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Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's meeting with CIS Executive Secretary Sergey Lebedev

On April 8, ahead of the regular meeting of the CIS Council of Foreign Ministers, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov will meet with Chairman of the Executive Committee and Executive Secretary of the Commonwealth of Independent States Sergey Lebedev.

The conversation is expected to focus on issues related to interaction between the CIS Executive Committee and Russia in preparing and holding meetings of top CIS statutory bodies.

The officials will also address the joint, coordinated efforts of the CIS Executive Committee and CIS member states in enhancing the effectiveness and optimising the activity of the organisation's executive and sectoral structures, factoring in present-day realities.

Mr Lavrov will have a number of bilateral meetings with his counterparts, the foreign ministers of the organisation's member countries, on the sidelines of the CIS Council of Foreign Ministers meeting in Moscow.

Swiss Foreign Minister Didier Burkhalter's working visit to Russia

On April 11, Didier Burkhalter, chief of the Swiss Federal Department (Ministry) of Foreign Affairs, will make a working visit to Russia on the invitation of the Russian Foreign Minister.

The talks will focus on a broad range of bilateral issues and will review past and upcoming meetings within the framework of the Russian-Swiss political dialogue. The foreign ministers will address a range of issues related to the implementation of the Swiss mandate to represent Russia's interests in Georgia and Georgia's interests in Russia.

There will be an exchange of opinions on current international issues, including the situation in Syria and Ukraine and the fight against international terrorism. Interaction within the OSCE in the context of European security issues will also be touched upon.

Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's talks with Bolivian Foreign Minister David Choquehuanca

Next week, we will host a number of high-ranking guests from Latin American countries.

On April 12, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov will hold talks with Bolivian Foreign Minister David Choquehuanca as part of Mr Choquehuanca's visit to Russia.

Russia and Bolivia are linked by decades of productive collaboration (April 18 is the 71st anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between the countries). We work closely together at the UN and other international forums, advancing Russia's political dialogue with Latin America's integration associations, above all, CELAC, MERCOSUR and ALBA. The signing of a joint statement on the no-first placement of weapons in outer space will be tangible evidence of this coordination.

The ministers will analyse the progress of joint efforts to develop practical cooperation, which received a significant impetus from the meeting of the two countries' presidents, Vladimir Putin and Evo Morales, at the Gas Exporting Countries Forum in Tehran on November 23, 2015 (the GECF's next summit will take place in Bolivia). During the past six months, a package of documents on cooperation in the fuel and energy sphere were signed with Gazprom, as were intergovernmental agreements on cooperation in the peaceful uses of atomic energy and building a nuclear research centre, based on Russian technology, with the Rosatom State Corporation.

In the interest of coordinating further efforts, the ministers will adopt a plan of action to develop cooperation between Russia and Bolivia.

Another important event is due to take place: the signing of an intergovernmental agreement on visa-free trips for citizens. When it is signed, virtually all of South America will become a visa-free zone for Russian nationals.

Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's talks with Argentina's Minister of Foreign Affairs and Worship Susana Malcorra

On April 13, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov will hold talks with Argentine Minister of Foreign Affairs and Worship Susana Malcorra.

We attach particular importance to this visit factoring in the new administration coming to power in Buenos Aires. We would like to note that soon after the elections, the two presidents, Vladimir Putin and Mauricio Macri, had a telephone conversation, during which they agreed to kick start Russian-Argentine relations in the spirit of comprehensive strategic partnership. The understanding reached will be reflected in a joint ministerial statement, initiated by the Argentine party.

Argentina is one of our key partners in Latin America. We closely collaborate with this country not only bilaterally, but also within international organisations, including the UN, the G20, and other international forums, advancing political dialogue between Russia and Latin America's integration associations, above all, CELAC and MERCOSUR. We intend to strengthen this cooperation.

At the same time, we believe it is important to ensure the progressive development of economic and investment cooperation. Argentina is our fourth largest trade partner in the region. Minister Malcorra will be accompanied by the Federal Minister of Agroindustry, the Neuquén Province Governor and other high-ranking officials, including those responsible for the implementation of an ambitious joint investment project: the construction of the Chihuido hydropower plant in Argentina. We consider this fact as a manifestation of the Argentine government's intention to expand practical it h Russia.

Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's official visit to Mongolia

I have good news for our colleagues from Asian media outlets. Today is your day.

Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov plans to arrive in Mongolia on an official visit on April 14. The visit programme is being finalised. It includes talks between the two countries' foreign ministers, discussion of the status of and prospects for advancing bilateral relations, current regional and global issues and key areas of cooperation in major international formats.

Once again, the visit programme is being finalised and we will inform you about it in detail when it is completed. In addition to the planned meetings and the busy schedule, the foreign ministers are expected to approve the medium-term programme of strategic partnership between our countries. This joint document, covering cooperation in the political, trade, economic, cultural and international areas, has been worked out with the involvement of relevant federal executive agencies and companies, in accordance with the agreement reached at the highest level during President Vladimir Putin's visit to Ulan Bator in September 2014. Successful implementation of the programme will give Russian-Mongolian cooperation new stature and additional dynamics.

Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's visit to Japan

Talks between Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and his Japanese counterpart Fumio Kishida are scheduled to take place in Tokyo on April 15. They will have a comprehensive discussion of topical bilateral and international issues. One of the ministerial meeting's goals will be to prepare for Russian-Japanese contacts at the top level, on which the two countries' leaders agreed earlier.

I'd like to note that a bit later we'll give you more details on this visit, which is now in the design stage.

Meeting of Russian, Indian and Chinese foreign ministers

On April 18, Moscow will host the 14th foreign minister meeting in the RIC format (Russia, India and China).

