforts are required to overcome the severe damage to Russian-US partnership caused under Barack Obama's administration. As Russian President Vladimir Putin said, we are ready to do our best to improve relations in the interests of our peoples, global security and stability. We support US President Donald Trump's position in favour of mending normal interaction. At the same time, we will certainly judge based on deeds. We are confident that the promotion of national interests, decency and predictability will set things straight in the long run.

The legacy of the former US administration also badly affected relations between Russia and the EU. We can see a growing demand in the EU business community and society for the normalisation of relations with Russia. We hope that Brussels will be able to sensibly set priorities and will not take its lead from a small but very aggressive group of Russophobes. Our proposals on how to return to common

sense were expressed by President Vladimir Putin during a meeting with President of the European Commission Jean-Claude Juncker in June 2016. The Eurasian Economic Commission's proposals on working contacts with the European Commission, suspended by Brussels, also remain valid.

Together with colleagues from other agencies, we are taking measures in response to NATO's actions aimed at changing the military and political situation in Europe, including the deployment of elements of NATO's military capabilities near the Russian border and the creation of the US global missile defence system and its European segment. Russia is a peace-loving country, but our love of peace is backed up by our readiness and ability to protect our citizens at all times.

We are deepening ties with Cuba, Venezuela, Nicaragua, Argentina, Brazil, South Africa, Nigeria, Sudan, Ethiopia, Guinea, Uganda, and other countries in Latin America and Africa and their integration structures.

Particular attention is being paid to supporting Russian businesses abroad, promoting major investment projects, and preventing discrimination and unfair practices against Russian companies.

Upholding the rights and interests of our fellow citizens caught in a difficult situation in a foreign country is our all-time priority. We are expanding international humanitarian and cultural exchanges, which are on the rise with an overwhelming majority of countries. We are consolidating partnerships with civil society and the media, also keeping in mind the need to provide a proper response to the information war unleashed against Russia.

The cowardly assassination of Russian Ambassador to Turkey Andrey Karlov once again reminded us of the need to enhance the safety of our foreign-based agencies and their employees. Several departments put together a package of measures approved by President Putin, which Prime Minister Medvedev used to issue instructions. We are pushing to have them implemented, which will require additional resources. We count on your support in this regard

All our actions are aimed at creating a proper environment for a peaceful and steady development of Russia and upholding the interests of its citizens. I believe that our joint efforts and coordinated actions with parliamentary and public diplomacy will allow us to successfully achieve all the objectives posed by our country's leadership to our diplomatic service.

Thank you.

Question: US President Donald Trump said during his election campaign that as soon as he becomes president he will change relations with China regarding job

creation, bringing jobs back to America, moving multinational production back to US territory, and where that is impossible or unprofitable, introducing additional import duties. He telephoned the head of the Taiwanese administration, prompting a negative response from the Chinese leadership. What position will Russia adopt if US-Chinese relations run into difficulties? After all, we have a friendly, strategic relationship with the PRC. It would be great if the three great powers – Russia, China and the United States – established friendly ties and cooperation.

Sergey Lavrov: I entirely agree with you. Basically, you have answered the question. We never align ourselves with anybody against somebody else.

Our relations with China indeed are on an upswing, they are thriving. They are rich, trusting, friendly and effective like never before with regard to bilateral cooperation in all areas and our cooperation and coordination of steps in the international arena. I do not think that prospects for the development of relations with any country in the world should call into question Russian-Chinese strategic partnership and multilateral cooperation.

I absolutely agree with you in that ideally, of course, all major powers should be aware of their responsibility for building relations with each other for the good of their peoples and so as not to undermine global stability, not to create confrontational gaps in international relations. This is required by the objectively evolving multipolar world that is replacing the bipolar and unipolar world that has failed to materialise.

Russia, the US, and China along with the European Union, powerful countries in Asia, Latin America, and Africa, such as India, South Africa and Brazil, among others, are the centres of current economic growth and financial power. The political influence of these countries is also growing. As a matter of fact, a group of associations, such as the EU and integration associations in the post-Soviet space, are emerging, without which it will be very difficult to deal with international economic and political issues.

