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Celebrating Victory Day in Sevastopol

It is more than symbolic that today's briefing in the run-up to Victory Day is being held in the Hero City of Sevastopol. On May 9, the residents of Sevastopol will celebrate the 72nd anniversary of Victory in the Great Patriotic War of 1941-1945 and the 73rd anniversary of liberating the city from Nazi invaders.

During these days, Sevastopol will be home to festive gatherings, rallies, concerts, the Mountain Height international festival, the historical patriotic festival The Flags of Victory, a military historical re-enactment of the Assault on Sapun Mountain on May 7, 1944, and athletic contests.

I'm not saying this for you – Sevastopol residents – but for the rest of the world, so that they can understand how Sevastopol understands and preserves its history and memory.

The bulk of the celebrations will take place on May 9. The most important events will include laying wreaths and flowers at the Memorial Wall to commemorate the heroic defence of Sevastopol in 1941-1942, the military parade, the Parade of Victors, the Immortal Regiment march, a gala performance on Nakhimov Square in downtown Sevastopol, and fireworks.

The anniversary of the liberation of Crimea

I would very much like the rest of the world to learn more about this land. I would like to remind everyone that every anniversary of Victory in the Great Patriotic War is a good occasion to recall the feats

in battle performed by the soldiers who defended Sevastopol and Crimea at the beginning of the war and liberated this peninsula during the Crimean offensive of 1944.

Under German occupation, the peninsula went through the same hardships and adversities of the occupation as many other Soviet territories, so when Crimea was liberated by the Soviet army, the people of Crimea valued their hard-won freedom all the more.

Many descendants of the people of Crimea remember the extremely bloody operations of the first stage of the war, such as the Battle for Perekop and the battles for the Ishun positions, the difficult moments of the Kerch-Feodosia landing operation, but also remember the spring of 1944, when the peninsula, which the Wehrmacht and the Third Reich literally sucked dry, was finally and forever liberated. They remember the joy of the people of Crimea as they greeted their liberators.

The liberation of strategically important Crimea gave new hope to the victorious Soviet people at that difficult time. There was still a whole year of fighting and losses to go before the end of war, but in the spring of 1944, after the Nazi invaders were driven from the Soviet land of Crimea, it became clear that Victory in that war would rightfully go to the Soviet people.

Marshal of the Soviet Union Alexander Vasilevsky put it best when he talked about the importance of liberating Crimea and Sevastopol from Nazi invaders. I would like to cite his book, *The Cause of My Life*: “The Crimea offensive of the Soviet forces ended on May 12, 1944 with the crushing defeat of the 200,000-strong 17th German Army. It took us 35 days to break through the enemy fortifications in Crimea; of these 35 days, three days were used to crush the defences outside Sevastopol – which were much more developed than ours back in 1942 – and to liberate the main base of the Black Sea Fleet. Moscow gave five firework salvos to honour the Army and the Navy liberating Crimea from the Nazi invaders. I really wanted to see Sevastopol on the very first day following its liberation”

This is a reminder for all those who do not know or do not want to know the history of Sevastopol and Crimea. Those who tried to establish their own rules with their dirty hands there. It did not work and will never work.

Anniversary of the tragedy at the House of Trade Unions in Odessa

Regrettably, during these days we are commemorating another anniversary. May 2 marked three years since the tragic events in Odessa, where, as a result of a barbaric, despicable act of arson committed by Ukrainian radicals, the House of Trade Unions, in which dozens of civilians had taken shelter, burned, causing the deaths of 48 people. All these people were guilty of was expressing their civic commitment based not on imaginary values, but on the values their grandfathers and fathers had won, arms in hand, at the cost of their lives, and rejecting the unconstitutional coup perpetrated in Kiev and did not want to let ultranationalist radicals into their land.

We have repeatedly noted that those responsible for that inhuman crime remain unpunished. Over the past three years, the Kiev authorities have failed to conduct a thorough, objective and real investigation of this crime – because they simply do not want to – so as to clarify all the circumstances of the tragedy. They are much more concerned about how to make people forget what happened and how to silence them, rather than prosecuting the culprits. This is not the first year that, on the eve of the tragic anniversary, unprecedented amounts of military hardware and fighters from radical nationalist groups like Aydar and

Azov are being moved into the city. People who want to pay tribute to the victims are not allowed to come near the House of Trade Unions, and foreign journalists coming to Ukraine to cover the memorial ceremonies are turned back at the border.

