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Esteemed colleagues,

Today, we are meeting not in Moscow but at an on-site briefing in St Petersburg, on the sidelines of a major forum that has drawn women from all over the world – over 110 countries are represented here by professionals, women who specialise in different areas.

Today, everyone heard debates, interesting subjects for discussion on specific issues.

I must also say that this is our second on-site briefing on the sidelines of this forum and we can compare them. Needless to say, the forum has grown into a completely different scale. The first one was an idea that we succeeded in carrying out. It was a test, a kind of improvisation. Today, the scale of it speaks for itself. This is a phenomenal event, very important and topical. There are no formalities in this. The forum is not being held for the sake of a forum. It is a very serious discussion on many topical issues that interest people.

Considering that I am in St Petersburg, I'd like to start our current briefing with the foreign ties of the Northwestern Federal District.

Foreign ties of the Northwestern Federal District

St Petersburg is one of Europe's internationally recognised business and cultural centres along with the Leningrad Region that leads in attracting foreign tourists and investment in this area. In 2017, the city was visited by 7.5 million foreign guests and this year the number of tourists will exceed 8 million. The region's large industrial and scientific potential attracts leading world manufacturers. The St Petersburg special economic zone is making good headway, as well as the region's technology parks and industrial enterprises. St Petersburg's automobile centre (which includes global carmakers like Toyota, Nissan and Hyundai) has shown the highest production rates in the past five years. There are plans to further expand production localisation, including engine production.

In August, St Petersburg Governor Georgy Poltavchenko visited Japan. The roadmap for developing Hokkaido-St Petersburg cooperation in 2018-2022 was signed as a result.

In the past few months alone, Shanghai Days were held in St Petersburg (this year the two cities celebrate the 30th anniversary of their twin ties) and the Business Cooperation Forum was held during Minsk Days. The city was visited by delegations from Vietnam, Ireland and Scotland.

Regions in the Northwestern Federal District are the main participants in Russia-EU international border cooperation programmes for 2014-2020. They cooperate on joint infrastructure projects with Finland and the Baltic countries.

Apart from organising interstate meetings and major global economic and public forums involving foreign leaders, major politicians, entrepreneurs and cultural figures, St Petersburg is implementing an important international agenda by expanding Russia's humanitarian influence abroad, promoting the Russian language and culture, preserving the historical truth about Russia's role in routing Nazism, training foreign students and carrying out "people's diplomacy" programmes involving the stars of world culture, opera and ballet. Recognising Russia's exceptional contribution to the development of jazz, UNESCO announced St Petersburg the capital of this music genre in 2018.

We are grateful to the leaders and residents of St Petersburg for their contribution to consolidating our country's positive image in the international arena, including the event's excellent organisation and the northern capital's famous hospitality.

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Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's upcoming working visit to Bosnia and Herzegovina

On September 21, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov will pay a working visit to Bosnia and Herzegovina. The plan includes meetings with members of the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Minister of Foreign Affairs Igor Crnadak in Sarajevo. The schedule for consultations between both countries' foreign ministries in 2019-2020 is being prepared for signing.

In Banja Luka, Sergey Lavrov will have talks with President of the Republika Srpska Milorad Dodik and will take part in the unveiling ceremony of a plaque for the dedication and laying of the cornerstone of the Orthodox church commemorating the family of Russian Emperor Nicholas II.

The general plan for the forthcoming meetings is to reaffirm Russia's commitment to the 1995 General Framework Agreement for Peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina, also known as the Dayton Agreement, to support the country's sovereignty and territorial integrity, the constitutional powers of its two entities, Republika Srpska and the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and equality of the three state-forming peoples.

The state of and development prospects for bilateral relations, and opportunities for deepening political, trade, economic, cultural and humanitarian cooperation will also be considered. The officials will exchange views on developments in the Balkans and other current issues on the international agenda.

Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov to attend 73rd UN General Assembly session

On September 18, the 73rd session of the UN General Assembly opened in New York – the central international forum for a comprehensive discussion of pressing world problems. This year, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov heads the Russian delegation to the high-level meetings of the session, which will begin on September 25.

The Foreign Minister's programme in New York will be as rich as usual and will include a series of meetings with heads of state and government and foreign ministers. He will also meet with UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres and President of the 73rd session of the General Assembly Maria Fernanda Espinosa. Sergey Lavrov will also participate in the foreign ministers' meetings of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council, BRICS and CSTO, and other high-level thematic meetings. On September 28, he is to speak before the member states at the UN General Assembly.

