

The annual special Direct Line with Vladimir Putin was broadcast live by Channel One, Rossiya 1, Rossiya 24 and Public Television of Russia TV channels, and Mayak, Vesti FM and Radio Rossii radio stations.

Andrei Kondrashov: Good afternoon. This is Direct Line with Vladimir Putin, a live broadcast by Channel One and Rossiya television channels. This event is also broadcast today by Rossiya 24 and the Public Television of Russia TV channels, and by Vesti FM, Mayak and Radio Rossii radio stations.

The anchors here in the studio today are Kirill Kleimyonov and myself, Andrei Kondrashov. Our colleagues in the call centre are Natalya Yuryeva and Tatyana Remezova.

Kirill Kleymenov: Good afternoon. This is the first Direct Line since President Vladimir Putin's inauguration. This programme is hugely popular. As of now, we have received around two million questions from the public.

Of course, some of the issues come up year after year. They include healthcare, housing and, of course, wages and pensions. There are also acute problems that are particularly pressing this year. Rising petrol prices is the main topic these days. All these issues will be discussed today. But, frankly speaking, we do not really want this Direct Line to become a book of complaints. Therefore, today we will also speak at length about Russia's future and the goals for the next few years.

However, as we speak about current problems, of course, we hope to solve some of them, here in the studio.

Andrei Kondrashov: As you may know, 2018 was declared the Year of Volunteering. That is why volunteers are helping us here today.

They represent dozens of charity organisations. Here they all are, young and enthusiastic. And because they are young, they will be interested in the contours of Russia's future more than anything else.

What is the point of them being here in this studio? They have been working with us for the past ten days and, you know, they have already managed to solve some minor and even not so minor problems reported by the public. As is often the case, local officials shift their responsibility to the federal government. And these guys have been calling governors and forcing them to act the way they ought to. Therefore, today they are ready to tell a few stories like this to the President when he arrives.

Kirill Kleymenov: Let me add that today, like in the early Direct Lines, we decided not to invite guests to the studio, and we did it specially to enable more questions to be asked by people who are out there on the spot.

Andrei Kondrashov: And perhaps a more serious change. For the first time in the history of this programme, we have decided to use the same video links which the President uses sometimes, indeed, rather frequently, to communicate with the governors, federal ministers and deputy prime ministers. And all these people – regional heads, key federal ministers and deputy prime ministers – will be live in this studio today.

So, if need be, the President can invite any of these people to talk and if such conversations do take place,

this would certainly be interesting.

Kirill Kleymenov: And so, the President of Russia Vladimir Putin is on the air.

Natalya Yuryeva: Good afternoon, Mr President.

Tatyana Remezova: Good afternoon.

Natalya Yuryeva: This is our traditional message processing centre, it has been working for more than ten days already. These are the telephone operators and here are the volunteers, this is something new that we did not have before.

Volunteers: Good afternoon.

President of Russia Vladimir Putin: Hello and thank you very much.

Volunteer (Passes a document to the President.): This is one of the most frequently asked questions, take a look at it during the Direct Line if you get a chance.

Vladimir Putin: OK. A question about fish, important.

Tatyana Remezova: Good afternoon. We are working in the call centre that is receiving questions for the Direct Line. I think right now the number of calls has just gone over two million. You can submit your questions to Vladimir Putin right now. The telephone number has not changed: 8 (800) 200 4040. You can also use 04040 for SMS and MMS messages. If you want to watch the broadcast with sign interpretation, please tune in to the Public Television of Russia or go to our website.

Natalya Yuryeva: Not only do our phones never stop ringing but the internet is also buzzing with activity. We have already received almost 270,000 online messages and another 53,000 via the programme's official accounts on Vkontakte and Odnoklassniki. We have received over 20,000 video messages and people continue to fire their questions.

Let me remind you that for your video question to feature in the programme, you need to install a special mobile app called Москва –Путину (Moskva-Putinu), sign up and either record a video or make a video call, whichever you prefer. Just like last year, you can also use the OK Live service to watch us live and wait for your opportunity to have a direct video link with the President. So, make a call, we are accepting questions until the end of the programme. Perhaps, it will be your question that Vladimir Putin answers.

Tatyana Remezova: We are also monitoring discussions on social media. Thanks to the SN Wall communications platform, here on this screen you can see how users respond to the programme in real time.

Over the past few days and this morning, almost 340,000 comments have been posted on Odnoklassniki, Vkontakte, Facebook and Instagram using hashtag #DirectLine. This is the most popular hashtag but people also use #QuestionForPutin, #PutinLine and #WatchingPutin.

We will also closely monitor responses to the programme while it is broadcast.

Kirill Kleymenov: We are all ready. Shall we start?

Vladimir Putin: Yes, please.

Kirill Kleymenov: Mr President, during the Direct Line two years ago you were asked whether we were passing through a black or a white streak. You replied, it is a grey streak. How would you answer the same question today?

Vladimir Putin: A predictable question, of course, because in this case we are talking about the outcome of our work last year. I have brought along the statistics for last year and the trends in the first quarter of 2018. If we use such categories – “white,” “black,” or “grey” – to indicate what streak we are in today, we are moving towards a solid “white colour.”

Of course, nothing in nature is absolutely white. Look at the Arctic and the Antarctic. They seem to be absolutely white, white wilderness, and yet even there is a sprinkling of grey and black spots. It is the same here. But on the whole, we are moving in the absolutely right direction.

What gives us grounds for thinking this? First, we have reached a trajectory of sustainable economic growth. Granted, it is as yet modest growth, as I have said before, but still, this is not decline but growth, 1.5 percent last year. Industry is growing, agriculture is growing steadily. And it is a steady trend.

What else gives us grounds for saying that we are moving in the right direction? Inflation is at an all-time low. This is an important prerequisite for further growth. All this is happening against the background of an even faster growth in direct investment: 4.4 percent during the past year. This is a very good indicator. It shows that growth is guaranteed, secured in the near term.

