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Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's visit to New York to take part in UN Security Council meetings

On January 18-19, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov will visit New York to take part in two high-level meetings: "Non-proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction: Confidence-building Measures" and "Building a Regional Partnership in Afghanistan and Central Asia as a Model to Link Security and Development." These meetings are organized by Kazakhstan, which holds the presidency of the Security Council in January. The first meeting will be chaired by President of Kazakhstan Nursultan Nazarbayev and the second one by Foreign Minister of Kazakhstan Kairat Abdrakhmanov.

We consider highly topical Kazakhstan's initiative on organising these events. Their importance is determined by the high interest of the UN member-states that support the consolidation of the Security Council's central role in searching for and elaborating efficient solutions to the main problems of international relations. We hope the participants will conduct a substantive exchange of views on non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and the situation in Central Asia and Afghanistan.

Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov has plans to hold a separate meeting with UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres. A schedule of bilateral meetings is being compiled. We will inform you in detail about these contacts.

Remarks by David Satterfield, Acting Assistant Secretary of State, Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs

I would like to quote remarks by David Satterfield, Acting Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs, who spoke during Senate hearings. He made quite a few remarks, but I picked the ones which, I believe, are the most offensive. In particular, he said that the United States does not understand Russia's long-term strategy in Syria.

The official Foreign Ministry spokesperson holds weekly briefings, the transcripts of which are posted on the ministry's official website. We focus extensively on Russia's long-term strategy in Syria. The US State Department could have already introduced its high-ranking official to our statements, briefings, and transcripts of remarks made by Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov. The Presidential Executive Office, primarily President Vladimir Putin, the Defence Ministry and the Foreign Ministry talk daily about the steps that Russia is taking to resolve the situation in Syria and achieve the long-term restoration of Syrian statehood. How is that unclear? It can be unclear only to those who have no interest in this subject whatsoever. We could not have anticipated such incompetence in an Acting Assistant Secretary of State.

In yet another statement, Acting Assistant Secretary Satterfield noted that the United States plans to act on Syria through the UN in opposition to the Syrian National Dialogue Congress in Sochi. In particular, he said that the United States will use the UN, the legitimacy of the UN Security Council and Resolution 2254 in everything that the United States and the international community do. This is a counterweight to Sochi, and Russia's initiatives designed to oversee and limit itself to its own track. We cannot and will not legitimise a settlement process that is alternative to the one that Russia is pursuing. Is he aware that Special Envoy of the UN Secretary-General for Syria, Staffan de Mistura, was in Moscow and met with the Russian Foreign Minister and Defence Ministry? Is he aware that modalities were arranged to connect the UN directly to the holding of the Syrian National Dialogue Congress in Sochi? Did he not hear the statements made by the UN Secretary-General and his special envoy? Is he not aware of the efforts that Russia and the UN are undertaking to restore Syrian statehood in the long run?

It is striking that the United States openly talks about opposing the Congress. It may well be that they are trying to package the events in Sochi as something in opposition to the processes unfolding in Geneva. We have repeatedly said that all these processes are intertwined. A full-fledged settlement is impossible without Geneva and Astana, or without connecting the negotiation platforms, which have been active over the past several years. All these elements are integral parts of the general global process. What is surprising, though, is that the opposition to holding the Congress in Sochi is now stated openly, in particular, by US diplomats. It is now becoming clear why some Syrian opposition groups are saying that they do not have a clear position with regard to participating in the Congress. It is clear who is behind this and who is actively hampering this process.

In yet another statement, which seems to be no less offensive, Satterfield pointed out that while Russia announced that the fight against ISIS in Syria is over, the United States and its coalition partners do not consider this to be an end to the efforts. This is sheer lack of understanding of what Russia is doing and has been doing in Syria. Originally, Russia suggested – just in case recently appointed or yet to be appointed high-ranking US State Department officials are unaware of it – joining efforts in fighting ISIS and other terrorist groups, and doing so on an international legal basis. Shortly afterwards, when we failed to hear, first of all, from the United States – as the leader of some anti-terrorist coalitions in Syria – confirmation of its desire to work together, Russia had to start that operation to counter terrorist groups which you observed, almost openly, sometimes online, as you visited the regions. During this operation, we have repeatedly stated that the United States and the international coalition that it leads provide direct support to certain terrorist groups. Certain politicians in the United States claim that it was not Russia that scored such a truly major victory in the decisive battle against ISIS, but the United States. Now, everything is distorted and portrayed as if the United States was left there face to face with the enemy. It is just lack of understanding of what is actually happening in that region.

Now that I'm done with these destructive, odd and offensive remarks by US diplomats, I would like to turn to specific subjects.

Developments in Syria

The number of provocations by Jabhat al-Nusra militants and radical illegal armed formations, including attacks against Russian military bases, increased markedly in Syria in the first days of 2018. By the way, David Satterfield could share a lot of interesting information about the role of the United States in supporting this entity with US legislators.

The Russian Defence Ministry reported about the circumstances surrounding the bombing of the Hmeimim airbase and the attempted massive use of drones equipped with high-tech equipment against our military at Hmeimim and Tartus on December 31, 2017. Information-wise, I have nothing to add to this. Let me just pose the question again, perhaps, to David Satterfield: Where did the terrorists get these fundamentally new means of conducting military operations? And why did they appear right now, when anyone, even an uninitiated onlooker, can see that Syria shows signs of stabilisation, and favourable conditions are being created for achieving a political settlement and restoring peaceful life in that country? Is it because such a turn of events, the most important role in which is being played by Russia, does not sit well with certain influential forces? Today, we talked about this. Our American partners are talking about it openly. In particular, they are not comfortable with another critically important and truly large-scale event associated with the beginning of a political dialogue inside Syria on a fairly solid basis of considerable efforts to combat terrorism in that country. Perhaps, someone still harbours illusions about Russia's rejection of its principled commitment to promote a peaceful political settlement in Syria based on UN Security Council Resolution 2254, or of its efforts to organise the Syrian National Dialogue Congress in Sochi on January 29-30. If you have such illusions, no matter how hard you try to talk your legislators in the Senate into anything, you are not getting anywhere with that.

In response to numerous provocations by terrorists, Syrian government troops began to actively advance in the southeast of Idlib province and in the southwest of Aleppo province towards the Abu Duhur airbase, which, since September 2015, has been controlled by Nusra. Government forces are currently close to liberating it.

On the eve of New Year, Nusra, together with Ahrar al-Sham and Failak-ar-Rahman staged a raid in the Damascus suburb of Harasta. In its scale, this attack is comparable to the attempt by the jihadists to break through the blockade of the capital district of Kabun in March 2017. The situation in Harasta stabilised on January 4. However, the hostilities that took place in this area had a negative impact on the overall situation in the de-escalation zone of Eastern Ghouta, and suspended the implementation of a set of confidence-building measures in the area.