The most frightening part of it all is that unless the people of Crimea had made their independent, historic choice in favour of Russia back in 2014, the same horrible fate would have awaited scores of others. We all know that as the situation in Ukraine deteriorated, threats to do away with the population of the peninsula grew louder, as did vows “to drown them in the Black Sea” and exterminate them up to the last family member simply for preserving their historical memory since childhood, speaking Russian and remaining faithful to their principles and ideals. Had we let that happen, there would have been many more deaths. Thank God, the Crimeans had sufficient will and Russia had sufficient strength, and we are together now.

Ukraine’s construction of a concrete dam on the North Crimean Canal

We are no longer surprised by decisions the Ukrainian authorities make with respect to Crimean residents. They seek to hurt them while in reality their actions hurt the Ukrainian economy.

For instance, Ukraine’s transport blockade of Crimea has led, in fact, to the complete severing of economic ties and the reduction of people-to-people contacts. Businesspeople on the peninsula have naturally turned to establishing ties with the business communities of other Russian regions. Such ties are getting closer and will grow stronger in the future with the opening of the highway and railway bridge across the Kerch Strait, which is being built at an accelerated pace.

The food blockade that Kiev introduced to create food shortages on the peninsula resulted in Ukrainian producers losing their share of Crimean market, which naturally was filled with Russian goods. The energy blockade, launched with the tacit approval of the Ukrainian authorities by extremist organisations banned in Russia – the Right Sector and the so-called Majlis of the Crimean Tatar People, who carried out blatant acts of terrorism, blowing up electric grid pylons – has only hastened the opening of the Crimea-Kuban energy bridge to make Crimea independent of Ukraine for its energy needs. I reiterate that the Russian side regards the crippling of energy sources as an act of terrorism.

I would like to inform those who don’t know that the foundational international law documents signed by European countries, particularly the European Union member states, say that deliberate damage to civil infrastructure should be regarded as terrorism. We have not seen even a slightly critical international response. As the result of its own actions, Kiev has deprived itself of the opportunity to purchase electric energy in Russia at manufacturers’ prices.

The Ukrainian authorities announced the other day that a dam will be put into operation to block Crimea’s access to water from the Dnieper. Reportedly, the dam is meant to perform an “essential geopolitical mission”. The pointlessness of this step is evident because water has not been supplied to the peninsula since spring 2014 and the Crimean people have learned to procure water from other sources.

As we look at the Ukrainian authorities’ actions, we cannot but wonder whom they are trying to hit the hardest: the Crimean people whom they regard as their own citizens? They were jubilant when websites described Crimea as Ukrainian territory. That would mean they are bullying their own people, leaving them without water. This is not the way to treat one’s own people. We have a feeling that someone in

Kiev (we all know who) is trying to punish the Crimean people for the choice they made in 2014. The amount of cynicism and hypocrisy on display is stunning. These actions prove only one thing: that the right choice was made.

The situation in Syria

The situation in Syria remains difficult. The Syrian government forces continued active fighting to destroy terrorists from ISIS, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham and other affiliated terrorist groups in the provinces of Damascus, Hama, Homs and Deraa.

The government troops pursued an offensive in northern Hama. The terrorists took out their failure on the frontline on civilians, shelling several towns, including the Christian town of Mahardah, using mortars and missile systems.

In Eastern Ghouta, violent clashes took place between the Army of Islam and their recent so-called comrades-in-arms from the Nusra-led Hayat Tahrir al-Sham and Faylaq ar-Rahman. The Lions of the East Army, part of the Syrian Free Army, attacked ISIS in Eastern Kalamun.

The ambiguity surrounding the April 4 incident in Khan Sheikhun persists. We are concerned about the lack of an adequate response on behalf of the OPCW to Russia's proposal to send a professional mission, including experts of this organisation, to Syria. As we proposed, the mission should be geographically balanced in order to fully and impartially establish all the details involved in that incident. Instead, we are being "fed" all sorts of findings by self-appointed experts who built their case about the unconditional culpability of the Syrian government in using chemical weapons in this locality from a distance, without ever going to the site of the supposed attack, allegedly committed by Syrian air forces. All their findings are based on analysing online materials largely concocted by radicals from the Syrian opposition.

