

French Minister for Europe and Foreign Affairs Jean-Yves Le Drian's visit to the Russian Federation

On September 8, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov will receive French Minister for Europe and Foreign Affairs Jean-Yves Le Drian during his short working visit to Moscow. The regular meeting of the ministers, organised at Paris' initiative, is intended to develop the agreements reached during the talks between Russian President Vladimir Putin and French President Emmanuel Macron on May 29 in Versailles.

During the upcoming meeting, the officials plan to discuss the main topics of the bilateral agenda, as well as the situation in Syria and other key international issues our countries are responsible for as permanent members of the UN Security Council.

Deputy Foreign Minister Alexey Meshkov's working visit to Slovenia

On September 4-5, Deputy Foreign Minister Alexey Meshkov will take part in the Bled Strategic Forum in the Republic of Slovenia at the invitation of the Slovenian side. It is planned that Mr Meshkov will speak at the plenary session "New vision for a new reality" dedicated to a discussion of the opportunities for countries to respond to common challenges and threats together.

In the context of European issues, presumably the focus will be on the situation in the Balkans and returning the region to the path of stability and cooperation as soon as possible. Russia will reaffirm its desire to see post-conflict settlement processes advance in a balanced way.

Deputy Foreign Minister Alexey Meshkov plans to meet with foreign policy officials from several countries of Southeast Europe and the EU on the sidelines of the Forum. A meeting with Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister of Slovenia Karl Erjavec will take place, as well as consultations with Andrej Logar, State Secretary of the Slovenian Foreign Ministry.

Current situation in Syria

Positive dynamics persists in the Syrian Arab Republic. The situation in the de-escalation zones is considered to be stable. The Syrian Government continues its efforts to bring stability to the country and to improve the humanitarian situation of the population, which has been severely affected by the protracted conflict.

With the support of the Russian Centre for the Reconciliation of Opposing Sides, it has become possible to hold several meetings via video linkup involving governors from a number of southern Syrian regions and representatives of territories controlled by armed non-extremist groups. In a constructive exchange, the parties discussed specific issues of restoring peaceful life, reactivating infrastructure, including power and water supply facilities, and resolving other issues, including preparations for the new academic year. Syrian authorities have confirmed their social obligations to citizens, regardless of their place of residence. It has been agreed that all schools, including those in areas controlled by the armed opposition, will receive textbooks and teaching aids on time, and that teachers will continue to receive their salaries. Certain progress is being posted in Eastern Ghouta, where the warring parties have exchanged prisoners and hostages. The Jaysh al-Islam group has released 11 Syrian soldiers in exchange for 40 militants. Damascus expects that all hostages who had been seized by Jihadists in 2013 during an attack on the Syrian capital's Adra suburb will be released during the Eid al-Adha sacrifice feast or immediately after it.

Illegal paramilitary units are becoming divided against the backdrop of the news about agreements reached between the Russian military and representatives of the Jaysh al-Tawhid group on de-blocking

the Damascus-Homs motorway on the Telbis side and deploying the Russian military police units there. The Council of the so-called Coordination Headquarters of the Northern Homs Governorate, which technically consists of seven groups of militants but in reality is run by Jabhat al-Nusra, has decided to expel Jaysh al-Tawhid from its ranks because of an argument over the de-escalation zone. But far from all militants have recognised this decision as legitimate, and many militants have preferred to distance themselves from it.

Abu Jaber Shaykh, the “Military Emir” of the Jabhat al-Nusra-led Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham group, has voiced his group’s readiness to disband, provided that other groups operating in Idlib and neighbouring governorates would follow their example and merge with an integral military organisation under joint command. One gets the impression that Jabhat al-Nusra members have come to believe in the salvation power of another routine rebranding, and they believe that another change in their organisation’s form and name will help them get removed from the list of terrorist organisations. However, all these attempts to step back from responsibility for their crimes and to become “legalised” are doomed to failure. The UN Security Council’s members have listed Jabhat al-Nusra and other Al Qaeda affiliated groups among terrorist organisations, with all the ensuing consequences.

The Syrian Army continues to exercise strategic initiative in all the main sectors and continues to pressure ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra militants.

Government forces are consistently liquidating a large group of ISIS militants who have been surrounded near Akerbat in Homs Governorate. A successful offensive continues in the direction of Deir ez-Zor. Some alarming reports are coming in. According to our information, the Shabab al-Sunnah paramilitary group has access to chemical weapons. Today, this group’s munitions warehouse in Bosra Al-Sham contains several rockets with toxic agents. The militants are planning to use these weapons in Daraa Governorate, most likely in Hiran, Nawa, Inkhil, Jamila, Tafas and Deira . As usual, government forces will once again be blamed for launching a chemical attack against civilians.

Trench warfare continues in Raqqa, with Syrian democratic forces failing to make substantial progress in the city’s central districts. Air force units of the US-led so-called international anti-ISIS coalition actively support Kurdish units. At the same time, we deeply regret that air strikes are hitting civilians, as well as terrorists. A city hospital has been hit once again recently.

The situation on the Syrian-Lebanese border

Moscow welcomes the recent counterterrorist operation conducted by Lebanese and Syrian troops with the support of Hezbollah to drive militants of ISIS, Jabhat al-Nusra and affiliated structures out of hard-to-reach areas on the Lebanese-Syrian border. We believe that its success has seriously undermined the international terrorists’ potential to carry out their planned large-scale expansion and contributed to bolstering the national sovereignty of the two neighbouring countries – Lebanon and Syria. The terrorists suffered a major military defeat. They were crushed and, which is also very important, demoralised. As for concrete parameters of the aforementioned operation, it would be logical to turn for relevant explanations to its direct leaders.

Russia invariably and consistently stands for waging an uncompromising battle against terrorism in all its forms and manifestations and believes there is a crucial need for broadly consolidated efforts by all parties concerned in order to eradicate this global threat.

The financial standing of ISIS

I would also like to say a couple of words about the financial standing of ISIS. We have repeatedly brought up this topic, saying that, regrettably, major financial backing of this terrorist organisation in

many respects and over many years has ensured its successful advancement.