The Russian participants in the session will focus on promoting the UN's central role and increasing its authority. We will continue to promote a unifying agenda in the interests of reducing the level of confrontation in the world and effectively resolving pressing problems based on international law. Among our specific priorities is reiterating the unacceptability of distorting history, supporting the creation of a broad anti-terrorist front, and promoting the balanced implementation of "Agenda-2030."

For more details on Russia's position and approaches at the 73rd session of the UN General Assembly, please visit our website.

We receive many requests for the details of Sergey Lavrov's programme in New York, and details on the planned meetings. The programme is being finalised. I can list some of the meetings planned. I have already mentioned several multilateral events; as for bilateral meetings, Mr Lavrov will meet with the EU High Representative for Foreign and Security Policy, the President of Croatia, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Zambia, the President of Cyprus, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Cuba, the NATO Secretary General, the State Council Member, Minister of Foreign Affairs of China, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Bolivia, the President of Somalia, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Guatemala, Belize, Suriname, Panama, with colleagues from Switzerland, the OSCE Secretary General, the President of Equatorial Guinea, the Foreign Ministers of Armenia, Sudan, and Jordan. He will hold a separate meeting with the UN Secretary General, alongside the meetings in a multilateral format. Meetings with the Foreign Ministers of Jamaica, France, Saint Vincent and Egypt are being discussed.

Meetings between Russia and the states of the South Pacific are traditionally held on the sidelines of the General Assembly. More meetings are in the works. Sergey Lavrov will later talk to the media on the results of his New York visit; we will keep you informed.

The Russian military aircraft shot down off the Syrian coast

As you know, an Ilyushin Il-20 aircraft of the Russian Aerospace Forces was shot down off the Syrian coast late in the evening on September 17 while it was on duty patrolling that part of the Mediterranean Sea. Russian military personnel were killed. On behalf of the Foreign Ministry – its leadership and the entire staff – I would like to express my condolences over these tragic deaths.

Russian President Vladimir Putin has given an exhaustive assessment of this tragic accident. The Russian Defence Ministry commented on the events that occurred that night many times and at different levels. Soon more information is expected to be provided – it will be made public – that will give answers to the questions that are arising in connection with this tragedy, in particular regarding the involvement of Israeli military pilots in the accident.

We maintain strong historical ties with Israel. At all stages of the establishment of Israel as a state our country invariably spoke in favour of developing and expanding mutually beneficial and friendly relations between our two countries and expected this Middle East country to fit in with the regional environment, turning into a factor of stability and prosperity in the Middle East.

It is clear that the September 17 tragedy will require that Israel conduct an additional investigation and provide an explanation. I believe the explanation will be given soon. In my view, the Israeli pilots, whose actions created a threat to the Russian aircraft, leading to it being shot down – information from our military experts testifies to this – lacked professionalism, to say the least. It is a shame to hide behind the backs of those who ensure safety, including yours, and, while performing their duty, cannot turn aside from a bullet intended for you.

Syria update

Syria update

The situation in Syria is a mix of positive and negative factors.

For the first time during the years of crisis, elections to local governments were held in Syria on September 16 with 5,300 polling stations opened across the country. This is a major and long-awaited event for that country, and a good sign of Syria transitioning back to peaceful life and the rebuilding phase.

We have a positive view of the numbers of Syrian refugees and internally displaced persons returning to their homes in Syria. A special international forum could give additional impetus to this process. In the final statement of the trilateral summit of the guarantor countries of the Astana process held in Tehran on September 7, the participants noted the willingness of Russia, Iran and Turkey to consider the possibility of participating in preparations for such a conference.

With the assistance of the Russian Centre for Receiving, Distributing and Accommodating Refugees, the flow of returnees from Lebanon and Jordan continues. More than 13,000 people have returned to their homes in Syria since July 18, 2018 (that is, only in a matter of two months), and more than 242,000 people since September 30, 2015.

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Internally displaced persons are returning to their homes as well, since the situation in the area liberated from terrorists has stabilised. Since January 1, 2018, 148,000 IDPs have returned to their homes, and 1,321,000 people in total since September 30, 2015 (the figures are tentative, but based on factual data).

We note with satisfaction the stabilisation of the situation in southwestern Syria after the military operation was successfully completed there in August. Life there is gradually returning to normal. The Syrian government is organising work to restore key infrastructure facilities and various humanitarian projects are still underway.