Things are much better in the de-escalation zones in northern Homs and the southern zone on the Syrian-Jordanian border. There are almost no violations of the ceasefire there. This allowed the Syrian government to begin practical work to restore the destroyed power transmission lines and, in general, resume normal power supply to the Rastan and Talbis districts.

In the first days of 2018, 69 former members of illegal armed groups took advantage of the Syrian President's executive order on amnesty. In Damascus, 650 insurgents were put on record, and 50 medium- and heavy-duty weapons were turned in. Another 500 fighters settled their status in the newly opened special centres in Palmyra and the town of Furqlus in eastern Homs for dealing with draft

dodgers and deserters.

According to Syrian human rights activists, in December 2017, 89 civilians died in mine explosions in the province of Raqqa, which was liberated by the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces led by Kurdish militia. Activists are complaining that the Americans and the local authorities that they support either completely ignore this matter, or try to charge local residents for disposing of mines and improvised explosive devices left behind by ISIS. This is what a high-ranking official of the US State Department, David Satterfield, meant when he said that the United States will now fight ISIS on the territory of Syria. How? By charging local residents for demining their land? We have repeatedly called for collective efforts to help Syria with humanitarian mine clearance. The situation in Raqqa, where civilians are actually unable to return, is additional confirmation of the importance of our appeal.

Russia continues its efforts to provide humanitarian aid to the Syrians. The Russian military regularly deliver food and medicines to the worst off areas of Syria. The centre for the reconciliation of opposing sides in Syria is working to normalise the humanitarian situation. Regular reports on the work of the centre's officers are posted on the website of the Russian Defence Ministry.

On January 6-7, drinking water was delivered to the residents of the towns of Salihiya and Hatla in the province of Deir ez-Zor, and medical assistance was provided, including to 32 children.

Safe and unhindered passage of UN humanitarian convoys to the villages of Tayyib and Tell-Gehab in the province of Deraa was effected. The residents were provided with food and household items, with a total weight of 180 tonnes and 240 tonnes, respectively.

The Russian military delivered several tonnes of humanitarian aid to the town of Zabadani in the Damascus region, and deployed a mobile medical unit there.



The humanitarian situation in Raqqa

The humanitarian situation in Raqqa remains extremely difficult, continuing to give rise to serious concerns. Large parts of the city are still mined, and there is a huge quantity of unexploded ordnance. Over 80 percent of buildings have been damaged. The city's water supply system is out of operation, and electricity is only available in some districts. A great number of dead people are still under the rubble. The city faces a serious threat of epidemics. Relevant UN bodies are yet unable to duly assess the situation there. Conditions have not been put in place for civilians to return to the city.

The reason for this situation is obvious. It is the indiscriminate use of force by the so-called US-led international coalition that used to fight ISIS, followed by manipulations to form a certain type of local government beyond the control of Syria's legitimate authorities in Damascus.

It is noteworthy that amid these developments, a conspiracy of silence between the Western media and political circles around the real state of affairs in Raqqa is taking shape. This is done so as not to discredit the actions of Washington and its allies in Syria, which, I would like to remind you again, are not based on international law. At the same time, there are ongoing attempts to blow out of proportion and distort the situation around Eastern Ghouta and Idlib, which are parts of the de-escalation zones in Syria.

Incidentally, what materials has the high-profile London-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights released on the situation in Raqqa? I do not think I remember any. The guys are keeping mum. We should find out whether they are feeling all right there.



Anti-Russian developments in Ukraine

The New Year holiday season was marked by unrest not only in Syria. Unfortunately, we have witnessed once again that December and January are a critical time for a number of political forces in Ukraine. For some reason, the New Year holidays and Orthodox Christmas is a time for some politicians and a large number of extremists to show off. It has been like that for a number of years. This year they showed off their Russophobia. To be honest, we were shocked by the developments.

In his TV address, Ukrainian President Petr Poroshenko wished Donbass residents peace and as a testimony of the sincerity of his words, welcomed the US decision on the supplies of lethal weapons to his country. Isn't this hypocrisy? Ukrainian Foreign Minister Pavel Klimkin, apparently after clicking through the channels on his kitchen TV, began to publicly bewail the domination of Soviet films on local TV on New Year's Eve. All that definitely provoked a specific atmosphere. On top of that were declarations by scandalous Ukrainian historians, aka falsifiers of history, who reduced themselves to suggesting that Ukraine's time as part of the USSR should be called "Soviet occupation" and modern Ukraine should be regarded as an heir to the Ukrainian People's Republic that had existed for just a few months in post-revolutionary Russia. The question arises: Why during the holiday season? Where does this maniacal passion come from to ruin a few days off, both for themselves and for the people who have been living through hard times for years?

I cannot ignore the acts of hooliganism by Ukrainian nationalists who threw paint at the Russian Science and Culture Centre in Kiev. Radicals from the far-right group S-14 also showed up as they blocked the Kiev Pechersk Lavra under the pretext of searching for some "FSB centre" there. Next time you feel like crashing something, check with us. We will tell you where the CIA centre is located in Kiev, and you can pelt it with paint.

The New Year "surprise" from the Maidan authorities was awaiting Russians who came to Ukraine on those days to visit their relatives and friends. They were forced to give fingerprints at the Ukrainian border.

The Ukrainian Foreign Ministry showed a very original way of caring for its compatriots by warning them that a trip to Russia for the New Year holidays could become a "one-way ticket." It is hard to dismiss this statement as it is very realistic. I can tell you for sure that many of those who came to Moscow from Ukraine for the holidays and saw how well decorated our capital was, how heartily guests are welcomed here, indeed showed a desire to stay here longer. The Ukrainian Foreign Ministry's statement is realistic here. The Ukrainian Security Service was scaring the country's residents with "anti-Ukrainian provocations" by Russian special services. Apparently, some persons disguised as Father Frost were supposed to kidnap people on Tverskaya Street.

What was going on in the media and public spaces of Ukraine regarding Russia during those holidays is complete absurd. They managed to politicise even the New Year and Christmas holidays by filling the festivities with Russophobic propaganda.

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Recording biometric data of Russian citizens crossing the border with Ukraine

Starting January 1, 2018, the Ukrainian border service will require the recording of biometric data, including a fingerprint scan, for citizens of the Russian Federation. Probably Ukraine has found additional money it does not know how to spend. All other issues have been resolved, but the country cannot do without Russian fingerprints.

According to the information received from the Ukrainian authorities, these procedures will be performed at border crossing checkpoints – passport control points, transport vehicles, parking areas for vehicles crossing the border and offices of the Ukrainian Border Service; as well as outside border crossing checkpoints – at the special areas designated to control traffic at sea (river) ports, fisheries, wharves (piers) and at offices of the Ukrainian Border Service.