We believe that as Russia, the US and China build their relations, this triangle should not be closed or directed toward some projects that could worry other states. [They should be] open and fair. I am convinced that the economic structure of Russia, the US and China is such that there is a great deal of complementarity in the material and economic sphere.

As for international security problems, these three countries play a very important role. Russia and China have restrained attempts to introduce confrontational, force-based solutions into world politics. We expect that Donald Trump, who has confirmed his commitment to focus primarily on US [domestic] problems and to abandon interference in the internal affairs of other states, will do the same.

Question: Russian diplomats are making significant efforts to spread Russia's influence across the world, to have different countries support our negotiating positions, and to promote our national interests. In this context, we believe that the Concept of State Policy for Promoting International Development approved in 2014 is critical. It has so far been implemented mainly through UN institutions and other multilateral channels. What's your take on the prospects and the effectiveness of implementing this concept as a soft power tool to promote our strategic interests in different countries? What do we need to do in order to step up this work?

Sergey Lavrov: Accounts Chamber auditor Alexander Zhdankov already mentioned that the concept of Russia's participation in promoting international development is being successfully converted into practice. We do have impressive figures in the sphere of development assistance. Last year, Russia provided bilateral and multilateral assistance worth of \$1.16 billion. The lion's share, more than 77 per cent, is used to provide assistance through bilateral channels. I believe this is the most effective way to support our friends and allies, and strengthen Russia's position in these countries.

The bulk of bilateral assistance goes to the CIS countries, who are our CSTO allies and integration project partners; 22.5 per cent of that amount is disbursed through multilateral organisations, such as the World Bank Group and the UN (although the World Bank formally is a specialised UN agency, but still is a fairly independent organisation). The assistance provided via the UN, not including the World Bank, amounts to about \$105 million per year. It is always provided for a specific cause, it's never depersonalised, and all its multilateral project recipients are aware that it comes from Russia. We have signed an agreement to create a fund jointly with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), which will do an even better job of directing our assistance funds.

Among the steps that I would still suggest reviewing, and we are discussing this issue with the Finance Ministry, is to do more to make sure that what we send through the World Bank Group channels is associated with Russia. Often, aid coming through these channels is impersonal, as if it comes from some abstract World Bank executives.

Question: In your remarks, you spoke about the situation in Ukraine and around it, which doesn't give cause for optimism, to put it mildly. It seems that the settlement of this problem does not interest Kiev or the leading global players – except for Russia, whose efforts towards this end have been rewarded with sanctions and mudslinging. Can this negative trend change now that Donald Trump and his administration have entered the political stage and in light of the upcoming change of leaders in some Western states? Is Kiev capable of reaching an agreement at all?

Sergey Lavrov: We have not seen this capability in Kiev so far. Here is a recent example. The other day President Poroshenko said that Kiev would not take a single step to implement the political aspects of the Minsk Agreements until its security requests are fulfilled, including the establishment of Ukrainian control over the entire length of the Russian-Ukrainian border. This was said in public by a president who signed the Minsk Agreements, which state clearly that control over the border will be re-established in full only after Kiev honours all its political commitments, such as amnesty, local elections and the approval of a special status for Donetsk and Lugansk and its formalisation in the Ukrainian constitution. President Poroshenko blatantly contradicts the commitments he signed along with President of Russia Vladimir Putin, President of France Francois Hollande and Federal Chancellor of Germany Angela Merkel.

Ukrainian Interior Minister Arsen Avakov has recently visited the headquarters of the Ukrainian National Guard, where he spoke about the need to prepare to use military force to reclaim the southeastern regions and Crimea. These people stand at the helm in Ukraine and are monitoring the implementation of the Minsk Agreements, or rather the efforts to hinder their implementation.