We have a good trade surplus. They give me various figures, some say 130 billion last year, others say 120 billion. We discussed it with the colleagues yesterday and the final figure is 115 billion. But even that is a very high figure.

At the same time, we have very low foreign debt, less than 20 percent, and the Central Bank gold and currency reserves are increasing (before, they stood at under 400 billion, today they are 450 billion or thereabouts). All this shows that we have good stable conditions for economic development.

Finally, one of the key indicators: life expectancy continues to increase, that is number one. And number two, we have achieved steady growth in incomes. Wages have risen, real incomes have risen by 3.8 percent. Again, experts cite various figures.

If the additional five thousand rubles paid to pensioners at the end of last year are subtracted it makes exactly 3.8 percent. I have to make it clear from the start: this does not mean that every individual feels the difference, but on the whole the statistics are absolutely objective, this is real, this is true.

We are exporting machinery and equipment, and these exports are growing substantially, which suggests certain structural changes in the economy. I have already noted with satisfaction that the export of agricultural produce is growing. Look, it reached 20 billion the year before last, and it was a pleasure that it exceeded the export of arms.

We exported armaments worth 15 billion, agricultural goods – 20 billion, now 23, and there will be even more this year. That is, we can state with confidence that we are moving in the direction of this ‘white zone.’ But there are still quite a few problems of course.

Kirill Kleymenov: The export of machinery and equipment that you mentioned, Mr President, shows growth despite the sanctions.

Vladimir Putin: This is not about sanctions. Let me see if I have forgotten anything. I think I have mentioned the main points. There are other good indicators, but what I said is probably enough.

Andrei Kondrashov: Mr President, we have been living with the new Government for more than three weeks now. Initially, there was a lot of debate about the Cabinet appointments, and passions are still running high about the nominations, from the prime minister to the old and new ministers.

Some say, stability and experience are precisely the new Government’s competitive advantages. Others say this is not the Government that can make the breakthrough you talked about in your Address. What do you think?

Vladimir Putin: I see these debates and, in fact, I had no doubt that they would arise. It is good that we have discussions on almost every issue, on all administrative decisions, every economic and social policy move. This is a good thing.

Here is what I think, and I believe many will agree with me. You see, the thing is that the development plan we need to implement, the one we have been talking about over the past few years, was drafted by the previous Government. They have been working on it for at least 18 months.

I know perfectly well that if we reshuffled 100% of the Government and appointed totally new people, even if they were perfect administrators and well-trained professionals, they would need at least two years to either formulate existing goals or develop new ones. We would lose at least two years. We do not have these two years.

Therefore, I made a decision that the Government should be significantly renewed by bringing in “fresh” people, if you would allow me to use this term, but well-trained and who have proven themselves in major and important spheres.

We also had to keep those who have been preparing solutions for the groundbreaking development of our country, to personify the responsibility for what has been done so far and what is planned for the near future. I think that we have the ideal Cabinet for today.

Kirill Kleymenov: Mr President, let us talk about what the Government will need to do in the near future. You have set very serious strategic goals for the country in the May Executive Order you signed after assuming office.

These goals include reducing the number of people living in poverty, improving the demographic indicators and increasing life expectancy to 80 years by a specific deadline. The ambitious economic goals include increasing real incomes and becoming one of the world’s top five economies.

But the question is whether the Government has real instruments for attaining these goals.

Vladimir Putin: First of all, we have a clear understanding of what we need to do and how to achieve these goals. These goals have been set out in my Address to the Federal Assembly and in the draft development plan, which the Government should adopt this autumn.

You see, even though we have preserved the core figures in the Government, we will still need to formulate our proposals and solutions within the next few months. As it is, only a new Government can do what we have been discussing for the past 18 months. This is the first thing we need to do.

Second, we must adopt a full-scale programme-based approach. We have used this principle in individual industries and spheres. We must now apply it everywhere. The programme-based approach has proved effective and we have accumulated the experience of applying it in practice. This is the first thing.

Second – or is it third? We must introduce personal accountability. This issue also concerns the new Government line-up, because many of those who will be implementing these tasks have kept their seats. The new people in the Government also have the ability to deal with this issue. There must be strong personal accountability. We have no time to waste, as I said.

And third, we must ensure funding. The figures have been made public. After making rough estimates based on the belief that we can spend 17 billion rubles on this in the next six years, we have come to the conclusion that we need another 8 trillion rubles, at least, to attain the goals you have mentioned.

Overall, we know where to get this kind of money. We must above all boost economic growth, which is the main source of additional funds, use the available resources more efficiently and adjust our macroeconomic plans, as well as our taxation policy, bearing in mind that the taxation policy the Government must adopt soon needs to stay intact for the next six years. This is the most important thing for those active in economic affairs.

Kirill Kleymenov: That is 17 plus 8 adds up to 25 trillion, right?

Vladimir Putin: Yes, 25 trillion rubles exactly.

Andrei Kondrashov: There are a lot of questions about taxes. People ask, for example, whether a sales tax will be introduced and whether the income tax for individuals will be raised above the usual 13 percent. A question from Voronezh: why raise taxes only to spend that money to shore up the tumbling standard of living. Will there be a tax hike?

Vladimir Putin: Indeed, as I said, we are talking about an extra eight trillion roubles, which will not come of thin air. I have already said where we can get the funds, I am not going to repeat it.

One of the sources is tweaking the tax system. What you have mentioned just now, the income tax on individual taxpayers, or the sales tax, it was also discussed by the Government and at the level of experts.

Many, including opposition parties represented in parliament, propose changing the income tax. We thought about it for a long time. At first glance, a differentiated scale of income tax appears to be more socially fair, that is, those who have a higher income should pay more taxes.

Practice, though, is more complicated than theoretical formulas. What does the practice of differentiated tax on the incomes of individuals in the former years show?

Andrei Kondrashov: People concealed their incomes.

Vladimir Putin: Exactly. As soon as it is introduced, some citizens who have higher incomes start using various methods to hide their incomes. Additional payments begin to be made under the table and so on.

