

Valdai International Discussion Club meeting

The President took part in the final plenary session of the 19th meeting of the Valdai International Discussion Club.

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Moscow Region

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The theme of this year's forum is *A Post-Hegemonic World: Justice and Security for Everyone*. The four day-long meeting brought together 111 experts, politicians, diplomats and economists from Russia and 40 foreign countries, including Afghanistan, Brazil, China, Egypt, France, Germany, India, Indonesia, Iran, Kazakhstan, South Africa, Turkiye, the United States, and Uzbekistan, to name a few.

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Moderator of the Valdai Club's plenary session Fyodor Lukyanov: Good afternoon, Mr President,

We look forward to seeing you every year, but this year, perhaps, we were more impatient than usual, since there are lots of issues to discuss.

President of Russia Vladimir Putin: I suppose so, yes.

Fyodor Lukyanov: The forum mainly focused on matters related to the international order, such as how the world is changing and, most importantly, who, in fact, is at the helm of the world, who runs it, and whether the world is amenable to being run at all.

However, we are discussing this as observers, but you have power, so please share your thoughts with us.

Vladimir Putin: Thank you very much.

Ladies and gentlemen, friends,

I had a chance to get a sense of what you discussed here during the last few days. It was an interesting and substantive discussion. I hope you do not regret coming to Russia and communicating with each other.

I am happy to see you all.

We have used the Valdai Club platform to discuss, more than once, the major and serious shifts that have already taken place and are taking place around the world, the risks posed by the degradation of global institutions, the erosion of collective security principles and the substitution of "rules" for international law. I was tempted to say "we are clear about

who came up with these rules,” but, perhaps, that would not be an accurate statement. We have no idea whatsoever who made these rules up, what these rules are based on, or what is contained inside these rules.

It looks like we are witnessing an attempt to enforce just one rule whereby those in power – we were talking about power, and I am now talking about global power – could live without following any rules at all and could get away with anything. These are the rules that we hear them constantly, as people say, harping on, that is, talking about them incessantly

The Valdai discussions are important because a variety of assessments and forecasts can be heard here. Life always shows how accurate they were, since life is the sternest and the most objective teacher. So, life shows how accurate our previous years’ projections were.

Alas, events continue to follow a negative scenario, which we have discussed more than once during our previous meetings. Moreover, they have morphed into a major system-wide crisis that impacted, in addition to the military-political sphere, the economic and humanitarian spheres as well.

The so-called West which is, of course, a theoretical construct since it is not united and clearly is a highly complex conglomerate, but I will still say that the West has taken a number of steps in recent years and especially in recent months that are designed to escalate the situation. As a matter of fact, they always seek to aggravate matters, which is nothing new, either. This includes the stoking of war in Ukraine, the provocations around Taiwan, and the destabilisation of the global food and energy markets. To be sure, the latter was, of course, not done on purpose, there is no doubt about it. The destabilisation of the energy market resulted from a number of systemic missteps made by the Western authorities that I mentioned above. As we can see now, the situation was further aggravated by the destruction of the pan-European gas pipelines. This is something otherworldly altogether, but we are nevertheless witnessing these sad developments.

Global power is exactly what the so-called West has at stake in its game. But this game is certainly dangerous, bloody and, I would say, dirty. It denies the sovereignty of countries and peoples, their identity and uniqueness, and tramples upon other states’ interests. In any case, even if denial is the not the word used, they are doing it in real life. No one, except those who create these rules I have mentioned is entitled to retain their identity: everyone else must comply with these rules.

In this regard, let me remind you of Russia's proposals to our Western partners to build confidence and a collective security system. They were once again tossed in December 2021.

However, sitting things out can hardly work in the modern world. He who sows the wind will reap the whirlwind, as the saying goes. The crisis has indeed taken on a global dimension and has impacted everyone. There can be no illusions about this.

Humankind is at a fork in the road: either keep accumulating problems and eventually get crushed under their weight, or work together to find solutions – even imperfect ones, as long as they work – that can make our world a more stable and safer place.

You know, I have always believed in the power of common sense. Therefore, I am convinced that sooner or later both the new centres of the multipolar international order and the West

will have to start a dialogue on an equal footing about a common future for us all, and the sooner the better, of course. In this regard, I will highlight some of the most important aspects for all of us.

Current developments have overshadowed environmental issues. Strange as it may seem, this is what I would like to speak about first today. Climate change no longer tops the agenda. But that fundamental challenge has not gone away, it is still with us, and it is growing.

The loss of biodiversity is one of the most dangerous consequences of disrupting the environmental balance. This brings me to the key point all of us have gathered here for. Is it not equally important to maintain cultural, social, political and civilisational diversity?

At the same time, the smoothing out and erasure of all and any differences is essentially what the modern West is all about. What stands behind this? First of all, it is the decaying creative potential of the West and a desire to restrain and block the free development of other civilisations.

There is also an openly mercantile interest, of course. By imposing their values, consumption habits and standardisation on others, our opponents – I will be careful with words – are trying to expand markets for their products. The goal on this track is, ultimately, very primitive. It is notable that the West proclaims the universal value of its culture and worldview. Even if they do not say so openly, which they actually often do, they behave as if this is so, that it is a fact of life, and the policy they pursue is designed to show that these values must be unconditionally accepted by all other members of the international community.

I would like to quote from Alexander Solzhenitsyn's famous Harvard Commencement Address delivered in 1978. He said that typical of the West is "a continuous blindness of superiority" – and it continues to this day – which "upholds the belief that vast regions everywhere on our planet should develop and mature to the level of present-day Western systems." He said this in 1978. Nothing has changed.

Over the nearly 50 years since then, the blindness about which Solzhenitsyn spoke and which is openly racist and neocolonial, has acquired especially distorted forms, in particular, after the emergence of the so-called unipolar world. What am I referring to? Belief in one's infallibility is very dangerous; it is only one step away from the desire of the infallible to destroy those they do not like, or as they say, to cancel them. Just think about the meaning of this word.

Even at the very peak of the Cold War, the peak of the confrontation of the two systems, ideologies and military rivalry, it did not occur to anyone to deny the very existence of the culture, art, and science of other peoples, their opponents. It did not even occur to anyone. Yes, certain restrictions were imposed on contacts in education, science, culture, and, unfortunately, sports. But nonetheless, both the Soviet and American leaders understood that it was necessary to treat the humanitarian area tactfully, studying and respecting your rival, and sometimes even borrowing from them in order to retain a foundation for sound, productive relations at least for the future.

And what is happening now? At one time, the Nazis reached the point of burning books, and now the Western "guardians of liberalism and progress" have reached the point of banning Dostoyevsky and Tchaikovsky. The so-called "cancel culture" and in reality –

as we said many times – the real cancellation of culture is eradicating everything that is alive and creative and stifles free thought in all areas, be it economics, politics or culture.

Today, liberal ideology itself has changed beyond recognition. If initially, classic liberalism was understood to mean the freedom of every person to do and say as they pleased, in the 20th century the liberals started saying that the so-called open society had enemies and that the freedom of these enemies could and should be restricted if not cancelled. It has reached the absurd point where any alternative opinion is declared subversive propaganda and a threat to democracy.

Whatever comes from Russia is all branded as “Kremlin intrigues.” But look at yourselves. Are we really so all-powerful? Any criticism of our opponents – any – is perceived as “Kremlin intrigues,” “the hand of the Kremlin.” This is insane. What have you sunk to? Use your brain, at least, say something more interesting, lay out your viewpoint conceptually. You cannot blame everything on the Kremlin’s scheming.

Fyodor Dostoyevsky prophetically foretold all this back in the 19th century. One of the characters of his novel *Demons*, the nihilist Shigalev, described the bright future he imagined in the following way: “Emerging from boundless freedom, I conclude with boundless despotism.” This is what our Western opponents have come to. Another character of the novel, Pyotr Verkhovensky echoes him, talking about the need for universal treason, reporting and spying, and claiming that society does not need talents or greater abilities: “Cicero’s tongue is cut out, Copernicus has his eyes gouged out and Shakespeare is stoned.” This is what our Western opponents are arriving at. What is this if not Western cancel culture?

These were great thinkers and, frankly, I am grateful to my aides for finding these quotes.

What can one say to this? History will certainly put everything in its place and will know whom to cancel, and it will definitely not be the greatest works of universally recognised geniuses of world culture, but those who have for some reason decided that they have the right to use world culture as they see fit. Their self-regard really knows no bounds. No one will even remember their names in a few years. But Dostoevsky will live on, as will Tchaikovsky, Pushkin, no matter how much they would have liked the opposite.

Standardisation, financial and technological monopoly, the erasure of all differences is what underlies the Western model of globalisation, which is neocolonial in nature. Their goal was clear – to establish the unconditional dominance of the West in the global economy and politics. To do that, the West put at its service the entire planet’s natural and financial resources, as well as all intellectual, human and economic capabilities, while alleging it was a natural feature of the so-called new global interdependence.

Here I would like to recall another Russian philosopher, Alexander Zinoviev, whose birth centenary we will celebrate on October 29. More than 20 years ago, he said that Western civilisation needed the entire planet as a medium of existence and all the resources of humanity to survive at the level it had reached. That is what they want, that is exactly how it is.

Moreover, the West initially secured itself a huge head start in that system because it had developed the principles and mechanisms – the same as today’s rules they keep talking about,

which remain an incomprehensible black hole because no one really knows what they are. But as soon as non-western countries began to derive some benefits from globalisation, above all, the large nations in Asia, the West immediately changed or fully abolished many of those rules. And the so-called sacred principles of free trade, economic openness, equal competition, even property rights were suddenly forgotten, completely. They change the rules on the go, on the spot wherever they see an opportunity for themselves.

Here is another example of the substitution of concepts and meanings. For many years, Western ideologists and politicians have been telling the world there was no alternative to democracy. Admittedly, they meant the Western-style, the so-called liberal model of democracy. They arrogantly rejected all other variants and forms of government by the people and, I want to emphasise this, did so contemptuously and disdainfully. This manner has been taking shape since colonial times, as if everyone were second-rate, while they were exceptional. It has been going on for centuries and continues to this day.

So currently, an overwhelming majority of the international community is demanding democracy in international affairs and rejecting all forms of authoritarian dictate by individual countries or groups of countries. What is this if not the direct application of democratic principles to international relations?

What stance has the “civilised” West adopted? If you are democrats, you are supposed to welcome the natural desire for freedom expressed by billions of people, but no. The West is calling it undermining the liberal rules-based order. It is resorting to economic and trade wars, sanctions, boycotts and colour revolutions, and preparing and carrying out all sorts of coups.

One of them led to tragic consequences in Ukraine in 2014. They supported it and even specified the amount of money they had spent on this coup. They have the cheek to act as they please and have no scruples about anything they do. They killed Soleimani, an Iranian general. You can think whatever you want about Soleimani, but he was a foreign state official. They killed him in a third country and assumed responsibility. What is that supposed to mean, for crying out loud? What kind of world are we living in?

As is customary, Washington continues to refer to the current international order as liberal American-style, but in fact, this notorious “order” is multiplying chaos every day and, I might even add, is becoming increasingly intolerant even towards the Western countries and their attempts to act independently. Everything is nipped in the bud, and they do not even hesitate to impose sanctions on their allies, who lower their heads in acquiescence.

For example, the Hungarian MPs’ July proposals to codify the commitment to European Christian values and culture in the Treaty on European Union were taken not even as an affront, but as an outright and hostile act of sabotage. What is that? What does it mean? Indeed, some people may like it, some not.

Over a thousand years, Russia has developed a unique culture of interaction between all world religions. There is no need to cancel anything, be it Christian values, Islamic values or Jewish values. We have other world religions as well. All you need to do is respect each other. In a number of our regions – I just know this firsthand – people celebrate Christian, Islamic, Buddhist and Jewish holidays together, and they enjoy doing so as they congratulate each other and are happy for each other.

But not here. Why not? At least, they could discuss it. Amazing.

Without exaggeration, this is not even a systemic, but a doctrinal crisis of the neoliberal American-style model of international order. They have no ideas for progress and positive development. They simply have nothing to offer the world, except perpetuating their dominance.

I am convinced that real democracy in a multipolar world is primarily about the ability of any nation – I emphasise – any society or any civilisation to follow its own path and organise its own socio-political system. If the United States or the EU countries enjoy this right, then the countries of Asia, the Islamic states, the monarchies of the Persian Gulf, and countries on other continents certainly have this right as well. Of course, our country, Russia, also has this right, and no one will ever be able to tell our people what kind of society we should be building and what principles should underlie it.

A direct threat to the political, economic and ideological monopoly of the West lies in the fact that the world can come up with alternative social models that are more effective; I want to emphasise this, more effective today, brighter and more appealing than the ones that currently exist. These models will definitely come about. This is inevitable. By the way, US political scientists and analysts also write about this. Truthfully, their government is not listening to what they say, although it cannot avoid seeing these concepts in political science magazines and mentioned in discussions.

Development should rely on a dialogue between civilisations and spiritual and moral values. Indeed, understanding what humans and their nature are all about varies across civilisations, but this difference is often superficial, and everyone recognises the ultimate dignity and spiritual essence of people. A common foundation on which we can and must build our future is critically important.

Here is something I would like to emphasise. Traditional values are not a rigid set of postulates that everyone must adhere to, of course not. The difference from the so-called neo-liberal values is that they are unique in each particular instance, because they stem from the traditions of a particular society, its culture and historical background. This is why traditional values cannot be imposed on anyone. They must simply be respected and everything that every nation has been choosing for itself over centuries must be handled with care.

This is how we understand traditional values, and the majority of humanity share and accept our approach. This is understandable, because the traditional societies of the East, Latin America, Africa, and Eurasia form the basis of world civilisation.

Respect for the ways and customs of peoples and civilisations is in everyone's interest. In fact, this is also in the interest of the "West," which is quickly becoming a minority in the international arena as it loses its dominance. Of course, the Western minority's right to its own cultural identity – I want to emphasise this – must be ensured and respected, but, importantly, on an equal footing with the rights of every other nation.

If the Western elites believe they can have their people and their societies embrace what I believe are strange and trendy ideas like dozens of genders or gay pride parades, so be it.

Let them do as they please. But they certainly have no right to tell others to follow in their steps.

We see the complicated demographic, political and social processes taking place in Western countries. This is, of course, their own business. Russia does not interfere in such matters and has no intention of doing so. Unlike the West, we mind our own business. But we are hoping that pragmatism will triumph and Russia's dialogue with the genuine, traditional West, as well as with other coequal development centres, will become a major contribution to the construction of a multipolar world order.

I will add that multipolarity is a real and, actually, the only chance for Europe to restore its political and economic identity. To tell the truth – and this idea is expressed explicitly in Europe today – Europe's legal capacity is very limited. I tried to put it mildly not to offend anyone.

The world is diverse by nature and Western attempts to squeeze everyone into the same pattern are clearly doomed. Nothing will come out of them.