The ministers plan to discuss in detail current developments in the world, primarily in the Middle East and North Africa, Afghanistan and Ukraine. They will also review issues of countering international terrorism through concerted efforts and ways to further coordinate practical steps on key international venues, first and foremost, the United Nations, BRICS, SCO and G20.

The agreed-upon positions of the sides on global and regional issues will be reflected in the joint communique.

Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov to meet Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi

The Russian and Chinese foreign ministers will meet on the sidelines of the RIC forum in Moscow on April 18. At the meeting, they will discuss international, regional and bilateral issues.

Chairperson of the African Union Commission Nkosazana Clarice Dlamini-Zuma to visit Russia

On April 19-21, Chairperson of the African Union Commission Nkosazana Clarice Dlamini-Zuma will pay a working visit to Moscow.

Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov will hold talks with his colleague on April 20. They plan to discuss topical issues of interaction between Russia and the African Union and map out specific steps to further develop cooperation in the context of the memorandum on mutual understanding between the Russian Foreign Ministry and the AU Commission on holding political consultations, signed in 2014. They will also review the main international and African issues and developments in the Middle East, including the struggle against international terrorism, which is a priority for Africa.

Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's official visit to Armenia

Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov plans to visit Yerevan on April 21-22.

He will discuss with Armenian leaders urgent bilateral, regional and international issues and exchange opinions on Eurasian topics.

Special attention will be paid to urgent measures on stabilisation in the conflict area in connection with the recent developments around Nagorny Karabakh.

Developments in Nagorny Karabakh

Switching from the minister's schedule to regional and international issues, I'd like to start with the Nagorny Karabakh settlement and the developments in the region.

I'd like to recall that Mr Lavrov will depart for Baku today, literally in the next few hours. We informed you about this earlier. Considering recent developments, this scheduled trip is becoming particularly topical.

As you know, the Russian leaders are doing a great deal for normalisation in the conflict area. President Vladimir Putin and Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev spoke over the phone with the leaders of Azerbaijan and Armenia. Mr Medvedev will visit Yerevan and Baku in the next few days.

To repeat, Mr Lavrov departs for Baku to take part in a trilateral meeting (Russia, Azerbaijan and Iran). He will meet with his Azerbaijani counterpart Elmar Mammadyarov in the bilateral format. Mr Lavrov also plans to meet his Armenian counterpart Edward Nalbandian on the sidelines of the CIS Council of Foreign Ministers in Moscow on April 8 as part of the efforts to normalise the situation and restore peace in the region.

We hope that Russia's intensive efforts will facilitate the durable restoration of the ceasefire and the resumption of talks on a peaceful settlement of the conflict.

Situation in Syria

Russia notes with satisfaction that the ceasefire regime introduced in accordance with the Joint Statement of the United States and Russia as co-chairs of the International Syria Support Group of February 22 is observed, by and large. In many cities and communities across Syria, the Government and the opposition were able to agree on a truce, which has had a positive effect in terms of reducing violence in the country in general, as well as providing humanitarian access to those who need it and making it as easy as possible.

Against this backdrop, the Syrian army, backed by the Aerospace Forces of Russia, continues its uncompromising struggle against ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra terrorists. The liberation of Palmyra on March 27 was an obvious success. Russian combat engineers are already clearing the territory of mines, and have already removed 1,500 explosive devices. Building on this achievement, terrorists were dislodged from Al-Qaryatayn on April 3. Its population is mostly Christian, and the city has strategic significance and was an important stronghold for the terrorists. With this victory, the Syrian army can continue its offensive against Raqqa, which is viewed as the capital of ISIS in Syria, as well as the Deir ez-Zor Governorate.

In this situation, the terrorists are trying to reverse the momentum at any cost. Reports on ISIS fighters firing rockets with mustard gas at the Deir ez-Zor airport are a matter of grave concern. We strongly believe that actions of this kind by the terrorists should be fiercely condemned.

Statement by US State Department spokesperson Mark Toner

We have taken note of the statement by the US State Department during a press briefing by my colleague Mark Toner. Answering a question on the position of Russia and the United States regarding the fate of Syria's President Bashar al-Assad, he said, among other things, that both countries agree in a sense that the future of the country's leadership and government should be determined in a political process that would reflect the aspirations and will of the Syrian people.

The Foreign Ministry welcomes this statement and believes that its actual purpose is to ensure the constructive advancement of the political process towards an inclusive peaceful settlement in Syria.

Russia's draft statement to the press by the UN Security Council

Unfortunately, the overall situation doesn't inspire as much optimism as this statement.

You are all probably aware of what happened with the draft statement to the press by the UN Security Council, which was circulated by Russia, emphasising the need to ensure that the Syria talks are inclusive. Russia submitted this draft to the UN Security Council on March 31.

The main purpose of this document was to invite all opposition forces to join the talks, including representatives of the Kurds, who are among the key constituencies of Syrian society. Despite Russia's willingness to compromise on this issue, the Western members of the UN Security Council, France, Great

Britain and the United States, with Ukraine in their bandwagon, literally blocked this draft by proposing amendments that diluted the very gist of the statement and erroneously labelled the last round of talks inclusive, which was not the case. Taking this position cannot but cause regret, especially as it runs counter to the decision of the International Syria Support Group and [Error! Hyperlink reference not valid.](#) This push-back is even harder to understand, especially since it came from our Western colleagues (France, Great Britain and the United States). It is obvious that the reason for doing so was probably, among other things, in order to please or under the pressure exerted by regional players, who still prioritise their ambitions instead of striving to ensure real progress in the Syrian settlement. The Foreign Ministry continues to insist on enabling Kurds to take part in the talks, above all the Democratic Union Party. The next round of intra-Syrian talks will be very important, taking into account the gist of the issues that should be discussed by Syrians.