The losses the ISIS terrorist group sustained in Syria and Iraq have significantly reduced its opportunities to generate profit, especially from trade in hydrocarbons. As a result of operations by the Russian Aerospace Forces in Syria, over 15,000 ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra targets have been destroyed since September 2015, including more than 200 oil and gas extraction sites, 176 oil refineries, 112 fuel pumping stations and around 4,000 fuel tanks. In 2016, the ISIS budget received \$200-250 million in fresh revenues from trade in oil and oil products. This is significantly lower, compared with \$1 billion the year before. Faced with stiff resistance from the international community in Syria and Iraq, the so-called Islamic State is adapting to the new conditions, boosting revenues through the taxation of the territories it controls, extortions and ransom kidnappings, expanding trade in antiquities and human organs, receiving profit from direct investment in fish farming enterprises in Iraq and stock market speculation. In October 2016, the Financial Action Task Force on Money Laundering (FATF), during its session in Paris, unveiled reports about ISIS attempts to invest in construction businesses in Germany and in real estate in Europe, the United States, including New York, and also in Turkey. I would like to repeat this once more, otherwise we risk being accused again of interfering in someone's affairs. The case in point is the FATF international plenary session held in October 2016.

In these circumstances, Russia stands for further coordinated moves to combat this terrorist group. In June, we circulated among the UN Security Council members a draft resolution on introducing trade and economic embargo against the ISIS-controlled territories. We are also proposing to establish close practical multilateral cooperation between special services in a bid to expose countries, individuals and legal entities maintaining economic ties with ISIS and subsequently curb their criminal activities.

On-the-spot reporting by a VGTRK crew headed by Yevgeny Poddubny on the US coalition's actions in Syria

We paid attention to the on-the-spot reporting by VGTRK correspondents headed by Yevgeny Poddubny, who is now working in Syria. These reports aired on television today; they were broadcast by the Rossiya 24 channel, and were also posted on the internet.

Of course, these materials require a careful review by the relevant agencies, including international ones. According to the reports, the so-called US-led anti-terrorist coalition is not fighting terrorists in the south of Syria, but is actually pursuing its own goals. One of them is creating its zone of influence in this country, which is bled white by the war on terror. For this purpose, according to eyewitnesses, various methods are used, up to the direct transfer of foreign-made weapons to militants, which is what happened at the al-Tanf base in the south of the country.

I urge everyone once again to have a look at the series of investigative reporting by the VGTRK team. They include materials and information that were provided by eyewitnesses. These data are available to the public. Once again, we call upon the relevant international agencies to carefully verify these data and come up with appropriate assessments.

Situation in Yemen

The situation in the Republic of Yemen remains extremely tense. A bloody civil conflict has been going on in the country for more than two years. The area of combat operations is expanding. The most fierce clashes are reported in the central and southwestern parts of Yemen (the Maarib and Taiz provinces, respectively), as well as in the north, including Hajja, Saada and Al Jawf. This has an extremely negative impact on the country's rapidly worsening socioeconomic situation.

We are concerned by the high intensity of airstrikes by the Arab coalition on Yemeni cities and towns that

often lead to civilian casualties. Thus, according to the UN, on August 25, over 30 civilians were killed when a residential area in the south of the Yemeni capital Sana was hit as a result of yet another technical mistake. We hope that the ongoing investigation into this incident will be as objective and effective as possible and will help avoid new civilian casualties in Yemen.

Moscow still believes that there is no alternative to the early cessation of violence in the country and the resolution of all problems on the intra-Yemeni agenda at the negotiating table under the aegis of the UN as part of a broad national dialogue, taking into account the interests of all Yemenis without exception. We also believe it is necessary to ensure unconditional compliance with the norms of international humanitarian law in Yemen, alleviate the suffering of the country's people and provide unhindered humanitarian access to all of its regions. For its part, Russia will continue to do all it can to facilitate these efforts.

Situation in Iraq

Moscow welcomes the successes of the Iraqi armed forces fighting ISIS. That said, the recent liberation of Tal Afar – one of the last terrorist bases in Iraq – does not mean that this evil has been eradicated. A lot of effort will still have to be taken to that end. Fighting is ongoing northwest of Tal Afar in the al-Ayadia district, and the town of Hawija is still under ISIS control. Meanwhile, the humanitarian situation is cause for concern. Over 900,000 Mosul residents had to flee their homes for safer parts of the country when hostilities broke out. According to some estimates, about a quarter of them have now returned to their homes. All of them are in need of aid.

The war has exposed another serious problem – i.e., the “children of war.” According to UNICEF Iraq, about 3,800 children have been separated from their families as a result of the operation to free Mosul. Russia is working to find out how many of them may be Russian or of Russian descent. As they arrive at Iraqi orphanages they need to be identified to confirm their connections to their families who are looking for them. The Foreign Ministry is working on this, as are our embassy in Baghdad, our consulate general in Erbil; Presidential Adviser and Council for Civil Society and Human Rights Chairman Mikhail Fedotov, and Presidential Commissioner for Children's Rights Anna Kuznetsova, and naturally, all of these efforts are being closely coordinated with the Iraqi authorities.

We support the Iraqi government's steps to restore the country's sovereignty and territorial integrity. Intra-Iraqi national conciliation and harmony is a guarantee of stability and constructive development.

We are also convinced that this goal can be achieved through an inclusive dialogue in the interest of all Iraqis, based on respect for and compliance with constitutional principles. We act on the premise that the upcoming parliamentary elections, which, as we hope, will take place within the timeframe established by the law, will be an important landmark down this path.

Developments in Afghanistan

The situation concerning security in Afghanistan remains complicated.

The Taliban have not eased their pressure on the national security forces and stage large-scale attacks around the country. Over the past week, the Taliban conducted offensive operations in the provinces of Baghlan, Nuristan, Ghazni, Helmand, Zabol as well as in Urozgan. Numerous casualties have been reported among Afghan servicemen and civilians.

Regrettably, the situation in Kabul has not stabilised despite additional measures that have been taken to enhance security in the Afghan capital. On August 29, five people were killed and eight were wounded in a terrorist attack staged by the Taliban at a bank in central Kabul.

We have taken note of the continued attempts to spur religious strife in Afghanistan. On August 25, the

Afghan wing of the terrorist group ISIS staged a terrorist attack on the Imam Zaman Shiite mosque in Kabul. Over 30 civilians were killed and some 80 were wounded in this attack. We send our condolences to the families and friends of the dead and wish all those who were wounded a speedy recovery. We again urge the Afghan authorities to protect the safety of their people and to prevent a split in society due to ethnic and religious differences.

Situation on the Korean Peninsula

We regret to say that North Korea yet again violated UN Security Council resolutions by launching a ballistic missile, which flew over the territory of Japan on August 28.

We urge the conflicting parties to show restraint, act responsibly and put an end to their militant rhetoric and actions. A competition on who is stronger, which we are witnessing, can only push the region towards a military conflict. Wouldn't it be better to compete in something else, like who can prepare and possibly implement the best scenario for a peaceful settlement?

