Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's remarks and answers to media questions at a news conference on the results of Russian diplomacy in 2016, Moscow January 17, 2017

Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen, happy New Year and best wishes on all holidays.

The past leap year was not easy. In addition to the troubles that usually befall leap years, some man-made events also took place which were not conducive to strengthening international security.

Russia's vision of its goals in the international arena is described in detail in the country's new Foreign Policy Concept that was approved in November by President Vladimir Putin. I am sure that all those who are interested in this sphere of our country's activity have familiarised themselves with it. International issues were very prominent at President Putin's news conference (December 23, 2016), as well as in a number of his other statements. I will therefore not lay out our vision of the year's results. We'll do better to leave more time for questions and answers.

I will only say that last year did not see any reduction in threats. I am referring above all to the threat of international terrorism, which continued doing its dirty business. It has affected residents of cities in Europe, the Middle East and other countries. As a result of a heinous terrorist attack, we lost our ambassador to Turkey, Andrey Karlov. Terrorism has become a genuinely systemic problem. The fact that the international community is still unable to effectively rally and form what President Vladimir Putin described last year at the UN as a united, universal antiterrorist front certainly arouses serious concern and regret.

Why is this happening? There are probably a lot of reasons. We see that pooling efforts to fight terrorism, organised crime, drug trafficking and many other threats is becoming a systemic problem that is compounded by basic differences between the objective trend toward the formation of a polycentric world, on the one hand, and the actions of those trying to hold on to the outdated concept of unipolarity, on the other hand. I am referring to the domination not even so much of one state as one group of states with their own system of values. More and more we are running up against a conflict that has been growing over the past several years and that has asserted itself in a very naked form at the current stage. I'm referring to the divide between what underlies the foreign policy of a particular country – pragmatism, correctly understood national interests – versus messianism, the aspiration to disseminate values across the world, what's more, according to the interpretation that has evolved and developed within this group of states.

If we talk about Western and European values, which are constantly put forward as example for us, these are probably not the values the grandfathers of today's Europeans espoused but something new and modernised, a free-for-all, I would say. These are values that can be called post-Christian. They are radically and fundamentally at odds with the values handed down from generation to generation for centuries in our country, which we would like to cherish and hand

down to our children and grandchildren. When during foreign policy battles we and many others face a demand to accept these new post-Christian Western values, including permissiveness and the universality of liberal approaches to the life of the individual, I think it is indecent on a human level. But in terms of professional diplomats, it is a colossal mistake and a completely unacceptable overestimation of your own influence on international relations.

There is a struggle between two trends. The messianic addiction to propagating values (there was the export of democracy, and now we can see an attempt to export values) stands in opposition to the growing desire of serious politicians to focus on pragmatically assessing their own interests, on trying to understand the legitimate interests of other countries and finding areas of overlap in approaches to certain issues, be it terrorism or economic development, without undermining their own interests, and so on. You see, I believe the clash between pragmatism and messianism in foreign policy is adding a new dimension to the contradictions that have been observed over the past few years.

The Russian Federation's choice is well known. We are not intending, of course, to export anything. There used to be the practice of exporting revolution in our country's history. We have ceased doing that, but a bad example is contagious. I repeat, the export of democracy and values continues to sow problems in international relations. It is precisely the export of values and the demand to accept only the European view of things that triggered the crisis in Ukraine. The export of democracy and values led to the so-called "Arab spring", and we are now reaping the consequences. The "Arab spring" has, in turn, sparked the import of migrants in Europe. So, export-import transactions, unfortunately, do occur and don't benefit security one bit.

Our choice is pragmatism based on the core interests of the Russian Federation. Those interests are simple. They remain unchanged and consist of ensuring that our country does well, that the well-being of our people improves, and that our economy and social sector develop steadily in an atmosphere of security and under the most favourable external circumstances possible. That's what our work is aimed at. Here, there is no room for any idealised position or messianism. We are looking for overlapping interests with all who are ready to work toward a global economy that develops in the interests of all countries and peoples without exception. We are looking for common approaches with those who realise that there is no alternative to united efforts against terrorism and other modern challenges, with those who are ready to work with us on an equal and mutually beneficial basis, taking into account mutual interests and striking a balance between interests. We adhere to these positions in our work at the UN, BRICS, the G20, the CIS, the SCO, the CSTO, the EAEU and other multilateral structures. And we adhere to the same positions in building relations with our partners and allies in various regions of the world, whether individual countries or interstate integration associations or other kinds of associations. We are ready to build relations with the United States, the European Union and NATO on the principles of equality, consideration of each other's interests, mutual respect and, I repeat, without the import of values or attempts to impose any values on us, all the more so now that –

as the latest information wars suggest – those values or pseudo-values have already been seriously discredited.

I would like our conversation to be frank. I have attempted to express what I feel at the current stage of international affairs. And now I am inviting you to ask your questions.

Question: Both during and after the US election campaign, there were claims of Russian interference in the process. How did the diplomats' working conditions change in 2016 in general? Were there more attempts to recruit Russian diplomats? Foreign Ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova recently mentioned one such case. Is there evidence of covert pressure on diplomats in host countries?

Sergey Lavrov: Any diplomatic mission can share its experience of working in a particular country. On Barack Obama's watch, we periodically received complaints about the US embassy in Moscow working in unbearable conditions: surveillance, snubbing the ambassador, who was turned down by all Russian agencies. We made a special effort to look into the situation. It turned out to be the opposite of what was claimed. We inventoried the contacts that the Russian ambassador to the United States had at his request during the same period and we gathered corresponding information on the contacts of the US ambassador to Russia with Russian official agencies. Russian ministries, agencies and members of parliament receive the US ambassador dozens of times more often than Americans receive the Russian ambassador.

Regarding recruitment attempts, we have not made public complete statistics on this score, but over the past few years, especially during Barack Obama's second term in office, such unfriendly moves with respect to our diplomats increased. In her recent TV appearance, Maria Zakharova mentioned a case when an attempt was made to recruit an officer from the Russian Consulate General who had come to the doctor to pick up prepaid medication for Yevgeny Primakov. It takes real gall, profound cynicism and unscrupulousness to make a recruitment attempt in such a situation. That was not the only case. April 2016 witnessed unprecedented recruitment approaches with an offer of collaboration at the level of the second in charge at the embassy: minister-counselor. US special services, in a bid to make a recruitment offer, inserted $10,000 with an offer of collaboration into one of our senior-level diplomats' car. If somebody is interested to know, the money was put on the balance sheet by our accounts office and is working for the benefit of the Russian state. There were also some really disgusting episodes when two staff members at the Russian military attaché's office in Washington, who were having lunch with their wives at a restaurant near Washington on a day off, were seized by FBI agents, handcuffed and questioned, while being denied contact with the embassy. In the end, we naturally extricated our comrades but there was not even an apology.