Escalation of violence in southeastern Turkey

Violence continues unabated in Turkey's southeastern Kurdish communities, which remains a matter of concern. Official reports say that the ongoing counter-terrorist operation the Turkish government has been carrying out since July 2015 resulted in 285 civilian deaths, and the real number could be much higher. For almost one month, the city of Nusaybin in the Mardin Province has been under a de-facto siege. Artillery is used in the operations against PKK supporters. In this context, the city is facing a dire humanitarian crisis comparable to that in the "liberated" town of Cizre in the Shirnak Province, which took so much suffering and where most residential buildings are in a state beyond repair. The Foreign Ministry again urges Ankara to renounce attempts to resolve the long-standing Kurdish issue by force, which leads nowhere but to a dead-end.

Alparslan Celik's detention in Turkey

The Foreign Ministry closely follows developments related to the arrest of Alparslan Celik in Turkey. We have been receiving numerous questions from the media on this issue. It is for that reason that we decided to elaborate on this matter today. Alparslan Celik is suspected of being directly involved in the killing of Oleg Peshkov, the pilot of the jet downed by the Turkish Air Force over Syrian territory on November 24, 2015.

Officially, his arrest resulted from an accusation of illicit arms possession. The Turkish authorities did not comment in any way whatsoever on the fact that this extremist had said in public that he was involved in the killing of the Russian pilot. Moreover, according to media reports, Alparslan Celik refuted these statements during interrogation.

The way Turkish law enforcement agencies and the judiciary will respond to this development in the course of the proceedings against this fighter, who doesn't deny being a member of the radical nationalist Grey Wolves organisation, will be crucial to how Russia's views future steps by the Turkish authorities. The relevant agencies in Russia are now exploring opportunities to bring criminal charges against Alparslan Celik for involvement in the murder of the Russian pilot.

Developments in Libya

The developments in Libya remain complicated. Security continues to degrade due to the absence of unified government bodies, the army and law enforcement. Terrorists groups, including ISIS, are actively trying to expand the zone of their influence and establish control over oil facilities on the Libyan coast. In this context, the arrival in Tripoli of the Presidential Council headed by Prime Minister Fayez al-Sarraj

on March 30 is a major landmark in implementing the political agreement on the parameters of national reconciliation signed in Skhirat, Morocco last December. Let me recall that we welcomed its signing and the adoption of UN Security Council Resolution 2259, which fixed the Skhirat agreements as a key element of the settlement.

We believe that today Mr Sarradj should concentrate on creating conditions for the normal functioning of the new government in the Libyan capital. A vote of confidence from the country's legitimate parliament – the House of Deputies in Tobruk, as is envisaged by the aforementioned agreement – is of decisive significance in this respect. The observance of this procedure will make it possible to develop productive cooperation between the cabinet of ministers and the parliament in resolving urgent domestic problems, including the struggle against the terrorist threat. Attempts to force Libyan politicians into mutual peace and accord with various restrictions and punishments are counterproductive.

Russian idea of a convention on countering chemical terrorism

On March 1, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov presented a new Russian initiative at the Conference on Disarmament (CD) in Geneva on countering terrorism and the use of weapons of mass destruction by terrorists. Participants in the forum were requested to start talks on drafting an international convention on combating acts of chemical terrorism. The idea is to supplement the available counterterrorist instruments of the world community with a new document that would be at the juncture of disarmament, non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and anti-terrorist efforts. We suggest drafting it at the Conference on Disarmament, where the convention on a chemical weapons ban was agreed upon in the past.

During the past month, we have carried out large-scale diplomatic work on explaining the Russian initiative, both to the delegations of the countries represented at the Conference on Disarmament and in their capitals. The initial response reflected their interest.

The responses received at the initial stage allowed us to prepare a draft of the elements of the future convention and an explanatory note to it that contains remarks and proposals by representatives of different states. These documents were officially submitted to the CD on March 29.

The main point, which I would like to draw your attention to, is the proposal made by a number of countries, including China and Italy, which we supported, to expand the convention to include the acts of biological terrorism. So now we are talking about the international convention on countering acts of chemical and biological terrorism. The expansion of this initiative has increased its "added value" and made even more justified its link to the CD, where this issue was first discussed more than 40 years ago. Today Russia has focused on promoting this initiative. We are using our bilateral and multilateral contacts for this purpose. We will continue consultations with all interested countries. Importantly, we are addressing our appeal to start talks on this convention not only to the 65 participants of the Conference on Disarmament, but in fact to all countries that are ready to closely cooperate in elaborating a truly effective document on combating terrorism and the use of weapons of mass destruction by terrorists. The conference's procedures allow this via the mechanism of observers. In addition, in working on the provisions of the convention, we are planning to rely on the expert experience of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, the member-states of the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention and UN anti-terrorist agencies.

As for potential evolution in the response of states, it is too early to make any specific assessments. We can get a more or less accurate picture only when the Conference on Disarmament resumes its session on May 16, that it, after its participants analyse the documents presented by Russia. In turn, we'll use this time to work on the elements of the convention, factoring in its expansion.

As for the US response, notably, the reaction of Assistant Secretary of State Thomas Countryman, I'd like to note that we have been discussing our initiative in the bilateral format since the start of the preparations for presenting it to the CD. For the time being the US side is voicing some difficult-to-understand doubts about the advisability of elaborating the convention at the CD, and the opinion that it is better to address issues of countering chemical and biological terrorism through adopting a new UN Security Council resolution to this effect. To be honest, neither suggestion is very convincing.

We'd like to hope that after further analysing our proposals, the United States will deem it possible to support them. Among other things, this will open the way to unblocking negotiations at the Conference on Disarmament, which would be in the interests of all its participants, including Washington.