We have also noticed that only Russia and China have so far advanced a practicable initiative on a comprehensive political and diplomatic settlement of the Korean problems, including the nuclear one. We again urge all the sides involved to launch a dialogue on the basis of the Russian-Chinese roadmap without delay and without advancing any preconditions.

Polish authorities revise their previous decision on Russia's participation in creating a new Sobibor Memorial Museum

Doubtless, the news from Poland about inviting Russia to take part in events marking the 75th anniversary of an uprising at the former Nazi concentration camp in Sobibor is positive. Russia sees this date as infinitely important; this is an inalienable part of the Russian nation's history, accompanied by painful losses and pride for our common victory over Nazism.

However, one is dismayed over comments surrounding Warsaw's invitation. These comments clearly show that the Polish side continues to justify its refusal to allow Russia to fully take part in a project to upgrade the Sobibor Museum. And all this is taking place against the backdrop of statements from other countries, members of the project's International Management Committee, including Israel, that have supported Russia's participation. Now that all countries have openly supported Russia's participation in this project, it is obvious who exactly opposed Russia's joining the project. Warsaw's assurances that the decision to bar Russia from the project has no negative implications with regard to this country are simply ridiculous.

The public should not be misled by claims that the Russian side had allegedly and only recently, requested that it be included on the list of project participants. These statements are very strange. It is hard to imagine that people are deliberately making these statements because the facts and documents are available.

Here is a brief history of the issue. In 2013, the Polish Ministry of Culture and National Heritage invited Russia to take part in upgrading the museum. Russia immediately expressed a willingness to participate and even to make a substantial financial contribution. Poland then deliberately delayed a final resolution of the issue, and is now saying that too much time has passed, and that the project is close to completion. It should be noted that the Russian side is striving to take part in upgrading the museum not simply because of the personality of Alexander Pechersky, the Red Army officer who led the history-making uprising at the concentration camp. We must do this for the sake of perpetrating the memory of all of the victims of those terrible events and all inmates of Nazi concentration camps.

Just the other day, we were dismayed to read a statement by Jaroslaw Sellin, Deputy Minister of Culture

and National Heritage of the Republic of Poland. It was published August 30 by the Polish Press Agency. For example, the statement noted that Russia had allegedly delayed its response. I repeat, many people, including Polish officials, said that no one had invited Russia, and that the Russian side had made a last-minute decision to participate and thus upset the plans. All this is not so.

We realise the need for submitting the appropriate facts. In confirmation of my words, we will show you a copy of a letter by Piotr Zuchowski, First Deputy Minister of Culture and National Heritage of the Republic of Poland and Chief Curator of Monuments, and Wladyslaw Bartoszewski, State Secretary at the Office of the Prime Minister, Plenipotentiary Envoy of the Prime Minister for Inter-Ethnic Dialogue, to Alexander Alexeyev, Ambassador of the Russian Federation to the Republic of Poland. In this letter, the Polish side took the initiative and presented several arguments inviting Russia to take part in this project. This letter will be posted on official Foreign Ministry accounts and on social networks.

It seems to me that there is no need to comment on this document. I would like to note once again that this is not a Russian press release, but rather an authentic official document that was submitted to the Russian Embassy.

In addition, I would like to say that, in June 2015, the Polish side sent its standard request suggesting that Russia provide additional explanations regarding the modality of its participation in the project. That same year, Moscow sent a reply to the Polish side, by agreement with the Russian Ministry of Culture, setting forth detailed and specific data and information about Russia's tentative financial contribution, as well as a list of Russian agencies and organisations, including the Ministry of Culture, the Defence Ministry, Foreign Ministry, the Russian Federal Archival Agency, the Russian Military Historical Society and the Central Museum of the Great Patriotic War of 1941–1945.

Again, all this data was submitted to the Polish side in 2015. As you understand, when we are talking about very large sums and the involvement of state agencies, all this calls for intra-state coordination. All this was done. In 2015, all aspects of Russian participation were submitted to Warsaw in response to the Polish side's invitation.

The peculiar interpretation of freedom of expression by the Ukrainian authorities

Yesterday, we were shocked by the Kiev regime's actions with regard to Russian journalists that we promptly commented on. This can hardly be described as anything other than an abduction of a Russian journalist, in this case Anna Kurbatova, a Channel 1 reporter. How else can you describe a situation where people who do not introduce themselves seize a person's mobile phones and documents in broad daylight and do not allow her to make a phone call to a diplomatic mission or to her family or relatives or her employer? Then that person disappears from the media field for several hours and it is only under enormous pressure from the public, media colleagues, journalists, including representatives of Russian executive government agencies, that meagre information is eventually provided to the effect that the correspondent has been detained by Ukrainian security services, and this is not the first time. We were also shocked by the fact that we have heard no assessment of these actions by Kiev from any high-ranking international official or representative of any other country.

We see the concern that is shown about everything that happens to civil society members in various situations in other countries. Why then has there been no reaction with regard to Russian journalists? Yesterday, we also heard the Ukrainian Security Service explain its actions, saying that it does not like the content and substance of Channel 1 reporting. Is that not censorship? A correspondent who openly works in the Ukrainian capital, in front of everybody, not underground, and who does not disseminate any illegal material but works openly is called a national security threat – you know, this is some new word in a sphere that is commonly known as freedom of the media and freedom of expression. To reiterate, this can cause nothing but shock. We have taken note of the comment on the issue made by an OSCE

representative. However, I would like to draw your attention to the fact that this is not the first such incident with Russian journalists in Ukraine.

In my opinion, it is necessary to draw systemic conclusions, not make careful, general comments that we see on social media.

One of the explanations given to Russia of what is going on with our journalists, in particular in Ukraine, but also in EU member countries, is that the authorities of those countries regard members of the Russian media as propagandists.

Continuing propaganda on Lithuanian social networks

I will give you an example of how Lithuanian propagandists work and for some reason nobody strips them of accreditation or puts them in an interrogation room or seizes their mobile phones and holds them incommunicado, as was the case with the Channel 1 reporter yesterday.

We have already drawn attention to the spam-like activity of Lithuanian Internet users. They continue to post stamped-from-the-mould, absolutely meaningless comments on social networks on a massive scale, in particular on the Foreign Ministry's web pages. The reason I mention it in this context is that this activity is not self-motivated: it was caused and provoked by, among others, journalists who are official representatives of media outlets that have urged the people of their countries to take targeted efforts with regard to Russia in cyberspace.

Recently, such comments have been centred around the obsessive idea that Germany and the Soviet Union were equally responsible for unleashing World War II. We understand very well that this is a provocation; these are not real users who express their opinions but people who were co-opted by propagandists (there is no other way to describe them). Needless to say, we will keep track of this topic and provide extended commentaries that will be widely available (we will make no secret of them). First of all, we will send them to the relevant international bodies that deal with propaganda issues, protecting freedom of expression, in particular the OSCE, since this is a concrete example of how propagandists work and how cyber operations are initiated by propagandists-slash-journalists.