We know from our European colleagues that the overwhelming majority of European governments are fully aware of what's happening. They see Kiev's unwillingness to implement the Minsk Agreements and know that the recurring violence and shooting at the contact line are mostly provoked by the Ukrainian Armed Forces with Kiev's connivance and with support from the so-called volunteer battalions, including the Right Sector, which has preserved its autonomous status, does not take orders from the Ukrainian military leaders and acts as it wants. These activities are encouraged because Ukrainian leaders know that if peace and tranquillity return to the region their sponsors will demand that they start delivering on their pledges.

I hope that if Donald Trump adopts a pragmatic approach to foreign policy and follows up on his intention not to interfere in the affairs of other countries, which will not create any additional problems for the United States, the Kiev authorities will see that they have to paddle their own canoe rather than rely on their overseas patrons, as they did when Barack Obama and Joe Biden were sitting in Washington.

Question: Britain voted to exit the European Union last year. Marine le Pen has promised to hold a similar referendum in France if she wins the presidential election. The EU's sanctions policy regarding Russia is controversial, because many European leaders don't support it. Does this mean that we may witness the EU's collapse in the near future?

The Baltic countries often brazenly infringe on the rights and interests of their own Russian-speaking groups of population. Do you think that Russia should take a tougher economic and political stand with regard to these countries?

Sergey Lavrov: We have been speaking about the discrimination of Russian speakers in the Baltic countries at various venues, including the UN, the OSCE, the Council of Europe and numerous committees, such as the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, and we also respond to each unfriendly step via bilateral channels. I believe that we must give practical answers to the practical manifestations of Russophobia. There are no ready recipes for every occasion and every act of discrimination. I can tell you that we take each event of this kind very seriously.

As for the EU's collapse, we have never wanted this. President Putin said more than once that Russia would like the EU to be strong, united and independent. It is bewildering to hear about the alleged Russian plots against the EU, that we have toppled the Democratic administration in the United States and plan to do the same in France, Germany, the Netherlands and other countries. These rumours are being kept alive not only through irresponsible political statements. I have recently watched a Euronews interview with a political analyst who said as if it were a fact that Russia is interested in weakening the EU. Euronews did not provide any comment to this, not to mention an alternative opinion.

As President Putin has said, we want the EU to be strong, united and independent, and we don't want the majority in the EU, which represents normal political forces and normal states, to toe the line of a small group of Russia haters who have been speculating on the principles of solidarity and consensus in order to propel the EU onto a path which the majority of the EU nations don't like.

Question: The Mongolian Government is planning to build several hydropower stations on the Selenga River tributaries. This is an issue of concern to the Baikal regions in Russia because of unpredictable consequences for Lake Baikal. Selenga is the largest river flowing into Lake Baikal. Russian scientists fear that the construction of dams will lower the water level in the lake and reduce the annual runoff into it, which is fraught with serious environmental problems for Baikal, one of Russia's most important natural landmarks and a UNESCO world heritage site. The Selenga River tributaries are not cross-border rivers and so Mongolia's economic activities on them cannot be regulated by international rules or the bilateral Agreement on the Protection and Use of Transboundary Waters, which Russia and Mongolia ratified in 1995. We need to find other solutions and sign new agreements. What is the ministry's stand on this? Is the Foreign Ministry involved in the efforts to safeguard Russia's interests in this issue? What other solutions are possible?

Sergey Lavrov: We are aware of this problem and we are actively contributing to its settlement. I discussed this issue personally with President of Mongolia TsakhiagiinElbegdorj during a visit to Mongolia last year. The President and Prime Minister of Russia also discuss it during their contacts with the Mongolian leaders. Apart from outlining this problem, we have forwarded our views on the situation to our Mongolian colleagues through the relevant economic agencies and also our proposals for resolving the problem without building a hydropower plant. We can supply enough electricity to Mongolia without increasing risks to the ecosystem of Lake Baikal and the surrounding region.

Question: The United States has withdrawn from the Trans-Pacific Partnership negotiations and agreement, while Russia has indicated its interest in the TPP. Has this increased the probability of Russia joining this project? Would this be expedient?