I would like to say to those who are trying to find evidence in this manner: you are looking in the wrong place, gentlemen. The perpetrators must be sought among those who are interested in escalating the situation, not in establishing a political process and preserving peace on Earth. The Syrian government cannot be interested in continuing bloodshed by any stretch of imagination. It's been already said more than once, and I would like to point it out once again: it is important to conduct a full-fledged international investigation, which will show what really happened in Khan Sheikhun. The way our Western partners are using every avenue to block this particular angle of such a mission confirms our opinion that they are not interested in establishing the truth.

The humanitarian situation in Syria remains the focus of our attention. People residing in the provinces of Aleppo, Latakia, Homs and Es-Souveida received food and essentials with the help of the Russian military. An air bridge and the parachute system were used by Russian aircraft to deliver goods to Deir-ez-Zor, which is surrounded by ISIS. Work with all parties to the conflict made it possible to ensure the arrival of a UN humanitarian convoy consisting of 51 trucks in the large city of Duma located to the northeast of Damascus.

I would like to note that the forces trying to politicise the provision of humanitarian aid continue to speculate on the "lack of medicines" in the areas controlled by the militants. Information juggling and deliberate misleading of international public opinion have been recorded on many occasions, including by representatives of international humanitarian organisations, as was the case, for example, in late 2016,

following the liberation of eastern Aleppo from militants, where drug depots were found, or just the other day, following the completion of an operation to evacuate militants from Madai and Zabadani, where civilians have already begun to return. In this regard, of particular concern is the information about the terrorists seizing medications from pharmacies and clinics that provide their services to the civilian population of Eastern Ghouta, and sending them to jihadist camps in Arbin, Zamalka and Duma. Their goal is clear: to raise a clamor that the local population allegedly has no access to medical care.

As you know, the fourth high-level international meeting on Syria ends in Astana today. In addition to Russia, Iran and Turkey – the guarantor countries behind the ceasefire regime – a delegation of the Syrian government and a number of armed opposition groups are taking part in it. The United States and Jordan are participating as observers. Special Envoy of the UN Secretary General for Syria, Staffan de Mistura, is also among its participants.

We are waiting for the official end of the meeting, after which we will be able to analyse the results, and substantively discuss the outcome, new proposals and initiatives which, in our opinion, will contribute to consolidating the ceasefire in Syria. This also applies to the idea of creating de-escalation zones in Syria and all related issues.

Developments in Afghanistan

The developing military and political situation in Afghanistan does not leave room for optimism. Recently, the Taliban movement made a statement announcing the start of its regular spring offensive. This time, the Taliban called it “Operation Mansouri,” to commemorate Mullah Akhtar Muhammad Mansour, the previous leader of the movement. According to the statement, along with military operations, the movement also aims to engage in “state-building” and regulating life on Taliban-controlled territories. We believe that the Afghan government has cause for serious concern, all the more so as the Taliban have already started to turn their promises into actions by seizing Zebak district located in Badakhshan Province close to the border with Tajikistan.

The terrorist activity of the armed opposition is not diminishing either. On May 3, eight people were killed in a suicide bomber attack of a US military convoy in Kabul and another 25, including three NATO soldiers, sustained injuries of varying degrees. According to the latest reports, ISIS’s Afghan wing has claimed responsibility for the attack.

We took note of the return to Afghanistan of the leader of the Hezb-e Islami opposition political party, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, who made a peace agreement with the Afghan government in September 2016 and was removed from UN Security Council sanctions list. His calls to Afghan President Ashraf Ghani and Afghanistan's Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah to resolve the existing differences between them, and for the resignation of one of them if they fail to do so, reveal the ambitious plans of this political figure. We hope that Mr Hekmatyar can have a stabilising influence on the domestic political situation in Afghanistan, and contribute to the process of national reconciliation in this country.

Amendments to the Polish law on the prohibition of propaganda of communism and any other totalitarian regime of April 1, 2016

The Polish Senate has approved amendments to its law prohibiting propaganda of communism or any other totalitarian regime, of April 1, 2016, which is also known as its decommunisation law. Now it also

concerns monuments and other memorial signs outside cemeteries in honour of Soviet soldiers who liberated Poland from Nazi occupation in 1944–1945 with a tremendous toll of lives. The owners of land plots where these commemorative tokens are situated will be instructed to dismantle them within 12 months. It is planned to reimburse them with relevant outlays from the state budget. The endorsement of these amendments is not over yet but, doubtless, the remaining formalities will be settled with no great problems.