Exempted from these procedures are heads of state and government, members of parliamentary and government delegations, support personnel accompanying such delegations (persons) and members of their families; people under 18; tourists on a cruise; crews of military ships (aircraft) who arrived in Ukraine according to established procedure; crews of non-military ships; crews of civil aircraft on international flights and international trains if staying at airports or railway stations indicated in their working timetable; heads of diplomatic missions and consulates, diplomatic personnel, consular officials, administrative personnel of diplomatic missions and consulates, members of military attaché offices and trade missions, as well as their spouses, children and parents supported by these persons; employees of foreign affairs agencies holding diplomatic or service passports who arrived in Ukraine on business trips and members of their families; officials of international organisations who arrive in Ukraine on business trips or working at branch offices of such organisations situated in Ukraine and having diplomatic privileges and immunity in accordance with charter documents of such organisations or corresponding international agreements, as well as members of their families.

If any person refuses to scan their fingerprints, they will be subject to the second-line control. The decision on permission to cross the state border will be taken based on the results of this control.

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Upcoming meeting on the DPRK in Vancouver

We are aware of plans to hold in Vancouver a meeting of representatives of the member countries of the coalition of the Korean War of 1950-1953. We cannot help but regard this idea as a relapse of the Cold War mentality, which is especially inappropriate against the backdrop of recent signs of movement towards dialogue between the North and South of the Korean Peninsula.

The goal of the event, announced by the Canadian organisers – the discussion of possible steps to further increase pressure on North Korea – is debatable. This is especially interesting in the context of statements made by US President Donald Trump several hours ago that he has very good relations with the leader of North Korea.

We would like to recall that less than a month ago, on December 22, 2017, the UN Security Council approved by consensus Resolution 2397, which provides for new restrictions on the DPRK over the nuclear and missile programmes carried out in that country. But in contrast to the UN Security Council, which takes legitimate and binding international legal decisions, a decision to increase pressure, sanctions introduced unilaterally or by a group of countries are not based on law.

We have repeatedly stressed that the only way to reach a mutually acceptable solution to the complex problems of the Korean Peninsula is direct dialogue between all the parties involved. Instead, a gathering of former participants of one of the sides in the war is being convened. It is unclear what kind of message they want to send to the world community. We do not exclude the possibility that the initial idea was transformed into something different during its implementation. Unable to keep track of recent developments, this ponderous idea turned into something quite strange.

We do not consider it possible to support an event that could aggravate the already tense situation on the Korean Peninsula.

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Developing Russia-Japan cooperation in 2018

For Russia-Japan relations, 2018 will be a significant year. According to summit-level agreements, for the first time in the history of bilateral relations, the Year of Russia in Japan and the Year of Japan in Russia will be organised. The opening ceremony for the bilateral year is scheduled at the Bolshoi Theatre on May 26. We see this large-scale project as aimed at giving a strong positive impetus to cooperation between our countries in politics, the economy, science and technology, culture and other fields. In particular, we hope to pursue major business initiatives capable of laying the foundation for mutually advantageous cooperation for an extended period.

In 2018, we also plan intensive contacts between the foreign ministries of both countries. During talks between Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and his Japanese counterpart Taro Kono in Moscow in November 2017, the two ministers agreed to hold their next meeting in Japan this spring. There will also be new rounds of the Russia-Japan strategic dialogue between first deputy foreign ministers and consultations between first deputy foreign ministers on strategic stability.

As for developing joint business activities on the southern Kuril Islands, both task forces (for business and logistics issues) are coordinating projects in five areas of activity approved by the two leaders, such as mariculture, wind power, greenhouse facilities, waste recycling, organising package tours and also the possible launch of local cross-border transit between the Sakhalin Region and the Hokkaido Prefecture. The next round of talks between deputy foreign ministers, on the basis of the results of this work, is planned for February.

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Celebrating the 140th anniversary of Bulgaria's liberation from Ottoman rule

March 3 marks 140 years since the Preliminary Treaty of San Stefano was signed, which put an end to the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-1878 and laid a foundation for the future development of an independent Bulgarian state.

One of the main organisers of festive events in Bulgaria is the National Committee formed in May 2017 under the patronage of President Rumen Radev. It consists of representatives of government and non-government organisations, media, academic and cultural circles and clergy. Marking key events in the Russo-

Turkish War is already under way in many Bulgarian cities with the active participation of Russian political and public figures, and diplomats of the Russian Embassy in Sofia. For example, in June 2017, the city of Svistov marked the 140th anniversary of the first Bulgarian city liberated by the Russian Army. At the end of August 2017, during a joint ceremony, President Rumen Radev and Russian Ambassador Anatoly Makarov paid tribute to the memory of heroes of the epic fights for the Shipka Pass. In December 2017, a representative delegation of Russian MPs and historians attended celebrations of one of the pivotal victories at Plevna. Sofia marked its liberation at the beginning of January. The highlight will be large-scale celebrations in March, which Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia is expected to attend.

Moscow will also organise events to mark the anniversary. On March 3, a traditional wreath-laying ceremony will take place at the monument to Russian grenadiers killed in the Battle of Plevna during the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-1878, located in Ilyinsky Public Garden. There are plans to hold an exhibition of documents from the Foreign Policy Archives of the Russian Empire at the Russian Foreign Ministry, Russian-Bulgarian emission of three postal stamps with portraits of Chancellor Alexander Gorchakov and heroes of the war of liberation General Mikhail Skobelev and General Eduard Totleben, as well as several other joint events, about which we will keep you informed in detail.

Those who are interested in this subject, please, follow the official website of our Embassy in Sofia where we will post materials, detailed reports and photos of these events.

We are convinced that the scheduled celebrations will be held on a high level and make a contribution to the further development and consolidation of our dialogue.

The act of vandalism against the memorial to Soviet soldiers who liberated Vienna on the city's Schwarzenbergplatz Square

We are outraged by yet another incident of vandalism against the memorial to Soviet soldiers who liberated Vienna on the city's Schwarzenbergplatz Square. On the night of January 10, paint was splattered over the base of the monument.

The Russian Embassy in Austria has sent a note of protest over this fact to Austria's Federal Ministry for Europe, Integration and Foreign Affairs, demanding that the damage be promptly rectified and the persons who committed this offensive action be identified and punished.

We are deeply disappointed by the fact that despite a series of similar cynical acts of vandalism, including those that took place ahead of memorial dates and planned wreath-laying ceremonies, not a single offender has been identified as yet.

We have repeatedly spoken with our partners about the need to improve the protection of the monument from vandals by introducing guards or installing CCTV cameras on the square. Unfortunately, we must say that our calls have gone unheeded in Vienna so far.