Has anybody seen anything of the kind, for example, a news and analysis show host on Channel 1 urge users to take not civil action with regard to particular issues but carry out targeted cyberattacks against official resources? I don't think so. Meanwhile, our journalists are called propagandists and nobody even wants to remember the cases I have just mentioned.

Using Mozambique's debt to Russia to implement development projects under the UN World Food Programme

The Government of Mozambique has started implementing its versatile National School Meals Programme in cooperation with the World Food Programme (UNWFP) and under a bilateral intergovernmental agreement on using Mozambique's debt to Russia to finance development projects in Mozambique. This programme provides for converting part of the Mozambican debt amounting to \$40 million to various events aimed not only at solving the problem of chronic child malnutrition in Mozambique but also at enlisting an increasing number of school-age children to take up primary education. It is planned to use food products produced by local peasant farms, which should facilitate the development of agricultural commodity production and eventually create conditions for strengthening food security in the country.

For the UNWFP, with which Russia has for long maintained fruitful cooperation, participating in this large-scale conversion programme based on the Debt in Exchange for Development model is the first experience of this kind and it attaches much importance to its success. Our country, one of the main

donors of this major United Nations humanitarian organisation, works consistently to diversify forms of assistance to countries in need. Along with traditional food aid, the UNWFP's transportation and logistical potential has been strengthened and the spectrum of instruments used to finance our international humanitarian activities has been expanded. Given that Russia has identical intergovernmental agreements with Tanzania and Madagascar, which also provide for using their debt to finance development projects, we hope for effective implementation of the relevant agreements as a means of strengthening Russia's positions as an international donor.

The Days of Moscow in Astana

Between August 23-25, Astana hosted the Days of Moscow, a major event in the two capitals' cultural dialogue, which were a great success.

The Moscow delegation included over 200 members and was led by Moscow Government Minister Sergey Cheryomin. The delegation members were received by Astana Akim (Mayor) Aset Isekeshev and Metropolitan of Astana and Kazakhstan, Alexander.

The programme of the Days of Moscow included the Modern Technology for Smart Cities business forum, where urban development, transportation infrastructure modernization, introduction of digital technology in city economy, social development, and other issues were discussed.

We are satisfied with the steady growth of trade between Moscow companies and their Kazakh partners, which reached \$800 million during the first six months of this year.

The Days of Moscow included the conference on upgrading the skills of Russian language teachers in Kazakhstan with the help of professors and teachers from the leading Moscow universities.

There was also a cultural programme, with the Turetsky Choir art group and other Russian companies once again presenting brilliant performances.

The Days of Moscow are yet another memorable landmark in the year of the 25th anniversary of diplomatic relations between the Russian Federation and the Republic of Kazakhstan.

Update on Russian citizen Maria Dapirka, detained in Vietnam on suspicion of drug trafficking

Russian national Maria Dapirka was detained on August 23, 2014 at Tan Son Nhat Airport (Ho Chi Minh).

During this time, Russian diplomatic missions in Vietnam (the embassy in Hanoi and the consulate general in Ho Chi Minh) have been providing Ms Dapirka with assistance in defending her civil rights in accordance with consular procedure and current legislation. Consular officers regularly visit the detainee at the pretrial detention facility and stay in touch with her relatives. Ms Dapirka's interests in court are represented by a local defence lawyer.

The trial that was set for August 30 has been rescheduled. Following the counsel's petition, the case was returned for further investigation, since the material presented by the prosecutor's office lacked conclusive evidence regarding the amount of narcotic substances that were brought in or the fact that Ms Dapirka was aware of the contents of the bag with drugs.

Naturally, the Foreign Ministry and our missions abroad are closely watching the situation.

Foreign Ministry launches Chinese-language website

Today we are launching a Chinese section of the official website of the Foreign Ministry. Our website will have yet another language version. It will not be as complete as the Russian version, however, we will select news stories for Chinese users, as well as Chinese speakers, that will be of priority interest to

them. The Chinese-language version will also contain photos, current news and a variety of sections. This is part of our effort to promote and expand the availability of the information posted on the Foreign Ministry's official website.

I believe that this step is in line with the tasks of fostering bilateral relations, comprehensive strategic partnership and engagement that have already reached an unprecedentedly high level.

I would like to reiterate that the Chinese-language version of the website has gone online today but will only be available in a test mode. We are looking forward to comments and proposals from our users. We are prepared to respond to them promptly.

I invite our Chinese friends to the website. Huaning guan ling!

From answers to media questions:

Question: Recently, Richard Hoagland, former co-chair of the OSCE Minsk Group, outlined what he described as principles for a Nagorno-Karabakh settlement. I am sure you know about them. How should Mr Hoagland's statement be treated – as only the US opinion on the Nagorno-Karabakh settlement process or as the co-chairs' consensus position? Can you also comment on the appointment of a new US co-chair?

Maria Zakharova: The statements that you've cited are nothing new. The Russian, US and French presidents have repeatedly referred to them in their joint statements on the Nagorno-Karabakh settlement process from 2009 through 2013. You can read them and find the relevant quotes.

As for the appointment of the new US co-chair, we welcome it. We act on the premise that in their new lineup the co-chairs will continue their efforts to facilitate a settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. We hope that the team spirit that has always been characteristic of the troika will be preserved.

Question: This morning, a group of officers attached to the personal representative of the OSCE chairman came under fire as they monitored the Armenia-Azerbaijan border. According to preliminary reports, there were no casualties. Reports say the attack originated on the Azerbaijani side. Does Russia intend to initiate a meeting between the foreign ministers of the parties to the conflict to accelerate preparations for the next presidential summit that will consider this issue, among others? Firing on an OSCE officer is an unprecedented incident.

Maria Zakharova: During conflicts, escalations and complications, we have always urged the sides involved to follow a balanced approach so as not to escalate tensions but move toward a political settlement. You know what our traditional assessment is.

As for the incident you mentioned, experts will have their say after they study the circumstances on the ground.

I have no information regarding plans to call a meeting of foreign ministers. As you know, dialogue is maintained with all parties at the expert level through the contact group. If and when it is necessary to call such a meeting you will be duly informed. As of right now I do not have such information.

Question: Baku constantly raises the question about the need for opening substantive talks. Is it not time that Russia, as co-chair of the OSCE Minsk Group, initiate bringing Nagorno-Karabakh de facto back to the negotiating process? Otherwise it is impossible to ensure substantive talks.