In other words, the fiscal result is close to zero, but there is a lot of noise and the investment climate worsens visibly, so it was decided that it was impracticable.

As for the sales tax – this was also discussed and many of our experts came out for introducing this tax. Firstly, we used to have such a tax, called the turnover tax. It was a heavy burden on the economy as a whole and it is a heavy burden ultimately on the citizens, because it inevitably spurs inflation.

All this convinced us that introducing this norm is not expedient either. Other proposals are being considered by the Government and are to be adopted. Without getting ahead of ourselves, let us wait until these decisions are made, they should be made very soon.

Regarding the burden on citizens that may increase poverty. Our target is to cut poverty by half. We have talked about it more than once, indeed, between 2000 and 2007 and 2008 the number of people living below the poverty line dropped by half.

That figure moved somewhat in the negative direction during the complicated economic situation in 2008–2012. But now, as I said, wages have grown at the rate of 9.8 or 9.6 percent and real incomes have grown by 3.8 percent.

We are moving in this direction and we are set to solve one of the key tasks – reducing the number of people living below the poverty line. The redistribution within the tax and budget system is aimed not at increasing the number of people who live below the poverty line, but on the contrary, at reducing it.

We are talking about certain manoeuvres in the tax and fiscal sphere to direct part of these resources to solving this task, reducing the number of people in our country who live below the poverty line, create conditions under which the state will be able to render assistance to those who need it, in other words, to target it better. If we follow that course, there will be no worsening of the situation and we will most probably achieve a positive result.

Kirill Kleymenov: Let us go back to the economy. As I said at the very beginning of the programme, the petrol price hike is one of the most urgent topics today. Our programme gets a great many of calls and messages about that.

My colleague Tatyana Remezova is continuing her work in the call centre.

Tatyana Remezova: Thank you, Kirill.



Petrol is indeed breaking records not only regarding prices, which are changing daily, but also in terms of the number of questions sent to our call centre. For example, the price of petrol in Achinsk, Krasnoyarsk Territory, went up by six rubles in a week and a half. According to a message from Tatarstan, it was 39 yesterday, 41 today. AI-95 gasoline in Anadyr is 55 rubles per litre. The Ulyanovsk Region residents have launched “A petrol-free month” campaign. Meanwhile, others ask: Isn’t it time for people to sell their cars? Alexei Karavayev from St Petersburg has sent us his video question.

Alexei Karavayev: Good afternoon, Mr President. I am Alexei Karavayev from St Petersburg.

Will you please tell us how long petrol prices will go on rising. Diesel fuel is 45 rubles per litre – how long can we tolerate this? It is just impossible, stop it, one way or another. We made such a momentous choice on March 18, the whole country voted for you but you are failing to curb petrol prices.

Vladimir Putin: Alexei, thank you for your question.

I think you must have noticed that the Government has already made a number of decisions aimed at solving this problem.

I agree with you that what is happening now is unacceptable, it is wrong. But we have to admit that this is the outcome of the incorrect, to put it mildly, regulation that has been introduced recently in the field of energy, in the sphere of energy resources. What happened? While managing the budget, the Government revised some taxation measures, made a so-called manoeuvre in this area.

What was it all about and what was done? I am not going to go into details or specifics but it ultimately led to boosting exports of crude oil. What happened next? Oil prices went up in the global market. To supply crude oil to their refineries, our companies do that, but they calculate the lost profit for the volume of oil sent to refineries, which they could have otherwise sold on the international market and gotten a big income. To make up for these alleged shortfalls in revenue they raise petrol and diesel fuel prices.

The Government has already taken a number of steps in this regard. Let me remind you that something was achieved quite recently in a dialogue with our leading oil and gas companies. So what has been done? First, excise duties were lowered by 3,000 rubles on petrol and 2,000 rubles on diesel fuel. A previous decision to further increase excise duties as of July 1 was cancelled, it will not happen. By

autumn this year, further measures will have been taken to stabilise the market situation. I proceed from the fact that the Government will be strictly monitoring this, and the Federal Anti-Monopoly Service will enforce necessary decisions rather than turning a blind eye to developments.

To get an expert opinion from people directly responsible for this, let's hear from the Russian Energy Minister.

Andrei Kondrashov: Right now, he is available.

Vladimir Putin: Yes, I know, our anchors have already announced that we are working in a different mode today, in a new format. I have asked my colleagues from the Government, from the regions to be available, to be in their offices during the Direct Line.

We can call Alexander Novak and ask him to comment on what I have just said.

Kirill Kleimyonov: Let us do it.

Andrei Kondrashov: We are calling the Energy Minister. Please.

Minister of Energy Alexander Novak: Mr President, good afternoon.

Allow me to report on the current situation. Indeed, in May we recorded a rise in fuel prices of an average 5.6 percent against April. This is indeed above the level of inflation. If we take January-April, prices at petrol stations were growing no faster than inflation. Therefore, in May we first observed a real price increase, according to the Federal State Statistics Service. Now, the price rise has been stopped. The Government in May promptly adopted a number of measures aimed at stabilising prices in the wholesale market and at petrol stations. You have already said this. We reduced excise tax on diesel fuel and petrol from June 1, and this measure has been working since June 1, and we agreed not to raise excise taxes on petroleum products from July 1.

These urgent fiscal measures have certainly had a positive impact. We can see that prices at petrol stations have not gone up since May 30, since the end of May. In addition, agreements were reached with all oil companies at Government level to stabilise prices at petrol stations, and to increase the output of petroleum products and their supply to the domestic market to prevent a deficit.

I would like to report that today there is a sufficient amount of fuel in the domestic market to meet domestic needs and to take farmers through the sowing period, and there is no shortage.

Mr President,

We in the Government have worked out a number of additional measures that could help stabilise the market in the event of any price deviations. We are talking about the possibility of imposing an export duty on petroleum products. An appropriate draft law has been prepared, which we are ready to submit to the State Duma.

We would like you to support it. This would be an additional factor to curb price rises in the domestic market.