Sergey Lavrov: I wouldn't say that we have shown interest in joining the TPP project. Both China and Russia said they are monitoring this process and have noted that it aims to create a "private club" whose members will first adopt its rules and only then invite other countries to join it on conditions that were developed without their contribution.

We responded to this approach with a concept of open economic spaces. China advanced the initiative for a Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) simultaneously with the TPP project. The RCEP has something in common with China's Silk Road Economic Belt. Russia is promoting the Eurasian economic integration project, which is not limited to the five member states [of the EAEU] and is holding discussions on interaction tools, including the possibility of creating a free trade zone, with some 50 countries and their associations. President Putin has formulated the idea of a Greater Eurasia that would integrate the EAEU, SCO and ASEAN economies.

I do not know how this process will develop now that the United States has officially withdrawn from the TPP project (President Donald Trump has signed a memorandum regarding this). For example, Australia has announced its intention to save the project at all costs and to proceed towards its implementation with the remaining TPP members. Japan has said the deal is over without the United States. Let's wait and see what happens next. As I said, we do not believe the TPP is based on the right approach. The process should be open to all countries willing to take part in trade liberalisation and in promoting mutual investments. The conditions, norms and rules should be discussed with the involvement of all interested countries.

Question: President Vladimir Putin's visit to Japan has undoubtedly created a new foreign policy environment in the Asia Pacific region. How does the Foreign

Ministry plan to modify its practical diplomacy? Currently, China and Japan are competing for influence in the region. We must build on our relations with these countries. Will the Russian foreign policy change in the context of this new Pacific configuration?

Sergey Lavrov: I don't think that our foreign policy will change. At any rate, the fact that President Vladimir Putin has paid an official visit to Japan does not reflect any changes in our approaches to cooperation with Asian countries or other states. We have invariably said that we want to expand cooperation with Japan in every area, including trade, the economy, culture, education, science and technology, and, of course, foreign policy cooperation.

Bilateral dialogue continued unabated for 11 years, during which President Vladimir Putin did not visit Japan. President Putin and Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe communicated regularly. Prime Minister Abe has visited Russia on several occasions. Mr Putin and Mr Abe met at virtually every multilateral event in which they took part. Our approach has always focused on good relations.

As in my reply about the potential Russia-United States-China trio, I would like to say that we don't maintain friendly relations with any country to the detriment of someone else. We have never tried to take advantage of contradictions between other countries, including those between Japan and China. Some other parties to international relations regularly try to score points and to engage in various intrigues using these contradictions. We don't play such games. This is an absolutely responsible statement. I'll be ready to hear out anyone who has even the slightest evidence of a different approach and to respond accordingly.

Question: The European Court of Human Rights has recently made a politically motivated and biased decision on the well-known Dima Yakovlev Law. This is not the first politically motivated decision made to the detriment of justice. The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) continues to maintain sanctions against our colleagues and virtually hampers their participation in the work of PACE. At the same time, the Council of Europe is an institution whose time has passed. The same is true of the OSCE, a Cold War relic, an institution from the bygone age. Does it make sense for Russia to continue participating in the work of these institutions, where we continue to play the part of students or should we establish a new format of cooperation with European colleagues, where Russia would act as an equal partner? What do you think about this?

Sergey Lavrov: Russia already acts as an equal partner in the organisations you mentioned, except the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, which has obviously abused the principles of equality and mutual consideration of interests that lay at the foundation of this oldest European organisation. (I'd say, it is an auxiliary club, rather than one of the Council of Europe's governing bodies).

Unfortunately, no one had ever predicted that attempts would be made to limit the rights of some country. Therefore no such ban was included in PACE regulatory documents.

I believe that, while continuing to honestly and openly defend our interests, which demand the complete lifting of any restrictions regarding the Russian delegation, we should now simultaneously demand that CE regulatory documents include provisions banning any discrimination whatsoever against any delegation, provisions that in effect silence a rightful member of a European organisation.