Maria Zakharova: You know our established position on the issue. I can refer you to our earlier comments.

Question: Tension in North Korea-US relations have greatly escalated since the missile launch on August 28. Is there a possibility that Russia will act as a mediator between North Korea and other countries concerned, and hold bilateral talks with North Korea or a similar event?

Maria Zakharova: As you know, we are in contact with the US, South Korea, North Korea, China and all those involved in the settlement process. We also maintain contacts on a bilateral basis. As for mediation, why not regard the Russian-Chinese initiative to bring the situation back on course peacefully and stop further escalation? The initiative is on the table. It is available, understandable and, in our view, absolutely viable.

As you know, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov has had a series of meetings with his counterparts in Manila. Naturally, this topic was discussed via bilateral channels. It is important for all regional players. We reaffirmed the relevance of the Russian-Chinese initiative at the UN Security Council. We do so publicly. High-ranking Foreign Ministry representatives have talked about this. Our efforts along these lines can be described as proactive.

You're absolutely right: What is going on in the region cannot but worry us. We talked about this today, as did Russian Permanent Representative to the UN Vasily Nebenzya. Rhetoric coming from a number of capitals, as voiced by their official representatives and political circles, is cause for concern. All efforts should be aimed at resolving the situation by political and diplomatic means, not discussing the use of force, even in theory.

To reiterate, everything that is required for talks is on the table. Simply, political will is needed to act on these proposals.

Question: What would Russia's response be if the US used military force against North Korea?

Maria Zakharova: The idea is not to allow this hypothetically, in theory or in practice.

Question: Recently, a national reconciliation committee was created in the Kurdish city of Afrin on the initiative of the Russian Centre for Reconciliation in Syria. Does this mean that the Kurdish side will be included in the political settlement of the Syria crisis? This has not been done yet.

Maria Zakharova: We have always believed that the Kurds should have a role in the political settlement process, since we regard them essentially as an inalienable part of a political settlement. We constantly make this position known to our colleagues and partners officially and during our contacts. In this situation, we see no chance for a comprehensive settlement without bringing on board the Kurdish forces that you've mentioned.

Question: You said that following the agreements between Lebanon, Hezbollah and the Syrian Government, a group of ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra militants was moved to the border with Iraq. The Iraqi Government and the Kurdish autonomy have expressed their concern. Do you think this can further escalate tension in these territories?

Maria Zakharova: This question should not be addressed to me, since it belongs in the domain of political and military expert forecasts.

Question: Can you comment on another aspect of the problem of the Korean Peninsula? As we know, Russia has strongly condemned North Korea's recent missile launches but Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov stressed in a conversation with US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson that Russia

believes the further toughening of sanctions would be counterproductive and dangerous. Could you clarify Russia's position, since it may appear contradictory?

Maria Zakharova: There are no contradictions here. A lot of sanctions have been imposed on North Korea. This set of instruments is working but unfortunately, it is not bringing the desired results because it is necessary not to tighten the sanctions screws (especially unilaterally, pursuing one's own line on top of UN Security Council decisions) but to follow the clear-cut path of a political-diplomatic settlement. This involves not only a sanctions policy but also talks, meetings, dialogues and multilateral and bilateral formats that are the first steps down this path. The point is that it is practically impossible to get the situation off the ground with pressure from sanctions alone. We are seeing this in practice. This is precisely what Russia is saying. There are international sanctions pressure tools (when they are legitimised by the UN Security Council). We have fully subscribed to the decisions that we helped draft. We are committed to them. However, without a political-diplomatic path and negotiating process, this pressure will not bring the result that we are seeking and that we have subscribed to. That is the point. There is no double dealing or double standards here. Our position is that sanctions are a tool, an addition to the main line, which is a political-diplomatic solution.

Question: Two days ago, Deputy Foreign Minister Igor Morgulov had a meeting with US Ambassador to Moscow John Tefft devoted to the new US strategy in Afghanistan. In this context, what is your view of the prospects for international cooperation in bringing about peace in Afghanistan?

Maria Zakharova: We addressed the new US strategy on Afghanistan in detail at our previous briefing. This assessment is available on the Foreign Ministry's website. As for international cooperation, it has a variety of forms, including the UN role. Many have already forgotten that the UN Security Council has mandated US presence in Afghanistan, which involves giving an account to Security Council members and the international community on the work done and the steps planned. This should also involve bringing on board regional players and organisations, for example, the SCO with its anti-terrorist structures. They should be engaged in the settlement process – fighting terrorism in Afghanistan. These are just a few examples of how international cooperation in this area can and should proceed. Unfortunately, we are seeing Washington's unilateral policy in this sphere. The US has long been playing the leading role here. The results are plain to see. They are not encouraging and not inspiring. Now a new strategy has been made public. We observe a kind of seesaw in the way Washington formulates its Afghanistan strategy. It is constantly changing. Unfortunately, these changes are not backed up by positive results on the ground. If you are interested, I can prepare a more detailed analysis on this topic next time.

Question: In an interview with the Dozhd television channel, you said that Russia did not make the decision to reduce the US diplomatic corps but only suggested that the US consider doing so. Would it be correct to say that in the language of diplomacy, this "suggestion" is a polite form of demand?

Maria Zakharova: Diplomacy is all about finding various options for addressing problems. For more than half a year, we have proposed various solutions to the US on ways of dealing with the situation that has evolved. You remember very well how the events developed and you know about the amount of sanctions-related pressure and the decision to impose sanctions against Russia that the US made. We remember the last "gesture of ill will" on the part of the Barack Obama administration that declared [a number of] Russian diplomats personae non grata and expelled them. Nevertheless, as you remember, no

tit-for-tat measures were taken. For half a year, there was no silent waiting for an opportunity to come up, but attempts were constantly made to invite the US to open dialogue and there were several rounds of expert-level talks on ways of overcoming the situation. It was stated during those talks, among other things, that unless the situation was resolved, unfortunately, response measures would have to be taken. And this is exactly what happened. Therefore, the US side received the suggestion that it received. The statement was made public both in Russian as well as in English and I don't think there were any problems when it came to the translation of it. It was a suggestion. As you understand, Russia slammed the door but did not put a padlock on it. The padlock was put on by the US.

Question: If the US had rejected the suggestion, what would have been the next steps?

Maria Zakharova: Why don't you put this question to the US? Or have you already done so?

Question: We wrote to the US Embassy.

Maria Zakharova: What did they say?

Question: So far nothing.

Maria Zakharova: This is exactly the answer to your question. We also asked what we should do but received no response for months.