As for the claims that on President Obama's watch, the US embassy in Moscow was subjected to unprecedented harassment, I can see no grounds for such claims. There were a few episodes that came out into the open because the Americans tried to portray them as a hunt for US diplomats. In reality, nothing could be further from the truth. What happened was that intelligence

operations by US representatives working under diplomatic cover were stopped. There was a well-known case when a US diplomat in disguise, a wig and fake eyebrows or something got into the US embassy building, refused to present his ID to a security officer at the gate and hit him. There were also several other episodes involving US diplomats in disguise, including a man dressed as a woman, who then changed back into men's clothing in a public toilet. All of that was recorded. Staff members of the military attaché's office at the US embassy very much like driving all around our motherland in rented cars. Therefore they do not have diplomatic number plates. They use Russian number plates. That way it is easier to avoid being spotted. They go to the Kaliningrad, Leningrad, Murmansk and Voronezh regions. They have been repeatedly spotted in Novorossiisk and the republic of Chechnya and they have covered literally every inch of the border with Donbass. This is to say nothing about the fact that in addition to spying, US embassy diplomats have been often observed participating in unsanctioned anti-government opposition rallies, including in disguise. You can make your own conclusions.

I once spoke on this topic. In November 1933, diplomatic relations between our country and the United States were restored. [USSR] People's Commissar for Foreign Affairs Maxim Litvinov exchanged official notes with US President Franklin D. Roosevelt, which, in addition to recording the fact of the establishment of diplomatic relations as such, stated – to reiterate – at US insistence that each side has a right to run its affairs at it sees fit, undertakes not to interfere in the other side's affairs and to keep all organisations under its control from actions disrupting the calm, well-being and security of the other contracting party, including agitation to change the political and social system. This is almost a quotation. To repeat, it was included in the documents on the establishment of diplomatic relations between the USSR and the US at Washington's insistence.

In 2012, long before the events in Ukraine and long before the time when they began to accuse us of meddling in Syria, as well as other sins, a propaganda attack was launched against Russia and our foreign and domestic policy, with different agencies actively working in Russia, including the Agency for International Development. During one of our contacts, I proposed to US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton committing to paper the adherence to the principles that had been recorded as a basis of relations between our countries at Franklin D. Roosevelt's insistence. She politely evaded that conversation. A year later, John Kerry became the secretary of state and I proposed the same to him. He also did not show much enthusiasm about that. Draw your own conclusions and do not forget that the obligation not to engage in any campaigning to change the political and social system, as recorded at US insistence, is grossly violated, among other things, by the Ukraine Support Act that was adopted by the US Congress a couple of years ago, which directly instructs the State Department and special services to impose democracy in Russia the way the Americans understand it. Incidentally, this is about compliance with agreements and the fact that it is necessary to respect international law and remember that a document that was signed and not disavowed is your sacred obligation.

This has been a bit too long. But it's true that the US is doing a great deal, and this is not even everything.

Question: There have been many forecasts and statements expressing hope that Russian-US relations will improve after Donald Trump assumes office. If these forecasts prove accurate, what impact could this have on the Syrian crisis settlement?

Sergey Lavrov: This seems like a simple question, but it would take more than one phrase to answer it.

First, we are realists, and we are certainly watching the incoming US administration's preparations to assume office. I would not go to extremes in terms of expectations. The media and political analysts have made great many forecasts. Some are thrilled, while others say there is nothing to rejoice about and that nothing much will change. But there is no point talking about this now. Only after all seats are assigned and the new administration starts working will we see how relations between the United States and the rest of the world will develop. I said "the world" because Donald Trump has specific views. They differ greatly from the views of his predecessors, both Democrats and Republicans; his views are based on the fundamental US interests as Donald Trump sees them. When he says that his key foreign policy priority will be the fight against terrorism, we are happy to welcome this intention. This is exactly what our American partners lacked before him. On paper, they seemed to be cooperating with us and other countries, drafting relevant documents, but in fact, they were deceiving us when they pledged to separate the moderate opposition from Jabhat al-Nusra, which they did their best to protect from strikes. According to a recent leak about John Kerry's meeting with Syrian opposition forces several years ago, the United States regarded ISIS as a suitable force for weakening Bashar al-Assad's positions.

What Donald Trump and his team are saying now shows that they have a different approach to this and that they will not apply double standards in the fight against terrorism in order to achieve unrelated goals. What Donald Trump has said about his resolve to focus on US security interests and on creating favourable conditions for American business is just what President Putin goes by when setting out Russia's foreign policy guidelines.

I would like to mention one more issue which Donald Trump has spoken about several times. He said that each country must be responsible for its own development. We think so too. We believe that countries must act independently, that there must be less parasitism and more respect for the legitimate interests of all countries. Donald Trump has said that the fight against terrorism will be his main foreign policy priority, as far as I know, and so I hope that our cooperation on Syria and other counterterrorism issues will be more effective than our interaction with the Obama administration. But we will be able to officially coordinate our cooperation in the fight against terrorism in Syria only after the President-elect, the secretary of state, the defence secretary and intelligence and security officials assume office. We believe it will be correct to invite representatives of the UN and the new US administration, as I said at a meeting of the foreign

ministers of Russia, Turkey and Iran in Moscow on December 20, to the planned January 23 meeting in Astana between the armed groups that signed a ceasefire agreement on December 29 and the Syrian Government. As you know, this agreement has been approved by the UN Security Council and that Moscow, Ankara and Tehran have pledged to guarantee compliance with it.

We hope the new US administration will accept this invitation and will be represented at this meeting at any expert level it considers appropriate. This could be the first official contact during which we will be able to discuss a more effective way to fight terrorism in Syria. It should be remembered that Russia and the United States created and are co-chairing the International Syria Support Group (ISSG), which has not been dissolved. It has two task forces – a Humanitarian Task Force and a Ceasefire Task Force. There is a good chance we can invigorate these mechanisms, considering that the new US administration is resolved, according to its statements, to fight terrorism in earnest and not as this happened before.

Question: The meeting in Astana will take place very soon. We know that Russia is playing a big role in the Syrian settlement. Will you support the idea of a federal system of government in Syria? Would such a system guarantee the rights of Syrian Kurds, and would the status of Kurdistan be formalised in the constitution?

Sergey Lavrov: This is for the Syrians to decide. All UN decisions that were adopted by consensus in the past few years say clearly that the Syrians themselves must decide the future of their country through an all-encompassing, that is, inclusive dialogue between all ethnic, religious and political groups without exception.

Under UN resolutions, external forces, including Russia, the United States and regional countries, should create conditions for launching an inclusive dialogue in Syria. We have been working towards this goal for the past year. However, some opposition groups were unwilling to accept this formula, and the situation was influenced by the specific claims presented by the so-called High Negotiations Committee, which sabotaged the UN efforts to launch intra-Syrian talks because it claimed the right to represent all groups that stand in opposition to President al-Assad. I believe that one obstacle to the talks was the fact that the UN only sent invitations to members of the political opposition, the overwhelming majority of whom were emigrants living in Europe, the Middle East or other countries but not in Syria, and to some opposition members in Syria. By the way, the Kurds are part of the internal opposition, although some Kurdish politicians live abroad. Anyway, the Syrian groups that were invited to the UN-sponsored talks consisted of politicians, both emigrants and those who live in Syria. These talks were not attended by those who really determine the situation on the ground, that is, armed groups or armed opposition.