In all, about 30,000 residential buildings, over 5,000 educational and 150 medical institutions have been repaired in Syria since September 2015. We are talking about a period of several years. Importantly, all of that is happening amid the brutal fight against international terrorism being waged by the Syrians and the Syrian government with Russia's support. These are not data during peacetime, developing or restoring these buildings during a time not marred by fighting terrorism, but rather at the high point of this fight.

During the same period, Russia carried out about 2,000 humanitarian aid projects, as part of which over 3,000 tonnes of food and basic necessities were distributed. Russian military doctors provided qualified help to 93,000 Syrians.

We are making contacts with stakeholders in order to resolve the acute problem of the Rubkan camp of refugees and internally displaced persons in an area that the United States illegally and unilaterally took under its control. According to our estimates, it can be resolved by providing residents with all forms of humanitarian aid, arranging safe corridors for the people who want to leave, creating status resolution points, and continuing the practice of concluding ceasefire agreements.

During the talks between President Putin and President Erdogan in Sochi on September 17, progress was achieved on the de-escalation zone of Idlib. A memorandum on stabilising the situation in this province was signed, whereby a demilitarised zone with a depth of 15-20 km will be created along the line of contact between the opposition and the Syrian army by October 15. This buffer zone will be jointly controlled by the Russian military police and Turkish patrols.

The agreements reached between Russia and Turkey will save civilian lives. We hope that they will contribute to not only separating moderate opposition groups from terrorists in Idlib, but will also have a sobering effect on the provocateurs who are planning to use a staged chemical attack to justify another aggressive missile and bomb attack on Syria by the US-led coalition.

Unfortunately, it is too early to say this Western-backed scenario is dead. There's information about ongoing "chemical" preparations. Nusra engages in chemical weapon deliveries to allied illegal armed groups, and the chemical warfare agent sarin was delivered to the national hospital of Idlib.

The notorious White Helmets may play the lead in the planned false flag operation. According to incoming information, hundreds of members of this organisation have recently arrived in Syria and started preparations led by foreign instructors. There's evidence that women and children abducted by terrorists may become victims of staged attacks.

With their public threats to carry out a large-scale military operation against Syria, our US partners impede the process of reconciliation in this state. Instead of nudging the sensible armed opposition to a dialogue, they instill in the opposition groups an absolutely illusory feeling that they can intervene in the conflict on their side.

Encouraged by this support, the Idlib militants continue their attacks on the territories controlled by the Syrian government. For example, in August, the Russian military recorded 554 ceasefire violations by illegal armed formations, including with the use of anti-aircraft guns and mortars, which killed 29 people. There were about 350 violations since the beginning of September, which indicates that the terrorists are stepping up their efforts.

We noted the mounting scandal in connection with the evidence of assistance provided by the government of the Netherlands to Syrian anti-government groups. We are convinced that this episode must be thoroughly and objectively investigated.

It is becoming increasingly clear that the settlement process in Syria is gradually being taken over by political and diplomatic efforts. After more than seven years of war, the country lies in ruins, and the people badly need all-round support from the international community. In this regard, we again urge the West to abandon its disingenuous show of humanism and join in the efforts to provide genuine assistance to the Syrians in all matters related to rebuilding the state, including support for the returning refugees. The provision of humanitarian aid cannot be subject to political demands, as it is supposed to be an act of humanity and true solidarity.



The Dutch government finances terrorist groups in Syria

We have taken note of a scandal unfolding in the Netherlands, which was provoked by a journalist investigation that revealed facts that indicate that the Dutch government provided aid to terrorist groups in Syria. Let me remind you that this includes Jabhat al-Shamiya, recognised as a terrorist group by the Dutch Prosecutor's Office, as well as other groups that, in one way or another, are linked to Al Qaeda, one of which became notorious for using civilians as live shields and dragging teenagers into military actions. These organisations received aid through official channels in the Netherlands.

This so-called "non-lethal" aid consisted of various types of ammunition, pickup trucks and satellite phones worth a total of 25 million euros.

The most fantastic thing about it all is that when we appeal to our Western colleagues and propose, at forums and conferences, as well as in our bilateral contacts, to take part in restoring the civilian infrastructure in that country – there is no money, nor is there any enthusiasm for finding it. Twenty-five million euros! Can you imagine how many schools, hospitals, infrastructure facilities, bakeries, humanitarian aid distribution centres, the humanitarian aid itself – clothes, medicines, textbooks for school children – could be provided with this money?

The Dutch government was aware of the fact that the means it provided could be used for purposes that were far from peaceful: for example, pickup trucks can have machineguns mounted to them.