Hopefully, this time Austrian authorities will give attention to this issue and will promptly take appropriate measures to ensure the due protection of the monument and preclude similar incidents from happening in the future.

Archive materials published in the US deal, among other things, with the commitments not to expand NATO to the East

The recent years have seen the Alliance act aggressively to expand to the East, citing an alleged "Russian threat" as justification for such actions. Unfortunately, as we have seen on many other occasions, the words of our Western counterparts often diverge from their actions and from reality, and absolutely ignore historical facts and agreements.

In December 2017, the National Security Archive (a non-governmental organisation under the George Washington University, USA) published documents pertaining to the negotiations on German reunification in 1990. They unambiguously show the commitment of the West not to advance NATO to the East. Copies of public speeches, the Gorbachev Foundation papers and telegrams, letters and transcripts of talks declassified by the State Department and the foreign ministries of other states speak directly or indirectly about commitments of the Western leaders not to expand the Alliance towards the Soviet borders.

For example, German Foreign Minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher, speaking in Tutzing on January 31, 1990, said that "changes in Eastern Europe and the reunification of Germany must not infringe upon the security interests of the USSR." Mikhail Gorbachev received reassurances that NATO posed no threat to the USSR from British Foreign Secretary Douglas Hurd (April 11), French President Francois Mitterrand during his visit to Moscow (May 25), and US President George Bush in a telephone conversation (May 31). These are just some of the talks that were held.

During his meeting with Mikhail Gorbachev on February 9, 1990, US Secretary of State James Baker famously said that NATO would not expand "one inch eastward." This is one of the many examples of a flurry of assurances by Western leaders that the Alliance would remain within its borders after the reunification of Germany that were constantly made at the very beginning of the 1990s.

We find similar passages in the conversations held at the time between German Foreign Minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher and US Secretary of State James Baker and British Foreign Secretary Douglas Hurd. This was said during the meetings of Mikhail Gorbachev and Eduard Shevardnadze with the US Secretary of State, during the talks between Vladimir Kryuchkov (head of the KGB) with Robert Gates, Deputy National Security Advisor to the US President.

All these numerous documented facts of pre-existing agreements demolish the attempts of our Western partners today to deny the obvious. The materials published by the Alliance demonstrate a gross violation by the Alliance of what was essentially "a gentlemen's agreement" with the USSR on respecting its security interests and NATO's commitment not to expand to the East. The question is whether there were any gentlemen among our Western colleagues who made these "gentlemen's agreements."



RIA GLOBAL designated as foreign agent in the USA

Reports from the United States on January 10 said that next to Russia Today, RIA Global, the content provider for Sputnik's US branch, will now be designated as a foreign agent.

I would like to make it very clear that this measure is not an innocuous formality, as some might think, something that has been mentioned more than once. In fact it blocks the work of our media in the US, as was highlighted by the case of RT when its journalists were stripped of their accreditation with Congress. In addition to these steps, Russian media representatives have had their visas cancelled, are being expelled from the country and, moreover, have come under pressure from foreign security services.

We have to state again that Washington has no intention of revising its policy of whipping up anti-Russian hysteria and an atmosphere of confrontation. Instead a campaign is unfolding to crack down on the media space. All this, unfortunately, is reminiscent of various episodes that took place in the West in the past. We thought that the Western states had long turned that page in their history, but that is not the case. Old templates are being actively used.

Such measures are absolutely unacceptable. We see these measures as instances of outright discrimination against Russian media outlets, and in general as an attack on the freedom of expression. Of course, these steps totally contradict the basic norms of international law in the field of providing equal access to information for all and the freedom of expression.

Most interestingly, while choosing the Russian media as its enemy, the US authorities continue to show a benign attitude to the Mirotvorets centre, which publishes personal data of thousands of media professionals who covered the events in Ukraine, including in Donbass, thus putting their lives under threat.

To be honest, we would like, at long last, to see compliance with obligations to ensure the rights and freedoms of journalists by the relevant international organisations, in the first place the UN and the OSCE, and a reaction from human rights NGOs, including those in the West who use any pretext to criticise the situation in Russia. Where are you now that the Russian media are being discriminated against?



Continuing Western pressure on social networks

The Western democracies continue to tighten control over the social networks. Thus, in December of last year the British Parliament's Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee held hearings on "fake news" and misinformation in the social networks and its impact on public life in Western countries. During the hearings serious concern was voiced over the fact that the companies that administer the social networks are too slow in removing "undesirable content", are off limits to the public and parliamentarians and are too independent.

We have the impression that by organising such hearings the British MPs are laying the ground for the introduction of elements of internet censorship. It cannot be ruled out that UK authorities may choose to pass tough legislation to strengthen control over the social networks. They have an example to emulate: as of January 1 the law on Improving Enforcement of the Law in Social Networks, also known as the Facebook Law, came into force in Germany. Under the law the operators of social networks are obliged within 24 hours to limit access to "obviously unlawful" content at the request of the authorities. Legal entities breaking this law may be fined up to 50 million euros. The reaction to the law has been mixed. The media accused the authorities of introducing censorship and media control.

Thus, the global social networks still come under heavy pressure on the part of the authorities in the United States, Germany and Britain, which, under the banner of fighting extremism, are trying to suppress the social networks and turn them into propaganda weapons reporting to the government. The aim is clear and understandable: to reformat the social networks to fit their selfish interests, to block out voices that contradict the "mainstream."

One observes an interesting trend in the interaction and relationship between the social networks and the traditional media. We understand that in the Western world the media are in one way or another under financial or administrative control. There is a sense that uncontrolled publication of materials and information in the social networks, which, incidentally, has for many years been equated to the work of the media in the Western world, is beginning to pose a direct threat to the existence of the traditional mainstream media that catered to the interests of the Western political elites. That is why an onslaught on the freedom of expression in the social media is being launched.

We believe this explains the increasingly frequent reports of the shutting down of accounts in the networks without stating the reason. We see that sometimes the rules of moderation are bent to suit political expediency.

I would hazard a prediction that in 2018 we may see continued tightening of the screws in the social network mechanism. Next in line is France, as French President Emmanuel Macron has unambiguously declared in public. There are grounds for fearing that the example will be followed by other Western countries (sometimes of their own accord and sometimes under pressure from the "heavyweights").

That trend should be closely watched, which we intend to do.



US State Department recommendations concerning trips to Russia

On January 10, the US State Department published recommendations to American citizens that are extremely puzzling. Russia is described as a country to stay away from because of "increased risks", a country where the situation may change at any moment. I wonder if the State Department has taken a leaf out of Ukraine's notebook. Ukrainians speak of "a one-way ticket" and here we are warned that the situation may change at any moment. What they mean by that is a mystery.