I think we took a big and very important step forward after Russia and Turkey proposed involving the warring sides in the talks and the Syrian Government signed agreements to this effect with the field commanders of the majority of armed opposition groups. The goals at the Astana meeting include, first, the consolidation of the ceasefire regime, and second, an

agreement on the field commanders' full involvement in the political process, which includes drafting a constitution and holding a referendum and elections. This process was launched by the UN in Geneva but has lost momentum. There are plans to re-launch it. We believe that field commanders must participate in this process as full members. I think that the process must not be limited to the groups that signed the ceasefire agreement on December 29. All other armed groups willing to join the ceasefire should have the opportunity to do so. We have received appeals from several groups that are not parties to these agreements but are willing to join them. I consider this a healthy process that can help involve those who really control the situation [on the ground] in the talks.

Question: 2016 will also be remembered because of the bloodshed in Nagorno-Karabakh – in Azerbaijan's occupied territories. What will be Russia's position if a counterterrorist operation begins in the occupied areas to cleanse Azerbaijan's territory of the occupation forces and other criminal elements? Will Russia look the other way? Will it interfere in Azerbaijan's internal affairs?

Sergey Lavrov: This is no longer something abstract or related solely to Azerbaijan's internal affairs. There are a number of resolutions on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, primarily ceasefire resolutions that the UN Security Council adopted at the height of the conflict. If you are interested, we can turn to the archives and see how the demands on the immediate ceasefire were complied with, as well as who observed them and who didn't. Since the Russian- and OSCE-mediated ceasefire, a requirement has been in force on evacuating the occupied areas, but under no circumstances should [the evacuation] be performed by force: [it is to occur] after the final status of Nagorno-Karabakh is determined. This is recorded in the documents drawn up by the OSCE Minsk Group via its co-chairs (Russia, the United States and France). This figures in numerous statements adopted by the co-chair presidents (presidents of Russia, the United States and France), as well as in statements and documents that were approved and signed by the presidents of Armenia and Azerbaijan. These documents unequivocally stipulate a peaceful settlement of disputes.

The bloody events that happened there in April 2016 are a matter of deep concern. At that time, Russia played a decisive role in stopping the bloodshed. Given their mutual recriminations, we negotiated with President of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev and President of Armenia Serzh Sargsyan in Vienna, and President Vladimir Putin held talks with them in St Petersburg in June 2016, focusing on the need to create an investigative mechanism and increase the number of OSCE monitors directly along the line of contact. That it is necessary to investigate incidents was also discussed at the meeting of the presidents of Russia, Azerbaijan and Armenia in Astrakhan in 2011.

As I understand, you are concerned with non-recurrence of these events in the future. But, regrettably, such an elementary and essential thing as a mechanism to investigate incidents or an increase in the number of OSCE monitors along the line of contact cannot be put into practice as

long as there is no consensus within the OSCE. OSCE representatives can also be asked why their organisation is unable to reach consensus.

Question: Two events have happened against the backdrop of the OSCE Minsk Group co-chairs' condemnation of the use of force or the threat of force in Nagorno-Karabakh. One was a large clash on the Armenian-Azerbaijani border – not Karabakh – on December 29, 2016, which left several servicemen dead and wounded. The other was the arrest of a Russian-Israeli blogger, Alexander Lapshin, in Minsk last month at the request of Azerbaijan over his visit to Nagorno-Karabakh following which he wrote that people in Nagorno-Karabakh had a right to decide their future themselves. When he went to Minsk on business, he was arrested at Azerbaijan's request and has been in a Belarusian jail for over a month. Protest actions have been held at the Belarusian Embassy in Yerevan, but we don't know anything about Russia's reaction to the arrest of its citizen.

What do you think about the clash on the Armenian-Azerbaijani border on December 29, 2016?

What is Russia's stand on blogger Lapshin's arrest in Minsk?

Sergey Lavrov: First, we are against considering any foreign visits by journalists or private individuals as a crime. Second, we are against extraditing Russian citizens detained outside Russia to any other country.

Our consular officials have met with Alexander Lapshin. We know that he is also an Israeli citizen. Israeli diplomats have met with him too. We will take measures to resolve this issue based on respect for the rights of a Russian citizen who also holds Israeli citizenship.

There is one more thing I want to say on this. As you know, Russia and Belarus, as members of the Union State, have decided to guarantee equal rights to their citizens in all spheres without exception. This includes efforts to coordinate a common visa space, which provides for a common migration space, a coordinated list of undesirable persons and a common extradition policy. We hope the issue is still on the table in light of the Belarus-EU agreement on the establishment of illegal migrant centres in the country. This could create opportunities for the abuse of law, considering that there is no technical border between Russia and Belarus. We will discuss this issue with our Belarusian colleagues. In principle, we have long been negotiating a common migration policy. I believe recent developments call for accelerating these talks to reach practical results as soon as possible.

As I said, we have consular access to a Russian citizen detained in Belarus, and we are working closely with officials from Israel, the country of his second citizenship.

Question: Three years ago Russia signed an agreement on the Russian-Estonian border, but the State Duma has still not ratified it. They say it is not the right time now.

Sergey Lavrov: Yes, this is an interesting story indeed. In 2005, Estonian Foreign Minister Urmas Paet and I signed agreements on the land and lake borders. We agreed that these

agreements would be ratified without any incendiary addenda and territorial claims. We received a hundred percent guarantee that this would not happen and these agreements were submitted to the Estonian Parliament for ratification. A day before the end of the spring session, the Estonian MPs adopted a law on ratification, citing the Treaty of Tartu of 1920, which contains, as you know, territorial claims against the current Russian Federation. We asked our Estonian colleagues that, if they knew that they would not receive enough votes to ratify the agreements as we had agreed, why they did not revoke the law and wait for the next session where it could undergo further discussions. They never responded, so we were forced to revoke our signature.

Many years later, Urmas Paet and I agreed to sign these agreements again and launched the ratification procedure. We signed them in Moscow and agreed to exchange ratification instruments in Tallinn (by the way, this is the only capital of a former USSR republic that I have never visited as a Minister), but we also agreed that favourable conditions should be created for the ratification. By this we meant the absence of sudden demands towards each other, and no accusations that Russia threatened the security of Estonia and other countries in the region and the entire Eastern Europe. Unfortunately, when the agreement was submitted to the State Duma Committee on International Affairs and committee members began the hearings, Tallinn's rhetoric became absolutely inappropriate for this process to continue without sparking discontent of the Russian public.

We are ready to get back to ratification; our MPs have repeatedly said that. They sense the attitude of their voters and it is up to them to make the decision. We will support this process providing that our relations develop in a constructive manner, not in an environment created by a confrontation policy.

Question: NATO is now deploying troops on the Russian-Estonian border. What is your view on this?

Sergey Lavrov: It's not a good thing and I think it is completely unnecessary. If NATO's military organisation sees no better use for its forces than in Estonia, on the border with Russia, then their intelligence is not doing a very good job and they have little understanding of what is going on in other areas under NATO's responsibility.