This is being investigated in the Netherlands, but the case materials that have been disclosed make it obvious that support for Syrian anti-government forces was provided in complete violation of international law and was a direct interference in the internal affairs of a sovereign state.

The Netherlands were guided in Syria by a perverse rationale under which international law can be ignored if human rights, as decided by the Dutch themselves, are grossly violated somewhere (the so-called "rejection of legal fetishism" introduced by the country's former Foreign Minister Bert Koenders). As a result, Dutch aid found its way into the hands of those for whom human rights, including the right to life, means nothing.

The Dutch authorities are evidently repeating their own mistakes. In 2010, after the conclusions of the "Davids Commission" that probed political support for military campaign in Iraq in 2003 and declared it illegal, Prime Minister Jan Balkenende was forced to resign.

We are convinced that the international community, specifically the UN Security Council and the UN Council for Human Rights, must react to these newly-revealed facts of double standards. The facts that we are witnessing now are absolutely outrageous. This is, in essence, criminal aid to terrorists by the official authorities of the Netherlands.

Russian proposals on Afghanistan voiced by Permanent Representative of Russia to the United Nations Vasily Nebenzya at the September 17 UN Security Council meeting

In view of the growing expansion of ISIS in Afghanistan and, as a result, emergence of trouble spots across the whole country, including near the borders of our Central Asian partners, we intend to make more active use of the counter-terrorism sanctions of the UN Security Council to combat ISIS in Afghanistan. In practical terms, we are collecting the evidence for applications to the UN Security Council ISIL and Al-Qaida Sanctions Committee to impose counter-terrorism sanctions against certain individuals and organisations of the Afghan branch of ISIS or those who are directly related to it. These are the Russian proposals voiced by Permanent Representative of Russia to the United Nations Vasily Nebenzya at the September 17 UN Security Council meeting.

We call on all the member-states to actively join the process and direct respective requests on imposing sanctions to the above committee.

Extending sanctions to ISIS-related entities will allow the member-states to put respective sanctions on them – a ban on international travel and weapons sales, freezing financial assets, etc.

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Update on Maria Butina, arrested in the United States

We continue efforts to free Russian citizen Maria Butina, who was detained in the United States on blatantly unsubstantiated accusations.

Employees of the Russian Embassy in Washington visited our compatriot in prison on September 13. We found out that Butina is still being segregated, which is usually something applied to dangerous criminals. US authorities agreed to improve Butina's confinement conditions, in particular, her food ration, only as a result of our efforts.

We cannot disregard certain absolutely outrageous publications in the US media which present the efforts of the Russian Foreign Ministry and our Embassy in Washington, D.C. – our diplomatic actions, official notes, consular visits, which are absolutely common in international diplomatic practice on defending the interests of citizens in such circumstances – as alleged evidence of her "connection" with the Russian authorities. We are often criticised by civic society representatives for untimely and insufficient assistance rendered by Russian diplomats. This time, we are being accused of having special relations with distressed persons who were detained or arrested. How come? Every day we receive requests and appeals for help from those who got into trouble, were detained in airports, who are facing a prison term or sanctions in the host country, asking for a lawyer, help in contacting their relatives, legal advice on legalising their documents, or, for instance, improving confinement conditions. People get into different situations related to their health and emergencies, and we are trying to help everyone.

There are, among others, outrageous cases when people get into trouble through no fault of their own or due to exceptional circumstances, but when the law and certain legal and international norms are violated with respect to them, or a situation lies completely outside the legal framework as was the case of businessman Viktor Bout, pilot Konstantin Yaroshenko, or the case unfolding with Maria Butina. You know how closely we are following the fate of these people. It is simply disgraceful to write and publish in the media allegedly factual data on the diplomatic actions by the Russian side conditioned by a special relationship with that Russian national. It classic fake news as it were.

We are deeply concerned about the obvious and cynical use of the case involving a Russian citizen in the political infighting in Washington. We demand that political prisoner Maria Butina is released.

I have one more question: when the same US media outlets publish information about prisoners in the Russian Federation, those with foreign passports, nationality or citizenship, charged and even convicted by the court in grave crimes, when the media pay special attention to them, should we also conclude that those prisoners have a special relationship with the governments of the countries whose media focuses on them? Does it also imply special relations? It's very odd logic. Especially regarding Maria Butina. Apart from, in our view, the absolutely ungrounded detention, what bewilders and outrages us – not just the Ministry but also the public – is the conditions she is being kept in. Even from the point of view of US lawyers, she did not do anything deserving confinement in those absolutely inhumane conditions. She is woken up every night to be checked nearly every 15 minutes, etc. What should a person do in this life to be mistreated like that? That's a big question.