British Parliament's report on 'Russia's information warfare'

We have carefully reviewed this material, which was made public by the British Parliament on March 28. It contains certain conclusions by "independent experts." This latest analytical essay is called, "Russia's information warfare – airbrushing reality." This report is presented as part of a parliamentary probe that began in the parliamentary Defence Committee on January 11, subject: "Russia: implications for UK defence and security."

We have analysed the document, which incoherently describes the "coordinated but undeclared information campaign against the United Kingdom," the results of which, in the authors' own admission, are difficult to assess. It is difficult to assess but easy to publish. We have not found anything fundamentally new in this material. The only novelty is that for the first time in many years Russia stands accused of direct interference in the UK's internal affairs, such as its possible withdrawal from the EU and the modernisation of Trident nuclear systems. Otherwise, it is a familiar stock of information and propaganda clichés regarding the insidiousness of the Russian media that purportedly mislead the British audience, as well as Russia's global plan designed to weaken the UK, the EU and the Western world as a whole.

The authors seek to dodge facts as unnecessary impediments. For example, the Sputnik radio network, which allegedly encourages the Scots to break away from the UK, has not gone on the air yet (presumably, this is a trifle). In addition, interviews with MPs from not the largest of British parties on RT TV network programmes are due solely to the fact that representatives of the Conservative and Labour parties were instructed by their bosses a long time ago to have no contact with this Russian media outlet. Surely, if representatives of major parties are unavailable, journalists have to get information from somewhere. They get in touch with parties that are willing to do so, provide information and present their point of view. This is interesting: They don't want to state their position on the network (in fact, there is a tacit guideline to that effect), but they watch and closely follow what is going on and are even jealous. We understand that this pseudo-analysis, as well as many other similar materials, is aimed at scaring the British public with a mythical Russian threat. The motives are understandable: to get additional budget appropriations for military needs, as well as to counter "dangerous propaganda."

This story has become a good business.

First they intimidate people by planting stories and preparing presentations intended to scare, and then they allocate budget money for new defence projects and various countermeasures in order to oppose this Russian "threat". This is large-scale profiteering. All of this is used to justify the significant spending of taxpayer money, while taxpayers are urged to treat this with understanding, tighten their belts and face social spending cuts. Meanwhile, the same phrase, that this is done because of the Russian "threat," is constantly repeated. This is an old trick. We have seen it used before. Cold war arsenals are taken out from the mothballs. Unfortunately, it seems that Britain is still nostalgic for those days.

Strengthening NATO's eastern flank

Last week, during his visit to Minsk, Pentagon representative Michael Carpenter stated that the deployment of a Russian military base in Belarus will be regarded by the United States and NATO as a threat to regional stability. At the same time, in his opinion, there are no threats to Belarus either from the East or from the West, including from NATO, while the strengthening of the alliance in countries neighbouring the republic is of an exclusively defensive nature. This logic is stunning: When NATO is strengthened, this is for defensive purposes, but when somebody else does the same, this is outright aggression. This is not a child's essay. It was stated by an official representative of a major governmental body. This logic is simply striking. On the one hand, Mr Carpenter admits that the creation of new military bases leads to tension and even destabilisation in the region, but on the other hand, [he alleges] that NATO's enhanced activity and new bases emerging in Eastern Europe are something totally different and only necessary for defence.

I always ask everyone to be objective. To be objective in this case it is necessary simply to use any search engine and find a map with the location of NATO bases, and everything becomes clear. The alliance is present in practically all regions and corners of the world, while the employment of its forces has led, and continues to lead, to deplorable consequences, and this is evidenced by a large number of examples. One NATO general also recently dwelled on the value of the alliance's additional military presence in Europe in the form of rotating motorised brigades, stating that its strong side is its ability to generate and deploy military assets to stabilise the situation in any region. Naturally, we would be interested to know exactly where "stabilisation" was achieved through the efforts of NATO forces. If they speak officially about this, we would like to see at least a couple of concrete examples. Maybe this concerns some covert operations? Don't be shy, tell us.

We keep being told all the time that the strengthening of the "eastern flank" is a purely defensive measure that does not provoke anyone. I have cited statements by representatives of the alliance, the United States and the UK. How can such statements be taken seriously? Who can react to such statements? I will tell you. As in the case of the UK, where reports on the Russian "threat" are compiled, there are "clients" for such statements: the public, which is gradually conditioned and spooked by the prospect of Russian aggression and sometimes even Russian occupation. The scheme the alliance uses is prosaic and its methods have remained the same. First, there is intimidation and then NATO structures appear as "saviors" who declare goals of "noble democratisation". What happens in fact is that one country or another is occupied. When new military contingents are deployed in a peaceful country without any real threat whatsoever there is no other way to describe this. Somehow it so happens that the government, the authorities and the political establishment begin to take decisions that are at odds with the interests of these countries, but for some reason coincide with the interests of NATO's leading member states. This is precisely quiet, creeping occupation. Many European states have already become hostage to this policy. All of these games are very dangerous. The question is that they are dangerous both in and of themselves and in terms of the time that has been lost for the fight against real threats, such as international terrorism. Instead of consolidating efforts in the fight against ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra, there is the constant ratcheting up of rhetoric and attempts to legitimise the need to counter a "demonic" Russia (it is clear who demonises it and for what purpose). All of this is irresponsible. The keyword here is responsibility. All of these actions are clearly irresponsible. The most dangerous part of this is that we can really lose time.

History will put everything in its place. In a couple of years, these generals and NATO representatives, among others, will be copycatting the statements of Russian representatives, talking about threats and the time that has been lost. This is exactly what will happen, no doubt. The question is the extent to which the threats that have to be countered now will become irreversible.