In our opinion, this is another unsubstantiated claim aimed at ratcheting up anti-Russian hysteria in the US and cultivating a visceral fear of Russia among Americans.

American tourists are told that the main potential threat to them is terrorism. I would like to ask the US State Department if, going by that criterion, it is safe to go to downtown New York. This is hypocrisy pure and simple. This is a common problem – think of the UK, France, Spain and Belgium. These countries have seen horrendous mass terrorist attacks, but the US State Department for some reason considers them to be safer. From the viewpoint of the US State Department, there is no such threat. But that is absurd.

The same document says that Americans in Russia are often victims of harassment. Name the place in Russia where Americans became victims of harassment, or were hurt or simply uncomfortable. Can anyone cite a single example involving US citizens? We have delved in all the archives. We do not know of such facts. What does the State Department have in mind? Who wrote it all for them is a big mystery.

By contrast, such incidents involving our countrymen in America occur all the time. Thus, a Russian citizen Anton Kemayev, who was in Pittsburgh on December 19, was caught in crossfire in a street shootout and was shot in the head.

Incidentally, Ukraine, where hostilities are taking place and the internal political situation is indeed unstable and may certainly change at any moment, is regarded by the State Department analysts as being a safer place. What does one make of it all? Who writes all this stuff for them?

We are truly dismayed by the fact that US authorities earlier created artificial problems for Russians getting American visas and now are trying to talk their own citizens out of traveling to our country under absolutely mystifying and absurd pretexts.

Incidentally, statistics show a steady growth in the number of Americans traveling to this country as tourists (to 207,000 in the first nine months of 2017). Welcome to Russia. And don't listen to the US State Department.

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Situation around Viktor But

The fact that timely medical assistance has not been rendered to Russian citizen Viktor But, who is serving a 25-year prison sentence in the US for an unjustified charge, is extremely worrisome. When he caught the flu, with a high fever and violent cough, the prison authorities said there was no doctor in the correctional institution and suggested that he wait two weeks.

Only after the Russian Embassy in Washington intervened the ball got rolling. Thanks to the efforts of our diplomats, who immediately contacted the prison administration, the US Federal Bureau of Prisons and the State Department, and also sent a note to the foreign ministry of the host country with demands for action, adequate treatment was finally provided. The Russian citizen was given a medical examination and began to receive the proper medicine.

This is not an isolated case. Pilot Konstantin Yaroshenko, convicted in the United States and serving a twenty-year sentence, has very serious health problems, including those resulting from the beatings he took during his abduction by American agents from Liberia. And he too was denied medical treatment for a long time.

From the very beginning of these stories, we can see a prejudiced attitude towards our compatriots and carbon-copy actions. Both But and Yaroshenko were seized by Americans in third countries, forcibly moved to the US, convicted without real evidence and given long sentences. Their appeals are regularly rejected, and they do not receive timely medical assistance when it is needed.

This is just outrageous from a legal standpoint! We seriously fear for the lives of our citizens, as Washington is incapable of meeting their basic needs while they are being imprisoned. We will continue to take all possible measures to protect their rights and legitimate interests. We insist that they be given an opportunity to return to their homeland as soon as possible.

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US Senator Benjamin Cardin's report Putin's Asymmetric Assault on Democracy in Russia and Europe: Implications for US National Security

Regarding Senator Cardin's speculations about Serbia, we would like to point out Washington' persistent lack of a civil attitude to its foreign partners.

When President of Serbia Aleksandar Vucic visited Moscow in December 2017, he spoke openly and sincerely, which is in line with the traditions of partnership and friendship between our countries, and expressed readiness to further strengthen multifaceted cooperation with Russia. At the same time, he confirmed Belgrade's policy of integration with the EU as well as its intention to maintain military neutrality. We respect the foreign policy priorities of our Serbian friends and act based on our mutual willingness to strengthen bilateral cooperation. We would like to stress that our cooperation with Belgrade is fully in compliance with international law and is based on respect for the entire range of factors that influence the situation in the Balkans.

At the same time, we have never advocated a negative agenda or urged our partners to take actions that would be directed against any other party. On the contrary, we and our Serbian partners are open to discussion of current matters of concern for the situation in the Balkans with any interested parties. The above report has shown, regrettably, that not everyone shares this inclusive approach. Instead of the promotion of a broad dialogue aimed at settling existing problems, such attempts are only aggravating differences in the Balkans and are provoking additional tension.

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UK's intention to discredit FIFA World Cup Russia

We have quoted more than once and otherwise demonstrated materials that our Western partners and the media outlets they control publish with the aim of tarnishing Russia's reputation as the host of international events. Yesterday I commented on the fresh attempts to blame Russian diplomats for interfering in the US elections. We have commented on these allegations more than once, yet they are reprinted again without any mention of our statements.

I would like to speak now about what we expect to happen during the FIFA World Cup. I think that you remember all the mud-slinging in relation to the Sochi Olympics. Now we expect a growing amount of negative media reports ahead of the FIFA World Cup Russia. We have grounds to assume that it will become one of the very important and possibly even the main theme of publications in the Western media. We have talked about this subject more than once during our briefing, exposing staged news, including by British media outlets. However, it was only the tip of the iceberg. We have found out that British journalists have received "a state order" to create a negative backdrop for the FIFA matches in Russia. The plots, subjects and methods of doing this have been worked out in detail. The media have not been told to look for breaking news. Instead, they have been issued the theses for use in their publications, such as the lack of the necessary infrastructure and conditions for holding the matches, the alleged aggressiveness of Russian fans and unprofessionalism of Russian law enforcement agencies, which allegedly cannot guarantee the safety of foreign tourists. By the way, it cannot be ruled out that travel warnings issued to those who plan to visit Russia are connected one way or another with the upcoming sports event.

We have a clear view of the structure and mechanism of influencing journalists, including in the UK, which is why we do not expect any feats of heroism from them. We understand that they need to earn their pay. However, we again urge foreign fans not to believe this smear propaganda but to talk with football fans who regularly travel to Russia and have enjoyed our hospitality and had a chance to assess our infrastructure as well as to see its drawbacks with their very own eyes rather than through the eyes of propaganda masterminds.

Refresh your memory about the Sochi Olympics. Let's try and remember who tried to scare the people and through which media outlets, and what they wrote after the games. For example, the Daily Telegraph's Ian Chadband wrote that the opening ceremony was "a visual journey through [the] country's history." Jonathan McEvoy wrote in the Daily Mail that "for Russia [the opening ceremony] marked its revival as a post-Soviet powerhouse, confident of its seat at the top table after two decades of doubt and despondency." Italy's La Repubblica wrote that the ceremony was magnificent as predicted, as inclusive as Russia itself, and with each classical episode unforgettable.