Update on the chemical incidents in Salisbury and Amesbury

Russia has demonstrated openness and a willingness to cooperate with British investigators in establishing the real reasons behind the incidents in Salisbury and Amesbury, something that has made the UK authorities not only nervous but also toxically sarcastic. Instead of conducting a professional, businesslike and calm discussion of the essence of the matter, British officials have recently been making increasingly strange statements with an obviously aggressive tinge. That said, let me emphasise again, Russia has not been given any official information on the Skripal case, which should make at least something clear.

We have repeatedly noted numerous inconsistencies and overt divergences in the so-called "evidence" that London presents to the public. We have never received responses to our questions. These are attempts to conceal the truth and compel Moscow to make excuses and, on top of all of that, to pressure their allies into introducing new anti-Russia sanctions.

I'd like to repeat again that the Russian Federation has had nothing to do with the incident in Salisbury and is not involved in it in any way. We resolutely reject any British insinuation on the Skripal case. From the very start, Russia has been open to cooperation with London on investigating the Salisbury incident and not because Britain started accusing Russia in abusive terms but because Russian citizens are involved in it.

As before, Russian law enforcement agencies are ready for practical and responsible cooperation with their British colleagues, in part, in the criminal case launched by the Russian Investigative Committee on March 16 of this year in connection with the attempted premeditated murder of Russian citizen Yulia Skripal and the inquiries into legal aid, which were sent to the British authorities.

In addition, the issue of the location and condition of our compatriots must be cleared up. For over six months they have been detained by force by the British authorities.

Our consular representatives in the UK have been denied meetings and contact with the Skripals up to this day. I'd like to emphasise, once again, that their relatives have not been allowed to meet with them even though they are in the UK (as we have been told in London). Moreover, Viktoriya Skripal was even denied a British visa that she required to at least indirectly communicate with the people who, as we understand it, deal with the Skripals. These include representatives of British secret services. We will continue to insist on meetings with these Russian citizens and on obtaining case materials.

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Navigation in the Sea of Azov

Recently, our Western partners have become concerned about the situation in the Sea of Azov. Items in many publications, including statements by US experts and officials, have appeared on the issues of the Sea of Azov.

We consider it necessary to express our view on the situation since the lawful actions of the Russian border guards are presented as Russia ignoring international norms and its ostensibly continued attempts to destabilise the situation in Ukraine.

The international legal status of the Sea of Azov and the Kerch Strait is determined by bilateral international treaties, in part, the Treaty between the Russian Federation and Ukraine on the Russia-Ukraine State Border of January 28, 2003 and the Treaty between the Russian Federation and Ukraine on Cooperation in Using the Sea of Azov and the Kerch Strait of December 24, 2003. These documents confirm that "the Sea of Azov and the Kerch Strait are historically the internal waters of the Russian Federation and Ukraine."

Russia's actions on inspecting ships are exclusively aimed to ensure security in the Sea of Azov and the Kerch Strait. They do not conflict with any standards of international law that are applicable to this sea. Russia's right to take these actions is explicitly reaffirmed by the practice of other states that are implementing their sovereign rights with respect to their internal water bodies.

No doubt, everyone knows of statements by representatives of the so-called Mejlis of the Crimean Tatar People, which is considered an extremist organisation in the Russian Federation, about the need to block navigation in the Kerch Strait. Moreover, I think all of you have seen in practice what the current Kiev authorities and Ukrainian radicals are capable of. You may recall the suspension of water distribution from the Dnieper through the North-Crimea Channel, suspension of railway traffic with Crimea via Ukraine, and the food blockade of the peninsula. The world and international law will not forget the detonation of power transmission lines connecting Ukraine's Kherson Region with the Republic of Crimea. Now that the automobile section of the Kerch Bridge has opened, Ukrainian radicals are calling to blow it up. Nobody is even making an effort to conceal this. These facts are taken not from intelligence data but from media publications and statements. It is the actions of Kiev and the radicals whom it inspires but does not control, that are compelling Russia to toughen security measures in the sea.

Importantly, the freedom of navigation in the Sea of Azov and the Kerch Strait is being upheld. So far, neither ship owners nor ship captains have complained about the actions of the Russian border guards. The Ukrainian authorities also recognise the right to inspect ships.

And one more point. In conditions where Ukraine allows itself to take absolutely illegal and provocative measures as regards Russian ships and crews (we are referring to the capture of the Nord fishing vessel and the unlawful detention of the tanker Mechanic Pogodin in the port of Kherson, etc), Russia will continue to take the necessary steps to ensure security in the Sea of Azov and the Kerch Strait.