The conceited aspiration to achieve global supremacy and, essentially, to dictate or preserve leadership by dictate is really reducing the international prestige of the leaders of the Western world, including the United States, and increasing mistrust in their ability to negotiate in general. They say one thing today and another tomorrow; they sign documents and renounce them, they do what they want. There is no stability in anything. How documents are signed, what was discussed, what can we hope for – all this is completely unclear.

Previously, only a few countries dared argue with America and it looked almost sensational, whereas now it has become routine for all manner of states to reject Washington's unfounded demands despite its continued attempts to exert pressure on everyone. This is a mistaken policy that leads nowhere. But let them, this is also their choice.

I am convinced that the nations of the world will not shut their eyes to a policy of coercion that has discredited itself. Every time the West will have to pay a higher price for its attempts to preserve its hegemony. If I were a Western elite, I would seriously ponder this prospect. As I said, some political scientists and politicians in the United States are already thinking about it.

In the current conditions of intense conflict, I will be direct about certain things. As an independent and distinctive civilization, Russia has never considered and does not consider itself an enemy of the West. Americophobia, Anglophobia, Francophobia, and Germanophobia are the same forms of racism as Russophobia or anti-Semitism, and, incidentally, xenophobia in all its guises.

It is simply necessary to understand clearly that, as I have already said before, two Wests – at least two and maybe more but two at least – the West of traditional, primarily Christian values, freedom, patriotism, great culture and now Islamic values as well – a substantial part of the population in many Western countries follows Islam. This West is close to us in something. We share with it common, even ancient roots. But there is also a different West – aggressive, cosmopolitan, and neocolonial. It is acting as a tool of neoliberal elites. Naturally, Russia will never reconcile itself to the dictates of this West.

In 2000, after I was elected President, I will always remember what I faced: I will remember the price we paid for destroying the den of terrorism in the North Caucasus, which the West almost openly supported at the time. We are all adults here; most of you present in this hall understand what I am talking about. We know that this is exactly what happened in practice: financial, political and information support. We have all lived through it.

What is more, not only did the West actively support terrorists on Russian territory, but in many ways it nurtured this threat. We know this. Nevertheless, after the situation had stabilised, when the main terrorist gangs had been defeated, including thanks to the bravery of the Chechen people, we decided not to turn back, not to play the offended, but to move forward, to build relations even with those who actually acted against us, to establish and develop relations with all who wanted them, based on mutual benefit and respect for one another.

We thought it was in everyone's interest. Russia, thank God, had survived all the difficulties of that time, stood firm, grew stronger, was able to cope with internal and external terrorism, its economy was preserved, it began to develop, and its defence capability began to improve. We tried to build up relations with the leading countries of the West and with NATO. The message was the same: let us stop being enemies, let us live together as friends, let us engage in dialogue, let us build trust, and, hence, peace. We were absolutely sincere, I want to emphasise that. We clearly understood the complexity of this rapprochement, but we agreed to it.

What did we get in response? In short, we got a "no" in all the main areas of possible cooperation. We received an ever-increasing pressure on us and hotbeds of tension near our borders. And what, may I ask, is the purpose of this pressure? What is it? Is it just to practice? Of course not. The goal was to make Russia more vulnerable. The purpose is to turn Russia into a tool to achieve their own geopolitical goals.

As a matter of fact, this is a universal rule: they try to turn everyone into a tool, in order to use these tools for their own purposes. And those who do not yield to this pressure, who do not want to be such a tool are sanctioned: all sorts of economic restrictions are carried out against them and in relation of them, coups are prepared or where possible carried out and so on. And in the end, if nothing at all can be done, the aim is the same: to destroy them, to wipe them off the political map. But it has not and will never be possible to draft and implement such a scenario with respect to Russia.

What else can I add? Russia is not challenging the Western elites. Russia is simply upholding its right to exist and to develop freely. Importantly, we will not become a new hegemon ourselves. Russia is not suggesting replacing a unipolar world with a bipolar, tripolar or other dominating order, or replacing Western domination with domination from the East, North or South. This would inevitably lead to another impasse.

At this point, I would like to cite the words of the great Russian philosopher Nikolai Danilevsky. He believed that progress did not consist of everyone going in the same direction, as some of our opponents seem to want. This would only result in progress coming to a halt, Danilevsky said. Progress lies in "walking the field that represents humanity's historical activity, walking in all directions," he said, adding that no civilisation can take pride in being the height of development.

I am convinced that dictatorship can only be countered through free development of countries and peoples; the degradation of the individual can be set off by the love of a person as a creator; primitive simplification and prohibition can be replaced with the flourishing complexity of culture and tradition.

The significance of today's historical moment lies in the opportunities for everyone's democratic and distinct development path, which is opening up before all civilisations, states and integration associations. We believe above all that the new world order must be based on law and right, and must be free, distinctive and fair.

The world economy and trade also need to become fairer and more open. Russia considers the creation of new international financial platforms inevitable; this includes international transactions. These platforms should be above national jurisdictions. They should be secure, depoliticized and automated and should not depend on any single control centre. Is it possible to do this or not? Of course it is possible. This will require a lot of effort. Many countries will have to pool their efforts, but it is possible.

This rules out the possibility of abuse in a new global financial infrastructure. It would make it possible to conduct effective, beneficial and secure international transactions without the dollar or any of the so-called reserve currencies. This is all the more important, now that the dollar is being used as a weapon; the United States, and the West in general, have discredited the institution of international financial reserves. First, they devalued it with inflation in the dollar and euro zones and then they took our gold-and-currency reserves.

The transition to transactions in national currencies will quickly gain momentum. This is inevitable. Of course, it depends on the status of the issuers of these currencies and the state of their economies, but they will be growing stronger, and these transactions are bound to gradually prevail over the others. Such is the logic of a sovereign economic and financial policy in a multipolar world.

Furthermore, new global development centres are already using unmatched technology and research in various fields and can successfully compete with Western transnational companies in many areas.

Clearly, we have a common and very pragmatic interest in free and open scientific and technological exchange. United, we stand to win more than if we act separately. The majority should benefit from these exchanges, not individual super-rich corporations.

How are things going today? If the West is selling medicines or crop seeds to other countries, it tells them to kill their national pharmaceutical industries and selection. In fact, it all comes down to this: its machine tool and equipment supplies destroy the local engineering industry. I realised this back when I served as Prime Minister. Once you open your market to a certain product group, the local manufacturer instantly goes belly up and it is almost impossible for him to raise his head. That's how they build relationships. That's how they take over markets and resources, and countries lose their technological and scientific potential. This is not progress; it is enslavement and reducing economies to primitive levels.

Technological development should not increase global inequality, but rather reduce it. This is how Russia has traditionally implemented its foreign technology policy. For example, when we build nuclear power plants in other countries, we create competence centres and train

local personnel. We create an industry. We don't just build a plant, we create an entire industry. In fact, we give other countries a chance to break new ground in their scientific and technological development, reduce inequality, and bring their energy sector to new levels of efficiency and environmental friendliness.

Let me emphasise again that sovereignty and a unique path of development in no way mean isolation or autarky. On the contrary, they are about energetic and mutually beneficial cooperation based on the principles of fairness and equality.

If liberal globalisation is about depersonalising and imposing the Western model on the entire world, integration is, in contrast, about tapping the potential of each civilisation for everyone to benefit. If globalism is dictate – which is what it comes down to eventually, – integration is a team effort to develop common strategies that everyone can benefit from.

In this regard, Russia believes it is important to make wider use of mechanisms for creating large spaces that rely on interaction between neighbouring countries, whose economies and social systems, as well as resource bases and infrastructure, complement each other. In fact, these large spaces form the economic basis of a multipolar world order. Their dialogue gives rise to genuine unity in humanity, which is much more complex, unique and multidimensional than the simplistic ideas professed by some Western masterminds.

Unity among humankind cannot be created by issuing commands such as “do as I do” or “be like us.” It is created with consideration for everyone's opinion and with a careful approach to the identity of every society and every nation. This is the principle that can underlie long-term cooperation in a multipolar world.

In this regard, it may be worth revising the structure of the United Nations, including its Security Council, to better reflect the world's diversity. After all, much more will depend on Asia, Africa, and Latin America in tomorrow's world than is commonly believed today, and this increase in their influence is undoubtedly a positive development.

Let me recall that the Western civilisation is not the only one even in our common Eurasian space. Moreover, the majority of the population is concentrated in the east of Eurasia, where the centres of the oldest human civilisations emerged.

The value and importance of Eurasia lies in the fact that it represents a self-sufficient complex possessing huge resources of all kinds and tremendous opportunities. The more we work on increasing the connectivity of Eurasia and creating new ways and forms of cooperation, the more impressive achievements we make.

The successful performance of the Eurasian Economic Union, the fast growth of the authority and prestige of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, the large-scale One Belt, One Road initiatives, plans for multilateral cooperation in building the North-South transport corridor and many other projects, are the beginning of a new era, new stage in the development of Eurasia. I am confident of this. Integration projects there do not contradict but supplement each other – of course, if they are carried out by neighbouring countries in their own interests rather than introduced by outside forces with the aim of splitting the Eurasian space and turning it into a zone of bloc confrontation.

Europe, the Western extremity of the Greater Eurasia could also become its natural part. But many of its leaders are hampered by the conviction that the Europeans are superior to others, that it is beneath them to take part as equals in undertakings with others. This arrogance prevents them from seeing that they have themselves become a foreign periphery and actually turned into vassals, often without the right to vote.

Colleagues,

The collapse of the Soviet Union upset the equilibrium of the geopolitical forces. The West felt as a winner and declared a unipolar world arrangement, in which only its will, culture and interests had the right to exist.

Now this historical period of boundless Western domination in world affairs is coming to an end. The unipolar world is being relegated into the past. We are at a historical crossroads. We are in for probably the most dangerous, unpredictable and at the same time most important decade since the end of World War II. The West is unable to rule humanity single-handedly and the majority of nations no longer want to put up with this. This is the main contradiction of the new era. To cite a classic, this is a revolutionary situation to some extent – the elites cannot and the people do not want to live like that any longer.

This state of affairs is fraught with global conflicts or a whole chain of conflicts, which poses a threat to humanity, including the West itself. Today's main historical task is to resolve this contradiction in a way that is constructive and positive.

The change of eras is a painful albeit natural and inevitable process. A future world arrangement is taking shape before our eyes. In this world arrangement, we must listen to everyone, consider every opinion, every nation, society, culture and every system of world outlooks, ideas and religious concepts, without imposing a single truth on anyone. Only on this foundation, understanding our responsibility for the destinies of nations and our planet, shall we create a symphony of human civilisation.

At this point, I would like to finish my remarks with expressing gratitude for the patience that you displayed while listening to them.

Thank you very much.

Fyodor Lukyanov: Thank you very much, Mr President, for such an all-encompassing speech.

I cannot but spontaneously grasp at the conclusion, as long as you mentioned the revolutionary situation, those at the top and those at the bottom. Those of us who are a bit older studied all this at school. Who do you associate yourself with, those at the top or the bottom?

Vladimir Putin: With the bottom, of course, I am from the bottom.

My mother was... As you know, I said it many times that I come from a working family. My father was a foreman, he graduated from a vocational school. My mother did not receive education, even secondary, she was a mere worker, and had many jobs; she worked as a nurse

in a hospital, and as a janitor and a night watchman. She did not want to leave me in kindergarten or in nursery.

So therefore, I naturally am very sensitive – thank God this has been the case until now and, I hope, will continue – to the pulse of what an ordinary person lives through.

Fyodor Lukyanov: So, on the global level, you are among those who “don’t want to [live in the old way]?”

Vladimir Putin: At the global level, naturally, it is one of my responsibilities to monitor what is going on the global level. I stand for what I just said, for democratic relations with regard to the interests of all participants in international communication, not just the interests of the so-called golden billion.

Fyodor Lukyanov: I see.

Last time we met exactly a year ago. The international environment was already tense, but when we look at last October compared to this one, it seems like an idyllic time. Much has changed over the past year, the world has literally turned upside down, as some say. For you personally, what has changed over this year, in your perception of the world and the country?

Vladimir Putin: What was happening and what is happening now, say, as related to Ukraine, these are not changes that are happening just now or that began after the launch of Russia’s special military operation, no. All these changes have been happening for many years; some pay attention to them, others do not, but these are tectonic changes in the entire world order.

You know, these tectonic plates, they are in constant movement somewhere down there in the Earth’s crust. Experts say that they are moving now, and are always in motion yet everything seems quiet, but changes are still happening. And then, they collide. Energy accumulates and when the plates shift, this causes an earthquake. The accumulation of this energy and its outburst have led to these current events.

But they have always happened. What is the essence of these events? New centres of power are emerging. I constantly say, and not only me, is it really about me? They happen because of objective circumstances. Some of the previous centres of power are fading. I have no desire to talk now about why it happens, but it is a natural process of growth, decay, and change. New centres of power are emerging, mainly in Asia, of course. Africa is also taking the lead. Yes, Africa is still a very poor continent, but look at its colossal potential. Latin America. All these countries will definitely keep developing, and these tectonic changes will keep happening.

We did not bring about the current situation, the West did... If you have more questions, I can go back to discussing the developments in Ukraine. Did we carry out the coup, which led to a series of tragic events, including our special military operation? No, we did not.

But what really matters is that tectonic shifts are taking place now and will continue to take place. Our actions have nothing to do with that. Indeed, the ongoing events highlight and promote the processes that are picking up pace and unfolding more quickly than they did before. But in general, they are inevitable, and would have taken place regardless of Russia’s actions towards Ukraine.

Fyodor Lukyanov: Speaking about the state, have you learned anything new about it over the past year?

Vladimir Putin: You know, as far as the state is concerned... Of course, we have incurred costs, above all, losses associated with the special military operation, which I keep thinking about all the time, and there are economic losses as well. But there are enormous acquisitions and what is happening now, will, without any doubt, ultimately – I want to emphasise this – will ultimately be beneficial for Russia and its future.

What are these acquisitions about? They are about the strengthening of our sovereignty across all areas, primarily, in the economic sphere. Not long ago, we ourselves were concerned about our becoming some kind of semi-colony where we are unable to do anything without our Western partners. We cannot perform financial transactions, we have no access to technology and markets, or sources for acquiring the latest technology. Nothing. All they need to do is snap their fingers for all that we have to fall apart. But no, nothing fell apart, and the basis of the Russian economy and the Russian Federation turned out to be much stronger than anyone may have thought, maybe even ourselves.

This is an act of purification and understanding of our capabilities, the ability to quickly regroup given the circumstances and the objective need not only to speed up the import substitution processes, but also to replace those who are leaving our market. It turned out that in most areas our businesses are replacing those that are leaving. Those who depart are whispering in our ear: we are leaving for a short while and will be back soon. Well, how are they going to accomplish that? They are selling multibillion-dollar properties for just one dollar. Why? They are reselling them to the management. What does this mean? It means they have reached an agreement with the management that they will return. What else could it be? Are they gifting these businesses to two or three individuals? Of course, not. We know this sentiment.