This time again, it will be interesting, done professionally and on a large scale.

Once again, we point out that the British media have launched an active smear campaign with regard to the upcoming FIFA World Cup in Russia.



Excerpts from answers to questions:

Question: The US Department of State advises American citizens not to visit a number of countries, including Russia and Azerbaijan ...

María Zakharova: Are you also mocking the Americans? Do you also have some places where they can get hurt?

Question: The motives of this statement are unclear.

María Zakharova: I know what the real motives are. Azerbaijan has successfully organized numerous international sports and cultural events. Countries that accomplish a lot, including tourism, should always be "kept on their toes," so that they would not forget that it is always possible to create a certain dangerous image through propaganda. This is what our Western partners probably believe.

To be quite honest, I have not read about the inadvisability of visiting Azerbaijan in the original document, but I have seen this in news reports. I believe that only those people who have never been to Baku could have written something like this. I often visit Azerbaijan and Baku, including the city's old central district, restaurants, museums, with great pleasure; and I also call on my friends there. Therefore I can say it is sheer rubbish to write that tourists are not advised to visit Baku and Azerbaijan.

I repeat, only those people who have no idea about Azerbaijan, its culture and political realities could have written this. It is highly unlikely that they even know where this country is exactly located.

Question: I have a question about the Syrian National Dialogue Congress. How are the preparations for this event proceeding? Have all the Syrian parties, including the Kurdish parties, been invited to attend the Congress?

María Zakharova: You know, we are not talking about whether everyone or not everyone has been invited. It is now necessary to coordinate all aspects, issues, deadlines, and the list of invited guests and participants. Therefore it is still too early to say who have been invited, and who have confirmed their decision to attend. Very active work is underway. I can say once again that, as soon as we receive detailed information, we will share it with you. Right now, I can assure you that the preparations are underway.

Question: Can you confirm reports that a delegation of the Foreign Ministry and the Central Election Commission will visit Syria and organise Russian presidential elections there?

María Zakharova: Regarding the organisation of the Russian presidential elections in 2018, we will, of course, focus on Syria where many Russian citizens, including service personnel and specialists involved in rebuilding the country, are staying. Foreign Ministry employees visit the Syrian Arab Republic on a regular basis. I will additionally brief you on a possible joint trip involving representatives of the Foreign Ministry and the Central Election Commission.

Question: What would you like to say about the response of Ukrainian media outlets to a decision to give the rank of full state councillor 3rd class of the Russian Federation to Inal Ardzinba?

María Zakharova: I have seen their response. I would like to tell those who are probably unaware of the situation that, in early December 2017, the President of Russia issued his executive order on giving the rank of full state councillor 3rd class of the Russian Federation to Inal Ardzinba, a department chief with the Presidential Directorate for Social and Economic Cooperation with the Commonwealth of Independent States Member Countries, the Republic of Abkhazia, and the Republic of South Ossetia.

This caused an absolutely inadequate response on the part of Ukrainian media outlets. Russian media outlets also pelted us with questions and asked us to comment on this matter because the Ukrainian media outlets employing professional experts on black propaganda equated this rank with the military rank of major general, and Mr Ardzinba reportedly received this rank for conducting certain counter-terrorist operations in Ukraine.

This is absolute gibberish! Ukraine remains quite "indifferent" towards Mr Ardzinba. This manic desire to monitor the lives and careers of Russian officials is probably motivated by their own personnel shortages or by their permanent desire to find some external enemies. We have been noting this many times now. In this case, I can only advise Ukrainian media outlets to, at long last, focus on their country's domestic political economic and social matters, not to look for external enemies and not to invent news which is later widely circulated. It would be better to analyse Kiev's compliance with the Minsk Agreements. I believe that this is always beneficial.

Inal Ardzinba has become a popular hero of Ukrainian epic literature.

Question: Yesterday President Vladimir Putin visited the Komsomolskaya Pravda editorial office. He made a number of foreign policy statements, including the one that denuclearisation of the Korean Peninsula must proceed through a dialogue. At the same time, this dialogue has continued for years. Is it possible to speak about any progress and measurable results concerning this matter?

Maria Zakharova: I have already commented on this theme at length today. I told you about the obvious progress that we – and other parties – have seen. I think the footage of the dialogue between the South and the North has been seen across the globe. We proceed from the premise that this very complicated issue (we do realise its complexity) can and must be resolved in a calm and composed fashion at a negotiations table. Definitely not by military means, not by demonstrating one's military power, whoever is doing it; not by intimidating civilians, to say nothing about using nuclear weapons for intimidation. The elements of the negotiation process that we have seen must send a very important signal and indicate the manner in which this matter can as well as must be resolved.

Russia, on its part, has repeatedly stated that it is willing to provide help in the talks and in settling this situation, and has answered the question on whether the help can be formal or informal. We assume that no formal status is required for this. In our contacts with our western partners, with South and North Korea, we promote the idea of an exclusively political and diplomatic resolution of the situation, and we are doing our best to prevent any escalation of the situation and to reduce tension.

Question: Between January 22-23, President of Argentina Mauricio Macri is visiting Russia. Will the Russian and Argentine foreign ministers meet ahead of this visit?

Maria Zakharova: I do not have any detailed information concerning the events on the sidelines of the UNSC meetings during Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's current visit to New York. I will find out and get back to you. I do not have this information at the moment.

As you know, the ministers met only recently. Their meeting was extensively covered on the ministry's website.

Question: Earlier today, you have dwelled on media persecution and US sanctions against RT and Sputnik. The day before yesterday, the Russian Embassy in Washington declared that the US continued to put pressure on the Russian media in that country. I must say in this connection that now it is the turn of the Iranian Television and Radio Company. What assessment could you give to the conformity of freedom of expression with the US model of democracy?

Maria Zakharova: I gave this assessment regularly and I did so today. I certainly can reiterate that it is unacceptable to persecute the media, where the case in point is not a threat to peace and stability or involvement in terrorist activities (all of this is regulated by law), but a clear political bias, domestic political squabbles in this or that country (as we can see now in the US), expulsion of journalists, accreditation denials, and continuous public harassment.

One more point I would like to draw your attention to, sir, is that you said: "Now it is the turn of the Iranian Television and Radio Company." This is something everyone should remember. No one can be sure that he/she will not be the next. If you tacitly agree with what is being perpetrated against your colleagues, you should know that the lack of a response from the professional community gives a green light to all those who are experimenting with your colleagues.

The entire world of journalists should rise, when inadequate, unjust and unlawful actions are taken with regard to no matter what media – Russian, Brazilian, Cuban, Iranian, or any other – and react thereto via country and international professional associations, journalists unions, or individually. They should make it clear that this is unacceptable. Then everyone will understand that the international journalistic community has a powerful voice and that these experiments are just inadmissible.