It is perfectly evident that the ideology underlying this legislative initiative helps to impose untenable views on the Polish public – views that have little in common with historical truth. As a result of its so-called struggle against totalitarianism, the Polish authorities are themselves practicing prohibitive measures and are denying not only the feat of glory performed by the Red Army, but also their own postwar history.

This notorious decommunisation encourages those who deem it normal to desecrate the sublime memory of the joint heroic struggle for liberation from Nazism. This is revenge-seeking and utter ignorance of what it all might lead to in the future. Today's problems in Russian-Polish relations will recede into the background someday. However, it would be bizarre to talk about normalisation near the ruins of our monuments and desecrated graves.

We know the Polish people. Many of them are Russia's true friends. Russia is a congenial country to some of them, while others don't have any strong emotions toward our country, though they realise that to develop relations and cooperation is more beneficial than to turn again and again to the revision of history. We understand quite well that there are people in Poland who painfully perceive our joint history due to their own family history. Such things do happen, and it concerns us, too.

I have a question to ask ordinary Polish people: Aren't you afraid that in five or 10 years, the schoolbooks that your children study will say that Poland, particularly Warsaw, was liberated from Nazis by extraterrestrials? Are you ready to face this? At any rate, it seems to us that this is where things are leading.

Coffin with a Russian imperial army officer's body found in Turkey

According to available information, the body of a high-ranking military officer, presumably a general, of the imperial Russian army was found at a construction site in the northeastern Turkish province of Ardahan on April 24. The two-metre by ninety-centimetre coffin had the image of Orthodox crosses on it, meaning that the officer was buried in accordance with Christian rites during the period the Ardahan province was part of the Russian Empire (1878 - 1917).

Local authorities informed Ankara and a decision was made to suspend construction and turn the body over for examination to experts at the archaeological museum in the city of Kars. The Russian foreign mission in Turkey immediately followed up on this issue.

Turning to the identification, we have no evidence at this time to confirm that the officer was indeed Russian general Vasily Geiman as claimed by several media outlets. We hope that the ongoing examination of the remains will provide us with more details.

We believe that the body is to be reinterred afterwards, preferably at a site chosen by the person's

descendants if any are identified. Relevant Russian agencies are ready to cooperate with our Turkish colleagues on this.

The find, if we can call it that, is further evidence of the real need to promote bilateral cooperation in the area of military memorials and remembrance. The recent ratification of the related Russian-Turkish agreement of December 3, 2012 is a step down this road.

Order by the International Court of Justice of provisional measures in Ukraine v. Russian Federation

There were many requests for comments on the order by the International Court of Justice regarding the provisional measures under Ukraine's application against Russia.

The Foreign Ministry has already shared its position on this issue on a number of occasions, and detailed comments were provided by the Information and Press Department on April 20 and May 2. We suggest that everyone examine these comments as well as the order itself, available on the website of the International Court of Justice. Let me simply highlight a few important points.

As you know, on April 19 the International Court of Justice released an order regarding provisional measures in the application filed by Ukraine against Russia on compliance with the International Convention for the Suppression of the Financing of Terrorism (ICSFT) and the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (CERD).

Regarding the ICSFT, the Court concluded at this stage that Ukraine's accusations against Russia of failing to comply with its obligations under this international instrument were groundless.

As for the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, here is what the Foreign Ministry has to say.

The International Court of Justice has taken a principled stand, dismissing numerous and well-known statements by Ukraine about the alleged aggression and occupation of Crimea.

The Court did not support a single provisional measure requested by Ukraine or the key message of Ukraine's application that Russia was allegedly conducting a "campaign of cultural erasure directed at non-Russian communities, in particular Crimean Tatar and ethnic Ukrainian communities".

Despite the claims put forward by Ukraine, the Court's order does not contain such words as "repression", "persecution", etc., to describe Russia's actions towards Crimean Tatars or Ukrainians living in Crimea or the requirement "to rescind the ban on the Mejlis of the Crimean Tatar people".