Question: When it comes to the Cyprus issue, you are probably one of the most experienced diplomats and ministers in the world. This is a long-running issue and is once again in the spotlight today. Negotiations are underway, but it looks as though Russia has been sidelined from this process. The Russian public often asks if the Cypriot or Greek governments have contacted you on having Russia take part in the settlement process in one form or another. What is your assessment of the situation?

Sergey Lavrov: Yes, this is indeed one of the matters I have long dealt with, above all because the Cyprus issue has traditionally been on the UN Security Council's agenda, partly because UN peacekeeping forces are stationed on the island and the Security Council extends their mandate

at regular intervals. The Security Council's permanent members always co-authored the resolutions on extending the mandate or on the political settlement process in Cyprus. When I was coming to the end of my term as permanent representative at the UN in New York, the plan put forward by then UN Secretary General Kofi Annan produced similar hopes as we see for the meeting in Geneva now. Annan proposed that the parties agree to hold a referendum, even with some key issues still unresolved. If the referendum went through, these outstanding issues would be settled with the UN acting as arbitrator, dividing territory between the two sides and settling ownership disputes. I met at that time with the Cypriot leaders when they came to New York. We took the view that it would be a mistake to have the serious issues dividing Turkish and Greek Cypriots settled through arbitration. But the Annan plan was supported and a referendum was held but failed to pass. If you are suggesting that my position at that moment was a reflection of my experience, yes, this is probably the case.

The reason I say this is to get it across that attempts to put a positive face on everything are not always productive. I saw excessive optimism during preparations for the meeting in Geneva. I do not hide that we have spoken with our Cypriot, Greek and Turkish colleagues. We are in contact with everyone. Responding to their question on how we would like to see this conference organised, we said that if we are talking about an international event that will discuss guarantees, the best option would be to have the Security Council act as guarantor of a united Cyprus, and not just one, two or three countries. Our Greek and Cypriot colleagues agreed with this. In this respect, they expressed interest in having all five permanent UN Security Council members take part in this conference, which will examine international aspects of the settlement process. The other participants in the process did not want this format, it seems, and this leads me to suspect that some of our partners hope to avoid a solution in which Cyprus' security would be guaranteed by the UN Security Council rather than one, two or three countries. I do not think this is the right approach, but we are ready to support any agreements that the two Cypriot communities reach together.

Question: Russia and Greece have traditionally warm relations. They have held a cross-culture year. But some forces seem to be trying to mar this positive atmosphere. Greek journalists have learned that despite their warm words about Russia, the Greek government refused to allow a Russian warship headed to Syria to refuel in a Greek port. A Russian diplomat was expelled from Athens in late 2016, and Russia reciprocated by expelling a Greek diplomat from Moscow. We know about this even though Russia and Greece decided, at the intergovernmental level, to suppress this information.

Sergey Lavrov: I can say that if the latter is true, then the score is one to one, and we can leave it at that.

As for refuelling our warships that deliver supplies to the Russian Aerospace Forces, the Hmeymin base and our logistics support facility in Tartus, we have managed. We have the

capability to ensure the operation of our aerospace and naval forces without bothering any of our colleagues.

Question: Donald Trump said in an interview the other day that he might propose offering to end sanctions imposed on Russia in return for a nuclear arms reduction deal with Moscow. What can you tell us about this besides waiting until after Trump's inauguration?

Sergey Lavrov: You understand that I do not want to, and have no right to interpret anything Donald Trump may have said in an interview. However, I understand the phrase you mentioned differently from the majority of observers and commentators. If I understand correctly, he said he would see what can be done about the sanctions. This is only part of what he said. He also said that if some good deals can be made with Russia, a solution should be found. And then he said that nuclear weapons should be reduced substantially. I do not see a direct connection between nuclear disarmament and the lifting of sanctions.

As for nuclear weapons, strategic stability and nuclear and strategic parity, this is a key issue in Russian-US relations. I can understand the US President-elect mentioning nuclear arsenals in connection with Russia. I am convinced that one of Russia's priorities will also be to resume the strategic stability dialogue with Washington, which has been disrupted by the Obama administration alongside many other positive mechanisms. During its last week in office, the outgoing Obama administration proposed resuming this dialogue with Russia. Being polite people, we did not reject the offer and have even had a meeting. But we will discuss this issue in earnest with the Trump administration.

You must know that when we talk about international security and the steps that should be taken to reduce physical threats to this security, we must keep in mind absolutely all factors that influence strategic stability, and there are many factors besides nuclear weapons. They include strategic conventional weapons, including hypersonic weapons that can destroy targets in any part of the world within an hour even without nuclear warheads. Those who have these weapons do not need nuclear weapons. The second factor is the Ballistic Missile Defence (BMD) system, which is changing the strategic balance. We need to negotiate this issue, so that any changes in strategic balance will not destabilise the situation. One more thing that influences strategic stability is the space militarisation plans of the current and previous US administrations. There are also other variables, including the US refusal to ratify the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty (CTBT). All these factors – I may have forgotten to mention some – influence global strategic balance and parity. We are willing to hold talks as soon as the new US administration assumes office and prepares for such a meeting, which must be held in a business-like manner and with full awareness of our responsibility to our nations and to the rest of the world.

Question: Many people think that the leaders of the two superpowers – Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin – should meet, something that has not happened for a long time. A rather respected newspaper, The Sunday Times, reported last Sunday that the meeting would be held at Reykjavik halfway between Moscow and Washington. Can you comment on this report?

Sergey Lavrov: With the same response as Washington and Moscow: it has no substance. There was no communication about plans of this sort.

Question: The Eurasian Economic Community made strides in the past year. How do you estimate Europe's reaction to this? How would you advise developing the Eurasian space at this point?

Not long ago, the leadership in Uzbekistan changed. How do you think Russia-Uzbekistan relations will fare?

Sergey Lavrov: As far as relations between Russia and Uzbekistan are concerned, they have long been those of strategic partnership and alliance, despite the fact that Uzbekistan withdrew from the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) several years ago. Our bilateral allied relations are legalised internationally. We think that the new president and the new leaders in Uzbekistan are certainly interested in maintaining continuity in our relations. We welcome this. We also hope that additional opportunities for stepping up Uzbekistan's relations with the Russian Federation and its other neighbours, including multilateral organisations, will be used in the interests of the people of all of our countries.

As far as the EAEU is concerned, it is making consistent progress. As you know, a new customs code was approved not long ago, which helps cut commodity registration time and costs and reduces the number of documents necessary to enable goods to cross the border. There is a functioning common market for pharmaceuticals and medical products. A single electric power market will be established before 2025. Despite the problems related to the current foreign economic situation and difficult negotiations within the EAEU, I can see that this union has very good prospects. There are real results that the citizens of Russia and Uzbekistan can see and understand the advantages of EAEU membership.