We did not decide for the US what to do with its employees. That was done by the US by declaring Russian diplomats *personae non grata*. What's more, as you know, unfortunately, declaring someone *persona non grata* is routine diplomatic practice. Much of what happens in the outside world does not become known in the public domain, is done behind closed doors. Something leaks into the media. When diplomats are expelled, new ones arrive, since the host country had specific complaints about the work of particular officers. Do you know that the US did not issue visas to the Russian diplomats who were to replace the 35 officers declared *personae non grata*? Visa applications were submitted so that those officers could work, replacing those who were expelled but the US did not grant them visas.

Just as you say you asked the US Embassy but got no response, likewise, we have been living more or less the same way for the past several months now. We often get no coherent explanation of what is going on or what the overall strategy could be. So Russia made the decision that was made public in the form of a suggestion. This statement was posted on the Foreign Ministry's website. The US reaction was what it was.

To reiterate, we did all we could not to lock the door – it was Washington that turned the key in the lock.

Question: Newly-appointed Russian Ambassador to the United States Anatoly Antonov said in an interview with the newspaper Kommersant that he would do his best to convince the Americans that we are not enemies. This sounds positive. Do you believe that it is a positive sign and that our relations can improve? How will Antonov's mission differ from that of his predecessor, Sergey Kislyak?

Maria Zakharova: Much of what is said sounds positive until CNN distorts it.

I am glad that you have taken note of Mr Antonov's interview with Kommersant, but unfortunately CNN does not take note of much of what is posted on the Foreign Ministry's website or said during briefings and news conferences.

With your perfect Russian and knowledge of Russia, you should know that we have never relied on

aggressive rhetoric in our relations with the United States. We have always left the door open even despite sanctions, pressure, attempts to drive Russia into isolation and all kinds of insidious information tricks. We could close the door partially, saying that our response was pending, but we also always said that we were set for positive relations and that our initial desire, which we never abandoned, was to have normal relations with the United States. We never said that these relations would be cloudless, because we take a realistic stand and know everything about matters where our points of view overlap and where they differ, including very serious divergence. But we also said that our differences can be left behind and that we can work together on issues of common concern. The President of Russia, the Foreign Minister and Russian ambassadors spoke about this in numerous interviews and at news conferences. You will not find a single example of our aggressive rhetoric. We have never said that the United States is an aggressor regarding Russia or that we view the United States as an enemy; quite to the contrary. Despite what Washington officials have said, our newly-appointed ambassador to the United States has expressed our present position during his interview.

I have a question for you. How do you present this information and our position to the American audiences? I don't think that the Americans regularly monitor the website of the Russian Foreign Ministry. They receive their information from the American media, and their attitude to Russia largely depends on how CNN presents Moscow's position.

Question: I just want an honest answer to a simple question. Will something differ when Mr Antonov assumes his office in the United States?

Maria Zakharova: Differ from what? It's good that you have asked a clear question. Can you formulate it more clearly, though? You have asked if something will differ when Mr Antonov assumes office. Differ from what?

Question: From what happened to Ambassador Kislyak.

Maria Zakharova: What happened to him?

Question: He was criticised. Do you hope for improvement or for change?

Maria Zakharova: I want to give an absolutely clear answer to your very simple question. You said that something happened to Ambassador Kislyak. I asked what happened to him. You replied that he was criticised. My question is who criticised him?

Question: You know the answer.

Maria Zakharova: Of course I do. He was criticised by the American media and by representatives of the Democratic Party (if you can call this criticism) who lost the presidential election. These Democrats and the American media are still there, in Washington. Now, a new Russian ambassador comes to the United States, and I have a question for you: Do you intend to objectively report what he says and does, or will you carry on the same old policy towards Russia?

Question: Does this mean that you think the media are much more powerful than the US administration?

Maria Zakharova: This is a good question. Which is more powerful, the US administration or the

media? I will have to think about the answer to that.

Question: The United States and Russia must work together.

Maria Zakharova: I don't believe I'm hearing this from CNN! Our efforts were not in vain then. It is said on August 31, during a briefing by the official spokesperson of the Russian Foreign Ministry, that Russia and the United States must work together. Yes, they must, and who's preventing this? Who has curtailed the work of the Bilateral Presidential Commission? Was it Russia? Who has suspended all forms of interaction between our special services and militaries? Was it Russia? No, it was the United States who did this.

It might be unwilling to work together with us in these very complicated areas. But there is also the grave issue of terrorism, which needs our cooperation. Is the United States promoting dialogue on this matter? No, it is setting up blocks instead; it has blocked every possible venue. If you understand that we need to lift these blocks, then we realised this a long time ago and we have been speaking about this. Can you cite any statements in support of this approach, which the American public approved through the media? Regrettably, I believe that CNN did the most to show that cooperation with Russia is impossible and that it must not develop.

I remember the interview Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov gave to your commentator. It was before the presidential election, when Russia was presented as a monster whose aircraft killed an innocent Syrian boy. Your political commentator showed a picture of that boy to Sergey Lavrov, alleging that Russia was responsible and asking the Minister what he would say to this. Russian warplanes are bombing civilians in Syria, she alleged. A CNN commentator said this. Several months later it transpired that the boy was alive, that he was not killed in a Russian air raid, and that Russian aircraft were not to blame after all. The boy's father later made a statement to accuse those who had raised the ballyhoo over his child of bias. He also said that he did not approve of what the opposition was doing and that he could even be a supporter of Bashar al-Assad.

Do you know how many letters we wrote to CNN to request that it publish a refutation? All in vain. If you think that we should work together, we are all for it. But let's see some practical action first.

Question: So, there is no hope for an improvement in US-Russian relations?

Maria Zakharova: Quite to the contrary. We pin great hopes on this. The interview given by Russian Ambassador to the US Anatoly Antonov provides our understanding of how this work should develop. In this in-depth interview, he was not theoretising or offering political analysis. Instead, he provided factual data and examples of how we can develop fruitful, normal and mutually beneficial relations. We are all for it. There is hope and desire on our part. It depends on the US side, because, regrettably, everything we are doing is reciprocated with an aggressive and militant rhetoric, the extension of sanctions, strange media reports, and this never-ending story about the alleged Russian interference in US elections. Where is the evidence? Nobody has any evidence. On the contrary, there is understanding that something happened at the US election without any practical or hypothetical Russian interference. However, an opposition view is still being promoted [in the United States] every single day.

Yes, there is hope, as the newly-appointed Russian Ambassador to Washington Anatoly Antonov said in his interview with Kommersant. I think he will be happy to talk about this with the US media as soon as he assumes office.