Andrei Kondrashov: Thank you, Mr Novak.

Vladimir Putin: It is not just an incentive. Rather, it is a warning to the oil companies. I hope that we will not have to resort to anything like that. We have always had a constructive dialogue with the oil companies and with the gas companies. What is good is that there is understanding on their part, understanding that the problem cannot be driven into a corner, that it needs to be addressed – this is very good.

By the way, I see Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Kozak on our screens now. I know – he reported the situation to me yesterday: yesterday, he met with our leading oil companies, with their heads. Let us give him the floor, let us listen to what they agreed upon yesterday.

Andrei Kondrashov: Mr President, while we are connecting with Mr Kozak, let us show you a joke. It is

about how you would fill up today your yellow Lada Kalina that you once drove across Russia.

Vladimir Putin: Let us see.

Andrei Kondrashov: This is the picture we have. It is a joke that went viral on the Internet.

And here is Mr Kozak.

Vladimir Putin: Yes. Please, Mr Kozak.

The Lada Kalina is already being discontinued as other models are going into production. But it was a good car.

Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Kozak: Indeed, on May 30, we agreed with the oil companies to freeze prices. The Government took reciprocal steps: that is precisely what the Government's mission is – to flexibly respond to the situation in external and domestic markets.

Therefore, on May 30, together with the oil companies and key ministries, the Government adopted the necessary decisions to lower the excise taxes, as you already said, within the existing parameters.

The reciprocal proposals by the oil companies consisted in stabilising fuel prices at filling stations. We agreed that we will control, that we will monitor the situation at the filling stations daily and that the Federal Anti-Monopoly Service will update the Government on a daily basis during the week.

As of yesterday, all companies are generally delivering on their commitments. Yesterday, we additionally agreed to increase supplies of petrol and diesel fuel to the domestic market. Over this week, trade in diesel fuel on the exchange has already increased by 20 percent and in motor petrol – by 19 percent.

This is also having a stabilising effect on the market. Overall, as the Energy Minister said, except for some firms with a small trade volume, oil companies are delivering on their commitments.

Regarding Mr Novak's words about a threat – and you were right in saying that failure to implement the agreements posed a threat – the Government will literally tomorrow submit to the State Duma a draft law, which is expected to serve as a restraint in order to bring down the so-called export netback and ensure a balance between internal and export motor fuel prices. The law, if enacted, will allow the Government to raise export duty on motor fuel, bringing it practically to the level of export duty on crude oil.

This was also met with understanding by oil companies. The Government will be able to address this kind of threat, as it will have an additional tool to respond to the situation in the domestic and export markets. However, we hope we will not have to use it.

Should such a situation develop, depending on how well oil companies meet their obligations and what world oil prices are, the Government will be able to quickly take the necessary decisions. I am sure that this move will lead to a stabilisation of oil prices.

Andrei Kondrashov: Thank you very much, Mr Kozak. We will forward all questions and other messages we have received from our citizens regarding growing fuel prices, directly to Mr Kozak and Mr Novak.

Vladimir Putin: Please proceed with this draft law; I will support it.

Kirill Kleymenov: Mr President, there is a subject we must take up at the beginning of this programme. The World Cup will begin in Russia in exactly one week. It is an event we have all been looking forward to and preparing for a long time.

The national teams are already arriving. The Iranian team has arrived and settled in the assigned premises, and the Spanish and Panamanian teams are expected in Krasnodar and Saransk today. I know that they have prepared a landmark welcome ceremony.

We can move to the huge FIFA fan zone in Moscow, on Vorobyovy Gory, from which you get an

amazing view of Moscow and the Luzhniki Stadium, which has been renovated for the World Cup.

I am giving the floor to my colleague, Anton Vernitsky.

Anton Vernitsky: The vista point on Vorobyovy Gory offers a full view of Moscow and, most importantly, the Luzhniki Stadium, where the World Cup will begin in a week with an opening game between Russia and Saudi Arabia.

Luzhniki is one of the 12 stadiums that have been built for the games. This is because Luzhniki, although it has not changed on the outside, has been thoroughly overhauled to become one of the world's best football arenas. Today we invited to this meeting those who are closely associated with football.

Valery Gazzayev won the UEFA Cup with CSKA Moscow and is now one of the most renowned coaches in Russia. Mr President, you talked with him about football last year.

Yevgeny Lovchev is now our colleague, a sports expert and journalist, but he was once a famous player with Spartak Moscow. And lastly, we have with us Yury Semin, the chief coach of Lokomotiv Moscow, which won the Russian Premier League this year. This impressive group of football personalities is ready to speak about the world's most popular game and its future.

We discussed this issue before we were given the floor. We talked about the Russian team's chances considering that its performance has not been impressive during the friendly matches. We have decided that it depends on the World Cup, which will begin in a few days.

We also talked about the new stadiums, which are really big and beautiful and have been built in many cities. But do we have enough good football teams to attract people to these stadiums. What will happen to these stadiums? Take Luzhniki, which you can see behind us. It hosted the opening ceremony of the [1980 Summer] Olympics and athletic world championships, but now it is purely a football stadium. What will track and field athletes do now? There are many other questions.

The first question is from Valery Gazzayev.

Valery Gazzayev: Thank you.

Good afternoon, Mr President.

Vladimir Putin: Good afternoon.

Valery Gazzayev: During last year's Direct Line, you asked me about the quality and the future of our football. I considered your question a direct instruction to work in this area. My colleagues and I have watched almost all world football tournaments, all the best world and European championships. We also developed a programme to reform Russian football and the national tournament in order to involve all Russian regions in children's, youth, professional and amateur football, and, of course, we will also use the legacy of the 2018 World Cup. I would also like to say that we are making use of the legacy of the 2014 Olympics as well. We are ready to present to you our programme and to tell you about it in detail.

As for our question: naturally, all our colleagues and the entire football community understand how busy you are today and how difficult the current foreign political situation is. Therefore, we would like to ask you to keep football in the centre of your personal attention. You are a winner by nature.