Competent Russian agencies and institutions are currently conducting further analysis of the order released by the International Court of Justice.

Using social media to spread misinformation

On April 27, Facebook released a report on information operations within this social network initiated by various governments or non-state actors to manipulate public opinion. These actors used fake Facebook

accounts to spread false news and misinformation, spam, malware, financial fraud, and break into user accounts. The social network said that it intended to develop and implement a set of measures to fight this kind of actions.

The Foreign Ministry welcomes Facebook's decision to draw the attention of the international community to the risks associated with social media, especially the issue of misleading information campaigns that we have called out on a number of occasions, including at our press briefings. Russia is regularly targeted by sophisticated information attacks, mostly through social media.

Despite our numerous requests, Facebook never blocked fake accounts of the Russian embassies in the Czech Republic and Slovakia. In addition, we have recently identified similar fake accounts of the embassies in Sweden and Uganda, which are used to deceive Facebook users. By refusing to act, Facebook encourages misinformation. Although we are grateful to the company for taking prompt action to unblock accounts of Russian missions abroad, but honestly this was the least they could do. In fact, Facebook should do more to prevent fake accounts from spreading further. In this connection, let me remind you that the list of the official accounts of the Foreign Ministry and its missions abroad is available on the ministry's official website: go to the Press Service section and click Social Media.

Unfortunately, Facebook moderators continue to block accounts of our missions abroad for unknown reasons. In 2016, a number of embassies had to create new accounts in order to be able to remain in touch with the readers, mostly our compatriots living abroad. Let me emphasise that we view social media as an important tool for interacting with our subscribers across the world and hope that all the issues will be resolved in the near future, especially now that the company has recognised the existence of problems within its network.

Presentation of a book by the Chairman of the State Council of Crimea

I would like to share with you that a presentation of the English-language version of Follow Your Path, a book about the Crimean War by Vladimir Konstantinov, Chairman of the State Council of the Republic of Crimea, will take place on May 11 at the International Press Centre of Rossiya Segodnya, to which we are grateful for today's news briefing.

We invite all to take part in this event.

The Turetsky Choir: Victory Songs in Berlin

As I said at the previous briefing already, the Turetsky Choir is preparing a unique surprise for Victory Day. There will be many delightful surprises all over Russia, while the Turetsky Choir is preparing a gift for our compatriots residing in Germany – veterans, former concentration camp inmates, and all who remember WWII firsthand.

At 4 pm on May 7, the Russian Science and Culture House will host a media scrum on the occasion of this ambitious project to promote peace, goodwill and friendship – Victory Songs in Berlin.

The large-scale peace action Victory Songs will open on Gendarmenmarkt at 6 pm, right after the talk with the media. Admission is free. Invitations can be obtained on the website <http://biletkartina.tv>.

The diverse programme of the concert will include such moving songs as The Tocsin of Buchenwald, the universally loved Katyusha, the lyrical The Swarthy Girl, and many others.

We hope that this project for peace and against Nazism and all others forms of fascism, terrorism and xenophobia will be success.

More information will appear on the Foreign Ministry official website.

Hidirlez celebrations in Crimea's Tatar community

I would like to take this opportunity to congratulate all the Crimean Tatars of the peninsula on the occasion of Hidirlez, which will be celebrated on May 6.

In accordance with the directive of the Head of the Republic of Crimea, the goals and objectives of celebrating this holiday include supporting, developing and promoting ethnic folk art and preserving the identity of the traditions and customs of the Crimean Tatars. The Russian Federation traditionally emphasises the importance of ethnic customs, and their significance and relevance for preserving culture in a multi-ethnic state. For us, the priority is to maintain and develop the historical heritage of the peoples of our state, including, of course, the Crimean Tatars. In this regard, I congratulate all Crimeans, and especially the Crimean Tatars, on Hidirlez, the day of celebrating spring and agriculture in Crimea!

Answers to media questions:

Question: There is a tendency for the volume of tourists visiting Crimea from Ukraine to increase during the May holidays. This is good for Crimea, as Ukrainian citizens can see the current situation. Is it worth stepping up work to attract tourists from Ukraine?