Bellingcat as an instrument to divert attention from investigating the tragedy of the Malaysian Boeing over Ukraine

We took note of an interview with Bellingcat representatives for the BBC in which they sarcastically spoke about some “trolling” on the part of the Ministry of Defence and the Foreign Ministry of Russia, for allegedly attacking them.

I would simply like to recall that we do not attack anyone, but rather, give our unbiased assessment of the work of both this group and those who use its materials as reliable information.

We understand the purpose of this group’s activities. Acting jointly with the current Ukrainian authorities, they continue to use all possible “fakes,” to create quasi-evidence to blame Russia. Why do we take this position and on what is it based? Even now the commission (investigating the circumstances of the Boeing tragedy over the territory of Ukraine) prefers to ignore Russia’s reasoning, which is corroborated by facts and evidence, in particular by tests and experiments. The commission ignores it to the extent that it makes no reply to this reasoning, while at the same time passing off these “fakes” for the hundredth time as proof or integrated evidence, even when this information has been debunked, and not only by Russia.

At present, we have information, that leads us to believe that loyal and handy witnesses in this case are being selected and presumably trained. This begs the question: why is all this being done? The aim is once again to give the global community fabricated proof of Russia’s aggression. This seems blasphemous in this case, because people died there and their families want to know the truth. One may endlessly combine all these invented stories and collect evidence allegedly found on social media sites and at the same time ignore the results of experiments, including those provided by Russia. All this can be done only if you neglect to consider one thing: this case is not just an information campaign, it involves human lives, the destinies of the victims’ families, who definitely want to know the truth.

Foreign Policy File section on Foreign Ministry’s website

The Foreign Ministry will launch The Foreign Policy File, a new section on its official website today. We are improving the Ministry’s website, upgrade it taking into account, among other things, suggestions from the media and the public. We have analysed the best web resources by our colleagues and embassies and thought it would be useful to have an internet dossier on current issues regarding Russia’s approaches to the most important and controversial topics.

The page carries concise materials featuring the approaches of the Russian Federation to the key issues of the international agenda. For users’ convenience, the issues are structured into large blocks: crisis settlement and regional conflicts, international organisations and fora, the CIS space, Russia’s relations with other countries and regional associations.

We will update the page regularly and illustrate it with officials’ statements on the issues. The page will contain materials on Russia’s official position and quotes from Russian leaders and Foreign Ministry’s officials on certain topics.

I would like to qualify that the new section will not reflect the entire range of topics. For example, bilateral relations are covered in response to your suggestions. This thread will be continuously enlarged. If you cannot find materials today regarding Russia’s relations with a certain European, African or Asian nation, it does not mean that that this issue is being ignored. We shall upgrade and expand the section based on your demands.

I hope this will turn out to be a useful tool in your everyday work.

Open Door Days at the Joint Institute for Nuclear Research

Please be advised that the Joint Institute for Nuclear Research in Dubna invites journalists to the Open Door Days marking the 60th anniversary of the Institute to be held in English for foreign journalists from April 12 to 14, and for Russian journalists from May 17 to 19.

The Institute for Nuclear Research is a world-renowned intergovernmental research center. During the Open Door Days the participants will be able to learn about the research centre's work, to visit laboratories and see basic research equipment, and talk to the researchers.

To enter the Institute, foreign correspondents will need to present their accreditation cards and Russian journalists – their journalist IDs.

For more information please call the Institute's press service at +7 (496) 216 3890, write to sc@jinr.ru, or go to www.jinr.ru.

Would-be justification by the Polish authorities of the removal of Soviet-era monuments

Poland persists in repeating the mantra that Polish experts, diplomats and representatives all believe that the February 22, 1994 agreement between the governments of Poland and Russia on the burial sites and place of remembrance covers only military cemeteries that all benefit from protection and oversight by the authorities, and are maintained and repaired at the country's expense. As they claim in Warsaw: "This agreement has nothing to do with monuments that symbolise Communist dominance over Poland in 1945–1989."

In this regard we are calling yet again on the Polish authorities, international community and the media. We have already issued an assessment of the mass acts of vandalism in Poland that are encouraged by the authorities. It should be added that references to the 1994 agreement are inadequate, to say the least. We are confident that Poland intentionally refrains from any references to the basic treaty between the Russian Federation and the Republic of Poland on friendly and good neighbourly cooperation dated May 22, 1992. This document clearly stipulates that the parties undertake to protect any and all places of remembrance that citizens in both countries respect and honour. Let me remind you that this treaty is available online. If you read it, you will understand that all attempts to interpret its articles otherwise, or refuse to see what the treaty stipulates, is like cheating.

Response to Polish colleagues

Our Polish colleagues have recently said that the comparison I made between the way ISIS fighters destroy monuments and cultural heritage in Syria and elsewhere and the actions by the Polish authorities to remove monuments to the Red Army was "indecent."

I would like to ask these Polish colleagues who mentioned "indecent," a word that should be remembered more often, whether or not officials in Warsaw view the statement by the country's Foreign Ministry whereby Auschwitz was liberated by Ukrainians, and Russian soldiers had nothing to do with it, as decent? How decent was that? Is it decent to forget those who paid with their lives for freeing Poland from Fascism and Nazism? Is it decent to lose any sense of gratitude towards our grandfathers who did not return from that war or came back mutilated? Is that what decency was all about? What decency are you talking about? Is it decent that in some places local authorities call for demolishing monuments to soldiers who freed their country? They show so much zest and commitment when it comes to securing immediate political gain, and are so enthusiastic, while understanding that their actions run counter to Warsaw's international, as well as bilateral obligations, and, most importantly, run counter to the will of

Polish veterans? Is that decent?