Thank you for letting us celebrate and host the World Cup. We have received spectacular, amazing, one-of-a-kind sports facilities. And, of course, this infrastructure will be the foundation of our future impressive results.

Kirill Kleymenov: Mr Gazzayev, what is your question?

Valery Gazzayev: I would like to wish you good health, Mr President.

Anton Vernitsky: But what is your question?

Valery Gazzayev: My request is that football should be a focus of your attention, Mr President. I am very pleased that it is so. I would like to wish you good health, Mr President. May God protect you, St George assist you in all endeavours and St Nicholas the Wonderworker give you health and luck.

Thank you.

Kirill Kleymenov: Mr President, do not abandon our football.

Vladimir Putin: Now, I take it the question was about the so-called legacy, right?

Kirill Kleymenov: It was mentioned, yes.

Vladimir Putin: What are we going to do with these grandiose facilities after the World Cup?

You are absolutely right. We have managed to solve a very difficult task, the kind of task no other countries that hosted Olympic Games had managed to solve as effectively. The infrastructure in Sochi (practically all of it) is in use, and what is more, it is in use all year round. Both clusters, the Coastal and the Mountain one, are in use. And that is definitely a success.

Regarding the football infrastructure, the 11 stadiums. Of course, we have spent a lot of money on them and – I absolutely agree with you there – all this infrastructure should be utilised, above all for the development of sport. I mean amateur sport, children's sport, we should create children's and youth teams and leagues and organise competitions. All these facilities should pay their way and work effectively.

All this is possible given a competent approach. As you know well, a modern stadium is not just the football pitch; there is a huge number of spaces inside the stadiums where you can put anything you like. And they do put in anything they like, in the good sense of the word, of course. There are retail centres and fairs, cafes and restaurants.



Kirill Kleymenov: Sports clubs.

Vladimir Putin: Yes, of course. Not just sports clubs, but (most importantly) special areas for fitness and sports. A lot would depend on the heads of the Russian regions because once the World Cup is over the organising committee will hand all this over to the regions.

I would like to appeal to my colleagues in the regions. We must not allow marketplaces to spring up at these venues, as it happened at sports facilities in Moscow in the mid-1990s. Such a development and such use of these wonderful facilities must not be allowed.

And I think the Russian Football Union, the RFU, should be actively involved so that these facilities are used effectively to host big, interesting matches, so that it would make it necessary to create new, interesting, strong and promising teams.

So that at long last we could raise a new generation of athletes and football players domestically. Let us face it, although our team has not been making a brilliant showing recently we have a huge number, millions of fans of this beautiful sport.

Incidentally, I remember my conversation with the coach of our national judo team on the eve of the London Olympics after a somewhat lacklustre performance of our team at the Europe and world championships, and the coach, Ezio Gamba, told me: our main event is the Olympic Games.

He was right because our judo team performed better than any other team, even that of Japan, had ever performed in the whole Olympic history. Let us hope that our football team will spring a surprise at the upcoming championship and give of its best.

Kirill Kleymenov: Of course, we have faith in our team and support it. We may be able to discuss this topic some more during the course of this programme. In the meantime let us touch upon some other questions as well.

Andrei Kondrashov: And before this, a question our studio has received from social network users. By the

way, this is not the only question, in fact, we have dozens: “Russia has a tradition: after the inauguration, the head of state announces pardons. Will this tradition continue?”

And another question: “It would be good to pardon those who are in prison for the first time for committing a minor offence. Will this remain a tradition?”

Vladimir Putin: What does the question say, “There is a tradition”?

Andrei Kondrashov: Yes. “There is a tradition: after the inauguration, the head of state announces pardons.”

Vladimir Putin: Honestly, I do not know anything about this tradition. I do not think Russia has it.

Andrei Kondrashov: Maybe they mean a European tradition, or an American one.

Vladimir Putin: But it says, “We have a tradition.” These are the words, “Russia has a tradition.”

Andrei Kondrashov: Yes, indeed. “Russia has a tradition.” Maybe if Russia does not, it will start this tradition?

Vladimir Putin: First, Russia does not have such a tradition. Second, it is not the President, but the Parliament – the State Duma – who announces pardons. We do this from time to time; I have supported these initiatives.

They must be well prepared and come from certain domestic calls and reasons, not external ones, even if they are as important as the presidential election.

Andrei Kondrashov: Let us give the floor to the call centre. Natalya Yuryeva, please.

Natalya Yuryeva: Thank you, Andrei.

Let us give people using social networks and mobile devices a chance to ask Vladimir Putin a question. Right now 7,000 people in the Moskva-Putinu [Москва-Путину] mobile app are waiting for their chance to talk to the President. Let us give one of them a chance.

Good afternoon! Hello, you are on. Please tell us your name, where you are from, and ask your question.

Natalya Zhurova: Good afternoon, Mr President. I am Natalya Zhurova from Tomsk.

I have three children. My question has to do with the allocation of free land to large families. This law does not work very well in our region.

As far as I know, in 2011, President Dmitry Medvedev signed a law on free land, the allocation of plots to large families. In 2015, this law became void, as far as I know.

At present, regional authorities are responsible for allocating free land to large families. In 2010, I signed up and was placed on the waiting list. I was number 735 at the time. This year, I have moved up half the list to 300 something.

Mr President, my question is this. How much longer will I have to wait – eight years or maybe ten – with three children, two of them boys? You see, we want to teach them, to show them how to work, we want each one of them to grow up to be someone and to love the Russian soil.

I am saying this on behalf of many families, parents raising large families: we would certainly like to live and work on our Russian land. I know there is a lot of abandoned land, but there are people who want to revive it and to live there. I am 42 years old, and if have to wait another ten years, I will be 52–53.

I mean, I understand that time goes by, but I want to live and bring up my children on this land while I am still young. Mr President, I think you understood my question. If this law actually works at the regional level, it would be good if it helped people, especially those with many children.