Lvov authorities ban public use of "Russian-language cultural products"

On September 18, in yet another Russophobic fit, the Lvov Regional Council declared a "moratorium on the public use of Russian-language cultural products in any form on the territory of the Lvov Region." How will their politicians communicate with one another? They don't speak Ukrainian or any other language. They have spoken Russian and thought in this language all their lives. How will they be able to visit Lvov now? What will they do there? All this was unambiguously timed to coincide with Ukrainian President Petr Poroshenko's working trip to Lvov (it appears that they had no other gifts in store.) It seems today this region's authorities intend to promote this absolutely unconstitutional initiative in the Verkhovna Rada. As we understand, they want to spread this initiative all over Ukraine.

I believe that there is no need for any additional assessments in this case. All we have to do is call on international organisations concerned to duly respond to these actions of Ukrainian authorities. We believe that they have violated universally accepted principles of democracy and human rights, the Ukrainian constitution and international treaties. We regret the fact that on top of everything else, officials in Ukraine are waging a war on the Russian language. This is a war against their own people, and no one cares about the law, conscience and common sense. And I am not even talking about international conventions.



Statements by Organisation of American States Secretary General regarding a possible armed invasion of Venezuela

The media are publishing reports about a possible foreign invasion of Venezuela, citing US and Organisation of American States representatives. These media reports are not the only sources of information.

First, US Ambassador to the Organisation of American States Carlos Trujillo started openly initiating a discussion of this issue in the media. It appears that he aimed to inspire the Latin Americans to intervene in Venezuela. Later, The New York Times wrote about contacts between the Trump administration and Venezuela's military, who are reportedly discontent with the current situation in the country. After that, Organisation of American States Secretary General Luis Almagro said openly that he did not rule out any scenario, and not only political, for resolving the situation in Venezuela.

We would like to note that a number of Latin American and Caribbean states resolutely reject such relations and are trying to distance themselves from them in every way. This is absolutely understandable because the Big Stick policy was conceived precisely in relations between the United States and its southern neighbours, and Latin America knows this well. In response, Latin American countries formulated foreign policy approaches that were reflected in the January 2014 declaration on proclaiming the continent a peace zone, passed at the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) summit in Havana. For example, the document calls on signatory states not to interfere, directly or indirectly, in the domestic affairs of other countries and to respect the inalienable right of every state to choose its own political, economic, social and cultural system.

We can see that Washington is now trying to lift a political taboo in Latin America as regards the very possibility of a new regional military operation. For this purpose, the United States actively exploits the immigration and temporarily displaced persons issue, which is sensitive for Latin American and Caribbean countries. But I would like to note that only part of them come from Venezuela.

We are convinced that the controlled chaos policy, now being imposed on Latin America by the United States, is absolutely deleterious. As practice shows, the consequences of such an approach are fraught with dangerous developments. All this has nothing to do with addressing socioeconomic issues facing Venezuelan leaders and, of course, the people of that state.

Toughening censorship on Facebook

Facebook continues to toughen censorship. We have already addressed this issue several times. Judging from reports, under the pretext of fighting 'fake news' and in addition to the existing rules for

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checking text messages and political advertising for credibility, Facebook now plans to verify users' personal data, audio and video content. Essentially, any information, not only on Facebook but on its affiliated mobile apps, Instagram and WhatsApp, can be blocked or deleted by the security staff who, as we understand, will double this year and reach 20,000 people.

Therefore, we are witnessing how Mark Zuckerberg's brainchild that was presented and declared to be a tool for free communication and content exchange (moreover, it initially proved to be one) is morphing into a manipulation tool of the US security services used to clean up the information space from the content the official Washington disapproves of and the reports about contacts and pressure that Facebook has been recently subjected to by the US authorities.

We can see all these steps that are seriously undermining the democratic values and the freedom of speech, the freedom in general; the steps that the United States asserts to be a necessary measure, allegedly against interference in the US election. Mark Zuckerberg himself claims that he is acting out of the best of motives.

In this context, I would like to share a curious fact that, I think, will be a big revelation for the digital media and the social media environment. There is a research organisation started by the Atlantic Council called Digital Forensic Research Lab (DFRLab) that analyses social media perception of presidential election campaigns in real time and exposes any signs of targeted influence on internet users such as 'fake news,' bots and 'viral campaigns' by candidates' campaign offices and external actors. Ahead of the general elections in Brazil on October 7, this organisation has intensified its activity. The information obtained by DFRLab is released in small doses via the Atlantic Council media resources (its website, another popular website and various partner media), the respective decision being made upon agreement with the US Department of State. It is also a fact that earlier the organisation participated in projects to monitor and expose influence on the protest activity in Russia.