Other outside parties that are interested in the EAEU is another confirmation that this organisation enjoys good prospects. Talks are under way with approximately 15 potential foreign partners, both countries and organisations on one kind of relation or another. As you know, an FTA agreement has been signed with Vietnam and an intergovernmental trade and economic cooperation agreement is being discussed with China. FTA negotiations with Israel are at an early stage, with a so-called research group established. The same ideas are being discussed with Egypt, Iran, India, Serbia and Singapore. Of course, these processes should be regarded in the context of the broader plans and concepts that President Vladimir Putin laid out last year. These plans are about promoting the so-called Greater Eurasia project, where EAEU, SCO and ASEAN member-countries can participate based on different forms of cooperation. Incidentally, the secretariats of these three organisations met in Sochi in May 2016 on the sidelines of the Russia-ASEAN summit, which also confirmed the Southeast Asian countries' interest in cooperation. On top of individual ASEAN countries desire to sign FTA agreements with the EAEU, ASEAN as an organisation is also considering the opportunity. The same processes include cooperation aimed at aligning Eurasian economic integration with the Silk Road Economic Belt project.

If I understand your question, you asked how Europe was viewing this cooperation. First, I will tell you that over a year ago, in November 2015, the Eurasian Economic Commission sent a proposal to Brussels on establishing contacts with the European Commission and discussing mutually beneficial cooperation in trade liberalisation and investment expansion. There is still no response. We proceed from information we receive via different channels and it shows that the EU does not regard the Eurasian economic integration movement as a full or comprehensive entity. The EU thinks this movement is driven by ideology and motivated by Russia's desire to seize zones of influence.

In my opening remarks, I mentioned a kind of foreign policy mentality motivated by messianism and the wish to promote values as our European partners understand them. Accusations that Russia is seeking to "isolate" neighbouring countries from European values are voiced not only by individual journalists but also officials. Zbigniew Brzezinski has written *Grand Chessboard.* To me, certain modern politicians are still guided by his creed with regard to Eurasia. In his book on Eurasia, he said that barbarians should not be allowed to unite. That's how he characterised us! Many modern politicians do not want the Eurasian economic integration project to come into its own, though not with the same degree of rudeness and impudence. Let me cite the example of Serbia. It is conducting and is willing to conduct FTA talks with the EAEU, but the EU is sending it signals that characterise what I said. High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Federica Mogherini has an adviser, Nathalie Tocci, who said that Serbia's relations with Russia were the main challenge for Serbia from the point of view of that country's conformity to EU foreign policy. This was said in connection with Serbia's current EU accession talks, rather than about Belgrade's relations with the EAEU. This shows that nothing has changed during the last 12 or so years, when Brussels regarded any partner in Europe as being obliged to choose between Europe and Russia. To my profound regret, this vicious, shortsighted and counterproductive logic prevails to this day. As I said, the Eurasian Economic Commission sent a cooperation proposal to the European Commission. I hope that at some point the elementary politeness that has always been a European value will have some influence and that we will receive an answer.

Question: Picking up on a colleague's question. Donald Trump spoke a few days ago about sanctions as well as nuclear weapons, and he seemed to link the two together. Are you prepared to do some kind of a grand deal with Donald Trump on these issues? And also, secondly, not a message to Donald Trump, not a message to the administration, but as he prepares to take office, what's Russia's message to America? Thank you.

Sergey Lavrov: I am somewhat confused because I think I have already answered these two questions, well definitely the first one. I spoke about my view of our relations in terms of strategic stability, and this is what I heard Donald Trump say when he spoke about three things: the need to deal with the sanctions, the need to find positive areas of interaction with Russia and

that one of such areas might be the dialogue on strategic nuclear weapons. I did not hear him speak of any proposed deals like “disarmament in exchange for sanctions.”

As for our message to the United States. We wish prosperity to the American people just like to any other nation. As I said today, we understand Mr Trump if he wants to concentrate his work on this issue both within and outside the country. If what Mr Trump and his team say about Russia and about their readiness to find common approaches to solve shared problems and overcome threats is true, if this is the position of the new administration, then we will reciprocate. Russian President Vladimir Putin has said that too on numerous occasions. Our position does not depend on who is a country’s leader; we are ready to cooperate with anyone who is committed to cooperation on the basis of equality and mutual respect of each other’s interests.

Question: Do you feel sad that you will soon lose German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier and US Secretary of State John Kerry as official counterparts in talks?

Ahead of the election in Germany, much is being said about Russia’s hacker attacks. Can you prove that your country does not pose a cyber threat?

Sergey Lavrov: Indeed, I have close and friendly relations with Frank-Walter Steinmeier and John Kerry. I hope that these relations will continue regardless of the positions we occupy in the future. At least, Frank-Walter and John both know about this. This is my position and I think they agree. I wish both of them success in their new capacity.

As for cybersecurity and accusations, to put it bluntly, I am not going to prove it to you why this is all a lie. I thought that Germany, just like many other countries, respects the principle of the presumption of innocence, so it is their obligation to prove our guilt. We have seen the proofs made up by some fugitive fraudster from MI6. These proofs have been denied by both Britain and their colleagues in the US who tried to frame the new administration. All of our television talk shows have been discussing these blatant provocations that discredit Europe and the part of the United States that is involved in it. So we can talk endlessly about how absurd and farfetched they are, and about the facts that prove it is a lie. But I am not going to do so. You know, international cybersecurity is something that should concern all of us. Russia was the country that urged sustainable cooperation in bringing order to cybercrime counteraction. We submitted a relevant proposal, by the way, to the OSCE and the UN. In particular, we proposed draft conventions on counteracting cybercrime in information space that would criminalise hacking. We were told that none of that was necessary, everything was fine, and it was enough that we had the Budapest Convention of 2001. It was adopted by the Council of Europe and allowed interference in sovereign affairs of countries without their permission. However, enormous changes have taken place since 2001. So these cries about the threat to the western cybersecurity are nothing but double standards. The same people who refuse to develop universal rules to bring order to the information space and who refuse to take part in international efforts in

counteracting cybercrime accuse us, without any proof, that we brought just about the entire world under our control.

I recently saw a BBC report about a special counterintelligence team created by the CIA, which allegedly has been investigating Donald Trump's financial ties with Russia for a long time. It comprises, apart from the CIA, representatives from the FBI, the NSA, the office of the Director of National Intelligence, the Department of Justice and the Department of the Treasury. All of them collected evidence that Russia has financial ties with Mr Trump or that he has connections with us. If the only thing this team consisting of respectable agencies has dug up was the "evidence" it presented to the public, they should all be fired because they are just worthless. So I am not going to explain and prove that we have nothing to do with it.

Question: We all remember how you congratulated your Chinese colleagues on the Chinese New Year during your news conference last year. You said then that Russia and China's cooperation on the international stage is an important factor for guaranteeing security. The Chinese Foreign Ministry's spokesperson said just recently that China seeks to continue strengthening and developing comprehensive strategic partnership between our countries in order to ensure security in the region and around the world. How do you assess cooperation with China on issues such as the Middle East, the Korean Peninsula and the fight against terrorism last year? What hopes do you have for future joint diplomatic efforts?

We all know that Russia made great efforts in 2016 to settle the internal conflicts in Syria and advance political talks in the Syrian Arab Republic. The international community is placing considerable hopes on the talks that will soon take place in Astana. What are Russia's achievements and losses in the Syrian settlement process begun a year ago?