So, this is critically important. We ourselves have finally realised – we keep saying that we are a great country – we have now realised that we are indeed a great country and we can do it.

We are fully aware of the mid-term consequences of cutting access to technology. But we did not have access to the critical technology anyway. The COCOM lists that have been in force for decades appear to have been cancelled. Now, they have tightened the screws, but it turned out what we are getting by, nonetheless.

Another important component, this time of a spiritual nature, which is, perhaps, the most important part. First, this motto – we leave no one behind – actually sits deep in the heart of every Russian and in the other ethnic groups who are Russian citizens, and the willingness to fight for our own people solidifies society. This has always been the great strength of our country. We confirmed and reinforced it, which is the most important thing.

Fyodor Lukyanov: Has any event in Russia caused your disappointment this year?

Vladimir Putin: No.

Fyodor Lukyanov: So, we do not need to draw conclusions and make any particular changes?

Vladimir Putin: It is always necessary to draw conclusions. If you are referring to a personnel reshuffle, it is a natural process. We must always think about renewal in different areas, train new personnel, and promote those who can deal with bigger tasks than those they dealt with before. Of course, this is a natural process. However, I cannot say that somebody has disappointed me or should be dismissed. No, of course, not.

Fyodor Lukyanov: Excellent.

Mr President, your decision to start a special military operation in February came as a big surprise for everyone, including the majority of Russian citizens. We know that you have described the logic and reasons for that decision many times. However, decisions of this importance are hardly made without a special motive. What happened before you made the decision?

Vladimir Putin: I have said this many times, and you will hardly hear anything new today. What happened? I will not speak about NATO's expansion to Ukraine, which was absolutely unacceptable to us, and everyone knew that but simply disregarded our security interests. Yet another attempt we made late last year failed again. We were told to shove it, to be quiet and... Alright, I will not say this in so many words, but they just ignored us. This is the first point.

Second, it is important that representatives of the Kiev regime, supported by their Western handlers, refused to implement the Minsk agreements. Their leader said that he did not like a single provision of the Minsk agreements. He said this in public! Other officials said openly that they would not implement them. The former [Ukrainian] president said that he signed the Minsk agreements on the premise that they would never be implemented. What other reasons do you need?

It is one thing when the media and the internet are used to plant some idea in the heads of millions, but real actions and practical policy are quite another matter. What I have told you now went unnoticed by millions of people, because it is lost in the information space, but you and I are aware of it.

All that was eventually said. What did it mean for us? It meant that we had to do something in Donbass. People have been living under shellfire for eight years, and the attacks continue to this day, by the way, but we had to take a decision for ourselves. What could it be? We could recognise their independence. But recognising their independence and leaving them in the lurch was unacceptable. So, we had to take the next step, which we did – to include them in the Russian state. They would not have survived alone, there is no doubt about that.

What if we recognise them and make them part of the Russian state at their request, for we know what people think, but the shelling and military operations planned by the Kiev regime continue and are inevitable? They have held two large-scale military operations; it is true that they did not succeed, but they were held. The shelling would certainly have continued. What could we do? Launch an operation. Why wait for them to be the first to do it? We knew that they were preparing to do it. Of course, this is the inevitable logic of events.

We weren't the ones who invented this logic. Why did they need the 2014 coup d'état in Ukraine in the first place? Yanukovich actually agreed to resign and hold an early election. It was clear that his chances – I hope Mr Yanukovich won't feel offended – his

chances were slim, if any. So what was the point of staging a bloody anti-state and unconstitutional coup in that situation? No idea. But there is only one answer – to show who's the boss. Everyone – excuse me, my apologies to the ladies – everyone sit quietly and keep your mouths shut, just do what we say. I just can't explain it any other way.

So they committed a coup d'état – but people in Crimea or in Donbass refused to recognise it, and that eventually led to today's tragic events. Why couldn't the so-called West fulfil the agreements that were reached in Minsk?

They told me, personally – in that situation, you, too, would have signed anything, if you were put in such conditions. But still, they signed it! They signed it and insisted that the leaders of the republics of Donbass, unrecognised at the time, put their signatures on it, too. And then they just murdered one of them – Zakharchenko.

All these actions led to today's tragic events, and that's all there is to it.

Fyodor Lukyanov: Do you not have a feeling that the enemy has been underestimated? To be honest, this sentiment is present in society.

Vladimir Putin: No. Do you know what the problem is? We always saw what was happening there.

For eight years, they have been creating a fortified area that cut deep enough into Donbass, and of course, venturing there and suffering losses was pointless – this is the first point. Secondly, we were well aware that this process would continue, and it would be getting worse, more difficult, more dangerous for us, and we would suffer even more losses. Those are the considerations we were guided by. NATO's development in that territory was in full swing – and it keeps on going, just like it was going on then. Those fortified areas would have spread far beyond today's contact line in Donbass – they would have been everywhere. That's all there is to it.

What we see now, when our troops in Donbass are putting the squeeze on from the south and north, this is one thing. But if fortified areas had continued to be built there for several more years, throughout the country, with personnel being trained and weapons systems accumulating there (weapons they never had, weapons many still do not have even now), the situation would have been completely different for Russia, even in terms of conducting this special military operation.

Fyodor Lukyanov: You have repeatedly said and written in your policy article that we are one people. Have you changed your mind after a year?

Vladimir Putin: No, of course not. And how can this be changed? This is a historical fact.

Russian statehood became established on our territories in the 9th century, first in Novgorod, then in Kiev, and then they grew together. It is one nation. People spoke the same language, Old Russian, and changes only started to emerge, I believe, in the 14th or 15th century under Poland's influence because the western areas of the Russian state became parts of other countries. This is where changes came from.

Of course, I have already said that every ethnicity goes through different processes in its development. If part of this ethnicity decides at a certain point that it has achieved a level when it becomes a different ethnicity, one can only respect it, of course.

But this process did not happen all on its own. First of all, as I said, it happened because some of Old Russian lands in the west became parts of other states, for a whole number of reasons.

Those states started promoting their interests. The lands that became part of Poland experienced a strong Polish influence, and so on. The language started to change. I already said that, when Ukraine was joining Russia, letters were written to Warsaw and Moscow. We have archives. Those letters said: “We, Russian Orthodox Christians, would like to address you with the following matter...” They asked Moscow to accept them into Russia and asked Poland to consider their interests and their Orthodox Christian customs. And yet, they called themselves “Russian Orthodox Christians.” I did not make this up. It was part of the nation that we now call Ukrainians.

Yes, then everything started happening according to its own laws. An enormous Russian Empire was built. European countries tried and partially succeeded in creating a barrier between Europe and the Russian Empire using the principle known since the ancient times: divide and conquer. They started making attempts to divide the united Russian nation. It began in the 19th century and eventually grew to a bigger scale, supported mainly by the West. Of course, they tried to cultivate certain sentiments in people and some even liked it, when it comes to historical and language aspects.

Of course, those sentiments were exploited exactly for the purpose I mentioned, to divide and conquer. It is nothing out of the ordinary but they certainly achieved some of their goals. And subsequently, it actually grew into cooperation with Hitler during WWII, when Ukrainian collaborators were used in campaigns to exterminate Russians, Poles, Jews and Belarusians. It is a well-known historical fact: killing squads assigned Bandera followers with the dirtiest and bloodiest jobs. It is all part of our history. But it is also a historical fact that Russians and Ukrainians are essentially one ethnicity.

Fyodor Lukyanov: So what we are witnessing is a civil war with a portion of our own people.

Vladimir Putin: Partly, yes. Unfortunately, we ended up in different states for a number of reasons. Above all, because when they were creating the Soviet Union after the collapse of the [Russian] empire – I have covered this in my articles and mentioned it publicly more than once – the Bolshevik leadership at the time decided – in order to appease the nationalist-minded Bolsheviks originally from Ukraine – to give them some originally Russian historical lands without asking the people who lived there. They let them have all of Malorossiya (Little Russia), the entire Black Sea region, and all of Donbass. At first, they decided to make Donbass part of Russia, but then a delegation from Ukraine came to see Vladimir Lenin who then summoned a representative from Donbass and told him the Donbass matter should be reconsidered, and it was, with the Donbass going to Ukraine.

In this sense, Ukraine, of course, is an artificially created state. All the more so as after WWII – this is also a historical fact – Stalin suddenly made several Polish, Hungarian, and Romanian territories part of Ukraine, thus taking these lands away from these countries.

He gave the Poles, who were not part of the Nazi coalition, some of the eastern German lands. These are well-known historical facts. This is how today's Ukraine was created.

I just had a thought that, in fairness, Russia, which created today's Ukraine, could have been the only real and serious guarantor of Ukraine's statehood, sovereignty, and territorial integrity.

Fyodor Lukyanov: I remember there was a discussion about the guarantors back in the spring, but then it all went away.

This may be a rhetorical question given that hostilities and much more are underway, but you and the Russian officials have said on multiple occasions that the special operation is going according to plan. What is the plan? Truth be told, this is not very clear to members of society. What is the plan?

Vladimir Putin: You see, I said at the outset, on the day the operation started, that the most important thing for us is to help Donbass. I have already mentioned this, and if we had acted differently, we would not have been able to deploy our Armed Forces on both sides of Donbass. This is my first point.

Second, the Lugansk People's Republic has been fully liberated. Military activities related to the Donetsk Republic are underway. Sure enough, when our troops approached it both from the south and the north, it became clear that the people residing on these historical Novorossiya (New Russia) territories see their future as part of Russia. How could we not respond to that?

Hence, we are witnesses to the events that have unfolded. They arose in the course and as a logical follow-up to the situation that has been taking shape up to this point. But the plan was there, and the goal is to help the people of Donbass. This is the premise under which we are operating. Of course, I am aware of the General Staff's plans, but I do not think we should be discussing the details.

Fyodor Lukyanov: Thank you.

Friends, I have satisfied my curiosity by monopolising everything. Now, let us give the floor to those with questions.

Let us begin. Ivan Safranchuk.

Ivan Safranchuk: Ivan Safranchuk, MGIMO University.

You said that we have a very important decade ahead in the development of the world and our country. But I'm left with the impression that a certain door exists that has led us to this decade.

I have a question about this door.

Nuclear rhetoric has intensified greatly as of late. Ukraine has moved from irresponsible statements to the practical preparation of a nuclear provocation; representatives of the United

States and the United Kingdom are making statements with suggestions of the possible use of nuclear weapons.

Biden, let's say, speaks about nuclear Armageddon, and straight away there are comments in the US that there is nothing to fear. At the same time, the United States is hurrying to deploy modernised tactical nuclear bombs in Europe. It looks like they are rattling the sabre while refusing to acknowledge the lessons of the Cuban Missile Crisis.

Mr President, could you please comment, is it true that the world is on the verge of the possible use of nuclear weapons? How will Russia act in these circumstances, given that it is a responsible nuclear state?

Thank you.

Vladimir Putin: Look, as long as nuclear weapons exist, there will always be a danger that they could be used. This is the first thing.

Second, the goal of the current fuss around such threats and the potential use of nuclear weapons is very primitive, and I would probably be not mistaken when I explain what this is about.

I already said that the dictate of the Western countries and their attempts to apply pressure on all the participants of international communication, including countries that are neutral or friendly to us, are achieving nothing, and they are looking for additional arguments to convince our friends or neutral states that they all need to confront Russia collectively.

Nuclear provocation and the inflaming of the possibility that Russia might theoretically use nuclear weapons are being used to reach these goals: to influence our friends, our allies, and neutral states by telling them, look at whom you support; Russia is such a scary country, do not support it, do not cooperate with it, do not trade with it. This is, in fact, a primitive goal.

What is happening in reality? After all, we have never said anything proactively about Russia potentially using nuclear weapons. All we did was hint in response to statements made by Western leaders.

Ms Liz Truss, the recent Prime Minister of Great Britain, directly stated in a conversation with a media representative that Great Britain is a nuclear power and the Prime Minister's duty is to possibly use nuclear weapons, and she will do so. It's not a quote, but close to the original wording. "I'm ready to do that."

You see, no one responded to that in any way. Suppose she just spaced out and let it slip. How can you say such things publicly? She did, though.

They should have set her straight, or Washington could have publicly stated that it has nothing to do with this. We have no idea what she is talking about, they could have said. There was no need to hurt anyone's feelings; all they had to do was dissociate themselves from what she said. But everyone was silent. What are we supposed to think? We thought it was a coordinated position and that we were being blackmailed. What are we supposed to do? Remain silent and pretend that we did not hear anything, or what?

There are several other statements about this matter. Kiev never stops talking about its desire to possess nuclear weapons. This is the first part of the Ballet de la Merlaison. So?

They keep talking about our outrageous actions at the Zaporozhye Nuclear Power Plant. What is so outrageous about it? That is how they word it sometimes. They are constantly insinuating that we are firing missiles at the Zaporozhye Nuclear Power Plant. Have they lost it altogether, or what? We are in control of this nuclear power plant. Our troops are stationed there.

A couple of months ago, I talked with a Western leader. I asked him what we should do. He told me we needed to remove heavy weapons from the Zaporozhye Nuclear Power Plant. I agreed and said that we had already done so and there were no heavy weapons there. “You did? Well, then remove the other ones.” (*Laughter.*)

It is nonsense, you see? You are laughing, it is funny, indeed. But it is almost verbatim what he said.

I told him, listen, you wanted the IAEA representatives to be present at the station. We agreed, and they are there.

They live right on the grounds of the nuclear power plant. They see with their own eyes what is going on, who is shooting and where the shells are coming from. After all, no one is saying that Ukrainian troops are shelling the nuclear power plant. And they are stirring things up and blaming Russia for this. That is delusional. It looks like a delusion, but it is actually happening.

I think I have already publicly said that the Kiev regime’s sabotage groups had destroyed three or four high-voltage overhead power lines outside the Kursk Nuclear Power Plant. Unfortunately, the FSB was unable to catch them. Hopefully, it will someday. They escaped. But they were the ones who did it.

We let all Western partners know about the incident. Silence was all we got in response, as if nothing happened. That is, they are seeking to stage some kind of a nuclear incident in order to lay responsibility on Russia and stir up a new round of their battle against Russia, sanctions against Russia, and so on. I just do not see any other point in doing so. This is what is happening.

Now they have invented something new. It was no accident that we went public about the information from our security services that they are preparing an incident with the so-called dirty bomb. Such a bomb is easy to make, and we even know its approximate location. Slightly modified remains of nuclear fuel – Ukraine has the technologies needed to do that – are loaded into the Tochka-U, it blows up and they say that it was Russia that made a nuclear strike.

But we have no need to do so; there is no sense in it for us, neither political nor military. But they are going to do it, nevertheless. It was me who instructed [Defence] Minister [Sergei] Shoigu to call all his colleagues and inform them about it. We cannot disregard such things.

Now they say that the IAEA wants to come and inspect Ukraine’s nuclear facilities. We encourage this, and we believe that it should be done as soon as possible and the inspections

should be at all such facilities, because we know that the Kiev authorities are doing their best to cover their tracks. They are working on it.