It is impossible to play these games at the Council of Europe itself. I'm talking about the intergovernmental component of the Council of Europe in which the culture of consensus exists. Unfortunately, this culture of consensus is now being put to the test because the Ukrainian delegation and its patrons are trying to submit non-consensus, unbalanced, unilateral and unscrupulous resolutions, one way or another. This does not make the Council of Europe any more influential. But the Council of Europe is an organisation whose activity hinges on legally binding conventions forming the common European legal framework. This is in our interest because we don't want to see any separate European Union space or that of any other country, so that they would mentor us like students, while posing as teachers. It is precisely the legal framework and foundation of the Council of Europe that prevents such actions, although there have always been and will always be attempts to abuse its authority.

The OSCE is not an organisation, it has no charter for the time being, and we have long advocated that its charter be finalised. It relies on political declarations, rather than legal documents. But the OSCE stipulates the consensus principle, which also guarantees our full-fledged involvement and complete protection of our interests. We respond when the majority starts following those who want to launch confrontation inside this organisation. In reality, our interests are not being infringed upon in any way.

Question: We are grateful to the Foreign Ministry and you personally for your active assistance to Zarina Albegonova, who has been fighting in vain in Turkish courts for five years to be reunited with her daughter Aylin. Her ex-husband, a Turkish citizen, stole their passports and kidnapped Aylin in April 2011. Zarina's appeals to the local law enforcement and judicial authorities have not produced the desired result, even though the mother has the custody of her children under Turkish law. Moreover, the kidnapping and illegal detention of a child is a criminal offence in Turkey. In 2012, an Istanbul court sentenced the ex-husband to five months in prison for kidnapping a child but released him on parole. The child is still living with her kidnapper and has not been returned to the mother by court decision. Does the Foreign Ministry of Russia plan to take additional measures to return a Russian citizen to her homeland?

Sergey Lavrov: This is not the only case of this kind. I can tell you about several dozen similar situations involving Russian citizens. The problem mostly concerns families that have separated, when a child is the main victim. We hold regular consultations on this issue. We always raise it at talks with our Turkish colleagues. There are many aspects in this particular case that point to the violation of Turkish laws, norms and regulations. However, the issue has been taken to court, and we expect the trial to be fair. I cannot say how it will end, but I fully agree with you that injustice must not be left unanswered.

Question: The latest surge of doping accusations against our athletes has been well orchestrated. The people see this as Russia's punishment for pursuing a consistent and honest policy. The blows have been directed at the most vulnerable groups. Our Paralympic athletes cannot take part in international competitions and may be unable to attend the [2018 Winter] Paralympic Games in South Korea. Some of our track and field athletes have refused to perform under the Russian flag. The phrase "sport is outside politics" sounds like ridicule. As lawmakers, we uphold clean sports and respect WADA recommendations. But doping has become an international issue, with numerous proposals advanced to reform WADA and adopt a convention to protect the rights of athletes. Is the Foreign Ministry helping protect the rights of our athletes? Have you spoken up against collective responsibility and discrimination in sport in high offices?

Sergey Lavrov: We spoke about this issue at all international venues, including the Council of Europe and UNESCO, which have relevant conventions. By the way, UNESCO has a relevant committee, the Approval Committee of the Fund for the Elimination of Doping in Sport, which is chaired by Gennady Aleshin, a Russian citizen who has been recently elected for a second two-year term. The committee is a very active body, and Aleshin's re-election as its chair is evidence that not all countries are willing to toe the line of those who shoot fake documentaries and prepare reports that are short on any proof of the Russian government's alleged involvement in violations that happen in all countries where athletes use dishonest methods to score professional achievements.

We have proposed adopting UN and OSCE resolutions against discrimination in sport and against attempts to politicise sport. We have submitted these initiatives at the UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), demanding an end to discrimination against athletes with disabilities. At the Human Rights Committee, we have proposed decisions to ban politicising sport events and a politicised attitude to sport.