Another important point is this: When these experiments affect your media, I assure you that a similar reaction of non-acceptance with regard to this media persecution policy will be forthcoming and a similar strong voice will be raised in defence of your media and journalists.

Regrettably, it takes a lot of effort to wake up the journalistic community, when this inadequate wave engulfed Russian media and journalists, who are banished from Latvia, denied accreditation in France, called propagandists at US officials' briefings, interrogated for hours on the border after their arrival to Ukraine, or even manhandled for example like in Moldova. Where is everyone? A response is needed. You will be given ten times stronger backing, if you find yourselves in a similar situation. I think all international journalists should wake up. These international experiments on Russian media are likely to be just a trial balloon, the testing of a model to restrict the national media. If you let it pass today, the same might happen to you tomorrow.

Question: Can you confirm the dates of the Syrian National Dialogue Congress? Do you know who will attend it?

Maria Zakharova: We believe the congress will be held in late January. We are working now to compile a list of those invited. We will confirm the timeframe and the list of invitees as soon as we can.

Question: A Defence Ministry representative said yesterday that they believe that drones were supplied to terrorists in Syria by a foreign country, most probably the United States. Do you think this has been done to disrupt the Syrian National Dialogue Congress in Sochi? Will this delay the congress?

Maria Zakharova: It is certainly true that destabilisation in the region, including in Syria and on its borders, is not simplifying the process of preparing for the congress. As I have said today, the counterterrorist and anti-terrorist efforts of Russia, the Syrians themselves and all those who helped fight terrorists in Syria have created a firm foundation [for the congress]. It was very important to use this opportunity to launch a comprehensive and even global process, involving not only a dialogue but also practical efforts by all political forces in Syria and beyond towards consolidating the country and finding the main development modalities for it, as well as for working on the possible structure and the main documents that would regulate the country's activities. In other words, we tried to map out a path to the future. Those who are promoting destabilisation are seeking to hinder a political settlement by undermining this achievement, which has been created through years of hard work. Since a political settlement in Syria is the task of the congress in Sochi, the congress has also been targeted by those who are trying to destabilise the situation.

Question: White House national security adviser H.R. McMaster yesterday had a meeting with members of the Syrian opposition. What is your attitude to such meetings, considering that the White House has recently said it had little hope for the venue in Sochi?

Maria Zakharova: It was probably said by those who are still aware of diplomacy. Today, I quoted a statement by a US official, according to which the Syrian National Dialogue Congress all but contradicts the relevant UN Security Council resolution and definitely contradicts the efforts taken at other venues. This is what a high-ranking US State Department official said. A diplomat, who should use diplomatic language, has said openly that the United States is opposed to the idea of the congress in Sochi. He also resorted to absurd arguments to try to prove his point, because in fact Russia is very much interested in the implementation of the relevant UN Security Council resolution.

Question: Do you think in this regard that efforts are being made to wreck the talks?

Maria Zakharova: Why think? You just need to read. I have more than read this; I have quoted a high-ranking diplomat who is a professional in his field. If this statement were made by a diplomat with a specialisation in Eastern Europe, Africa or Asia, it would have been understandable, because the diplomat would not have been an expert on the relevant matters. We would have then regarded such a statement as a mistake, a shortcoming or an inaccurately expressed view. But the statement was made by a professional who testified in the Senate on this very question. He said that the congress does not fit into the US vision of the situation in the region, and that the event is evidence of Russia's cunning. He added that Russia has well-nigh outmanoeuvred everyone. If they say this in public, I shudder to think what they say behind closed doors.

I said in response to the previous question that the cutting-edge weapons which are in the hands of the terrorists, which are used in terrorist attacks, and the terrorists' redeployment, which our Defence Ministry is monitoring, are definitely destabilising the situation. Taken together, this cannot have a positive effect on the upcoming congress or any other efforts to consolidate the Syrian opposition.

Question: Can UN Secretary-General's Special Envoy for Syria Staffan de Mistura influence the US position to change the Americans' views on the new meeting? Russia and other parties have done a great deal to bring representatives from the various sides in the Syrian conflict to the same table.

Maria Zakharova: Mr Staffan de Mistura is an intermediary who is mediating between the conflicting parties in Syria, but he also deals with the main international players who are involved in the Syrian settlement. You are right in saying that the UN Secretary-General's Special Envoy has many powers in accord with his position and so has the capacity to speak about the importance of the Sochi congress and to promote its success. This will not be the success for Russia but the success for Syria and the Syrians. When we speak about Syria today, we imply a Syria for all Syrians, that is, those

who support the government and those who have been fighting it for years, including, regrettably, through military methods. We are talking about a future Syria that will be home to all Syrians.

We believe that the special envoy's mediating powers should be applied to help the Syrians themselves and to promote the success of all Syrian citizens, groups and political forces that have agreed to use exclusively political and diplomatic means to achieve their country's consolidation and restoration.

Question: Can you comment on the recent inter-Korean talks? You have mentioned them, but how would the Foreign Ministry assess them? Are they the first positive move towards a new agenda and possible talks between the United States and North Korea? Or is it more accurate to regard them as talks between the two Korean states on the Olympic movement?

Maria Zakharova: We published a commentary on our website with our views on this issue immediately after the talks. It was very detailed. Do you want forecasts or assessments? If you want assessments, read the commentary. I have spoken about this again today. As for forecasts, frankly, we do want our forecast and those made in other capitals to become a lasting reality. We would not want this [the inter-Korean talks] to be a single event held in the context of the upcoming Olympic Games in South Korea, followed by the resumption of indifference, accusations and, worst of all, threats. We hope that these talks will show that both parties can interact constructively and maintain a dialogue, in which case the situation could lead to prospects for a political and diplomatic settlement.

Question: Will the foreign ministers of Russia and Japan and their deputies meet in Tokyo or in Moscow?

Maria Zakharova: I will inquire about this and let you know.

Question: With the Olympic Games in South Korea approaching, more publications are focusing on sports topics. Several media outlets have reported that a number of US athletes are using vaccines to conceal traces of doping. What is your response to this?

Maria Zakharova: I have seen reports that, in connection with American athletes preparing for the upcoming Winter Olympic and Paralympic Games in South Korea, the US Centres for Disease Control and Prevention have developed recommendations on vaccination, reportedly, against a wide range of communicable diseases.

We have looked more closely at this topic to understand the implications. Apparently, according to experts, the recommended vaccinations could be used to defend US athletes who would otherwise be caught doping. This is one opinion. There are certain loopholes in the anti-doping code. The fact is that antiviral vaccines are not considered prohibited substances.