Maria Zakharova: As for attracting Ukrainian tourists to Crimea, I think we should not focus on tourists from certain countries but develop the Crimean infrastructure and promote tourist facilities in general. I have come here, to this holy land, for the third time. Coming here for the last three years, I can see the civil and tourist infrastructure gaining momentum. It can be seen with the naked eye. This is also reflected in the figures which are given as statistical data by the relevant ministries and agencies, noting a continuous increase in tourists in Crimea. Therefore, we should develop this area, focus on developing the tourist infrastructure and promoting it, including for Russian tourists. Many Russian citizens have never been to Crimea, so acquainting them with it should become one of the priorities. I have been to many places, but the beauty of the Vorontsovsky Palace is really unique. The palace and the park are enough to make a holiday unforgettable, not to speak of the modern infrastructure, wonderful hotels and sights of Crimea. Yesterday, I was in Yalta, which has a stunning embankment, wisteria and chestnuts. Therefore, it is extremely important to develop the domestic potential and at the same time to wait for foreign tourists and guests. We always assist you with this issue.

Question: The Yalta International Economic Forum was held, which involved representatives of 40 countries. How do you assess the effect of such events?

Maria Zakharova: Talking about the relevance of holding the Yalta Forum is not interesting.

Question: Do you plan to participate in the Immortal Regiment?

Maria Zakharova: I will speak about my plans for May 9 a little later.

Question: Yesterday, President Vladimir Putin met Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. They noted that relations between Russia and Turkey have improved. How will this influence the development of Crimea?

Maria Zakharova: Unfortunately, our relations were frozen, and their development was suspended after tragic events that happened through the Turkish side's fault. It is always easy to sour something, but it is much harder to restore something, especially if we are talking about expanded relations. Foreign ministries and representatives from the appropriate services are now establishing bilateral contacts. We are cooperating more actively on the international arena, including cooperation on a Syrian peace settlement. Turkey largely expresses its own opinions and interests in this region. However, the dialogue continues and, most importantly, it is not stopping.

Question: Many countries are interested in Crimea, with numerous delegations visiting us. Do delegation members provide their superiors with authentic information after returning back home?

Maria Zakharova: The Foreign Ministry is doing everything we possibly can to convince people who are boldly talking about Crimea and Sevastopol from international rostrums to come here and see for themselves. It is easy to draw conclusions by relying on fake news and social network accounts that are a far cry from reality. People need to pluck up courage, and come and take a look. No one is saying that there are no problems here. There is no place in the world that does not have some problems or another. The question is whether the state has the will to address these problems and to overcome these difficulties together with the people. Over the past three years, Crimea has traveled down an unprecedented road as part of the Russian Federation. You cannot find any other example of this development when people were able to assert themselves in this manner and to start from scratch over the shortest possible period of time continually under pressure from the international community, putting up with conditions of unbridled sanctions, during a total lack of understanding and absolutely unjustified condemnation. All of us know that the development of Crimea was seriously hampered, and the same concerns its tourist potential as well when it was part of Ukraine. What we see now in Crimea is really unprecedented development. Surely, anyone coming here isn't going to keep mum. They will talk even if they don't have a public rostrum for spreading their viewpoint to the public. In any event, information is creeping through, and we are doing everything possible with a view to this end.

Question: The leaders of Russia and the United States spoke by telephone this week. The presidents agreed to re-invigorate the dialogue between the Russian Foreign Minister and the US Secretary of State on Syria, to establish contacts and to do joint work geared towards the Korean Peninsula settlement. How will this work be carried out by our respective foreign policy departments?

Maria Zakharova: It will be primarily implemented by the Russian Foreign Ministry and the US Department of State. An upcoming meeting of Mr Lavrov and Mr Tillerson has already been announced. Later, we will inform you about its format, date and time. It will provide an opportunity to implement the instructions issued by the presidents of the two countries to find common ground and search for solutions to major international issues. I believe this meeting will help make it happen.

Question: I'm sure you know there's a museum and memorial complex of the 35th Coastal Battery in Sevastopol, which is the brainchild of former Chairman of the Legislative Assembly of

Sevastopol Alexei Chaly. For 10 years now, admission to this museum has been absolutely free. Concerts have been held there on the eve of May 9 where Sevastopol performers sing military songs. Recently, Mr Chaly has been accused of "dancing on the bones." I believe these are egregiously cynical accusations. I would like to hear what you think about this idea. Do you think it's inappropriate to hold rock concert requiems at the memorial complex which Mr Chaly has built?