Question: The so-called acoustic attack against American diplomats in Cuba has caused a furore in the US, and there are also reports of Canadian nationals being affected. Certain US agencies do not

rule out that this attack could have been organised by a “third interested party” (Russia is mentioned among those) seeking to drive a wedge between the US and Cuba. What is Russia’s response to these suspicions? Have any Russian citizens been similarly affected?

Maria Zakharova: You know, this is a very strange issue to comment on. We have seen media reports citing sources alleging that a group of US Embassy officers in Cuba was repatriated for health reasons and is undergoing medical checks. Most importantly, we have not seen clear-cut official commentaries on the US side about what actually happened (although this issue has no bearing on us, as you correctly said, it has caused a furore). That is to say, there are a lot of reports - leaks and planted stories – but we have seen no official conclusions regarding the causes or the nature of the health problems experienced by US diplomats. At least, there have been no reports containing solid official charges.

Even considering that there are no official statements to this effect, you have asked this question, and there are a lot of reports, so I would like to wish our counterparts at the State Department well in any case.

We also have no information regarding the essence of this impact. It is hardly possible to draw any parallels with the health of Russian personnel in Cuba, because, to reiterate, it is not clear what this is all about. According to the Russian Embassy in Cuba, Russian diplomats and Russian nationals feel well and we also have no evidence that they have been subjected to any impact.

As for the attempts to see Russia’s “interest,” its direct or indirect involvement in this incident (there is no official information on the issue, and so it is difficult to talk about an “incident”) – that is an absolutely absurd and bizarre insinuation. Of course, nobody on the Russian side has been involved in the sonic, acoustic or, as I read somewhere, even musical impact or attack on US diplomats in Havana. Generally speaking, this looks grotesque. Unfortunately, this grotesque, on the one hand, is ludicrous and on the other, it is yet another reason for talking about Russia and the US in a confrontational tone. Therefore, there can be no official position on the issue.

We have taken note of statements by the Cuban authorities, who said they had no intention to carry out any illegal actions against foreign diplomats, and show willingness to cooperate with the Americans in investigating the problem. I believe there is every reason for the US to take advantage of Havana’s offer and clear up the situation.

I would like to reiterate that this is yet another absurd round in the information campaign to shape public opinion in a certain way and none of this, of course, is in the interest of normalising Cuban-US relations.

Question: Coming back to the number of US diplomats in Russia, have the Americans carried out what Russia asked? If so, how many of their Russian employees lost their jobs, and how many American employees have returned to the USA?

Maria Zakharova: If you recall, the proposal published on the Foreign Ministry website gave concrete deadlines, which we have not reached yet. As for the number and category of those dismissed or returning home, this is something for the Americans to decide. The embassy or the US State Department will provide this information if they think it necessary. I remind you that we have not yet seen any official response to the question on the number of people working at the American embassy and their other offices on Russian soil, unfortunately, and so you should direct this question to the Americans.

Question: Two days ago, the Polish Foreign Ministry summoned the Russian Ambassador in Warsaw and gave him a note regarding two issues: the Polish Foreign Ministry’s concerns over access to the crash site of the Polish president’s plane, and a proposal to continue dialogue on erecting a monument at the crash site. Could you comment on the substance of these issues and the

idea of proposing dialogue through such a form – summoning the ambassador and handing him a note?

Maria Zakharova: Each country has the absolute sovereign right to choose their form of communication. We have always advocated normal working dialogue on this matter. If this document has indeed been handed over, it will be examined, of course. I will clarify the matter with our experts and I think that, before the next briefing, I will be able to give an answer on how we obtained the document and what is our response to it.

I also draw your attention to the fact that the Russian ambassador in Warsaw has spoken to the media about this situation.

Question: Iceland is not a EU member, but it participates in the sanctions against Russia along with the United States and other countries. Iceland’s fishing, agricultural and other industries are suffering a great deal because of this. These sanctions have been imposed by the Government of Iceland, but the people and the fishing and agricultural industries are against them. Is a full resumption of trade between our countries possible, if Iceland withdraws from the anti-Russian sanctions unilaterally?

Maria Zakharova: You said everything yourself. You understand well that what the Russian side has adopted in this sphere was a reply to the introduction of sanctions. If countries don’t join or impose sanctions, there will be no reply. This is a very simple logic that we have repeatedly articulated. If there are sanctions, there is a reply; no sanctions – no reply. Accordingly, there is a possibility to promote full-scale ties in the sphere that, regrettably, has been largely blocked at an initiative other than ours. If you have some concrete detailed questions, you can send them to us and we will check with relevant experts. But in global terms, we have provided a reply at all levels and it is unchanged. You are absolutely right that these “sanctions wars” are directly affecting the producers, who are largely and basically far from politics and in this case do not quite understand what they are suffering for and why they are being punished. Several years on, there are a lot of facts that make it possible to look at the whole situation in retrospect. It is always difficult to do that when many decisions are motivated by emotion or based on unreliable information. Now we have a historical perspective: we can look back and see who played a role in events leading to the “sanctions wars” and what kind of role it was. We can also draw relevant conclusions as to who was behind these sanctions and who suffers from them.

Question: Yesterday, US Senator Ron Johnson, speaking in Belgrade, called on the Serbian authorities not to grant diplomatic status to the Russian-Serbian humanitarian centre in Nis as a means of showing the world that, in the senator’s words, Serbia opposes the aggression Vladimir Putin’s Russia is demonstrating, otherwise this could affect the flow of Western capital into Serbia. How do you view this American proposal, which sounds more like an ultimatum? What do you hope for from the Serbian authorities?

Maria Zakharova: I think it’s worth glancing at a map of the world to see where the United States and Serbia are located respectively. Why should the United States have the right to dictate to the Serbs their domestic and foreign policy?

Knowing the Serbs, I have the feeling that they will reach their own decisions on how to live. Regarding the issue of the centre in Nis in particular, they have every opportunity to make a sovereign decision without any prompting from American senators. We have explained in full our view of the situation and have ensured that the centre’s work is transparent. We have responded to all concerns that our American

colleagues raised and invited them to come to the centre to see the situation for themselves.

I want to say, not in response to the senator's statements, but in general, that this centre's work and purposes in no way present a threat to either the US or European countries. Its work and functions are directly related to the local population's life. You know what is written in the documents regulating the centre's work. I say again that anyone can go and visit it. Its activity is completely transparent. I think that the Serbs will decide for themselves how to proceed, without the Americans' help.

Question: Could you make one small clarification? If this is a civic aid centre and not some kind of espionage organisation, as Western media sometimes allege, then why does it need an official status and why do its workers need diplomatic immunity? Can they not provide assistance given their current status?