Therefore, I would like to remind you of the incident involving several US athletes who participated in the 2008 Olympics in Beijing. Their doping tests revealed traces of clenbuterol, which had been banned in sports since the late 20th century. Anti-doping agencies did not see any problem with this finding, explaining that the athletes may have consumed a corresponding amount of the substance with food.

It should be emphasised that this is by no means the only case. This implies that there is room for legalised doping which, although not being supported by law, remains unpunished if the athletes are deliberately guided and provided with substantial support from experts. All this constitutes very important material for study by relevant specialists since the doping issue has become fatal in recent years.

Question: On New Year's Eve, a prominent Russian political scientist, Director of the International Institute of Newly Established States Alexei Martynov was detained in Italy and ordered out of the country as a "national security threat." He had a three-year multi-entry Schengen visa issued by France. He was also prevented from entering Poland. Since he uses a Schengen visa, he is unable to enter the whole area covered by this framework.

After New Year, there was a story about Russian journalists in Latvia, and in all the reports it is a question of a national security threat. What can we do? It is obvious that these Russian nationals are not terrorists, drug traffickers or arms dealers. Why are they being treated as a threat to national security? The use of this wording is clearly abusive. The rights of these people are being violated.

Maria Zakharova: This is not abuse, but a magical wand that can change the laws of physics. It took our European colleagues (and Western colleagues in general, but in this particular question you are asking about the European Union) decades to work out and adopt norms regarding the freedom of the media and journalists. They wanted the rest of the international community not just to join these efforts (which would have been more or less fair), but to try and adopt these high standards in all countries without due regard for their national identity, traditions, political stability or lack of it, or in general for the developments in one country or another. They set extremely high standards regarding the freedom of speech, and used them as a template not for teaching others or helping them reach these standards, but for criticising specific countries that wanted to be free from any outside political control, where political elites and leadership had to be trolled, and where instability had to be maintained in Europe's interests.

We are now faced with a paradox. On the one hand, many countries have reached this high standard in terms of freedom of speech, and their media within their national information space are totally free, serve as genuine mass media outlets and compete in the information space with Western media and titles with much more superior budgets. In this situation, everyone became equal in the media. The paradox of today's media landscape is that you no longer have to invest huge sums of money in order for your message to resonate and be heard. For that, you need talent, professionalism and an unbiased perspective. And the technology is there for that. As it turned out, faced with real, Western-style competition, many traditional Western media started losing out to the competition. When this happens to national media outlets, the political elites of these countries also stand to lose in one way or another. The audience can opt for media products offered by foreign media, not only national outlets. This is when Western elites started asking themselves how they could support their national media resources, while pushing or driving out this new breed of competing media organisations that were established in keeping with their own legal framework and shaped by it. For many years now they have been inviting young journalists from across the post-Soviet space on so many occasions, and invested so much money in developing the information space in Russia, Azerbaijan, Armenia and other countries of the post-Soviet space. This led to the emergence of professional journalism.

There is hardly any way out of this situation. On the one hand, they were the ones who introduced these high standards and sought to implement them in other countries, but now it turns out that they would have to apply them to themselves. On the other hand, there is now a competitive environment in which their own media are starting to lose out to the competition, for a number of reasons. What they needed was some kind of a magical tool to legalise everything that had to do with restricting the activities of the undesirable media outlets, while also guaranteeing one hundred percent that the high standards regarding the freedom of speech remain intact. This is how the magical wording "national security" provided a pretext for denying accreditation to journalists, and denying them visas. People are being ordered to leave countries, unable to enter foreign territory or unable to communicate. There is absolutely nothing behind these claims. Russian journalists were designated as national security threats in the US, Europe and some other countries without any further explanations. However, this is deemed sufficient in terms of domestic policy or even for saving the face in international organisations, where they can just say that this is a matter of national security, not censorship or restrictions. This is the only way out of this situation for our Western partners. At least this is how I see this.

That said, I do believe that the professional community should come together to think of the possible ways out of this situation and discuss it. Tomorrow this could become everyone's problem. We have Prensa Latina with us at this briefing. Every year, this agency raises the subject of the media and informational inequality in the world within the UN Committee on Information. It has long been assumed that money is the key factor behind inequality. The Western world had no reason to be worried: they had more money, television sets and radio receivers. Developing and other countries were not part of this information competition, not even close to it.

Today, partly thanks to the internet, new information technology and the media, everyone can now be an actor in the information space. This is a paradox: on the one hand, there are many conventions, documents and agreements saying that interfering with the media is unacceptable, while on the other hand, they are no longer able to keep up with the competition.

Question: The matter concerns not only journalists. The list of persons who allegedly pose a threat to national security includes political analysts, academics and Russian human rights advocates.

Maria Zakharova: The information sphere has broadened. As I have said, not only journalists are presented as actors. This thesis is being actively promoted by our Western colleagues. At all international events for the past seven years, I have heard it said that bloggers and journalists are equal. Our Western colleagues told us that bloggers have a different sphere of activity, level of responsibility and traditions. Today, they are becoming hostages to their own model. But I think that this issue should be discussed in the professional journalistic community. It is a very serious question.

Question: What if Russia starts acting likewise with regard to journalists, political analysts and other groups of citizens from the United States and other unfriendly countries?

Maria Zakharova: The principle of reciprocity has not been cancelled in international relations. But we also say that this will not do any good. This policy of our Western partners is completely wrong.

Question: We are grateful to you for speaking about the celebration of Bulgaria's liberation from the Ottoman yoke. This is very important for Bulgarians. Many people say jokingly that this event features more prominently in the news than Bulgaria's presidency of the Council of the EU.

Is it possible that the growing anti-Russia rhetoric is revenge by the United States and some other Western countries for Russia's victory in Syria? Is there a tendency for Western states to prevent small countries from developing relations with Russia? A recent case in point is Moldova.

Maria Zakharova: Don't say that Moldova is a small country, or they'll take offence.

This concept concerns not just specific events; it is part of the doctrine of deterrence. We have spoken a great deal about this. The facts are obvious. Regrettably, our Western colleagues, specifically Washington, put pressure on countries that are unable to pursue an independent policy to make a choice in favour of consolidating their positions with the West and to stop developing relations with Russia. This implies natural relations rather than some invented relations. I am referring to historical ties, cultural closeness and numerous scientific and humanitarian ties.

We have seen this happening over the past few years. It did not begin with Syria, and definitely precedes the operations by the Russian Aerospace Forces there, and even dates back to before Ukraine. Possible reasons for this are Russia's changing role and weight on the international stage, the personal views of some Western leaders, the rejection of the idea of multipolarity, as well as the concept of one's exceptionalism and the denial of other states' independence, let alone their leading or main roles, in international affairs. All of this can be regarded, to some extent, as part of a comprehensive deterrence concept.