Is it decent for Poland's newly appointed Foreign Minister Witold Waszczykowski to say that "Russia's defence doctrine envisages the use of nuclear weapons, including against Poland?" Is that decent, especially after so many attempts to improve our relations and turn the page?

How can decency be measured when those who talk about freedom of speech and criticise Russia for allegedly renouncing this fundamental principle of democratic development, decide to expel Russian journalist Leonid Sviridov from the country for political reasons. He never received any explanation for the accusations against him. All he learned was that the Polish secret services had "specific suspicions" in his regard. Essentially, this has dealt a severe blow to his professional reputation. Is that decent?

This is just a shortlist of what we have been saying at almost every press briefing. Let's start with defining what decency means. Were all instances I've just mentioned decent or not?

Answers to media questions:

Question: Can the parties in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict be convinced to resume talks after the largest escalation of the conflict since 1994? What role will Russia play in the peace process?

Maria Zakharova: Asking if this can or cannot be done may not be the best approach. Doubting that it can be done is dangerous logic that can inspire those who don't want peace.

We want this, and we know that the conflicting parties want it too. Over the years, we've tried to gradually and consistently prod the situation towards a final settlement. Sometimes we were a step away from an agreement, but unfortunately, the process dragged on. We believe that we will succeed, as there is no other option. At this time, it's dangerous to express opinions that will prompt people to doubt this. I have talked a lot about our role recently. Russia is a co-chair of the Minsk Group. In light of our relations with Armenia and Azerbaijan, I'd say that we have been playing a constructive role. All of our thoughts, ideas and hopes are aimed at finding a peaceful solution and at preventing any provocation. Russia is also playing the role of a large international participant in bilateral contacts with the countries that are either involved in this situation in one way or another or can influence one of the parties.

Question: You spoke about the Foreign Ministry's website and its development. Do you have the technology to post video materials on your official site in a higher definition for further use?

Maria Zakharova: We are working on this. I believe it's possible to post materials on sharing services and provide a link to interested television networks. I'll think about what can be done.

Question: Which countries won't send ministers to the upcoming Moscow meeting of the CIS Council of Foreign Ministers?

Maria Zakharova: I think questions about the list of delegation members and heads should be addressed to the CIS Executive Committee, which is responsible for preparing these meetings. We'll provide this list too, when we finish working on it.

Question: It's a strange coincidence that the Russian draft resolution on the Syrian talks was blocked at the UN Security Council when the UN Secretary-General's Special Envoy for Syria, Staffan de Mistura, was in Moscow for talks with Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov. Does this mean that there is no understanding on the importance of including the Kurds in the negotiations?

Maria Zakharova: Unwillingness to involve the Kurds in the negotiating process is evidence of what I spoke about today. It's a matter of record that there are regional players who are categorically against involving the Syrian Kurdish representatives in these negotiations. These parties have specific geopolitical interests that prevail over the acceptance of the need for a peaceful settlement in Syria. They still believe that they continue to play their political games no matter how many Syrian lives are lost. They are not experimenting with their own people, although their people are also involved, as we could see from our discussions today. They decided for some reason that the Syrians are second-class people on whom bloody experiments could be staged for five years. They know that the talks won't be truly

complete and inclusive without the Kurds, yet they persist in their actions, thereby bringing more suffering to the Syrians.

Russia has doing everything in its power to organise an inclusive dialogue, including at international venues. And we won't give up.

Question: When you said that preparations for summit meetings will be discussed in Tokyo, did you refer to President Vladimir Putin's visit to Japan or Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's visit to Moscow?

Maria Zakharova: I was speaking about the general schedule of bilateral meetings at the high and top levels. This concerns an agreement reached between the leaders of our countries. We'll keep you informed.

Question: Yesterday, our LifeNews colleagues were literally expelled from Azerbaijan. The head of the Azerbaijani Foreign Ministry press service said in a telephone conversation that journalists can work in the country, but in a comment for local media stated that our colleagues were cheating.

Maria Zakharova: We have followed and carefully reviewed the situation concerning the LifeNews TV network and we have requested detailed information from our colleagues, Russian diplomats in Azerbaijan, which they have provided to us. You also saw Dmitry Peskov's comments in this regard. First of all, media work should be respected. Media activity cannot be terminated due to reluctance or disagreement with an editorial opinion, to say nothing about the use of force with regard to journalists. These are generally recognised standards to which all civilised countries have subscribed. Second, the media should respect the laws of the host country. This is what we always say, and we guide our journalists accordingly. Third, despite the fact that the media should be independent and raise, among other things, critical issues with regard to an acute phase of a long-running conflict in the course of which a large number of people have been killed, it is imperative to be objective and not take sides. I've seen unacceptable materials and unacceptable questions that journalists put to people: Who are you for – Armenia or Azerbaijan? This is crazy and a bit scary. While the efforts of the entire international community and the sensible international establishment (with the exception of certain "particularly talented international players") are focused on doing their best to end the violence, killings and deaths and stop this conflict from spreading, how is it possible to publish these kinds of things? Are these news reports? Is this journalism? This may not just spread the conflict but can also incite hatred among people. We have worked for years at all possible levels to bring the sides' positions closer together, always highlighting the need to achieve a new level of mutual understanding. This is why we regard the kind of reports I mentioned as unacceptable. It is critical to understand one's responsibility at this time. To reiterate, expulsion and the use of force against journalists is unacceptable, not least because of the backlash. Journalists should not be expelled but provided with additional information; it is essential to communicate with them and give news conferences. Naturally, on the condition that journalists honour the laws of the host country.

I urge you not to paint black and white pictures but to be objective and look at the situation without going to extremes and without allowing your personal predilections to prevail in covering this sensitive issue. This should be a two-way street: respect for law on the part of the authorities and respect for law on the part of the media. The efforts of all parties should be aimed at stabilising the situation and abandoning the attempts to deliberately create this kind of atmosphere in the media. Any conflict or problem should be revealed but there should be no taking sides one way or the other. Journalists should stay above the fray and present the situation as it is.