Maria Zakharova: Who is criticising him?

Question: Mr Chaly's detractors have become much more active recently.

Maria Zakharova: Don't you think that this issue, just like in any other free society, should be addressed by civil society? If there are people who don't like it, there must also be someone who will defend him, if they believe it's the right thing to do. I think that holding such debates is what a democratic state and a free civil society are all about. Therefore, if you believe that this is a worthy cause, and this issue is important to you, I think you simply need to use the resources and the potential of civil society to uphold your point of view. I don't think there should be any special resource here. Once again, I am not a local resident, but your guest. So, this is what I can tell you on this account.

Question: I would like to ask what you think.

Maria Zakharova: For me to be able to tell you what I think, I need information. I will be able to express my viewpoint when I get access to such information.

Question: Crimean researchers have been practically cut off from the rest of the academic world over the past three years. Crimea hosts significant Russian and even international conferences. However, none of them has ever made it to the Scopus international database. In addition, a department of Sevastopol State University signed an agreement with the University of Berlin last year. However, the German Foreign Ministry did not issue visas for our researchers, and they are unable to travel. Here's my question: can the Russian Foreign Ministry help Crimean researchers in that regard?

Maria Zakharova: Please send us all the papers, and we will make appropriate steps. I'm aware of this issue. It concerns not only your university, but many others as well, because, I reiterate, let's face it: people are being punished for the choice they have made. They punish individuals, and, unfortunately they do so in a perverted manner making sure it hurts. Well, that's what the historic choice is all about. So, please let us have your information and we will see what we can do for you.

Question: The rector of our university asked me to ask you the following question. Do you think that, since we are not welcome in the West, our university, as well as other higher educational institutions of Crimea, could become an instrument of Russia's soft power in the Black Sea region, the Middle East, or the Mediterranean?

Maria Zakharova: I think that the mission of any university is to become a high-class educational institution that turns out top-notch specialists. This is their number one goal. If it's achieved, and if these specialists enjoy demand both in our country and abroad, then this will be a soft power tool. Being on this soil, having proper knowledge and showing their best qualities, the people can use their actions and skills

to tell the world about Crimea.

Question: In February 2017, Crimean businessman Yevgeny Kabanov sent a letter to President Trump saying that the people of Sevastopol and Crimea are hoping to see positive changes in relations between Russia and the United States. The issue concerned people's diplomacy, namely, that a negative attitude towards what is happening in Crimea and Sevastopol and in Russia in general is currently being formed across the world. Mr Kabanov believes it is important to expand the people's diplomacy reach, that is, to attract and to increase the flow of regional politicians, businesspeople, including leading ones, as well as regular people, who will come to Crimea and Sevastopol and see with their own eyes everything that is happening here and take this information back to their countries, so that the information does not come only from TV channels like CNN. What does the Foreign Ministry do to promote people's diplomacy?

Maria Zakharova: I'll need more than one hour to tell what the Foreign Ministry is doing in that regard. We are working actively with public organisations, such as NGOs. Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov holds meetings with them, and corresponding ministerial departments work regularly with them as well, including the activities to promote them on the international arena, because, as someone has just mentioned, they are often not allowed to go there physically being unable to obtain visas under far-fetched pretexts.

In addition to the microphone and the screen, the work with young people is conducted directly using a variety of youth forums. Speeches are being organised, and support and counseling are being provided. Work with young people is being carried out even within our ministry - we have corresponding organisations for young diplomats. Work is being done to support our cultural component, which includes creative groups and active promotion of cooperation in culture, art, etc. All of that, one way or another, is connected with people's diplomacy.

I'd be remiss not to mention support provided to civil and personal initiatives, which are of interest for Russian institutions abroad. Every day, our citizens, compatriots or foreign citizens come to our embassies with their ideas, and some of them get implemented.

That also includes our awareness raising work to promote Russia's foreign policy. This work is conducted with the media and NGOs.

I would also like to point out that people's diplomacy today is multifaceted. Of course, it includes work with students. We offer several courses at MGIMO University and other universities, which also focus on forming understanding and interest in international relations with young people. We share an ambitious plan with one Russian university. I will not announce it now. Perhaps, we will unveil it in the summer. There's a wide range of measures and steps that we are using in our practice.