Finally, about using or not using [nuclear weapons]. The only country in the world which has used nuclear weapons against a non-nuclear state was the United States of America; they used it twice against Japan. What was the goal? There was no military need for it at all. What was the military practicability to use nuclear weapons against Hiroshima and Nagasaki, against civilians? Had there been a threat to the US territorial integrity? Of course not. It was not practical from the military point of view either, because Japan's war machine had already been destroyed, it was not able to resist, so what was the point in dealing the final blow with nuclear weapons?

By the way, Japanese textbooks usually say that it was the Allies that struck a nuclear blow at Japan. They have such a firm grip over Japan that the Japanese cannot even write the truth in their school textbooks. Even though they commemorate this tragedy every year. Good for the Americans, we should all probably follow their example. Great job.

But such things happen, this is life. So, the US is the only country that has done it because it believed it was in its interests.

As for Russia... We have the Military Doctrine, and they should read it. One of its articles explains the cases when, why, in relation to what and how Russia considers it possible to use weapons of mass destruction in the form of nuclear weapons to protect its sovereignty, territorial integrity and to ensure the safety of the Russian people.

Fyodor Lukyanov: Tomorrow it will be 60 years since the culmination of the Caribbean crisis, the day when it was decided to retreat.

Can you imagine yourself in the role of one of the leaders, Khrushchev, to be more precise? Can we get to that point?

Vladimir Putin: Certainly not.

Fyodor Lukyanov: It won't come to this?

Vladimir Putin: No, I cannot imagine myself in the role of Khrushchev. No way.
(*Laughter.*)

Fyodor Lukyanov: All right. And what about the role of a leader who has to make a decision on this issue?

Vladimir Putin: We are ready to settle any issues. We are not refusing. Last December we offered the United States to continue the dialogue on strategic stability but received no response. It was in December of last year. Silence.

If they want to, we are ready, let's do it. If they do not want to, we are developing our own modern technology, delivery vehicles, including supersonic arms. In principle, we do not need anything. We feel self-sufficient.

Yes, of course, at one time they will catch up with us in supersonic weapons as well. This is obvious, they have a high-tech country and it is only a matter of time. But they have not yet caught up with us. We have everything and we are developing this technology. If someone wants to conduct dialogue with us about this, we are ready, go ahead.

Fyodor Lukyanov: Rasigan Maharajh, go ahead, please.

Rasigan Maharajh: Thank you very much.

You have answered a direct point that I raised earlier but, if I could expand upon what I had asked.

Escalating and accelerating crises continue to further reveal the precarious position we are in and what our system currently is driving us towards. So, unequal exchange continues, as you pointed out, in equities distribution, especially of human capacity, capability and competence, and render future prospects of reconciliation and reform inside an unfair hegemonic system extremely bleak. Sanctions, fear of reprisals have rendered monetary sovereignty meaningless, especially with the weaponisation of the payment system. In our contemporary conjuncture, what could then constitute a more democratic and workable alternative to the current international system of payments and settlements?

Vladimir Putin: This is one of the key issues of the current development and the future of not only the financial system, but also the world order. You have just hit the bull's eye.

After World War II, the United States created the Bretton Woods system and made it several times stronger over the years. They worked in different areas and established international institutions that are under their control in both finance and international trade. But they are obviously breaking down.

As I have already said, the United States made a huge mistake by using the dollar as a weapon in fighting for its political interests. This undermines trust in the dollar and other reserve currencies. The loss of trust is big – believe me, I know what I am talking about. Now everyone is thinking whether it makes sense to keep foreign currency reserves in dollars.

It is not so simple to part with the dollar because the Americans have created a very powerful system that keeps these reserves and actually does not let them out. It is very difficult to get out but everyone has started pondering over the future. I have already described this and can only repeat what we think about the future of the international financial system.

First, this is a common understanding, but still: all countries must be guaranteed sovereign development, and any country's choice must be respected. This is also important, even in relation to the financial system. It should be independent, depoliticised, and, of course, it should rely on the financial systems of the world's leading countries.

And if this system is created (this will not be easy, it is a difficult process, but it is possible), the international institutions (they will need to be either reformed or recreated) helping those countries that need support will work more effectively.

First of all, this new financial system should pave the way for education and technology transfer.

If we put this together, collect a palette of opportunities that need to be taken, then this economic model and financial system will meet the interests of the majority, and not only the interests of this “golden billion,” which we talked about.

As a forerunner of this system, we certainly need to expand payments in national currencies. Given that the US financial authorities are weaponizing the dollar and creating problems with payments not only for us, but also for our partners and other countries, the striving for independence will inevitably promote settlements in national currencies.

For example, with India, we are now making 53 percent of mutual payments for exports in national currencies, and about 27 percent for imports. Similar arrangements with other countries are being increasingly used. For example, with China, payments in yuan and rubles are expanding fast, and with other countries, too – I will not list them all now.

So, as for our own financial system, I believe the main way to proceed is to create a supranational global monetary system that would be depoliticised and based on national currency systems. This system would certainly ensure payments and transactions. It's possible. In the end, one way or another, we have taken the first steps towards payments in national currencies, and then – steps at the regional level. I believe this process will continue.

Fyodor Lukyanov: Colleagues, please, when you ask questions, introduce yourself. Rasigan Maharajh, South Africa. So that everyone understands.

Alexander Iskandaryan.

Alexander Iskandaryan: Mr President, I am from Armenia and my question concerns my country and my region.

The discussion of a treaty between Armenia and Azerbaijan has become more intense lately, and this is mainly due to the fact that there are two competing drafts: a Russian draft proposed by the Russian intermediary, and a Western draft. This situation is quite risky, in addition to the other risks in the region. There are certain tensions.

What does Russia think and how does Russia plan to respond to this situation and act in the future in this context?

Thank you.

Vladimir Putin: You see, I do not even know if this has been discussed publicly before – maybe yes, maybe no – but, even if it has not been discussed, I do not see any secrets here.

For many years, we have continued the dialogue with Armenia, proposing to settle the Nagorno-Karabakh matter. Armenia de facto controlled seven areas in Azerbaijan. And we suggested moving towards normalising relations. There are two areas, Kalbajar and another one further to the south, with corridors, large areas. At a certain point we could make an agreement with Azerbaijan and it would give away five areas. They are not necessary, there is no use for them. They just sit empty as people have essentially been expelled from those territories. Why keep them? There is no point. While for connections with Nagorno-Karabakh, two areas, huge areas, by the way, should be enough.

We believe it would be fair to bring back the refugees and so on. It would be a good step towards normalising the situation in the region in general. Armenian leadership decided to pursue its own course, which, as we know, has resulted in the situation we have today.

Now, as concerns the settlement and the peace treaty, our position is that, of course, there must be a peace treaty. We support a peaceful settlement, delimitation of the border and a full resolution to the border issue. The question is, which option should be chosen. It is up to Armenia, the Armenian people and Armenian leadership. At any rate, whatever they choose, we will support it as long as it brings peace.

But we have no intention of imposing anything or dictating anything to Armenia. If the Armenian people or the Armenian leaders believe they should decide on a specific version of the peace treaty... As far as I understand, the Washington draft provides for recognising Azerbaijan's sovereignty over Nagorno-Karabakh. If Armenia chooses that, so be it. We will support any choice the Armenian people make.

If the Armenian people and leaders believe that Nagorno-Karabakh has certain peculiarities that should be considered in a future peace treaty, this is also possible. But, without a doubt, this is a matter of agreement between Armenia and Azerbaijan. The agreements must be acceptable to the other party as well, to Azerbaijan. It is a very difficult question, no less.

But Armenia is our strategic partner and ally, and of course, we will, to a great extent, bearing in mind Azerbaijan's interests, be guided by what Armenia itself is proposing.

Fyodor Lukyanov: Two years ago, you spoke highly about President Erdogan at the Valdai Club meeting, saying that he did not go back on his words but did what he said he would do. Many things have happened over the past two years. Has your opinion of him changed?

Vladimir Putin: No. He is a competent and strong leader who is guided above all, and possibly exclusively, by the interests of Turkiye, its people and its economy. This largely explains his position on energy issues and, for example, on the construction of TurkStream.

We have proposed building a gas hub in Turkiye for European consumers. Turkiye has supported this idea, of course, first of all, based on its own interests. We have many common interests in tourism, the construction sector and agriculture. There are many areas where we have common interests.

President Erdogan never lets anyone get a free ride or acts in the interests of third countries. He upholds above all the interests of Turkiye, including in dialogue with us. In this sense, Turkiye as a whole and personally President Erdogan are not easy partners; many of our decisions are born amid long and difficult debates and negotiations.

But there is a desire on both sides to reach agreements, and we usually do it. In this sense, President Erdogan is a consistent and reliable partner. This is probably his most important trait, that he is a reliable partner.

Fyodor Lukyanov: Has he ever tried to get a free ride, for example, from you?

Vladimir Putin: You see, I have already noted that the President of Turkiye is not an easy partner, that he always upholds his interests, not his personal interests but the interests of his country, but it cannot be said that he has ever tried to get a free ride.

He simply works towards a solution that is the best one, in the opinion of his government. We work towards solutions that will be the best for us. As I said, we usually find a solution even on very delicate issues, such as Syria, security issues and the economy, including infrastructure. So far, we have managed to do it.

I will repeat that this is extremely important. We know that if we have covered a difficult path and it is difficult to come to an agreement, but we reached it nevertheless, we can rest assured that it will be implemented. The most important thing is reliability and stability in our relations.

Dayan Jayatilleka: Thank you. My name is Dayan Jayatilleka, former ambassador of Sri Lanka to the Russian Federation.

Mr President, it is said that Russia is now facing a proxy war waged by the collective West and NATO. If so, it is probably the most serious threat faced by Russia since 1941. At that time, during the Great Patriotic War, the Soviet leader, who was a Communist, reached out to the Orthodox Church and to Russian nationalism in order to form a broad front to defend Russia. Would you say that, in a similar spirit, you would revisit the Soviet Russian past, the Communist heritage from 1917 to extract any useful elements of it, including the history of the Red Army, and would you think it worthwhile to reach out to the Communist elements, however few they are, in Russia to join in a broad patriotic front? Thank you.

Vladimir Putin: As for my position, I believe we should use our entire historical heritage. I don't think we should reject anything – the positive aspects of the tsarist empire in Russian history nor the positive facts in the history of the Soviet Union, which had many positive traits. There were also negatives in both cases – they were overcome in different ways and had different consequences.

As for relations with the left part of our political spectrum and other political trends... You know, the peculiarity of today's Russia is the practically complete consensus on the countering of external threats. Yes, there are some people with a completely pro-Western orientation, and they live abroad for the most part; they are mentally abroad, their families are abroad and their children study abroad. Yes, we have a few of them, but they have always been here and they always exist in all countries – there is nothing unusual about this. But overall, consolidation is very high regardless of the political slant or views on ways to develop Russia as such.

People with communist convictions believe we need to nationalise everything again. They want everything governmentalized, etc. It is hard to say how effective this would be. We do not reject this in some things and some places, in some specific historical situations, and we even have a law on nationalisation. That said, we are not doing this – there is no need for this whatsoever.

We believe in the need to use the most effective tools for national development, market principles but under the control, of course, of the state, government power, under the control of the people. We should use these advantages to achieve our main goals – improve

the nation's wellbeing, counter poverty, step up our efforts and achieve better results in housing construction, education, healthcare and the resolution of other issues that are vital to people.

So, in our work, we treat people who have left-wing views with respect, including those with communist convictions. As you said, and with good reason, the Soviet Union lived for a long time under the control and guidance of the Communist Party. At this point, I do not wish to go into detail and explain what was good and what was bad.

You mentioned religious organisations, but all of them – we have four traditional religions – are exclusively patriotic. As for the Russian Orthodox Church, it has been with its congregation, with its people throughout its entire history. The same is true today.

The key difference in today's relations with our traditional religions is probably that we really – not just outwardly – abstain from interfering in the life of religious organisations. Maybe, they are in this country in a much freer position than in many states that consider themselves democratic. We never exert any pressure on them. We believe we are in debt to them because during the Soviet years their property was squandered or taken abroad and sold, and so on. In other words, a lot of damage was inflicted on religious organisations, including the Russian Orthodox Church.

We try to support all our religions, but we do not interfere in their work. And, probably what is happening now is truly unique – there is a common patriotic mood related to the country's development within our state and the maintenance of our interests outside, but given these factors, we give them complete freedom of activity. I think this relationship, this situation is producing the desired results.

Fyodor Lukyanov: Mr Kubat Rakhimov, you have the floor.

Kubat Rakhimov: I am Kubat Rakhimov from the Kyrgyz Republic.

Mr President,

Russia is indeed the leader of a new anti-colonial movement. Russia's commitment to traditional, conservative values also receives global support. During the discussions here at the Valdai Club, we have seen very high demand for social justice and for an equitable organisation of social relations.

How do you see this, and how can we help you as Valdai Club experts? This is my first question.

My second question is, what do you think of the possibility of relocating the capital of the Russian Federation to the centre of the country, that is, to the centre of the Eurasian continent, so it can be closer to countries in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation?

Thank you.

Vladimir Putin: Regarding a more equitable social system in Russia, our Constitution states expressly that Russia is a social welfare state. And of course, everything we do, all our national development goals are basically to accomplish social objectives. We could discuss

these issues for hours, and even all day today would not be enough. Everything we do is designed to accomplish this, to accomplish the social objectives now facing the Russian state. We have many goals like this, including many unsolved problems.

I have already discussed this, but again, we need to develop the economy, to address healthcare, education and technological development issues on this basis and to restructure our economy. Structural changes are the most important thing. The labour market will change, and in this connection, we should, of course, think about those people whose jobs will be eliminated. We should provide them with new competences and retrain them, etc.

Regarding the Valdai Club, it brings together experts from various walks of life. Of course we would be grateful if these experts would update us on key development trends. We would listen to your opinions while making the plans I just listed. We can and must build upon our current policies while understanding future developments.

With respect to moving the capital, yes, we have talked about this. The Russian capital has been moved several times in the history of the Russian state. Historically and mentally, the centre of Russia is always associated with Moscow and, in my opinion, there is no need...

There are problems in the capital's development as a metropolitan area, but I must say that, with Mayor Sobyanin's team, these problems are addressed and resolved much better than in many other countries and metropolitan areas.

There was a period when issues of transport, social infrastructure development and other areas were serious – and they still are, to a certain extent. But still, in recent years, Mayor Sobyanin has done a great deal to curb these challenges and to create conditions for Muscovites, people who relocate for work and tourists to feel comfortable. A lot has been done for the city's development in the past few years.

There is indeed a problem of excessive centralisation of all federal organisations in Moscow. For example, I support the approach certain other countries take, specifically, to decentralise authority and competence to other Russian regions. For example, we are building a judicial centre in St Petersburg. The Constitutional Court is already based there, and there are specific plans concerning the Supreme Court. No haste is necessary; this work should be done gradually, creating favourable conditions for the judicial community to work in St Petersburg. And we will do it with no rush.