Now, I have a question for you. Who do you think is providing technical assistance to DFRLab and is the main sponsor of this organisation? As we understand, it is Facebook that signed a partnership agreement with the Atlantic Council last May, allegedly "to make a positive impact on the election around the world." Guys, what are you talking about? This is just manipulation and deception of the public, which believes in the so-called new media and the freedom of distributing information and in the idea that, by publishing this information on their pages, by embedding their personal data into the structure and system of social media they remain free citizens. And through globalisation, the world is becoming a common space for disseminating information. People believed in it without question. And now that millions of people have become members of this social environment, when they have shown their trust in it, they are being used in this way.

Therefore, the so-called fighters for free democratic elections and clean information space are in fact interfering with the affairs of other states and disseminating unreliable information. Their unsubstantiated accusations against other countries, including Russia, of the above said activity serve only as a disguise for their own actions of a similar kind.

We would really like to hear from Facebook and relevant international bodies and NGOs involved in human rights protection. We are ready to give answers as well but since we have this information and since we are constantly hearing accusations against Russia, specifically, let's be honest and begin with investigating the 'judges' themselves.

Threats against US broadcaster Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty journalists

The Foreign Ministry took note of reports that emerged in the public space alleging that journalists from US radio broadcaster Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty based in Russia were threatened in some way. The press release following the recent meeting between Agency for Global Media CEO John Lansing and US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo mentions, among other things, the continuing targeting of journalists from Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty and other free media by Russia, as well as threats against its journalists. This was an official statement that is currently available online as a formal press release.

In this regard, we would like to note that according to the available information, none of Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty journalists accredited with the Russian Foreign Ministry have reported any threats of persecution to the law enforcement agencies. Being the people in charge of issuing accreditation and assisting foreign reporters in Russia, the Foreign Ministry's Information and Press Department has not received any complaints from these journalists, while remaining in touch with Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty Moscow Bureau at all times.

Moreover, we asked the agency to clarify what they were referring to specifically. We always seek to maintain partner-like relations, and for this reason we never issue any public statements without additional checks. We asked the agency directly but there was no response. They were unable to tell us what their headquarters meant when they voiced their misgivings over the situation with Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty journalists in Moscow. One can only guess where these groundless accusations by the agency came from. It may well be that this is just another example of fake news, who knows.

Allow me to remind you that the Agency for Global Media, formerly known as the Broadcasting Board of Governors, is de facto one of the core propaganda institutions of the US. The agency is fully funded from the US budget. Its mission consists of coordinating a number of broadcasters, including Voice of America and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, who target Russian audiences.

It seems that statements on these alleged threats and persecution is just another attempt to justify generous allocations to the agency. When you have no evidence, just make it up. We stand ready to review any information related to this case. We requested clarification, but they did not respond.

Curiously, these anti-Russia fakes by the Agency for Global Media coincided with the European Court of Human Rights standing up for a journalist from the Ukrainian service of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. According to a recent ruling, ECHR ordered that Ukrainian authorities refrain from accessing data from the smartphone of Natalya Sedletska, editor-in-chief of the programme Schemes. It seems that this move was intended to protect her sources in an anti-corruption investigation by the reporter and herself from possible persecution. It turns out that the Agency is quite selective when it comes to the security of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty employees, and speaks out only when it sees a benefit. That said, it is still unclear why they did not mention the situation in Ukraine.

The Foreign Ministry reiterates that the safety of both Russian and foreign journalists has always been a matter of special concern for us. We do our utmost to enable them to fulfil their professional duties freely and unhindered. We maintain contacts with reports accredited with the Foreign Ministry on an ongoing basis, and are ready to provide any assistance they may need in any situation.

Third Radio without Borders international festival

On September 26-28, the Russian Academy of Radio will hold the third International Festival, Radio without Borders, in Nizhny Novgorod. The event will be supported by the Federal Agency for Press and Mass Media, Rossotrudnichestvo and the Foreign Ministry Information and Press Department. The Government of the Nizhny Novgorod Region will provide assistance in organising the festival.

The idea of the festival was proposed by professionals who work out the content of radio stations. This creative event is aimed at sharing experience and discussing important current professional issues by representatives of leading radio companies in Russia, the CIS and other countries.