Sergey Lavrov: Our relations with China are at their best level ever in our two countries' history. Bilateral strategic cooperation, comprehensive partnership and cooperation on regional and global affairs are all on the increase. We really do believe, and our Chinese friends share this view, that coordination between Moscow and Beijing on the international stage plays a key part in maintaining global stability, and we will continue this cooperation.

A whole series of agreements were signed during President Vladimir Putin's official visit to Beijing in June 2016. They included a joint declaration on economic and foreign policy cooperation, a joint declaration on strengthening global strategic stability, a joint declaration on cooperation in developing the information space (this covers information- and cybersecurity), and a declaration by the two foreign ministers on raising the role of international law. This list of agreements alone is evidence of the attention our leaders are giving to international issues. Of course, this includes the situation on the Korean Peninsula, where Russia and China are working very closely on the basis of trust to promote initiatives aimed at relaunching the negotiation process and at ensuring that the international community's firm position on not recognising North Korea's claims to nuclear power status and condemnation of provocative nuclear tests and missile launches does not become the starting point for an ongoing spiral of threats. We do not

want this crisis to end up being used as a pretext for a rapid and out of proportion arms build-up and military exercises conducted in aggressive fashion. At the same time as we put pressure on Pyongyang, we also want to keep the door open for resuming talks. Russia and China share absolutely identical positions here and are working to convince the other participants in the six-party talks to take the same approach.

On the Middle East issues, if we take the Syrian crisis and the situation in Libya, Iraq and Yemen, Russia and China traditionally vote in solidarity with each other in the UN. This reflects the completely coordinated approach we take on issues such as fighting terrorism. I note that along with the UN's efforts, we have counterterrorist programmes in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation too and are currently examining similar efforts through the BRICS group. Russia and China both play an important proactive role in these two organisations.

As for Syria and your request to assess our achievements and losses, it is not our job to do this. We take the view that we acted correctly when we gave a positive response to the request for help from the legitimate government of Syria, a UN member country, whose capital was only two-three weeks away from being seized by terrorists. I think the fact that we succeeded in pushing the terrorists back from Damascus and helped the Syrian army to liberate Aleppo is very important in order to preserve Syria as a multi-ethnic, multi-faith, secular state, as is called for by the UN Security Council resolution. Those who watched on in silence for 18 months as ISIS and other terrorists surrounded Aleppo are probably guilty of a crime, as they directly violated the UN Security Council resolution that called for Syria not to be turned into an Islamic state.

You know the losses we suffered. We grieve over the losses among our military service personnel, performers and doctors who were headed for Syria just recently to wish the service personnel there a happy New Year. Yes, these are losses, but we are sure that our heroes have forever engraved their names in the history of Syria's liberation from terrorism.

Question: Russian President Vladimir Putin's official visit to Japan in December 2016 was the most important event in our bilateral relations. How would you characterise it and what is the most important outcome of the visit, in your opinion?

An agreement was reached on joint economic operations on the Kuril Islands. The Japanese consider this an important decision, but it will not be easy to implement. How can mutually beneficial conditions be created in this regard?

Sergey Lavrov: I think the most important result of the visit was a very clear, unambiguous confirmation of mutual intent to bring our relations to a qualitatively new level without taking into account some external factors or the current environment. This is important because we know what kind of pressure was put on Japan by the outgoing US administration: here too, it tried to undermine prospects for normal relations so that the Japanese government would abstain from meeting with the Russian President or would lower the level of the meetings. The outgoing US administration is behaving indecently. I will repeat, even in this case they tried to take

advantage of their relations with Japan, tried to treat their Japanese allies as second-class, subordinate members of the international community. So under these conditions, the determination outlined in the joint documents to bring Russian-Japanese relations to a qualitatively new level is very important, despite the external factors.

Mr Putin and Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe agreed to continue negotiations on developing a peace treaty. This task will be given to our negotiating teams at the deputy foreign minister level. It was decided to, as you said, prioritise the development of joint economic activity and liberalise the travel restrictions, first for the former residents of the islands and relatives who want to visit the graves of their families. This process has already been initiated. Hiroshige Seko, the Japanese Minister of Economy, Trade, and Industry, visited Moscow after President Putin's trip to Japan, to begin discussing this issue with his Russian colleagues.

Naturally, our position is based on the tangible results of the Russian-Japanese summit, that is, twelve intergovernmental agreements and about 70 business agreements. One of the most important ones was the agreement to establish a Russian-Japanese investment fund. We feel very positive about the visit; the goals were clearly set. It will not be easy to reach them, as President Vladimir Putin said at the news conference, given the issue of the peace treaty. However, both parties are striving to solve these issues based on the vital interests of the Russian and Japanese people and not let other countries meddle in the process. There is much work ahead, but we are ready for it.

Question: You cited President Vladimir Putin several times today. In particular, he said that Russia has never tried to conceal the fact that it sent people to resolve military matters in Donbass. He also said that Russia had a duty to protect the Russian-speaking population in Donbass and Crimea. Could you please clarify where this is written in the Minsk Agreements and the Budapest Memorandum? What changes regarding the occupied territories in Donbass and Crimea would the Russian Federation be willing to make once the new US administration takes office?

Sergey Lavrov: Could you please repeat the last question?

Question: What changes regarding the occupied territories in Donbass and Crimea would the Russian Federation be willing to make once the new US administration takes office?

Sergey Lavrov: You are an experienced journalist. It would probably be better to ask whether Russia is ready to make changes, and not what changes Russia is ready to make.

Question: Is Russia ready to make changes regarding the occupied territories in Donbass and Crimea once the new US administration takes office?

Sergey Lavrov: Regarding the first question, we have discussed these arguments before and the relation between the events that took place and Ukraine's obligations, including under the Budapest Memorandum's terms. I remind you once again that the Budapest Memorandum contains just one legal obligation binding Russia, the United States and Great Britain, namely,

that nuclear weapons would not be used against Ukraine, which had given up its nuclear weapons. This was the only legal obligation cemented in the Budapest Memorandum in 1994. At the same time, of course, this document also contained political obligations declaring that we all desire and would respect Ukraine's sovereignty, territorial integrity and independence. This accords completely with our position. The only thing absent from the Budapest Memorandum is an obligation on the part of Russia or anyone else to agree with the results of an anti-constitutional armed coup d'etat, led by people who made it their first act to proclaim a fight against the Russian language and Russians in Crimea. I can quote the former leader of the Right Sector, Dmitry Yarosh, who said that, "Russians should be driven out of Crimea or exterminated." No one had any obligation to accept political changes of this kind in Ukraine under leaders of this sort. When they violated the agreements of February 20, 2014 and ignored their obligation to form a government of national unity under guarantees from France, Poland and Germany, the Ukrainian coup leaders flagrantly violated the Budapest Memorandum's terms regarding the need to respect in full Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity.