Some major companies that, say, mainly operate in Siberia but have head offices in Moscow, could move their headquarters to Siberia. And it is actually happening. RusHydro, for example, is establishing a base in Siberia, in Krasnoyarsk, building a head office there.

Certain federal government bodies could be distributed across the country. It would be beneficial for the governance system itself and the regions where these bodies would be based.

Fyodor Lukyanov: Thank you.

Ivan Timofeyev.

Ivan Timofeyev: Good evening, Mr President.

Ivan Timofeyev, Valdai Club.

Here is my question. An unprecedented number of sanctions has been imposed on Russia in the past year. You mentioned the freezing of our reserves in Europe, 300 billion. We could also add the freezing of citizens' and organisations' properties worth tens of billions. By the way, Europe plans to seize these properties, once the respective mechanisms are developed. There is much more, including financial restrictions, prohibited supplies of goods, technologies, Russian oil bans, gas supply manipulation and other measures. We are well aware of these, and you mentioned them in your speech.

Our economy was not expected to hold out. But it has survived, largely because it remains a market economy, it remains flexible and adaptive. Businesses are looking for new markets and searching for ways to implement import substitution wherever possible. The Government is taking many steps to help businesses.

But, maybe, considering the extreme foreign policy conditions and all the sanctions, it is time to further deregulate the economy? You mentioned decentralisation. Does it make sense to reduce the number of inspections and reduce regulatory pressure?

I would be happy to hear your opinion on this issue.

Vladimir Putin: As they say in these cases, we can choose to reduce the number of inspections and eliminate excessive state regulation.

You know that scheduled inspections have been discontinued not only for small and medium-sized businesses but also for large companies. If this was not mentioned yet, I will say it now – we will extend this through 2023.

As for regulation, our “administrative guillotine,” as we said, led to the cancellation of over 1,000 acts, I believe. They were replaced with fewer than 500 new ones – I hope they are up-to-date. Over 400 and something new acts now regulate economic activity.

So, we will continue on this road – of course, with the exception of production categories that have certain risks for consumers. I think everyone understands this. But we will still try to approach this in a way that makes these regulatory functions targeted so as to prevent them from interfering with the operation of companies and business in general.

You are correct – in response to all the restrictions that are imposed on Russia and its economy... you said they expected our economy to crash. This was not just expected; a goal was set to crush the Russian economy, but they could not achieve it. Yes, you are right – our economy has indeed become much more adaptive and flexible. It became clear that our businesses were already mature enough to replace imports and to take on the activities of the companies that left, our partners that decided to leave Russia. Our businesses easily took over and led the companies that had seemed only recently to be unable to exist without a Western presence. This was an easy change in most areas.

Yes, we understand and see the difficulties in the mid-term. We realize that we cannot produce everything. But you know, this morning I talked with several colleagues before coming here – naturally, I talked with people in the Government, the Central Bank and the Executive Office – and our experts still believe that we have passed the peak

of the difficulties linked with the avalanche of restrictions and sanctions. Overall, the Russian economy has adapted to the new conditions.

Much still has to be done to create new supply chains both in imports and exports and to reduce the attending losses. However, overall, the peak of the difficulties is in the past, and the Russian economy has adapted. We will continue developing on a more sustainable, more sovereign platform.

However, in response to all these challenges, we might and should – and probably do this in the first place – reduce the red tape in the regulation of businesses even more and support them and increase operating freedoms in their economic activities.

Fyodor Lukyanov: Mr Prokhanov, we won't pass over you.

Alexander Prokhanov: Mr President, very often foreigners ask us, “What can you, Russians, offer to the modern world? Where are your Nobel Prize winners? Where are your great discoveries, industrial and scientific achievements?” My colleagues often answer, “Well, what about the great Russian culture? Pushkin? Rublev? Russian icons? The marvellous Russian architecture?” They say, “But this was all in the past. What about today?”

When I listened to you today, it dawned on me what Russia can offer to the world: Russia can offer a religion of justice, because this religion, this feeling is at the heart of all Russian culture and Russian self-sacrifice. And today, Russia is making this sacrifice, essentially, it is standing up alone to the rest of the world, the cruel Western world, waging this fight for justice. This is the huge contribution that today's Russia is making to global civilisation and culture. Because even those old, traditional values that we talked about, and Rublev, the Russian icon painting traditions, and again, the delightful Russian Novgorod-Pskov architecture, and the amazing Golden and Silver Ages – they all talked about justice. At the core of Russian civilisation lies justice.

Maybe we should make the current Russian ideology a religion of justice?

Vladimir Putin: We have four traditional religions, I think that's enough.

Fyodor Lukyanov: We could have a fifth one.

Vladimir Putin: This was a joke, of course.

As for making something... You know, I follow your work, your writing, when I have time, I enjoy reading what you write and say. Of course, I know that you are a true Russian patriot in the kindest, best and broadest sense of the word.

But I'm not sure we need to offer anything to anyone deliberately.

You know, you just said that we are making sacrifices for the sake of other peoples. I'll argue with you here. We are not sacrificing anything. We are working to strengthen our sovereignty, and it is in our own interests. First of all, strengthening our financial and economic sovereignty, it will lay the foundation for our future growth – technological, educational and scientific growth.

Whether we have Nobel Prize laureates or not... When did Alferov make his invention? He was awarded the Nobel Prize for it after 30 years – or how many? Is that all that matters? The former President of the United States was awarded a Nobel prize. Is this an indicator of real achievement? With all due respect to both the Nobel Committee and the winner of this remarkable Nobel Prize, is that the only indicator?

Science is making strides. We must do our best to make sure that the returns from the fundamental and applied sciences for our development are higher by orders of magnitude, and we will make it happen. Today, we are seeing significant and noticeable research staff revamp, and our science is on track to become one of the world's youngest.

Clearly, the United States, with its competitive edge as a global finance monopolist, is pumping out like a vacuum cleaner everything from all over the world, including researchers and creative people. This, too, will come to an end when the dollar loses its monopoly as a global currency, something we see happening today.

You see, what we are doing appeals to many countries and peoples. Our Western “partners” spare no effort to slander Russia, to humiliate it, or to ignore its interests. When we fight for our interests and do so openly, honestly and, let's face it, courageously, this fact in itself, this example in itself, is highly contagious and attractive for billions of people on the planet.

You can see Russian flags in many African countries, in some of those countries. The same is happening in Latin America and Asia. We have many friends. We do not need to impose anything on anyone. It is just that many people – politicians and ordinary citizens – are tired of living under external dictate. Enough is enough, people are tired of it. And when they see an example of our struggle against this dictate, they take our side internally and externally. And this support will continue to grow.

Fyodor Lukyanov: Mr President, much has been said about research this time. I think one of the most interesting panels was about ways to develop science and technology under these circumstances.

Ruslan Yunusov is here in the audience. He presented a very interesting picture.

Ruslan Yunusov: Thank you.

Today, I represent Rosatom and the Valdai Club.

Mr President, you said the right words regarding research. We see that support for science in Russia has grown significantly over the past 20 years, and the mega-grant programme has made it possible to launch dozens of modern laboratories in Russia.

However, on the other hand, as scientists, we see that most of the professors who opened these laboratories never came to live in Russia and work full-time. I can understand why it is hard to compete. What we have here is a mega-grant for five years, but then you have lifetime tenure as a professor. This is really something to consider.

On the other hand, yesterday during the panel we talked about our Chinese colleagues who have made ground-breaking leaps in science over the past 20 years. Today, they have not just brought their scientists back, but are taking top spots in many areas.

Here we are dealing with quanta, and I want to say that we are aware that the most powerful quantum computer today is in China, not the United States, and the largest number of quantum patents is published by China, not the United States.

But, on the other hand, we, in Russia also have programmes that bring many laboratories together. The quantum project, the quantum computer project comprises 20 scientific groups, 15 universities and institutes under the Academy of Sciences. But we work under five-year plans.

I think today we have come under increased pressure as our scientific and technological sovereignty is facing a challenge. Maybe this is the right time to start formulating strategic projects and extend the planning horizon to 10 or 20 years.

Thank you.

Vladimir Putin: Yes, I agree with you – the higher the [planning] horizon the better, and the further out the [planning] horizon, the better. We must look at the positive examples in other countries, as well as those set by our friends and partners, including the People's Republic of China. They have done quite a lot over the years under the leadership of President Xi Jinping, who pays much attention to this – not only to the development of science but also to the development of China in general and the Chinese economy, and also to improving the well-being of the Chinese people. I know this as we are on very friendly terms with him. Of course, we can examine and put into practice whatever helps them achieve tangible results.

As for the mega-grants, they have played a positive role, indeed, and the next phase we are carrying out now is not just about research and establishing separate laboratories, rather it is the creation of academic communities of young scientists. This is, essentially, the future of these mega-grants.

I agree with those who have initiated this process. We are doing it. (*Addressing Andrei Fursenko.*) Are we not, Mr Fursenko?

We will continue doing this.

You said nobody is staying. Some people come here and work even if they are officially employed somewhere else, and they spend most of their time in Russia; there are quite a few people like this. These are our former compatriots and not only former ones but our compatriots who are employed somewhere abroad but regularly come to Russia to work.

You know, science, like art, hates artificial borders and restrictions. People must feel free, and we will not lock anyone up here, but we will welcome everyone who wants to work in Russia. In general, we have managed to succeed in our efforts, and we will continue moving further along this path.

You must be right in saying that we need longer term planning horizons. We are now giving mega-grants for five years, aren't we? Of course, we can extend them. These issues depend on budgetary funding but this can be done. In any case, today, we are able to extend [planning] horizons further.

What you said about people who are working abroad and have lifelong tenure is not typical – far from it. You yourself are a scientist and you know that after a contract that was signed for several years has expired, they can still tell you goodbye. So, all of this does not exist for your whole life there either. But the opportunity to speak your native language and be in touch with your culture is for life.

Therefore, both cultural figures and scientists must be given freedom of choice. We must create more attractive conditions than what they are offered abroad. This is not an easy process. We are going along this path and achieving results, and we will continue to move further, including – probably, you are right – efforts to extend planning horizons.

Fyodor Lukyanov: Please, Mr Wang Wen.

Wang Wen: Thank you. My name is Wang Wen, I am a professor from the Chongyang Institute, Renmin University of China.

Actually, this time I have visited more than 20 cities in Russia, and I wrote a lot of articles to tell the Chinese people about the real Russia, because in China, there are a lot of people that care about Russia and especially they care about you and your safety. So, my question is: I know you may feel a lot of pressure and burden. Do you feel scared, nervous or anxious, especially under the threat from the West? Did you create a new Russia or did Russia's destiny create you? What do you want to say to Chinese people and what are your comments on the past ten years of Russia-China relationship? What are your predictions and expectations of the future of Russia-China relationship? Thank you so much.

Vladimir Putin: You know, in my work I never think about achieving a historical accomplishment. Instead, I prioritize doing what must be done and what we can't do without. In that sense, our country's present circumstances are shaping all of us, including me.

Speaking about fear, many would love to hear me say I'm scared, but if I were afraid of everything, I would do nothing. I can't allow myself to be guided by fear in the position I hold. I must be guided by the interests of the people of Russia and the state of Russia, which I am and will be.

I will do what I think is necessary for the benefit of my people and my country.

As for Russian-Chinese relations, they have reached an unprecedented level of openness, mutual trust and effectiveness in recent decades. China is our country's biggest trade and economic partner. We cooperate in all spheres. In the military area, we have been conducting regular exercises. In military technology, we have enjoyed a level of trust previously unseen in the history of our two countries. We work together to promote cultural and humanitarian projects, and naturally in the economy.

Russia's highest trade volumes are with China, and they are growing fast, gathering momentum even before the sanctions pushed trade towards Asia, and China.

My friend Mr Xi Jinping and I – he has called me his friend and I consider him as such, – we have set a goal to reach a specific trade volume level. We will certainly hit that target as we are moving towards it faster than planned.

As for our attitude towards China, we treat China and its people as friends, and we are deeply respectful of their culture and traditions. I am confident that we can certainly move forward with such a firm foundation.

Fyodor Lukyanov: Mr President, speaking of the fear that Mr Wang mentioned, when you pointed out the existence of the nuclear factor this spring, some people were nervous because they recalled what you said here, at our annual meeting four years ago. You said that we would all go to heaven, but we're in no hurry to get there, right? *(Laughter.)*

You've stopped to think; that's disconcerting.

Vladimir Putin: I did it on purpose to make you worry a little. Mission accomplished. *(Laughter.)*

Fyodor Lukyanov: I see. Thank you.

Mohammed Ihsan, please.

Mohammed Ihsan: I am Professor Mohammed Ihsan from the Kurdistan region of Iraq. I am so glad to be here, Mr President, really.

I have one direct question for you: the topic of this session is post-hegemonic world justice and security for everybody. Do you think at this stage, Kurds in four parts of Kurdistan are going to have more, better security and more justice for the future? If you do not mind elaborating more.

And, as you mentioned, in Central America and Africa, the Russian flag is everywhere. You have people who love and support Russia. Be sure that also in the Middle East, you have a lot of supporters and a lot of lovers for Russia and merely for President Putin. Thank you.

Vladimir Putin: Thank you for the final part. There are flags in European countries and in the United States, too, by the way, we have many supporters there. By the way, a large proportion of the US population adhere to traditional values, and they are with us, we know this.

As for the Kurds, I have already said, not in relation to the Kurds, but in general to all peoples: of course, we must strive for a balance of interests. Only if a balance of interests is achieved can peace be sustainable, including in the case of the Kurdish people.

Fyodor Lukyanov: Mr Staris, please go ahead.

Constantin Staris: Thank you.

Good evening.

Constantin Staris, Republic of Moldova. I represent the parliamentary opposition, of course, because our government, unfortunately for our country and our people, continues to prefer other destinations for their foreign trips. As a result, today, lights went out in Chisinau, almost a total blackout. But that's not what I was going to say.

I have a question, but first, I have a duty to fulfil. Mr President, you have spoken so nicely about your family that I cannot pass up this chance. I have two children, they are eight and ten, both pupils at the Pushkin Lyceum in Chisinau. They asked me to say hello to you, and I could not deny myself this little fatherly pleasure. So, hello from Alexandra and Gavril from Chisinau.

Vladimir Putin: Thank you.

Constantin Staris: Now my question.

You said in your address that new models of interaction between countries and regions would inevitably emerge. Perhaps, in this context, it makes sense to return to the idea that you voiced back in 2001, about a single economic, humanitarian and cultural space that would stretch from Vladivostok to Lisbon?

We, Moldovans of various ethnic backgrounds, would be satisfied to see this on the agenda, because for us, it is always difficult to choose between good and good, between Europe and Russia. For us, it would be a very promising project and a light at the end of the tunnel.