The festival will feature presentations of the most successful radio projects, roundtables and workshops.

The event will be held at the Sheraton Nizhny Novgorod Kremlin Hotel. For accreditation and information partnership, please contact Yana Melnikova at +7-915-087-94-62, +7-495-953-40-86 or by email: pr@radioacademy.ru.

Aftermath of hurricane Florence in the United States

The Russian Embassy in Washington posted a warning for Russian citizens about the impending emergency on its website and on social networks.

According to the Russian missions in the United States, there are no Russian nationals among the victims, although the scale of the disaster is huge, and there are many victims. Our diplomats and consular representatives are in constant contact with the US authorities on this issue and are ready to provide any possible assistance to our compatriots if necessary.

Russian citizens allegedly abandoned in Ukraine

At the previous briefing, I was asked a question as to whether Russia allegedly abandoned Russian citizens detained and convicted in Ukraine. They wrote a letter addressed to the President of Russia requesting their exchange for citizens of Ukraine who are being held in Russian penitentiary institutions. In a word, it sounded like the Ukrainian journalist was very concerned about the fate of Russian citizens.

We realise that this letter was most likely written at the initiative of Verkhovna Rada Commissioner for Human Rights Lyudmila Denisova. The Foreign Ministry received it with a note from the Ukrainian Embassy in Moscow on September 12, 2018 (in all, 21 appeals were enclosed). They were recently forwarded to the Presidential Executive Office and Russian Human Rights Commissioner Tatyana Moskalkova, who, as agreed between the presidents of Russia and Ukraine, was instructed, together with her Ukrainian counterpart, to deal with the issue of Russian citizens detained in Ukraine and Ukrainian citizens detained in Russia.

As for the problem per se, I would like to remind you that the Ukrainian side is holding more than the 21 people who wrote the appeals, many more. All of them are known to the Russian side, and our diplomats from the Embassy and consulates general in Ukraine maintain regular contacts with the detained persons and with their lawyers and relatives, continue to make every possible effort to release them, and to protect their rights and interests.

Russian Human Rights Commissioner Tatyana Moskalkova is certainly working on the problem, trying to establish a constructive dialogue with her Ukrainian counterpart.

END

Answers to media questions:

Question: Will Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov attend the CIS summit in Dushanbe? Specifically, will he take part in the ministerial segment?

Maria Zakharova: I spoke about the Minister's schedule during the briefing. This event is not on the list. Let me check this information, but as far as I know the Foreign Ministry will be represented at the level of Deputy Minister.

Question: You have mentioned Afghanistan. It has been reported that representatives of the Taliban movement agreed to attend the Moscow meeting on Afghanistan. What do you expect from them? What will be different about interacting with them in this format compared to the previous attempts to bring the Taliban to the negotiation table, including by the US?

Maria Zakharova: I don't think that trying to figure out how one format differs from another is what we need to be doing. What we need is to focus on ensuring that all these efforts are effective. Everything taking place at the so-called Moscow platform and everything that is planned for the future is designed to bring about concrete results instead of "getting ahead" or "outperforming" our partners.

This is not a political game for Russia. We are seeking to make a real contribution to resolving a very complex situation in Afghanistan, and in doing so we are guided by our own understanding of the situation in the region, among other things. This is an utmost priority for us, and we view Afghanistan as not just another spot on the world map that requires us to become involved. Unfortunately, the developments in Afghanistan, Russia's close neighbour, create additional tensions in the region. As a country, we are dealing with this problem in multilateral formats, for example within the SCO. For Russia, this is a matter of being pragmatic and implementing our national security strategy.

Question: You have mentioned that Sergey Lavrov will have numerous meetings on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly. Has the meeting with US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo been confirmed?

Maria Zakharova: There are many meetings that are under consideration, and the schedule has yet to be finalised. I know that there will be a series of bilateral talks. However there is still some time left before the visit, and many meetings are organised when the delegation is already there. The General Assembly and especially its political segment are like a living organism where meetings can be confirmed, rescheduled, delayed and reformatted on the go.

Question: There was much talk at the Eurasian Women's Forum about the women's agenda on entrepreneurship and economics, including in the digital economy. How does this agenda look in international terms?

Maria Zakharova: You will have a chance to learn about this tomorrow at a special session on today's reality, which will focus on the theme of women and diplomacy, highlighting how women view international matters. There will be a number of interesting speakers, both Russian and foreign, who have first-hand experience of what it means to be a woman in the foreign policy sphere. The participants will discuss theory and practice, as well as personal stories of achievement and success. I invite you to attend this session.

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