As for the Minsk Agreements, I have no intention of rewriting them. They were unanimously enshrined in the UN Security Council resolution. I have heard nothing suggesting that France or Germany as countries taking part in the Normandy format, or Donetsk and Lugansk as participants in the Contact Group have proposed changing these agreements. On the contrary, the entire international community repeats ceaselessly that there is no alternative to the Minsk Agreements. It is true that high-level political and official circles in Ukraine have expressed the view that no one intends to implement these agreements and that they should be redrafted and that the United States should be involved too, in addition to the Normandy format. We have been hearing this for a long time, right since the agreements were concluded. US President Barack Obama's administration has tried to support the agreements' implementation. These efforts had their use but did not ultimately produce results. I have heard nothing about the Trump administration saying the Minsk Agreements should be buried and the crisis in eastern Ukraine resolved some other way. We have no reason to consider this possibility.

Question: I have a question about the Balkans. A train was sent from Belgrade to the northern region of Kosovo several days ago. The train was painted in Serbia's national colours and had a message reading "Kosovo is Serbia." Kosovo special forces stopped the train at the border and forced it to turn back to Belgrade. President Hashim Thaci of Kosovo denounced the move as a provocation and as evidence of Serbia's readiness to annex northern Kosovo using the Crimea scenario. The Serbian President threatened to send troops to Kosovo to protect the Serbian population. A week ago, President of Republika Srpska Milorad Dodik said the republic would withdraw from Bosnia and Herzegovina to join Serbia, after which they would take over Kosovo's northern regions and then Montenegro. Can you comment on the current situation in the Balkans? Some experts say it is fast approaching war again.

Sergey Lavrov: Unfortunately, the Balkans have been a source of conflict more than once. I am convinced, or at least hope that, although the only thing history teaches us is that history doesn't teach us anything, everyone understands that the use of military force must be prevented this time even despite escalating tensions. As I said in my opening remarks, these problems are largely created by the policy of those who are forcing a new, modernised and post-Christian edition of so-called European values on the Balkan nations. I have no doubt about this.

As for the Belgrade-Pristina train, Serbian Foreign Minister Ivica Dacic called me the same day. I received first-hand information from him, and then we analysed what happened. The only thing I can say is that the EU must defuse the situation and take the necessary measures to ensure the implementation of the Belgrade-Pristina agreements, which were reached with Brussels' mediation and which say, first, that freedom of movement will not be restricted, and second, that there must be no Albanian security forces in Northern Kosovo where the Serbian community lives. As I see it, at least some of these EU-sponsored agreements have been violated.

As for statements by President of Republika Srpska Milorad Dodik, we stand for the implementation of the Dayton Accords, to which Mr Dodik pledged commitment until this day. At the same time, we often reminded our Western partners about the inappropriateness of a sovereign country being overseen by the High Representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina, a kind of governor-general who can force any decision on the three constituent ethnic groups – Bosniaks, Serbs and Croats. Several years ago, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) even held non-permanent status at the UN Security Council. The EU continues to defend the importance of this office, or it probably just cannot give up the powers it enjoys. This is irritating, just as the regular accusations of attempting to destroy the republic thrown at Serbian officials in Banja Luka. As I said, nobody is trying to destroy this republic. President Dodik has reaffirmed his commitment to the Dayton Accords more than once. However, the Dayton Agreements are being violated by those who take decisions in BiH without due regard for the opinion of the three constituent ethnic groups and without their agreement, contrary to the Dayton Accords. Hysterics over Bosnian Serbs' decision to mark January 9 as their day of culture, which has been denounced as an attempt to undermine the Dayton Accords, is a provocation and evidence of pride wounded by the fact that somebody can cherish one's own values more than Brussel's post-Christian values.

Question: My question is related to the situation in the Middle East. I spent a month in Iraq where I covered the battle of Mosul. I saw that harassment of Christians takes place both in Syria and Iraq. Their residences are destroyed; Christians flee their homes and are not going to return. I had an interview with Peshmerga General Sirwan Barzani, who said that people in this region will keep killing each other as long as there are corrupt politicians and no political will. He said the military understands that they will have to spill blood. He also said that after ISIS is defeated, a new ISIS would appear.

Sergey Lavrov: We are deeply concerned about the relocation of Christians. The number of them has dropped by 75 percent in Iraq and several-fold in Syria. In other parts of the regions

Christians also are having a hard time. We already spoke about how this crisis appeared. This was again a result of exporting democracy and values. It is perplexing that these efforts came from Europe but did a lot of harm to Christians, among others. This again makes me believe that the current values exported from Europe are post-Christian.

They counted on overthrowing the so-called authoritarian regimes that do not fit in the "decent regimes" category within the liberal philosophy. So this is the result. Just like that, Al-Qaeda was the result of the Americans supporting mujahedeen in the 1980s; the Islamic State appeared as a result of the 2003 occupation of Iraq. Same here, the Jabhat Fateh al-Sham, a follower of Al-Qaeda, is the most malicious, cruel and ruthless terrorist force in the Syrian crisis. It is possible to stop this war, to defend the rights not only of Christians, but also Muslims and other people who have lived their entire lives in Syria and other countries in the region, by force, because terrorism must be attacked and destroyed unsparingly. We are doing exactly this by helping the Syrian army and militia which, together with the Syrian army, take part in counterterrorism efforts.

I suggest you look at the statistics. Only last September, after the Russian Aerospace Forces began working in Syria at the request of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, the US coalition that had been there for about a year by that time, started to bomb ISIS positions and infrastructure, including oil fields which ISIS used to traffic oil. There are many examples proving that the Americans and their allies secretly wanted to use both Jabhat Fateh al-Sham and ISIS to weaken and eventually overthrow al-Assad's regime. That is why they did not rush to implement their declared goal, that is, counterterrorism efforts.

The second direction we consider a priority is, of course, the mobilisation of global public opinion. We have held conferences on Christians' rights at the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva three times. These conferences were initiated by Russia, the Vatican, Lebanon and Armenia. None of the EU member states joined us. Apparently, contemporary Europe considers defending Christians politically incorrect. You know that the article on the Christian heritage of Europe was excluded from the founding documents of the EU, including the draft EU Constitution and the Lisbon Treaty. We are planning another conference this spring. It is only a conference, but I think the media will be able to use it to attract attention to the awful conditions of Christians and peoples of other beliefs in the Middle East.

Apart from the UN, in the OSCE as well, we support the decision of the OSCE Ministerial Council on combating anti-Semitism. In 2015, we suggested that together with a declaration on combating anti-Semitism the relevant documents on Islamophobia and Christianophobia be adopted. There is still no consensus in the OSCE on the adoption of the latter two, so there is a problem. We are aware of it and are trying to do everything we can to at least neutralise it, and then solve it. But I urge the European media to look at their own capitals and see how their governments treat Christians.

Question: My question is related to the situation around Russian [war] memorials in Bulgaria. There are 3,400 common graves in the city of Pleven. I shot a film in Russian, saying that these graves are in a state of neglect. If we Bulgarians do not care about them, maybe you will pay attention to this situation? After all, this is where Ivan Tsolov Vinarov, who received the rank of colonel in Moscow and studied at the Frunze Military Academy, is buried. I had to use a machete to get to his grave. Maybe you will pay attention to this. Did these servicemen die in Bulgaria for us to pick oranges in Spain, olives in Greece and strawberries in the UK?