I apologise for such a long answer. But I urge you to understand the fragility of the present situation.

Question: What are the ceasefire terms of the parties to the Nagorno-Karabakh?

You spoke about decency and evaluated the behaviour of certain Russian journalists. As they bypass Baku, Russian media workers end up in the zone of Armenia's combat operations in the

occupied territory. How appropriate is this in terms of diplomacy, bilateral relations and the fact that Russia recognises Azerbaijan's territorial integrity?

Maria Zakharova: In other words, everything that I said prior to this you chose to ignore?

I'll say it again. Today, I shared all the assessments I had at my disposal. Regarding the actions of each party, you'd better ascertain this with official representatives from each side. Concerning the need for the media to observe laws, I stated, in no uncertain terms, that it's a two-way street. The host country should have clear-cut, comprehensible rules and regulations for the accreditation of journalists, for journalistic activity, and it should state publicly whether journalists have violated them, and if not then the authorities should provide journalists assistance. Likewise, members of the media should observe rules and do all they can to ensure that their reports are objective and do not inflame passions. This applies to journalists of all countries: Russia, Azerbaijan and Armenia, as well as any other country where stories on this issue are written.

In addition to the situation in Nagorno-Karabakh, there are countries with large diasporas representing both the people of Azerbaijan and the people of Armenia. Among other things, it is important to prevent hostility among people living in these third countries. It seems to me that you have no reason whatsoever to rebuke the Russian Foreign Ministry for urging any kind of support for one side or the other on this issue. We've always highlighted the need for joint efforts in the search for a peaceful settlement. We have provided a balanced evaluation of all actions, and sought to ensure that all facts were duly evaluated. Once again, I call for restraint, not in terms of renouncing your professional journalistic activity but in terms of expressing your personal emotions. I understand that you have a personal civic position but at the same time you are also journalists and are duty bound by virtue of professional ethics and the code of conduct to be objective and stay above the fray.

Question: Will Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov only meet with his counterpart Fumio Kishida during his visit to Japan?

Maria Zakharova: The agenda is still being finalised. I can only confirm that this meeting will take place. Details of other contacts and their schedule will follow at a later date. We'll hold off on this pleasure; we don't want you to be too happy too soon.

Question: Does the "offshore scandal" have an impact on the Foreign Ministry's work, on your relations with foreign partners?

Maria Zakharova: I have looked through the materials. In my opinion, most of them are not about Russia and if Russia is mentioned there, it is done in a rather strange, abstract and indirect way. This has not affected our work at all. Naturally, it would be interesting to read the results of journalist investigations on some topical issues when they contain specific facts.

We were prepared for this and we have taken it into account. As you know, the Presidential Executive Office made a statement that damaging information is on the way and it will be represented as facts. I believe that everyone was expecting much more.

Question: It's difficult to understand what has caused the revival of the Karabakh conflict. Does the Foreign Ministry have an idea which side pulled the trigger?

Maria Zakharova: We have already shared all our ideas with you. I have nothing to add on the subject.

Question: Can the referendum in the Netherlands have any impact? What is the Foreign Ministry's position on this?

Maria Zakharova: Due to the lack of time, I cannot elaborate on the subject. We have repeatedly commented on it – so I refer you to our previous statements on the issue. We believe a referendum shows the will of the people. We expect information campaigns to promote various approaches but they should not cross the line and exert information pressure on people. Unfortunately, we have registered and monitored such incidents and spoken about them. It is one thing when you promote your position, and another when you employ banned information strategies to shape public opinion.

Question: You said that Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov would meet his Armenian counterpart on April 8, the day when the CIS Foreign Ministers Council is holding its session. Is Moscow ready to mediate a meeting between the Azerbaijani and Armenian foreign ministers on Moscow's "home turf"? Is there a possibility of this meeting taking place on April 8?

Maria Zakharova: Let me correct you and say that it is the CIS Foreign Ministers Council that will meet on this day, and the bilateral meeting will take place on its sidelines. I can confirm that the Russian and Armenian foreign ministers are going to meet. And we will let you know if any other bilateral contacts will take place between CIS ministers. We are in turn prepared to do our best to return the situation to normal. All that can be done will be done.

Question: It is known that Russia supports the Kurds' attending the Geneva negotiations and has repeatedly requested their participation. What other steps is Russia taking to bring the Union of Kurdistan Party to the negotiations?

Maria Zakharova: I think these are significant steps. Submitting the draft statement of the UN Security Council President is already a very serious step. Besides, we engage in bilateral contacts, work in the International Syria Support Group, and maintain contacts between two co-chairs – Russia and the US. This is what Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov discusses with his US counterpart John Kerry. This is the whole spectrum of opportunities that we have.

Question: Bulgaria's Council of Ministers recently decided to send eight Bulgarian military servicemen with the Second NATO Signal Battalion as part of the NATO effort to enhance Turkey's air defense. Is it part of another scheme to set us up as "jackasses" as it was with the Burgas–Alexandroupoli pipeline project? Is it going to affect the tourist flow in 2016?

Maria Zakharova: This is an issue of Bulgaria's relations with NATO. The main thing is whether the Bulgarian people support their leadership's policy. As for NATO's actions, we regularly comment on them. It is Bulgaria's domestic affair, and I have nothing to add here.

Question: I have another question about the referendum in the Netherlands, since it's important not only for that country, but, perhaps, for the future of the European Union in general. You have repeatedly criticised the way the Dutch authorities were preparing the referendum, meaning that perhaps 30 percent of the voters will not show up at the polling stations. The preparatory work is over, and the referendum is underway. Have you changed your mind? Perhaps, the Dutch authorities have done certain things right?