But is this possible in the world we are about to build, in the post-conflict world, in a world without a hegemon, a global policeman or a dominant power?

Thank you.

Vladimir Putin: Is it possible to create a common humanitarian and economic space or even a region to ensure security for everyone who lives on this vast mega-continent from Lisbon to Vladivostok? Of course it is. Hope dies last. It is not our idea. True, back then they said, “to the Urals.” I later changed this idea from our French colleagues and former French leaders, extending it “to Vladivostok.”

Why? Because people who live beyond the Urals are steeped in the same culture, which is the most important thing.

Complex, difficult and tragic developments are taking place today. But in general, why not? Overall, it is quite possible to imagine such a thing. I think it would take place one way or another.

I was talking about it in my remarks about Eurasia as a whole, including the European part. Do you know what’s really important? Really important – I want to go back to my remarks – to have the European part regain its legal capacity.

How do I talk with a particular partner if they cannot decide anything without calling the Washington “regional party committee” every time to ask for directions?

In fact, this is what is happening in real life.

I remember one leader arrived during the onset of challenging events related to Syria. I had a meeting with him. We agreed on what and how we would proceed in detail. Very specific: I will do this, this and this.

From Moscow, he went to Washington. When he returned to Paris he forgot everything, as if we had not agreed on anything. How am I supposed to talk to him? About what?

We arrived at specific agreements, down to where the fleet would move, what we would do, and how we would agree on things. We are not against doing this. We are all for it. And we reached an agreement, a deal.

How are we supposed to talk with them? What is the point of talking to them? Better to call Washington directly and be done with it. I am not making things up, do you understand?

Of course, Europe is protecting its interests, especially in the economy, but then again it is doing so half-heartedly. There go the gas pipeline explosions. These are not our pipelines; these are pan-European pipelines. Five European companies are part of Nord Stream 1. So what? Everyone is keeping quiet, as if it is business as usual. They even have the nerve to suggest that Russia blew it up. Russia blew itself up. Have they lost their senses or what? No, they keep doing this.

Gazprom published photos from 2016 showing, I think, a US-made explosive device under the gas pipeline system. They claimed they lost it during exercises. They lost an explosive device so conveniently that it slipped right under the pipeline. I think the purpose of the device was to destroy underwater mines. Look, here is the photo.

The international media are keeping silent about this; no one is broadcasting it; it all withers on the vine and is nowhere to be seen: neither online, nor on television. This is another case of monopolising the media to promote what they need and to kill everything that stands in their way. It is right there, but no one is saying a word about it.

This is why it is, of course, necessary to create this common space from Lisbon to Vladivostok in all respects. But this can only be done with those who have the right to vote. I don't want to provoke or offend anyone, but this is how it is, this is today's reality. Nevertheless, I think it's possible in a historical perspective.

I mentioned this before but will say it again. At one time Helmut Kohl told me that the United States would deal with its own affairs, including in Latin America, sometime in the future, that Asia would develop powerfully in its own way and that if European civilization wanted to keep going as a global centre, it should definitely work with Russia. This was Helmut Kohl's position. Apparently, the current leaders of the Federal Republic have different views, but this is the choice of the European countries.

However, I would like to return to what you started with. You said the lights went out in Chisinau. It is unclear why they went out but we certainly have nothing to do with it.

Do you know why I am talking about this? Because Russia is always accused of everything – somewhere the lights go out, somewhere a toilet is clogged, sorry to mention it, somewhere something else breaks – Russia is to blame for all of it. Do you remember a question from a well-known movie – What about the chapel of the 12th or some other century? Have we destroyed this as well? No, thank God, we haven't. But I would like to tell you something, and it's perfectly true. When we held talks with Moldovan Government representatives on gas sales, Gazprom took a very pragmatic, market-based position on a natural gas contract with Moldova.

Moldovan representatives did not agree with Gazprom's position and insisted on pricing preferences. Gazprom balked and later Mr Miller contacted me, explained his position and said he considered it right. I asked him to meet Moldova halfway, considering the economic and financial capacity of the Moldovan state. I told him that these prices were fair from a market point of view, but Moldova could not afford to pay them. If they were unable to pay, what was the point?

He did not fully agree with me but heard what I said. Gazprom met the Moldovan Government halfway and signed a gas supply contract on Moldova's terms, on terms set by the Moldovan Government.

There were many details in this deal, but I simply do not want to bore the audience because probably nobody but you is interested. The details were related to debt, current payments and a certain advance payment. Overall, Gazprom met Moldova halfway in terms of price. They have to pay, of course. It seems to me that this is perfectly obvious.

As for why things were brought to the point of no power in Moldova, I am sorry, but this is not our problem.

Fyodor Lukyanov: Mr President, you mentioned Europe. There was an interesting episode two months ago or maybe less, when it turned out that when you spoke with President Macron shortly before the special military operation began, there were journalists in his office. The call was broadcast over the speakerphone, and they recorded everything. A somewhat unusual format. Okay, this is not the first time. How do you feel about such things?

Vladimir Putin: Negatively. I believe there are certain formats of communication between heads of state and they must be observed, otherwise the partner will lose credibility. There is nothing wrong with media representatives becoming familiar with what we discuss. All you need to do let the other party know about it, that is all.

Fyodor Lukyanov: Did they?

Vladimir Putin: Of course, not. During telephone calls, including through secure communication channels, we always assume that these are confidential calls that are not supposed to be made public, or if they are then the parties should agree on that in advance. If done unilaterally, this, of course, is not good.

Fyodor Lukyanov: When Mr Macron calls you, do you ask who is there in the same room with him?

Vladimir Putin: No.

Fyodor Lukyanov: Why? Maybe you should.

Vladimir Putin: Because I now assume that someone is listening.

Fyodor Lukyanov: I see.

We have a guest from Indonesia.

Connie Rahakundini Bakrie: Mr President, I liked your speech so much. I think it brings the spirit of building together, building stronger. Like the tagline for the G20. I am looking forward to your visit to the G20 next month.

But what I am going to ask you concerns the title. The event today is titled Post-Hegemonic World: Justice and Security for Everyone. I wonder, because in 1955, our President Sukarno already said that all the security alliances are dangerous to the world. Russia is in the Security Council and China is in the Security Council. Do you think you and China could file this issue to wipe out NATO, AUKUS, the QUAD, the Five Power Defence Arrangements, everything about it, together? Is that possible?

Number two, your friends in Indonesia are amazing. Everybody is saying hurrah all the time. And my second question is, can I have a picture with you later? Thank you.

Vladimir Putin: Yes, with pleasure. With such a beautiful woman, with pleasure.

We have had very good relations with Indonesia throughout most of recent history.

When President Widodo calls me, he calls me brother, and I say the same to him. We value our relationship with Indonesia.

I am grateful to the leadership and the President for the invitation to the G20 meeting. We will think about how we can go about it. Russia will definitely be represented there at a high level. Maybe I will go, too. I will think about it.

With regard to creating new blocs in Asia, I think, this is an attempt to take the failed system of bloc thinking from the Atlantic region to Asia. Without a doubt, this is a bad idea. Again, this is an attempt to be friends with someone against someone, in this case, against China. Not only do we not support an attempt to revive or recreate what happened in the Atlantic in the Asia-Pacific region, but we also believe that this is a very harmful and dangerous approach.

I must say that this will have adverse consequences for the participants or allies of the United States, which, as we know, are seeing the contracts for the delivery of submarines, or something else, being taken away from it. It is just that nothing has been done yet, but the negative consequences, including for the US allies, are already there. If this practice continues, the errors and problems will pile up. Of course, we have always opposed and continue to oppose policies like this.

Fyodor Lukyanov: I know that General Sharma wanted to ask something.

Maj Gen BK Sharma: Mr President, in the post-hegemonic world, what role do you expect India to play?

Vladimir Putin: India has come a long way from a British colony to its current state. Almost 1.5 billion people, and the noticeable results of development evoke universal admiration as well as respect for India from the whole world.

Much has been done in recent years under the leadership of Prime Minister Modi. He is certainly a patriot of his country. And his Make in India campaign has both economic and moral significance.

India has been making huge strides in its development, and it certainly has a great future. India not only has the right to be proud of being the largest democracy, in a good sense of the word, but also of the pace of its growth. This is an extremely important foundation for India's development.

We have a special relationship with India that emerged or was built on the foundation of a very close alliance that existed for many decades. We have never had any issues with India, I want to emphasise this, never. All we ever did was support each other. This is what is happening now, and I am sure it will continue in the future.

The pace of economic cooperation is growing today. Overall trade is growing. One example: Prime Minister Modi asked me to increase the supply of fertilisers, which is very important for Indian agriculture, and we did it. By how much do you think? The supply of fertilisers to India has increased by 7.6 times – not just by a fraction, but by 7.6 times. Bilateral trade in agricultural products has almost doubled.

We continue to expand ties in military-technical cooperation. Prime Minister Modi is one of the few people in the world who are capable of pursuing an independent foreign policy in the interests of his people. Despite any attempts to contain or restrict something, he's like an icebreaker, you know, just moving calmly in the direction that the Indian state needs.

I think that countries like India do not only have a great future, but also a growing role in international affairs.

Fyodor Lukyanov: The subject we raised, about fertiliser, has instantly brought Brazil to my mind for some reason. Where's Igor Gilov?

Vladimir Putin: By the way, we had reached an agreement with Brazil that shipments of fertiliser would increase. Unfortunately, they've gone down a little, a few percent, I think, maybe due to logistics issues.

Fyodor Lukyanov: Mr Gilov has left. Never mind. I think I can ask you a question he would want to ask.

Brazil is having an election soon. Lula may be coming back. Do you have a good relationship with him?

Vladimir Putin: We have a good relationship with Mr Lula, and we have a good relationship with Mr Bolsonaro. We don't interfere in their domestic politics, that's what matters most.

We are aware of a consensus in India on building a cooperative relationship with Russia and as part of BRICS, despite the stark domestic arguments. This is a matter of principle for us, we proceed from this premise.

We also have a consensus on working with Brazil. We consider that country one of our most important partners in Latin America, which it is, and we will do all we can to promote that relationship in the future.

Fyodor Lukyanov: Mr President, now that we have mentioned BRICS, Saudi Arabia said about ten days ago that it wanted to join. Do you support that?

Vladimir Putin: Yes, we do. All the BRICS countries need to agree on this for that to happen. Saudi Arabia is a fast-growing nation, and not just because it's a leader in hydrocarbon production and oil extraction.

It's because the Crown Prince and the Saudi government have very big plans to diversify the economy, which is very important. They have drawn up national plans to achieve that. I'm sure that the Crown Prince's energy and talent will ensure that these plans come to fruition.

So of course, Saudi Arabia deserves being part of large international organisations such as BRICS or the SCO. Just a short time ago, we agreed on Saudi Arabia's status within the SCO. We will continue to strengthen our relations both bilaterally and as part of multilateral associations.

Fyodor Lukyanov: Many in the West are saying that because of you bin Salman has been rude to the Americans.

Vladimir Putin: This is not true.

Mohammed bin Salman is young, decisive and strong-willed. These are obvious facts. Don't be rude to him, and you won't hear harsh language from him. That's it. You need to respect the Crown Prince and Saudi Arabia, and they will do the same. They will be rude to those, however, who are rude to them.

As for our involvement, this is just nonsense. The fact is, that the Crown Prince and the entire Saudi government are guided by their own national interests. I know the Crown Prince quite well personally, and I know what is driving him – he was thinking of his country's interests and of balancing energy markets when considering whether to cut or boost production.

I am being completely serious when I say that in this regard his position is absolutely measured. He aims to balance both the interests of suppliers and consumers, because in the energy markets it's not even the final price that's important, it's the current economic or political situation. What's really important for energy markets is stability and predictability. The Crown Prince wants to have that and generally, he gets what he wants.

Fyodor Lukyanov: Meaning, he won't let you get a free ride on his back?

Vladimir Putin: That he surely won't let you do.

Fyodor Lukyanov: Muhammad Javed, please.

Muhammad Athar Javed: Thank you very much, Mr President. I am bringing a lot of respect and love from Islamabad, Pakistan. Director General of Pakistan House, Muhammad Athar Javed.

You see, I really appreciate your comprehensive and very incisive analysis of the situation. My question relates to a very important factor. It also relates to pre-Second World War, when Jews were demonised and then later ignored, and everything that was related to them was ignored by the Western Europe and the United States. And then the horrible Holocaust took place.

Now there is a hate syndrome generated about Russians. You mentioned Donbass, how the people were being treated. I have witnessed it myself in the United Kingdom and in Scandinavian countries. There is a rise of neo-Nazism. And particularly, I am personally working on a project to assess the patterns. What we are realising is that it is very serious. Number one, it is not being reported, like the previous instances, in the pre-Second World War. Number two, it is being like, I would say, washed away totally. It means that there is a need on the part of Russia to protect, as you said, the Russian language issue, with Russians outside Russia, and also to try to implement counter-design against the rise of neo-Nazis. It is a very serious threat. And the last component of this is: in Ukraine, the recruitment of non-state actors from across different regions are being reported, very credible reports, in order to initiate a full non-state actors' brigade to fight the conventional army, to weaken the resolve. I think this needs to be addressed. I would really like you to give your analysis. Because this is very serious. Europe is facing a rise of neo-Nazism. Thank you.

Vladimir Putin: You know, I would say, one of the most serious and fundamental problems for those who supposedly care about the future of Ukraine, the so-called Ukrainian nationalists, is that the nationalist movement is merging with the neo-fascist, neo-Nazi movement.

After all, they rely on those who cannot be identified as anything but collaborators and Nazis. Clearly, they are versions of those who, as I have said, on behalf of the Hitler authorities, exterminated the Polish, Jewish, and Russian populations in the regions occupied during World War II. It is impossible to separate today's so-called patriots, flag-wavers and nationalists from Bandera followers – they are the same thing. That, in my opinion, is their big problem, really.

Therefore, I keep repeating, including to our so-called Western partners: look at what is happening on the streets of Kiev and other major cities, where thousands of people march with swastikas and torches, and so on.

Yes, manifestations of neo-Nazism are also possible in our country. In any country, in fact, as this is extremely tenacious. But we are fighting it, while over there, it enjoys support at the state level – this, of course, is a problem. It is being hushed up, but it still exists, and there is no getting away from it, because it does exist.

But today's flag-wavers in Ukraine are not even driven by any interests or nationalist ideas; their motivation is more primitive. They are driven by economic interests; they want to keep billions of dollars they stole from the Ukrainian people in Western banks. They stole it, hid it in Western banks and will do anything to protect their capital, anything the West tells them

to do. Only they are putting it in a nationalist wrapper, presenting it to their own people as a fight for the interests of the Ukrainian people. This is what is really happening – they will fight with Russia to the last Ukrainian and will not spare anyone.

I say this with regret. Their losses are one to ten, one to eight. Lately, it's been at one to seven, one to eight. They aren't sparing people at all. Can true patriots of their country allow this to happen? They are taking this path without looking back, without thinking about it or regretting it. Of course, they are far from protecting their national interests.