Sergey Lavrov: If you would hand over to me the materials regarding the condition of our soldiers' graves, I would be grateful. Until now, we had no evidence of serious problems with the condition of the graves of Russian and Soviet soldiers. We have a state system ensuring the maintenance of these graves. This is done in part on the basis of bilateral intergovernmental agreements. Otherwise, war graves are maintained through the War Memorials association and civilian graves through the Federal Agency for the Commonwealth of Independent States, Compatriots Living Abroad and International Humanitarian Cooperation. Based on your information, I would like to understand which category these graves belong to and whether they are a subject of the bilateral agreement between Russia and Bulgaria or whether their status is different. We give special attention to preserving the memory of all our warriors who laid down their lives in liberating Europe, including Bulgaria from the Ottoman yoke, and during the two world wars, quite a few Russian heroes gave their lives on the European continent. I would be grateful for the information you have mentioned.

Maria Zakharova: The Russia Today TV channel. People guilty of everything.

Sergey Lavrov: Is that a hashtag?

Maria Zakharova: It has been for a long time now.

Question: My question concerns a number of stories reported recently in some respected – I would even say, leading Western media outlets. For example, reports about compromising material on US president-elect Donald Trump. Many people in the United States, including members of the intelligence community, have already recognised their absurdity. A dead issue, you would think, but yesterday, in a primetime slot, the BBC TV channel aired a documentary where over 10 minutes was given to the so-called Moscow dossier. Our German colleague has already said the word "hackers" in this room. The impression is that Russian hackers and Russian propaganda in Germany are becoming what is known in English as buzzwords. For example, the German media recently resurrected the story about a girl named Liza as a scare story to show how terrible Russian propaganda is. Are these links of the same chain? Who or what is behind this?

Sergey Lavrov: I have already addressed this subject. These are convulsions that are based on a far broader context than simply the wish to play Donald Trump and Russia off against each other. These are the convulsions of those who understand that time is running out for them and

that they will no longer be able absolutely irresponsibly to promote their liberal values, the values of total licence in everyday life, in private life and in foreign policy. Serious people want to deal with the problems of their countries and their nations, not play these games to satisfy their own ego. Time is running out for foreign policy demagogues. They find this hard to stomach and so all sorts of fake stories are fabricated. I do not know whether it is right to say "fabricate a fake story." Are fake stories invented? All of this is very simple to do. First, someone from official circles leaks a fake story to the media. Then this leak is played up in the media, gains currency and is commented on by the same official as a given. There are plenty of examples. This applies to the girl you have mentioned and the so-called white helmets that the BBC has all but nominated (or it probably has) for a Nobel Prize. Then there was a video showing these white helmets stage all the horrors that were then disseminated on all TV channels and the Internet. This applies to the hysteria that our Western colleagues at the UN Security Council fanned, demanding that we force the Syrian government to allow a convoy with medications and medical equipment through to eastern Aleppo. When eastern Aleppo was freed, it turned out that there were so many medications at the militants' depots that western Aleppo, which had long been in the hands of government forces, could not even have dreamed about. Regarding the lies about the white helmets and medication supplies in eastern Aleppo, we have now sent an official query to the UN Secretariat and other international agencies. Both factors were used to demonise Syrian President Bashar Assad and those who help him fight terrorists.

I knew that this question would be asked. On the subject of lying, I brought here one quote. In a January 9 live show on the Voice of America Russian Service, reporter Danila Galperovich said that the claims by US intelligence officials who accused the Russian authorities of being involved in hacking attacks were not commented on by anybody in Russia from among those who usually make such comments by virtue of their office. Neither the Kremlin nor the Foreign Ministry nor the heads of committees in both houses of parliament purportedly made any statement regarding the accusations from Washington. This is the kind of truth that the Voice of America carries. In reality it lies. By the time Galperovich made his allegations, Presidential Press Secretary Dmitry Peskov, Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman Maria Zakharova and representatives of the Federation Council's Foreign Affairs Committee had issued statements. All this hogwash – sorry for using a strong word – comes from a radio service that is funded by the US State Department.

Perhaps some people would like to forget what Edward Snowden said three years ago, namely how the NSA hacked the al-Jazeera TV channel, the Aeroflot ticket booking system and the UN closed circuit video conference system, and how it wiretapped French President Francois Hollande, German Chancellor Angela Merkel and the EU leadership. They must be wishing this could be forgotten as soon as possible. Remember this, remind your readers that these episodes, which came out into the open and were confirmed by facts, for some reason went unnoticed by those who are now shouting all those lies and nonsense about Russia posing a cyber threat.

Question: I just want to ask you what you think realistically the talks on Syria in Astana can possibly achieve given that so many major opposition forces won't be attending? So realistically what can you do there?

And you say Russia wants to improve relations with the United States. How likely is that given the recent comments we've heard from members of Donald Trump's incoming administration calling Russia a threat? And does Russia really want to make up with America or is it more interested in keeping an external enemy, a kind of a foreign boogeyman?

Sergei Lavrov: As for the meeting in Astana, as I said the main difference from all the previous attempts is that it will be a meeting of people who use weapons against each other on the ground and control certain areas of the Syrian Arab Republic. Until recently, the process launched in February by the UN involved only the political opposition. As it turned out, most of these political oppositionists do not have any influence on the ground and do not control those who are conquering territories. But the UN process was suspended, because the so-called High Negotiations Committee that was courted by western countries and some countries in the region took a rigid stand not to discuss anything with anyone until Bashar al-Assad resigns. It was a crude violation of the UN Security Council resolution that left all issues to the discretion of Syrian negotiators who had to come to agreement with each other. But, nevertheless, the guardians of this High Committee did not do anything and did not allow UN Special Envoy for Syria Staffan de Mistura do his job. So in this dead-end situation created mostly by some European countries that were courting the committee, we, together with our Turkish colleagues, came up with a proposal. With Turkey and Russia as intermediaries, representatives of Syrian armed forces and the armed opposition forces reached agreements on ceasefire that were unanimously approved by the UN. Those agreements must be implemented. I hope that some western countries that now feel sidelined will not try to undermine them. We have received such information. We hope that a responsible approach has the upper hand, not a desire to retaliate.

The aim of the Astana meeting is not to involve only the political opposition, which is still present (and we fully realise that) in talks, but also the field commanders.

As for our future relations with the Donald Trump administration, I have already spoken about that and there is little I can add. As I understand it, you spoke about the Senate hearings. Many try to analyse them, which I think is pretty pointless, because what is important is the actions and positions voiced after the relevant people take their offices in Washington.

One more thing I want to say, a phrase by Rex Tillerson during the Senate hearings. Answering a question about Russia, he said that the US should be clear-eyed about its relationship with Russia, and that Russia was a threat. But then he said that Russia was not unpredictable in promoting its interests. Only a few people commented on this phrase, and maybe it was not taken into account. But the words about Russia not being unpredictable mean that we are dealing with people who will not engage in moralising and will try to understand the interests of their partners the same way they want to voice the interests of their own country.

I will say more on interests versus moralising and messiahship. I think that it is possible to solve many problems with many countries if we focus together on a pragmatic search for shared interests.

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Thank you. I would have stayed longer but I have to attend talks with Moldovan President Igor Dodon