Maria Zakharova: What I said was that this is about the citizens declaring their free will. . This is what referendums are all about: to allow citizens to come and make their position known. We are well aware that in order for the citizens to have a position of their own, they must have access to corresponding information. However, this information must be provided in the form of clarifications, not media pressure with the use of information techniques, policy statements, intimidation, or anything else like this. It should be an objective expression of their will by the people who understand what they stand for. That's it. The results of the referendum show the will of the people. Therefore, I'm not going to denounce or refute anything that we said previously. There are no reasons to do so. We believe our assessment was objective. We provided specific examples and facts.

Question: A delegation of the Turkish People's Democratic Party visited Russia in January. As we know, the participants came up with a plan to open an office representing Turkey's Kurdish people in Moscow. Why hasn't it opened yet? What has changed in Russia's position?

Maria Zakharova: We have already commented on this issue and spoke about the mechanism for opening such an office. There may be no office representing any particular region, if the issue is about a sovereign state. There are proper ways in which to do this that do not contradict Russian legislation and that may be used to register such an office under the Russian law. This issue should be taken up not by the Russian side, but by those who wish to register in a particular form. If you have any questions about

specific steps or actions by the Russian side that you don't understand, then please specify your question. I haven't heard anything that I could comment on today. Do you have a specific question?

Question: There were plans to open a Turkish Kurdistan office, just like the office of the Syrian Kurds that opened in February. Why hasn't such an office opened yet?

Maria Zakharova: I will find out more about this issue and then give you an answer.

Question: Is there any progress in bridging the gap of the positions of Russia and the United States regarding the future of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad? Some say, an extensive transitional period can be established in order to reach a compromise. Are there any discussions to this end underway? Some time ago, President Assad said that military successes of the government army will help unite Syria. Permanent Representative of the Russian Federation to the UN Vitaly Churkin then said that it's slightly out of sync with Russia's position in terms of diplomacy. Has the Russian position changed in any way?

Maria Zakharova: Basically, our position hasn't changed. We are saying unequivocally that the future of President Bashar al-Assad (the name of the Syrian president doesn't really matter here) must be decided by the Syrians themselves. To do so, and being fully aware of the complexity of the situation, we have launched relevant international support mechanisms. We are fully aware that Syria, which was brought to its current state (actually, a deadlock which is now obvious to all,) with the help of our Western partners, now needs the help of the international community. The international community has for many years been reluctant to address Syria's issues in terms of peaceful settlement, or to fight terrorists, but has focused instead on the regime change, which it openly admits. After this policy led to an expansion of terrorism in the region, particularly in Syria, and caused numerous casualties, including among the civilian population, and when the coalition failed to achieve the expected results, it was perhaps decided to adjust this position and to ratchet down the talk about al-Assad and his future, but not to take it off the table completely. Other goals and objectives, such as combating terrorism and launching the peace process, were advanced as top priorities. We have contributed a lot to this. As a co-chair, we support our Western colleagues in their efforts. We note positive developments in this area. I mentioned this today, when I commented on the remarks made by Mark Toner from the US State Department. Many reproach us for our finding fault with words only when there's a non-constructive debate with the US Department of State. It's not true. We note the truly important fundamental statements made by the State Department. We try to note them and say that these are the steps that can lead us in the right direction: a direction that is right not specifically to us, but to everyone. Therefore, we are fully aware of the fact that a number of regional players still cling to the concept that Assad must leave office. At the same time, we also note the efforts, in particular of the United States, to shift their emphasis, fully realising that the future of Bashar al-Assad remains part of their agenda.

With regard to the rapprochement, I think that it is, of course, there. The launch of the political process is precisely about Syria's future. People can talk all they want about who needs to go or whose time it is to rule. However, it is imperative to develop specific mechanisms. Not only do they need to be drafted on paper, but the appropriate groundwork must also be prepared for their practical implementation. This is what we and the United States are now focusing on. I'm not even going to comment on President al-Assad's remarks that military successes will help unite the country. All I can say is that the future of Syria is a peaceful future. Of course, it's not about suppressing dissent in that country, but about fighting terrorism, launching talks between Damascus and the opposition, drafting a peaceful settlement on paper and implementing it in practice, including the political process.

I will reiterate, without commenting on the specific phrase (I don't have it in front of me now), that this is a multi-track and a multi-component story. We do our best to make sure that each track leads us to our main goal, namely, a peaceful settlement. There may be no military solution to this issue. This is finally recognised by everyone. Many have had to admit it, although they didn't want to initially. We understand

that deep inside there's a sense that the military scenario is, perhaps, present, but a different point of view dominates the public space. The most important and fundamental part is that it is enshrined in international instruments and in the UN Security Council resolutions.

Question: What will Russia say if Armenia recognises Nagorno-Karabakh as an independent state?

Maria Zakharova: I have already provided my assessment of this situation. You are aware of our principled position on this issue.

Question: Last week, Syrian leaders said that Syria may not have a federal future. What does Russia think about such a statement?

Maria Zakharova: We believe that Syria's future and its political system are the subjects of a negotiation process, which was finally launched, albeit with great difficulty. It took us more than one attempt to get it going, and it's still not a direct dialogue, but proxy talks. The Syrians, including various representatives of that country, such as official representatives of Damascus and that part of the opposition that refused to deal with this issue militarily, should develop such solutions. The Syrians should decide how they intend to live. Of course, the co-chairs (Russia and the United States) and members of the International Syria Support Group are willing to share their experience and to assist in drafting the peace plan as it applies to the future of Syria. It does, indeed, help the process, but the Syrians must have the final say on this issue.