But this plague of nationalism is tenacious, only they prefer not to notice that it has become linked to neo-Nazism. And this is certainly a huge problem for the current Ukrainian regime, and for those who support them, of course. But we cannot ignore it and will always point it out, including as one of the root causes of today's crisis.

Fyodor Lukyanov: Mr Kim, go ahead, please.

Kim Heungchong: Hello, I am Kim Heungchong from South Korea. This is my second time at the Valdai Club and I have learned a lot. Thank you very much for providing a chance to think many things.

I have some questions about security. I would like to find out your opinion on Russia's position on the growing tensions between China and the United States over Taiwan, and North Korea's nuclear missile development.

Another question is about combatting climate change. Russia is very rich in fossil natural resources, and so speeding up the transition to carbon neutrality might contradict Russia's interests. What do you think about that?

Vladimir Putin: I will start with the last one. A transition to carbon neutrality does not go against Russia's interests – we have opportunities for developing alternative energy sources, including hydrogen energy and pure hydrogen, and we have serious competitive advantages in this respect. In part, it is possible to use gas. There are many opportunities, and this does not scare us at all but, on the contrary, creates an impetus for development. Primary gas is the best source of energy as a transitional source of energy. As for the deep processing of oil, we have substantial competitive advantages in this respect, as I just said. This does not run counter to our interests at all.

What really contradicts our interests is disorder and confusion in the energy sector, attempts to rush ahead in settling issues pertaining to energy security, to ensuring a green energy transition. How was it possible not to invest enough money or prevent investment in the traditional energy sector without preparing fully for this green energy transition? How could this happen?

This is largely the reason for the current energy crisis. After all, Western politicians just talk to win voters to their side. First, they scare regular people with potential climate changes, then they start exploiting this fear and make unrealistic promises, and then they receive the votes they need, come to power and then say "oops"!

What is happening now – a return to coal, a return to fuel oil? So, what is the result after all this talk? This is not about Russia. We are ready to supply gas, and we are ready to supply

oil – why turn them down? After the explosions on the Nord Stream pipelines we have one pipe left and it is operating. We can pump 27.5 billion cubic metres but they don't want it. What does this have to do with us? If they don't want it, so be it.

As for green energy, let me repeat that everything needs to be prepared for this before a final transition. Systemic measures limiting the development of traditional energy sources have triggered this serious crisis. There is no funding; banks do not give loans either in Europe or the United States. Why is everything limited – banks do not approve loans, do not insure, do not allocate land. Transport is not upgraded for oil and gas shipping, and this has continued for years. Considerable underfunding in the energy sector has led to shortages. This is what happened.

The United States is allocating oil from its strategic reserves – well, this is good, but they will have to be replenished and the market analysts understand this. Today, they have withdrawn oil from strategic reserves and tomorrow they will have to buy it again. We are hearing that they will buy when prices go down. But they are not going down. So what? Wake up! You will have to buy at high prices because prices have gone up again. What do we have to do with this? These blunders in the energy sector were made by those who have to think about it and deal with it. This is the first point.

The second point. This is about North Korea and Taiwan. No doubt, Taiwan is an inseparable part of the People's Republic of China. We have always adhered to this position and have never changed it.

We in Russia perceive all provocative gestures linked with US top officials' visits to Taiwan as nothing other than a provocation. Frankly, I do not know why they are doing this.

You know, we have been acquainted with many of those present here for years and speak the same language – so let's have a family talk. What is happening is a tragedy in Ukraine. The entire West has attacked us, trying to wreck our economy. It is supplying billions worth of weapons and ammunition to Ukraine. This is a fight against Russia.

But why spoil relations with China at the same time? Are they sane? It seems that this runs completely counter to common sense and logic. Why did this granny have to trudge to Taiwan in order to provoke China into some actions? And this is at the same time when they cannot settle relations with Russia due to what is happening in Ukraine. This is simply crazy.

It may seem that there is a subtle, profound plot behind this. But I think there is nothing there, no subtle thought. It is just nonsense and arrogance, nothing else. Do you understand what the matter is? Such irrational actions are rooted in arrogance and a sense of impunity.

Our position is clear. I have described it.

Now about the nuclear problem of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea.

In my opinion, this problem is also rooted in – you know what – the reluctance to talk and an absolutely boorish attitude to North Korea's interests, including its security interests. After all, they practically came to terms about everything. There was a moment. In effect,

the North Korean leaders virtually agreed to the US proposals on settling this problem, including its nuclear component.

But no, at the last moment the Americans changed their position and actually compelled the North Korean leaders to renounce the achieved agreements. In the meantime, the United States introduced additional sanctions there and started introducing restrictions in finance and banking although there was an agreement not to do this. For what purpose? This is also not very clear.

Incidentally, we have joint proposals with the People's Republic of China on how to move towards settling this problem. We have formulated these proposals in two documents and this is common knowledge. We will adhere to our coordinated position.

By the way, as regards humanitarian and similar issues, it is important to understand the condition of the North Korean economy and the needs of its people and to settle issues proceeding from humanitarian considerations rather than by applying more pressure.

We have very good relations with the Republic of Korea and we have always had an opportunity to conduct dialogue with both the Republic of Korea and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. However, we have learned now that the Republic of Korea has decided to supply weapons and ammunition to Ukraine. This will be destroying our relations. How would the Republic of Korea behave if we resumed cooperation with North Korea in this area? Would you feel happy about this?

I would like to draw your attention to this.

Fyodor Lukyanov: Mr President, since you said that we are having a family talk here, please unravel a mystery to our family-like gathering as there have been many speculations on this topic.

Did you tell President Xi Jinping about the plan to launch the special military operation when you met with him in China in early February?

Vladimir Putin: No, I did not.

Fyodor Lukyanov: Did he say later he was hurt because you had not taken him into confidence on that matter?

Vladimir Putin: You know, the Chinese leader is not the sort of person who talks about his grievances over whatever it may be. He is a leader on a global scale in his own right. And then we do not need it as we, Russia and the People's Republic of China, take sovereign decisions.

So, they in China see well what the West's striving to move the NATO infrastructure closer to our borders means to Russia and they are assessing this situation objectively. In the same way they saw what was happening in Donbass during the past eight years and they are quite capable of analysing the implications of and the reasons for the coup in Ukraine in 2014.

Of course, the People's Republic of China and the Chinese leadership speak in favour of pragmatic and balanced solutions that would help resolve the crisis which Ukraine has plunged into through peaceful means and we have respect for this position.

Fyodor Lukyanov: Please, Mr Nelson Wong, go ahead.

Nelson Wong: Thank you. I am Nelson Wong from Shanghai, China. It is a real honour, Mr President.

In your remarks, you mentioned that the rule-based order that was often used and is still being used by the West, it comes from nowhere. Which is actually quite true, and this has been also discussed quite frequently over the past four days in our discussions.

So, my question to you, Mr President, is that looking forward, we are actually moving into a time without a superpower, which was the topic of the first day of this year's discussion. So, since the US as the only superpower is losing its control, and we are moving into a new era, this is not only the beginning of the end of the US superpower, but we already are in the process.

So, in a new phase, I believe we also need to have some rules. So, if we are ever going to have any rules, what, in your opinion, Mr President, are the most important? Of course, it's not there yet, but for argument's sake, what would you think would be the most important when it comes to setting up a new set of rules? Thank you.

Vladimir Putin: Why are you saying there are no such rules? They do exist and they are written into the UN Charter. These rules are called international law. We simply need for everyone to comply with these rules and interpret them in the same manner. It is only possible to dismiss or radically update them when a foundation is prepared for maintaining relations on other principles.

The UN Charter recorded the alignment of forces following WWII. Of course, the world has changed radically since then. Giants like China, India and Indonesia with large population are showing economic growth; in Africa large counties – some of them with a population of 200 million – are emerging and making progress, as well as countries in Latin America.

The world is changing. Of course, international law should keep pace with these changes and regulate relationships between countries in keeping with the balance of forces that emerges in the world in reality. However, this should be done quietly, without haste and on the basis of clear principles, rather than rules invented by someone.

I mentioned this in my speech: who has read these rules? They are talking about rules – what rules? Where are they written and who has approved them? It is nonsense. Do they think they are talking to idiots? To some broad public, while some of those people do not even know how to read properly. What are the rules and who worked on them? It is nothing more than rubbish. Still, they keep drumming it into people's heads indefinitely. And those who do not observe these rules will be subject to restrictions and sanctions.

They are waging a trade war against China and are telling China what to do in its provinces, how to keep things under control and what kind of relations should be there, and to respect human rights. These are the tools, unfair competition tools that they are using to take

on the People's Republic of China. That is what it is. They are afraid of China's growing power and everything is happening because of that. They are splitting hairs on human rights or picking on certain regions of China to address their economic and political issues. The point, however, is to oppose China as a rising competitor, and they are coming up with all sorts of tools to get there.

The shared basis could include respecting one another's interests, openness and general rules that are consistently understood and applied by all participants of international communication. We need to achieve this balance of interests, restore this balance of interests and follow these rules. I think it should be done publicly, not behind closed doors, and not in the interest of any particular country or a group of countries, but in the interests of the entire international community.

Fyodor Lukyanov: Mr President, without leaving China, I would like to follow up on the previous question about green energy and the like. Clearly, Europe will close its energy market to us in the years to come. There is such a possibility.

Are we ready to move really quickly and build infrastructure for the Asian markets?

Vladimir Putin: You know we have been doing it, and not because of today's situation; we have been working on it for a long time now. The Power of Siberia was not built in connection with the events in Ukraine. We built it because we were aware that our Chinese friends' energy needs are growing, and we can meet them.

We are also holding talks with India and other countries on a variety of ways to deliver our energy to the Indian and other markets. We will continue to liquefy natural gas. We are still modest participants of the global LNG markets, but we keep growing. We will continue down this line. To reiterate, we will keep expanding this area of business not even because of the existing restrictions, but because these are the global economic trends.

In terms of purchasing power parity, the Chinese economy is bigger than the US economy, which is a hard cold fact, and its needs are growing. Why would we not, especially since we are friends and neighbours and enjoy wonderful relations and share a border, why would we not deliver energy there in the same way as we do to other Asian countries? We have been doing this so far and will continue to do so.

We have, in fact, agreed upon a new system of delivery across Mongolia. Both Mongolia and China are interested. We will provide our friends and partners with access to our energy resources. Why not? We did the same thing with the Europeans and the Americans, but they chose to leave our market. Godspeed, let them go where they want. Is it a good or a bad thing for them? I think ultimately it is a bad thing.

They are leaving and losing. We are open to cooperation and all comers are welcome, this process will continue. We have been preparing for this for many years now, and we will keep this process running going forward. I do not see any obstacles here that we would not be able to overcome, or issues that we would not be able to resolve. All issues will be resolved.

Alexei Dzermant: Alexei Dzermant, Minsk, Belarus.

Mr President, before I ask my question, I would like to convey the words of support coming from many Belarusians. I often meet with them at the panels where we discuss Ukraine, among other topics. The people of my country send a message of strong support personally to you and to Russia, which is fighting Nazism in Ukraine.

Here is my question. Since the West is, in fact, building actual walls and imposing a blockade, a sanctions pressure on the Republic of Belarus and Russia, the North-South corridor has become particularly important as a supply route and financially. Of course, it is important to complement it with specific projects to be implemented jointly by Russia and Belarus.

Would you agree that with Asia and the East in general making strides in economic growth, we need not only to develop the material infrastructure, but also focus on the cultural and humanitarian aspects, so that our ideas, values, and outlook on the world overlap with the ideas and values in the countries of the East?

Thank you.

Vladimir Putin: You are right. This is what we are doing, though. And that is not because someone is building a wall in the West, but we have always been doing so.

Look, most Russians live in European Russia, but Russia's territory to the east of the Ural Mountains is larger. Russia is a Eurasian country; we remember this and we never forget about it. We have traditionally developed our relations with Asian countries, and even more so now, with the surge of growth there going on for a number of years now.

We see it all, which is why we have largely reoriented our cooperation to the Asian countries. Well, of course, developing economic ties cannot go without paying attention to the cultural component. To a certain extent, China and India are the cradles of the world civilisations, and we approach this with great respect, attention and interest.

The Russian public's interest in these civilisations has always been very high. By the way, we have schools that study India and China, as well as their cultures and the people of these countries, which are multi-ethnic nations as well. We have always had high-level research in these areas, and we will support it in the future.

Fyodor Lukyanov: Colleagues, we have been working for over three hours now. I think we have already taken enough of Mr President's time. Has anyone got a burning question? There you are.

Vladimir Putin: Please, go ahead.

Philani Mthembu: Thank you, Chair. Philani Mthembu from South Africa, the Institute for Global Dialogue.

Mr President, you said that the West is not capable of unilaterally governing the whole of humanity and that we need to build a symphony of human civilisation. I am interested in just an expansion of your thoughts. If we are to build a multi-polar world order, what is the importance of regional cooperation as a means of reinforcing and building the blocks

of multipolarity? And then just a few words in terms of Russia's engagement with Africa, particularly, related to the Russia-Africa summit. Thank you.

Vladimir Putin: We have had very good, traditionally good relations with Africa in general, including with the Republic of South Africa since Africa's struggle for independence and against colonialism, as you know. These absolutely unique relations were forged during the years when the Soviet Union and Russia supported African countries in their fight for freedom.

And this foundation for our relations that took shape over the past decades must undoubtedly be used today under the new conditions to develop multilateral relations with African states, including with the Republic of South Africa, which, as you are aware, is a very active and effective partner of ours within BRICS.

We appreciate this and we are aware of South Africa's capabilities. We are aware of its capabilities and have confidence in the future of the African continent, and we will certainly develop our relations with African countries, both with those we have had traditional relations with us over the past decades and those with whom we are just beginning to develop them.

Regarding the substance of your question and its first part. I think I have basically answered it – I do not think I can elaborate on my position in a short answer.

We need to find a balance of interests. This cannot be done under the hegemony or an attempt to maintain the hegemony of one country or a group of countries over the rest of humankind. These hegemons will have to reckon with these legitimate demands of the vast majority of participants in international communication – and not in words, but in deeds.

After all, what is going on? Everyone pays lip service to equality and support for African countries and so on. It all sounds nice verbally but what happens in practice? After all, today such instruments are used as, let's say, the dollar or other currencies such as the euro. What is happening in reality? In the past two years, they have printed 5.9 trillion dollars and 2.9 trillion euros. Where did that money go? It went into buying goods in the world markets, and the United States started buying more food in world markets than it was selling there; it started buying up food thanks to having the printing press.

This is what a financial monopoly leads to – to immediate shortages. In addition to a poor harvest the previous year and the pandemic, production was cut, but they printed money to fight the pandemic and hurled it to their people, who started buying food and the prices went up. And who is affected? First of all, the countries of Africa and partly Latin America and Asia. Does anyone think about that? Of course, those who are doing it think about it. But they do not give a damn about the consequences. They are pursuing their interests without giving a thought to the consequences that arise for the African countries.