Maria Zakharova: This is because centres of this sort have the corresponding status. This is the practice in place. What I want to ask is why is this of such concern for American senators? Does it threaten Washington or the particular state the senator represents? What has the US to do with any of this? What has this matter to do with the United States? This is about our relations with Serbia and its people. I think that Serbia itself should decide on the matter and assess for itself the centre's work and activity, which is what it is doing.

Question: How would you assess recent comments by US Ambassador John Tefft, who said, among other things, that the US sanctions were an alternative to war against Russia. Let me remind you that he said this in an interview with Ekho Moskv (Echo of Moscow) radio station on August 28.

Maria Zakharova: In fact, we have taken note of this comment concerning the fact that the previous US administration headed by Barack Obama well-nigh contemplated in those years the use of force as a method of solving problems in relations with Russia. At least it was said that this option was contemplated. But later allegedly a decision was made to use the sanctions instrument.

I just want to remind you that now we can turn back and look at what was happening then, doing that objectively, based on the available facts, unemotionally and with a cool head. I think there is no longer anyone who would doubt that it was Washington under the Obama administration that "helped" to stage a coup in Kiev. Later a story was invented about a "Russian aggression" and fed to the media. Still later a story about Russian "interference in US elections" was added.

As for the use-of-force scenario, even if it was in existence, as Ambassador Tefft says, they certainly came to their senses in time. The logic that it is inadmissible to play these games must have gained the upper hand. But we constantly see other attempts. A military option was implemented in Iraq, involving a direct intervention in disregard of international law. The same was done with Libya and prior to that a similar experiment was performed on Belgrade. They also had a go at Syria. The picture is there for all to see. The sanctions story, as a foreign media representative told us earlier today, has led to quite significant economic losses in the United States, and a strong sanctions blow has fallen on the European countries. Sanctions make no sense as a factor of pressure. John Tefft himself said as much in his interview. According to him, the sanctions policy is a "blunt instrument."

Question: US intelligence veterans recently sent a letter to US President Donald Trump, questioning the much-hyped allegations of Russian meddling in the US election. Does this point to a glimpse of common sense in US public opinion?

Maria Zakharova: I won't draw any global conclusions as to whether or not there is such a glimpse. We

are working to ensure that there is. As for whether it actually exists or is lacking, that is a different question.

We have widely commented on this issue. As you well remember, Russia's interference in the election was invented under the previous administration, by Democratic Party representatives, candidates, people who are on the same ideological wavelength. That planted story was picked up by all world media outlets not only as an excuse for causing an uproar but also as an opportunity to score extra points by those who have made Russophobia their professional stock in trade, those who lost but refused to concede defeat and were looking around for some explanation and justification in the public eye.

To reiterate, those statements were not substantiated with facts. Neither officially nor via diplomatic channels did we receive any conclusive evidence from the Americans as to how, in their opinion, such interference could have been carried out.

We reaffirm our position to that effect. It is immutable. Russia has not meddled and is not meddling in the affairs of other sovereign states in any way and it has nothing to do with the outcome of US elections. It may be recalled that when Wikileaks threatened to publish Hillary Clinton's emails, it became clear that there had been yet another leak of sensitive information. However, whereas prior to that, it was very difficult to find informers, at that moment the Democratic National Committee miraculously announced (and that was done within the shortest possible time frame) that unnamed intelligence agencies had provided evidence (again no facts, no names) showing that this time the leak clearly had a Russian trail. The subsequent allegations were built on that "evidence."

I would like to draw your attention to the fact that this is definitely a mainstream story. It's gone viral. However, there are also other opinions. In particular, in late July, US intelligence service veterans from Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity published a memorandum addressed to President Trump regarding their investigation into the so-called Russian hacking. They conducted their own independent investigation. The results were just plain shocking for the mainstream media because they said Russia had nothing to do with it. Their forensic study provided what they regard as incontrovertible evidence that Russia had no role in the hack and even that the data had been copied, not hacked. Therefore, the leak could not have resulted from a hacking attack. Somebody apparently copied the information from the Democratic Party server. And it is clear who has direct access to Democratic Party computers at its headquarters or wherever. Certainly not Ambassador Sergey Kislyak. So, if this was about data copying, it could only have been done on US territory. As the intelligence veterans write, the Russians have become an ideal cover.

We hope that these data will help and provide an opportunity for an alternative look at the situation. We are not saying that this was in fact the case. We do not have such evidence. However, at least there should be a perception that the mainstream does not preclude the existence of alternative points of view.

Question: Polish Deputy Minister of Culture Jaroslaw Sellin has said that Poland suffered the biggest human losses in WWII. He also said the world should be reminded that Poland was the biggest victim of WWII, a war unleashed by Germany and the Soviet Union. Will you comment on this?

Maria Zakharova: Of course, such statements deserve political comments because they are made for political reasons and are politically charged. I would recommend people to start by reading documents and learning historical facts. We know very well why monuments are being torn down in Poland. We are told that these monuments are in a state of disrepair or that local people don't want them to be there, but we know that this is not so, that it is a political put-up job. Was this job ordered by political forces inside Poland or by some external agents? It could be a hybrid contract whose idea was suggested by external agents but took its final shape in Poland. This remains unclear. I think history will eventually pass

judgement on it. But we know that these are links in the same chain. They tear down the monuments that were put up with contribution from and in accordance with the wishes of Polish people, although certainly not all of them. But these monuments were put up and Polish people laid flowers to them. Why was this campaign launched now? We never said that Poles were at one on the reasons for the war, its consequences and on what happened immediately after the war. But why is all this happening now, including the monuments, the Sobibor death camp, the statements you have mentioned, and other, even more appalling statements that it was not the Red or Soviet Army but Ukrainians who liberated the Auschwitz death camp? This reference to ethnicity is abominable. It's terrible when people are classified by their ethnic origin. Why did none of this happen 10 or 20 years ago? This problem does not concern different social systems or even the side which Poland has taken. Regrettably, the number of those who witnessed those events is rapidly decreasing. It was dangerous to make such statements before, because they would have been refuted by the Polish war veterans who fought together with Soviet soldiers to liberate Poland and who laid flowers at these monuments. There are precious few of these witnesses left around the world; they are few and far between. The new generations that have come forward are ready to rewrite history to suit their political interests and to serve their purposes.

But we still have the decisions of the Nuremberg Trial. These documents cannot be rewritten. They provide a clear picture of the aggressor, the victims and the history of WWII. I think people should read these documents every now and then.

As for who suffered the biggest losses, I don't think this issue should be debated. It can be said that humanity suffered colossal losses. This would be the right thing to say. It can also be said that we must not allow history to be played with and manipulated mindlessly if we want to prevent losses such as the world suffered in WWII.