There is something else I wanted to say. When I went to our regional authorities, I was told that I should get on the waiting list, that is, I have no right to get land now, because in our region, it only goes to families with four children or more. And with three children, you have to wait in line. But, as I know this law, I think that the regional government is most likely violating it.

Vladimir Putin: Thank you for your question.

Natalya Zhurova: Thank you. I am very glad to see you and talk to you.

Vladimir Putin: Thank you, Ms Zhurova. This also sounds somewhat strange to me, indeed, that to get land, you need to have at least four children. The fact that there are three in your family is wonderful; it is our policy to ensure that families have at least three. This is my first point.

Secondly, we should incentivise families like yours.

The third point is about the land. Well, there is a lot of land in Russia, so it is not that; the question is that it should be suitable for use, including for housing construction. And this means that it must be close to infrastructure or the infrastructure should be built first. This, of course, requires certain costs, it goes without saying. These are the main, the most substantial costs.

You are from Tomsk, aren't you?

Natalya Zhurova: Yes, I am from Tomsk, from the city of Tomsk, the region's capital.

Vladimir Putin: Tomsk, or rather Tomsk Region is developing very well in a sustainable manner, and is self-sufficient in terms of resources. The issue is to set the spending priorities, including with regard to budgetary allocations.

Let us hear from Governor Zhvachkin. Is he with us today?

Andrei Kondrashov: We will ask our editors to get in touch with the Tomsk Governor.

Vladimir Putin: Yes, please.

Tomsk Governor Sergei Zhvachkin: Good afternoon, Mr President.

Vladimir Putin: Good afternoon.

Sergei Zhvachkin: I would like to thank you for answering part of the question. You said correctly that we have a special programme regarding this, alongside other programmes on the allocation of housing and other incentives for large families. She said she had moved up the waiting list from 700th to 300th place. I definitely need to talk with her. It looks as if officials have failed to inform her of her rights. We will definitely settle her problem soon, and I will meet with her and subsequently update you on progress in her case, Mr President.

You said correctly that the problem in Siberia is that we have a vast territory, but we cannot allocate land plots without utility lines. Therefore, we currently allocate only land plots with the appropriate infrastructure to large families. I will meet with her personally and subsequently report to you, Mr President.

Kirill Kleimenov: But is there a directive under which land is only allocated to families with four children?

Vladimir Putin: No, this is the local officials' interpretation. Here is what I would like to say. It is not "her" or "she." It is "Mrs Zhurova." This is the first thing.

Second, you said that some officials seem to misunderstand. We must know which officials these are, and they must not be guided by any formal considerations but try to act in the interests of the people who live on the territory these officials have been entrusted to manage. Of course, if there are instructions in your region that free land can only be issued to families with four children, you should take a closer look at them. Raising three children is a challenging task in modern conditions, and this family has three children, hence you should help these people. You should incentivise them and create conditions that would encourage other families to have more children. I ask you to settle this.

Andrei Kondrashov: Let us hear another question from our television audience. Tatyana Remezova is also in the call centre.

Tatyana, please, you have the floor.

Tatyana Remezova: Thank you very much, Andrei.

I would like to give the floor to our volunteers. They have been collecting calls for all 10 days of our call centre's work. Moreover, they called back and talked with those who contacted the Direct Line.

Sitting next to me is Anatoly Parfenov, a volunteer of the Russian Student Rescuer Unit; Alexandra Nemerovskaya, who represents Moscow Volunteers and the Give Life foundation; Olga Nikitina, who moved to Moscow from the Primorye Territory; and Olya, a healthcare volunteer. They all have been taking calls from the Far East.

Anatoly, please.

Anatoly Parfenov: Mr President, there are many calls from the Far East, and they all are very different.

The region has the same problems as everywhere else, but also those specific to the region, such as the Far Eastern hectare programme. One of the main problems with the Far Eastern hectare programme is that the land plots are very remote, so remote that it is impossible to get to them. People write that this is because all the good land plots were taken by officials. For example, Vitaly Grishchenko from the Khabarovsk Territory came from Moscow to receive a land plot 312 kilometres away from Khabarovsk. There also are cases when land plots are allocated in a preserved area, and it is difficult to receive the cadastral registration. There also are humorous incidents: for example, Olga Antonyuk from Vladivostok was only given half a hectare and told there was no more land.

Alexandra Nemerovskaya: Yes, it is difficult for the hectare to catch on, but it is also quite difficult to stay in the Far East. The acute deficit of jobs is the region's main problem. We have the example of Pyotr Litvintsev from Komsomolsk-on-Amur. He is a laid-off aircraft engineer who has to – can you imagine this? – paint roofs. Speaking about where our specialists go. Unfortunately, this is why young people leave.

Olga Nikitina: Yes, I can confirm Alexander's words, because I am from the Primorye Territory. I like my region very much and would like to connect my future with it, but, unfortunately, I cannot see a way to do this yet. We, people of the Far East, do not feel like a part of Russia. We want to travel across our country, visit our relatives and relax at the Crimean and Krasnodar Territory's resorts, but cannot do this because it is far too expensive to travel by plane or train even inside the region. Yes, there are subsidised tickets, but there are so few of them that they sell out in a matter of seconds.

Tatyana Remezova: We have a phone call from Ussuriysk. By the way, that is where Olya is from.

Olga Nikitina: Yes, that is where I am from.

Tatyana Remezova: I am sure it is on the same topic. Let us take this call.

Alexei Grigoryev: Good afternoon, Mr Putin. My name is Alexei Grigoryev.

I would like to ask you about the rise in the airfare on the Moscow-Vladivostok route this summer. My family (my wife and two kids) live in Moscow and I work in Ussuriysk, in Primorye Territory.

In June the price of economy class tickets from Moscow to Vladivostok rose from 55,000 rubles to 112,200. In other words, we have to spend about 150,000 rubles on one-way travel. Please consider this matter.

Vladimir Putin: Let us start from where our caller left off, the increasing airfare from the Vladivostok area to other parts of the Russian Federation. One of the volunteers has already mentioned this.