There are similar developments in another part of the food market: the fertiliser market. Look here, how is this possible? I have already spoken about that, and I will reiterate. How can a decision be made to lift restrictions and bans on Russian fertilisers in Europe and a follow-up clarification be issued that these restrictions are lifted for EU nations only? Have they gone mad? They published that clarification. Can you imagine it? Yet they are doing this without any scruples whatsoever. Is this the way a balance of interests is observed?

We have repeatedly said that we have 300,000 tonnes of fertilisers under arrest in European ports. Our companies are ready to give the fertilisers away for free, but they do not release them, including to African countries. Some African leaders asked me where exactly the fertilisers are. I asked my aides to inform them of the location and the amounts – 300,000 tonnes, which is worth millions of dollars.

Give them to the poorest countries, they need it. However, they do not release the fertilisers. Is this an observance of the balance of interests? If you want to fight Russia – go ahead. You do not want us to have additional revenues – but we are giving them away for free with no revenues. Give them to the developing countries, since your actions only contribute to growing prices. Why are they doing this? Obviously, this is in their interest.

Is this a balance of interests? How can we achieve stable relations? We must work to achieve this balance by acting in compliance with the standards we call international law. These standards must be agreed on and complied with, including in the financial sphere, where independent systems of international settlements must be established, as I mentioned earlier.

I gave a specific example of what incessant and unlimited emission of the basic currencies is leading to. It also has practical consequences, including and primarily for developing countries.

I want to go back to the following: if we want stability in the world, we must achieve a balance of interests.

Please, go ahead, I saw someone raised a hand t.

Fyodor Lukyanov: Nathalia Zaiser, please.

Dimitris Konstantakopoulos: Mr President, two small questions.

Vladimir Putin: This certainly does not look like Nathalia.

Dimitris Konstantakopoulos: Do you think that the time has come for a deeper integration on the space of the ex-Soviet Union? And my second question is: what is your message to the simple, average citizen of a Western country if you had in front of you such a citizen, what would be your message?

Vladimir Putin: First, about integration.

This is a very subtle issue. Here we must also seek a balance of interests about which I spoke as regards the entire world. It is necessary to do this professionally, consistently and without rushing. We have certain plans in the Eurasian Economic Union. This concerns the removal of restrictions on major groups of commodities to fully ensure the free movement of goods, finance, capital and labour.

I do not think it is expedient to rush ahead like it happened, say, in the European Union, when some countries with a certain level of economic development entered the Eurozone and did not know what to do with this. It happens because problems arise when the instrument of inflation becomes inaccessible for regulating the economic situation. I am referring to the well-known situation with Greece and some other countries as well.

Therefore, we should not rush ahead but should consistently move towards the implementation of the plans we have mapped out. We know what we need to do in this area and we will do it by all means, taking into account the interests of all participants in this process.

As for our message to the ordinary citizens of Western countries – both the United States and Europe – I would like to voice the main idea – campaign for higher salaries and wages – this is the first point. Second, don't believe that Russia is your enemy or even opponent. Russia is your friend and for decades, we have been doing everything in our power to strengthen our relations and we intend to do so in the future.

In this context, I remember a joke that I recently told my colleagues. An acquaintance of mine from Germany told me this joke a short while ago. Here's a family, and a son asks his father: "Dad, why is it so cold here?" The father replies: "Because Russia attacked Ukraine." The child asks: "What do we have to do with it?" Father: "We imposed sanctions on the Russians." The son: "What for?" The father: "To make them feel bad." The son: "Are we Russians then?"

I would like to say that all problems – and I am addressing in this case the people in the European countries and in the United States – that all problems that arise in this context are not linked with Russia's actions. They are rooted in the systemic mistakes of your political leaders, the political leadership of your countries – in the energy and food sectors and in monetary policy that led to an unprecedented growth of inflation and a shortage of energy resources. Russia has nothing to do with all this. This is a result of systemic mistakes by the leaders of your countries. It is necessary to conduct a realistic analysis of what is happening and seek changes in economic policy.

As for international politics, it is always, of course, a decision of sovereign states but it should certainly be based on the opinion of voters, ordinary people in different countries. But ordinary people should know – and I will end with what I began – Russia is not the enemy and has never had any evil intentions as regards the European countries and the United States.

And we know that we in Russia have very many friends there. We will build relations with the so-called collective West, relying on this part of the population in the European countries and the United States.

Fyodor Lukyanov: Mr President, and does your call to fight for higher wages also apply to Russian citizens?

Vladimir Putin: Yes, it does.

Fyodor Lukyanov: Excellent. Everyone has heard it.

Vladimir Putin: I must say this is one of the key issues the Government must deal with, and trade unions are doing it regardless of anything, regardless of any special operations.

A tough dialogue is underway in the trilateral commission between representatives of employers, trade unions and the Government. This dialogue is ongoing.

We see that our citizens' nominal incomes are growing yet real incomes have somewhat decreased. Taking into consideration the condition of the Russian economy, we can and must resolve these issues. I hope we will be able to solve all the issues in this sense and in this key in accordance with the plans of the Russian Government.

There is someone there who also wants to ask a question.

Fyodor Lukyanov: Mr President, don't you give orders, I am in command here. *(Laughter.)*

Vladimir Putin: It is called hegemony.

Fyodor Lukyanov: It cannot be helped, we have not overcome it yet.

Colleagues, I suggest a blitz session at the end. Nathalia Zaiser is sulking over there, and there are two more questions, after which we shall wrap up.

Vladimir Putin: All right.

Fyodor Lukyanov: Nathalia.

Natalia Zaiser: Good evening, Mr President. Nathalia Zaiser from the African Business Initiative Union.

I have been engaged in developing international relations and expanding contacts in public diplomacy for almost 15 years. As someone who builds bridges, it is important for me to project certain actions into the future.

Apparently, we are facing a new historical stage, and when the current chapter is finished, there will be a need to establish new or different institutions of international partnership. It probably concerns not only undecided nations but also those countries which are unable to openly speak out their intentions and positions due to their geopolitical situation.

Mr President, what is your vision of a new international partnership institution? Which basis of parities is Russia ready to offer at the international level? Which mechanisms, tools and personalities are needed to acquire new allies, partners and friends, not at a declarative level but at the level of unquestionable responsibility in terms of agreements? Do you think we should also change or build up other approaches within the future international partnership?

Thank you.

Vladimir Putin: Your question, if it can be called this, is so broad that it rather amounts to a position.

It seems to me that, in general, I have already given an answer to what you asked me about. We must and we can focus on cooperation, primarily, with countries which have sovereignty in taking fundamental decisions. This is my first point.

My second point is that we need to reach a consensus on each of these decisions.

Third, we need to secure a balance of interests.

As part of which institutions can we do this? Of course, these are primarily universal international organisations, with the United Nations Organisation being number one.

Fyodor Lukyanov: Please, Alan Freeman, go ahead.

Alan Freeman: Mr President, I come from Canada, a NATO country, whose future prime minister's grandfather was a Banderista.

We've heard the worldwide opposition to the stance of NATO and the many voices that exist in the global south. Those voices also exist in the north; they also exist in the collective West. Why don't we hear them? Because they are suppressed. Just look at what happened to Julian Assange. The media, the political elites, the academic elites have mounted an unprecedented campaign which is racist and Russophobic, which intimidates people to prevent them from expressing the full extent of their disagreement with what their governments are doing. So, you do not see here the extent of the opposition that exists in Europe, in Canada, in the United Kingdom. You do not see it. What can we do to build relations between those in the collective West that are fighting what their governments are trying to do, and the support that exists in the global south and in Russia for Russia's courageous actions and position in world politics?

Vladimir Putin: It seems to me that no one has to sacrifice any of one's national interests; you just have to stand up for your national interests and we will work in harmony with you.

We, of course, are not aware of all the details of the political struggle in the countries of the collective West, something you have mentioned. Perhaps, you know better than I that we are not involved in activities – practically at the level of intelligence services – targeting the opposition, the way the West is doing in its relations with us and our opposition. We know that hundreds of millions, if not billions, of dollars is being allocated to support the opposition using all means, all channels, anything they can think of to transfer funds to Russia for this purpose. We do not have time to keep tabs on all activities like this. At the same time, we are not doing anything of the sort.

We expect – I have talked about this many times earlier today, even, if I remember right, in my speech – our position on the fundamental issues of how international relations and societies should develop to appeal to a large number of people not only in the world in general but also in Western countries.

I just spoke about this. We know that we have great many supporters. We will rely on those supporters in building relations with the countries of the so-called collective West.

I can only wish you every success in your struggle for your national interests. This will be enough to maintain good relations with Russia.

(Addressing Fyodor Lukyanov.)

Still, let me have the last word. Anyone in the audience can raise their hand and I will answer your question.

Please, go ahead.

Fyodor Lukyanov: Gabor Stier.

Gabor Stier: Good afternoon, Mr President.

At the beginning of the talk, you spoke about the goals and how you had assessed the situation. My question is the following. Did you think on February 24 that eight months later the special military operation will still be going on? In fact, it is not just going on – the situation is getting worse. What's more, many people in the world are fearing the beginning of World War III.

Hence my question. One of my favourite cities in the post-Soviet space is Odessa. What do you think – I want your advice – if I wanted to visit it next summer or in two years...

Vladimir Putin: Do not put it off, go there as soon as possible. It is a joke. I am kidding.

Gabor Stier: Should I apply for a Russian or Ukrainian visa two years from now?

Vladimir Putin: You know, Odessa is indeed one of the most beautiful cities in the world.

As you know, Odessa was founded by Catherine the Great, and I think even the extreme nationalists do not dare to tear down the monument to the city's founder.

Odessa can be an apple of discord, a symbol of conflict resolution, and a symbol of finding some kind of solution to everything that is happening now. It is not a question of Russia. We have said many times that we are ready to negotiate, and I recently mentioned this publicly once again speaking in the Kremlin. But the leaders of the Kiev regime have decided not to continue negotiations with the Russian Federation. It is true that the final word belongs to those who implement this policy in Washington. It is very easy for them to solve this problem: to send the appropriate signal to Kiev that they should change their position and seek a peaceful solution to these problems. And that will do it.

And as for your possible trip to Odessa, joking aside, I recommend that you take it. It really is a very nice, beautiful city with wonderful traditions and history. It is well worth the effort to admire it.

True, in recent years, at least at the time when I was last in Odessa, it did not make the best impression on me, because obviously the public utilities were in disarray, it was visible even on the fronts of the buildings, although in the centre it seems all right so far, still well preserved, but should you take a step outside the centre, everything did not look so presentable. But still, Odessa is worth seeing.

Let's have the final question. Please.

Fyodor Lukyanov: Then Carlos Ron, he is from Venezuela and we can't do without it.

Vladimir Putin: Venezuela?

Fyodor Lukyanov: Yes.

Vladimir Putin: I would like the final question to come from Russians. But it is all right, go ahead.

Carlos Ron: Mr President, greetings from Venezuela, from President Nicolas Maduro, your friend.

You know, right now, about 30 percent of countries around the world are under some kind of illegal sanctions from the United States. You mentioned defending the principles enshrined in the United Nations Charter. Last month, the Group of Friends in Defence of the Charter met in New York, and one of the issues they addressed was contributing to the creation of a zone free of illegal sanctions where business can take place and where we would be free of those impositions. What do you think Russia can do to help create this space and how do you envision this can happen? And maybe you also have a message for the people of Venezuela. Thank you.

Vladimir Putin: By countering the sanctions imposed against it, Russia actually is creating a certain space of freedom so as to have no fear of sanctions pressure and freely develop economic ties between the most diverse regions of the world and different countries.

No special decisions are needed here. The very example of the current developments is very indicative, I think. The colleague has asked what kind of signals we are ready to send to citizens of European and Western countries in general. I spoke about that earlier but I also mentioned the mistakes in the global economy, finance, energy and food spheres made by the Western political leadership.

Here is a confirmation. Sanctions were imposed on Venezuela, which used to be one of the biggest oil producers until recently. Sanctions were also imposed on Iran and Russia. Now Saudi Arabia is threatened with sanctions. They want to introduce a price cap on Russian gas and oil. They are making a mistake at every step, which leads to tough consequences for those who impose those sanctions. It is just one example. And then they start looking for those who is responsible. They do everything with their own hands and then look for the guilty party.

Nevertheless, Venezuela keeps progressing. It faces big problems, we are aware of that, but Venezuela is overcoming them.

They imposed these sanctions on Russia and they expected a total collapse of the Russian economy. We talked about this at the beginning of our meeting today. But this blitzkrieg against the Russian economy did not happen.

What is going on? Look, inflation will be around 12 percent this year, and there is a downward trend. In the first quarter of next year, our experts say it will be around 5 percent. In the EU countries with developed economies, it is 17 percent as in the Netherlands, and in some countries, it runs at 21–23 percent, twice as high as in our country.

Unemployment is 3.8 percent. The unemployment rate is lower than it was in the pre-pandemic period: it was 4.7 back then. We will have a budget deficit of 2 percent next year, then it will be 1.4 percent, and another year later, 0.7 percent. It is bigger in almost all eurozone countries. The public debt is fundamentally lower than in the eurozone, or in the United States, or in Britain.

We are going to have a recession this year, somewhere between 2.8 and 2.9 percent. It will happen. But industrial production, manufacturing will remain at about the same level. Construction: the construction sector is up by more than 5 percent – 5.1 percent – for eight months of this year. Agriculture has doubled, and the trend is increasing.

We have an increase in lending to both the corporate and consumer sectors. Lending has gone up. Yes, we have seen some issues related to the outflow of money from banks due to the well-known events. The money started coming back and the people are doing the right thing, because it is much better to have at least some interest in the bank than to keep it under the mattress and lose money due to inflation, it is quite obvious. The stability of our banking system is reliable, the stability of the banking system is high. I repeat, lending is growing.

You asked me: what can Russia do to create conditions for living independently of these sanctions and to develop sustainably? It seems to me that this is not a bad example, and it is necessary to combine the efforts of all those who are interested in this, to achieve this agreement and the balance of interests that I have already mentioned many times. And then, without a doubt, we will succeed.

Let's stop here.

Fyodor Lukyanov: Finally.

Mr President, I began by saying that we were very much looking forward to seeing you. I think we will leave extremely satisfied, and we will have much to think about for a long time. It is hard for me, sitting here, to assess – of course, impressions may vary, but I think this is one of our most successful discussions in terms of both topic coverage and the overall atmosphere.

Thank you very much, and we are really looking forward to seeing you next year.

Vladimir Putin: All right.

I want to thank our moderator, our host. And of course, I want to thank all of you for the interest you take in relations with Russia, I mean primarily our foreign guests.

I want to thank all the Valdai Club experts for your work on this platform and, of course, for your tangible, substantial contribution to these brainstorming sessions that are so necessary, including for the decision-making process at a practical level.

Thank you. All the best.

Topics

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