As you know, this is a serious problem. If only everything depended on us! We have circulated a Federation Council statement on the inadmissibility of politicising the doping issue, which aroused much interest at the UN. We are also

ready to cooperate with the State Duma. We have a special agency that was established by decision of President Putin for cooperation with WADA and national anti-doping organisations. The Ministry of Sport and the Russian Olympic Committee are also contributing to this work. We are open to cooperation but only if such cooperation is based on concrete facts rather than allegations.

Question: We have set forth the main goals on Syria. They are the real fight against international terrorism, the protection of national interests and the creation of conditions for intra-Syrian dialogue. The Astana meeting, organised by Russia, confirms that we are coping with these tasks rather effectively. Do we still have any prospective diplomatic resources for compelling the parties to seek dialogue and concessions for the sake of attaining accord in Syria? What does accord mean to us: does this amount to a frozen conflict in Syria or does this mean a Syria with a new political status?

Can the new Washington administration join the political settlement without playing any geopolitical games?

Sergey Lavrov: This is a very important question. As I have said, a meeting between the Syrian Government and the opposition's paramilitary units concluded in Astana yesterday. The meeting also involved Russia, Turkey, Iran and UN Secretary-General's Special Envoy for Syria Staffan de Mistura acting as guarantors, and the US Ambassador to Kazakhstan as an observer. The participants approved a document at the end of the meeting. I believe that its results are quite important, elevating our efforts to an entirely new level.

First of all, the Syrian Government has held direct talks with armed opposition units. In effect, representatives of warring parties confronting each other on the ground, with weapons in hand, sat at one and the same table, although not for the whole day. This is unprecedented. Until now only representatives of political opposition, mostly consisting of emigrants, took part in various events seeking to organise an intra-Syrian dialogue.

Second, apart from direct contacts between the Syrian Government and the armed opposition, the Russian delegation, which included Foreign Ministry and Defence Ministry representatives, also held several direct meetings with representatives of the armed opposition and discussed prospects for launching joint counter-terrorist operations in Syria, primarily against ISIS, together with them. Theoretically speaking, the Syrian Government, the Russian Aerospace Forces supporting the Syrian Army, and armed opposition units are ready to pool their efforts and hit ISIS positions in Syrian regions still controlled by them.

This meeting also confirmed the ceasefire regime that was coordinated as a result of talks between the Government and the armed opposition, with Russia and

Turkey acting as mediators. Participants in the Astana meeting have made one more step in this direction. Russia, Iran and Turkey have established a trilateral committee whose members will monitor any reports on violations of the ceasefire regime on a daily basis. Regarding a mechanism to monitor ceasefire violations, I would like to recall that Russia and the United States had such a mechanism. It took us a long time to coordinate it, but the Obama administration later proved unable to conclude any agreements and to fulfil its part of the deal.

In addition, we have agreed in Astana that the armed opposition will take part in the talks on a settlement in Syria alongside the political opposition, which is stipulated in UN Security Council resolutions. We set down on paper that there is no military solution to the Syrian crisis. I believe it is of fundamental importance that the delegation of the armed opposition has signed this document.

And lastly, the Astana meeting has provided an impetus for the UN, which has been trying for almost a year to convene intra-Syrian talks. Moreover, seeking to provide a more powerful boost to this process, we have made public a draft constitution, which we prepared taking into account everything we have heard the Syrian Government, the opposition and regional countries say on this score over the past years. To prevent any speculation about the alleged attempts by Russia, Turkey and Iran to replace everything that has been achieved to this day with the Astana process, we invited members of the political opposition to come to Moscow on Friday for a briefing on the Astana meeting and our views on a positive development of the Astana process.

Question: Every responsible citizen and every politician appreciates your efforts on the diplomatic stage. I am sure that your achievements in the Middle East will go down in the history of our diplomacy. This makes us wonder about the negative processes that went on in Ukraine under our very noses for many years. What is the reason for this: a poor personnel policy, underestimation of the situation or something else? After all, we need to draw proper conclusions from this situation.