By the way, I would like to address all volunteers, not only those who are on the line with us, and to thank them for the work they have done to prepare this Direct Line and generally all the volunteers who work for our country in various, very important areas. This is the first thing. (Applause.)

Number two. Regarding airfare from Vladivostok to other parts of Russia. One of the volunteers has just said that there are programmes that subsidise flights at certain periods during the year that target various age groups.

The first thing to be done of course is to expand the geography (it is gradually expanding) of these subsidies and extend the periods when these subsidies are effective, and extend them to more age groups. However, these are limited one-off solutions even though they are needed and can be implemented.

And finally, at the end of the day the main solution, perhaps in time for today's event or maybe it was prepared in advance, but anyway a decision concerning the Far East was taken by the Government yesterday or the day before: the decision to introduce zero VAT on these flights. This is the first and very important, very substantial step towards reducing the price of these tickets. We will see how it pans out. This is the first thing.

Second, the labour market in the Far East. It is certainly a problem, as you have said. It is a great pity that an aircraft manufacturing engineer is painting roofs. A painter is a good profession, but that man's qualifications are way above painting roofs.

What are we doing about this? I would like to point out that we are supporting the high-tech sectors that were created in the Far East over the past decade. One of them is aircraft manufacturing. In the past, only



combat aircraft were manufactured in the Far East, but now we are also developing civilian production there.

For example, the SuperJet 100 is a civilian aircraft that is based on our aircraft manufacturing competencies, including those used to build combat planes. But we manufacture this plane based on modern achievements and foreign technology and competencies, and in cooperation with our Italian and French colleagues. The French worked on the plane's engines.

In other words, we will continue to develop aircraft manufacturing in the Far East along with shipbuilding, which we are reviving there. Take the Zvezda Shipyard, where major projects are progressing and where specialised vessels will be built, including very large ships that have never been built in Russia before.

We will also develop the space industry in the Far East. There is a reason the Vostochny Space Launch Centre was built in the Far East and not somewhere else in the country. These competencies – high-tech sectors, including auto manufacturing – will be further developed.

You know that we have taken a big step in science and education. In fact, although we created a new university based on existing schools, Far Eastern Federal University is unique for the Russian Far East in terms of quality and scale. These are large and long-term projects, but we will continue to move in this direction.

As for the Far Eastern hectare, the programme is effective despite its drawbacks. Thank you for drawing our attention to them. I hope it is not true that officials have taken the land plots. But we will review the situation again, although we have done this many times before.

Judging by the number of questions regarding this, the programme is popular, and people readily take these plots. You know that we have decided that land plots should be allocated not only to residents of the Far East but also to anyone who is willing to move and settle in the region. We will continue to improve this programme. I will definitely pay attention to this.

Thank you very much.

Kirill Kleymenov: Mr Putin, this year there are more questions about Russia's relations with the West. And I must note that anxiety in these messages and questions is mingled with discontent.

I will quote a typical message: "It seems that Russia is to blame for everything. The sanctions have become the main way of communicating with us. What can be done when they are not even willing to listen to our reasoning? And most importantly, there is a feeling that our arguments will not be heard at all, not ever."

Vladimir Putin: I am following what pops up on our left and right. One of the questions that appeared on the interactive screens: "The accusations against Russia are endless. How long will this continue?" This is similar to what you just asked.

What can I say? I have spoken about this more than once; I can only repeat myself. As you see, this is another way of restraining Russia, just as the notorious sanctions are, because these endless accusations give them reason to apply restraining measures, as those who resort to such methods in dealing with Russia and restraining Russia's development think. Why are they doing this? Because they see Russia as a threat, they see that Russia is becoming a rival to them.

I can only say that this is an erroneous policy; it is always preferable to establish constructive interaction rather than try to restrain someone, Russia included, and the overall effect for the world economy would be exceptionally positive, and for the overwhelming majority of those in international communication.

Our partners are finally coming to this understanding. You can see what is happening in many countries. Even at the political level, everyone talks about the need to build normal relations. Yes, each country has its own interests, but they should not be attained through selfish political strategies, including those in the economy. This understanding is coming to many of our partners. I hope this process will gain momentum.

Kirill Kleymenov: Mr Putin, and still, when do you think this period of decline in our relations with the West will end? Because during Russia's long history, we have had other periods of conflict with the Western countries, and very short stretches, when these relations reached a positive level. What is your estimate?

Vladimir Putin: You know, I cannot give you a specific date, but I can tell you the conditions under which this could happen.

It is obvious for us, for Russia, that we must protect our interests. We must do this consistently, not rudely or arrogantly, but we have to protect our interests in the economic and security spheres. We have done this and we will continue to do it. But we are always searching for compromise, we are ready to compromise.

All this pressure will end when our partners realize that the methods they are using are ineffective, are counterproductive, harmful to everyone and that they will have to deal with the interests of the Russian Federation.

Andrei Kondrashov: We have a SMS message on the subject “Will there be a World War Three?”

Vladimir Putin: You know, if you remember what Einstein said. I think he said he did not know what weapons the Third World War will be fought with but the Fourth World War will be fought with stones and sticks. This means that World War Three could put an end to civilisation as we know it. Understanding this should prevent us from extreme and very dangerous actions in the international arena that could threaten modern civilisation.

Incidentally, since World War II we have lived in conditions of relative, again relative global peace. Regional wars continuously flare up here and there. It is enough to recall the war in Vietnam, the conflict on the Korean Peninsula, or the current conflicts in the Middle East – in Iraq and Libya. But there have been no global wars. Why? Because the leading military powers established strategic parity. And no matter how unpleasant this may sound, it is true: the fear of mutual destruction has always deterred international actors from sudden movements and made them respect each other.

The US withdrawal from the ABM Treaty was an attempt to break this strategic parity. But we are responding. I already said in my Address that the modern weapons systems that have been developed and will soon be adopted by the armed forces will undoubtedly maintain parity.