Sergey Lavrov: I don't think we should look for reasons here and now. Of course, we must analyse what happened. Yet our current priority is to focus on doing what must be done to ensure the implementation of the Minsk Agreements, which alone can help Ukraine overcome the crisis. Obviously, mistakes were made, but we also know about the counterproductive and even subversive role played by our Western partners in their efforts to split Ukraine from Russia. They didn't stop at using very dirty methods. Some American politician – I think it was Zbigniew Brzezinski – said that without Ukraine, Russia ceases to be an empire. This is why the West was fighting tooth and nail, using prohibited and dishonest methods. The thrust of the Western policy was to force Ukraine to make a false and artificial choice: “you are either with us or against us.” They worked actively towards this, citing figures to

show how much the previous US administration invested in developing “civil society” in Ukraine, that is, how much it spent on instigators and Russophobes.

Of course, we must draw conclusions from this. I don't think we will use the same methods [as our partners], but we will remember this and will act with due regard for the methods our Western colleagues have used, despite their commitment to democracy, freedom of choice and the like. They enforced this choice crudely and cynically, with blackmail and threats.

Thank you for speaking so highly of our Ministry's performance. We see this as a result of close cooperation with the other branches of government, primarily, parliamentary diplomacy. I'm not going to make generalisations, I just want to respond to what Mr Kalashnikov said.

I'll start with our compatriots. The law is working. It helped significantly consolidate our expat community, and was also instrumental in helping our compatriots abroad to uphold their rights in their host states. The Fund for the Support and Protection of the Rights of Compatriots Living Abroad was created, with several dozen branches abroad, country councils of compatriots in almost 100 countries, and six regional councils, which regularly hold events allowing them to maintain contact with their historical homeland. Our compatriots are most actively involved in the drives, such as the St George Ribbon and the Immortal Regiment. They did a good job providing effective and objective coverage of the State Duma election in September 2016. Conferences and conventions on important unifying issues are being held annually. We strongly support the World Congress of Russian Press, which also supports the media operated by our compatriots. We actively promote the establishment of contacts between businesses run by our compatriots and Russian companies operating in respective countries. The World Compatriot Games is a recent initiative advanced by, as far as I know, United Russia. It's a sporting event that enjoys great success and popularity.

I agree that it's necessary to take further steps in the sphere of granting and obtaining Russian citizenship. We are now faced with several quite specific situations and issues that are fairly recurrent. A colleague of ours mentioned that in order to obtain Russian citizenship, one must relinquish foreign citizenship and present a document from that state to the effect that the person in question is no longer a citizen. Clearly, not only Ukraine, but a number of other countries will refuse to issue such papers. I'm aware that the Compatriots Commission is discussing the possibility of cancelling this requirement, so that a copy of a

statement by a third-country national that he or she has submitted such a request is sufficient. I think we should support this.

Second, there's an issue that we've been trying to resolve for three years now to no avail. I'm talking about the nationality of children born in mixed marriages. If a child is born in a mixed marriage in Russia, a request filed by any of the parents will do. If such a family lives abroad, and the mother of the child, a citizen of Russia, wants her child to have a Russian passport, she needs to get the consent of the child's father. So, it's the same situation approached in two different ways. I see this as a departure from the principle of equality which is enshrined in the Russian Constitution.

One more thing. I was surprised to learn that when a Russian citizen marries a foreign national, in order for that foreign national to obtain Russian citizenship, he or she must remain married for at least three years while residing in Russia all that time. I believe this is overkill. Perhaps something can be done about it.

President Putin has ordered that citizenship be granted to native Russian speakers and people steeped in Russian culture using a fast-track procedure. There's no clear enabling legislation in this area, though. Should the State Duma and the Commission on Compatriots take up this matter, we will be willing to actively help to develop corresponding recommendations.

My final point is that we have no illusions about another "reset" of our relations with the United States. We do not have any naive expectations in that regard. We are aware of the fact that US President Donald Trump is considered a masterful deal maker, but President Putin can make deals, too, and always does so in the interests of Russia