It is necessary to understand this, think about this and find modern forms of interaction that are in keeping with current realities. It is time to sit at the negotiating table and elaborate modern, adequate models of

international, European security.

Andrei Kondrashov: Here is question number 337 from our website. Alexei Ksendzov asks, or rather demands: “Mr President, please take some measures against Latvia. Why do they ban teaching in Russian language? Introduce some sanctions. Thank you.”

Vladimir Putin: I have already said that the introduction of any unilateral sanctions just complicates problems rather than helps to resolve them.

As for the position of our compatriots in the Baltic countries we continue talking about this and drawing the attention of the Baltic authorities, including in Latvia, to this issue. It is hard to believe that hundreds of thousands of people have been declared non-citizens in a modern civilised society. Such a category does not even exist – it is not envisaged by international law. There are citizens, people with dual citizenship or without any, but the notion of “non-citizens” has never existed. It was invented in the Baltic countries to limit the legal rights of the people that live there.

But we must defend the interests of our compatriots in a way that does not make their situation worse. This is why we are in dialogue with our partners in the EU in the hope that eventually they will be ashamed that while they pay attention to human rights violations beyond the EU, they allow flagrant violations of human rights on EU territory. This is exactly the situation described by the saying: “Why worry about a speck in your friend’s eye when you have a log in your own?”

We will continue working persistently on this issue but so as not to harm those who live in these countries.

Kirill Kleymenov: Let us give the floor to our TV audience. Tatyana Remezova continues taking phone calls and video questions.

Tatyana Remezova: Thank you, Kirill.

In addition to governors and ministers, there are many other well-known figures in our audience:

politicians, journalists and those who are commonly referred to as public opinion leaders. Now, we have Sergei Shargunov, a writer and a State Duma deputy, on the line.

Good afternoon, Sergei. You are on the air, you can ask your question.

Sergei Shargunov: Good-afternoon, Mr President.

Vladimir Putin: Good-afternoon.

Sergei Shargunov: Russky Island in Primorye. A large literary forum is under way here. Though I am a Muscovite, I nevertheless came here to attend this forum.

Here is my question. It seems to me that Russia has always been, in spite of everything, in spite of any obstacles, a freethinking country. Freethinking and sharp polemics have always been important both for our social life and our art.

I have been receiving many worrying signals lately from various places, especially from the regions. Some performers zealously revert to the extreme, in a manner of speaking – this applies to certain web hosting services on social networks, likes and reposts. These are not direct calls for violence, which I categorically condemn, but often it is simply a matter of absurd and harsh judgements. You can disagree with them, by why prosecute?

Sometimes, it comes down to sheer idiocy. For example, some young patriotically minded people were put on trial on charges of setting up a utopian group for a referendum on the responsibility of the authorities in the country. One might wonder if this is really a crime. But no, here is “an extremist community,” I understand that neither you, nor I can interfere with judicial proceedings, but we can nonetheless make some judgements.

Sometimes, I get the impression that if Article 282 of the Criminal Code were interpreted literally, then zealots would posthumously convict Pushkin, Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky and Mayakovsky and rule to sensor their work. And then we get these newly-passed laws concerning the internet. To my mind, they are fairly

vague. There is plenty of room for interpretation.

Would it not make sense to somehow stop those who rush full speed to raze other people's opinions? This is particularly worrying when it comes to people's destinies, especially young people, who, it seems, should not be scared off.

Vladimir Putin: Yes, I agree with you. You mentioned literary classics. A character from a very popular play said, "I'd take all books and burn them up like that."

We cannot take this path and we will never take this path. But judicial practice must be open to public scrutiny, which is extremely important, and adjusted if necessary to prevent excesses.

If the point at issue concerns extremist content, we must act in keeping with a general rule, just as in other spheres and areas of society, as I have said, this rule being that those that are guilty must be called to account. But we must first provide a definition for their actions before carrying the case to absurdity. I fully agree with you on that.

Let us analyse the problem within the framework of the Russian Popular Front. I will ask my colleagues to do this, since they have been effective in many other areas of concern to the country in the past.

On one hand, we must fight extremism, which is in the interests of the overwhelming majority of our people. Who would say "No" to putting an end to the [online] encouragement of suicide, especially among young people? Would anyone do this? Of course, not. Or take the popularisation of Nazi ideas. Nobody would protest putting an end to that. Yes, but we first must approve official definitions. We should involve the Supreme Court in this. I am confident and can assure you that people in our law enforcement and judicial agencies understand what they must do. If anything merits additional attention on our part, let us do it. Let's focus on the problems you have mentioned.

Sergei Shargunov: I will provide the names, if I may.

Vladimir Putin: Thank you.

Andrei Kondrashov: When replying to the previous question, you mentioned the United States' withdrawal from the ABM Treaty on ballistic missile defence. Do you remember that you first drew public attention to this issue back in 2007 in Munich? You said then that the United States was spreading its national jurisdiction to other countries, which is very dangerous. The theme of your speech then was a multipolar versus a unipolar world.

Years have passed. Nobody listened to what you said then. And now the EU and Canada are facing a trade war with the United States. The Federal Chancellor of Germany and the President of France recently visited Russia. Of course, they are not saying this in public, but do they suggest behind closed doors that it is time to lift the sanctions against Russia? Or are they still waiting for permission from Washington?

Vladimir Putin: This is not only about our one-on-one conversations, although they form a considerable part of the negotiating process with the leaders of France, Germany, with our Austrian friends – I have just been in Austria – and representatives of many other European countries, not to mention Asia. They are not just saying it in my ear, they are already saying it publicly.

A French Government Minister recently publicly said that the USA cannot be allowed to become the world's economic policeman. He said it publicly. The former German Finance Minister publicly said a few months ago that the Federal Republic had never been a sovereign state in the full sense of the word since 1945.

Everybody sees, of course, what is happening. But apparently, our partners thought that they would never be affected by this counter-productive policy involving restrictions and sanctions. Now we see what is happening, because the introduction of tariffs on steel and aluminium from not only Europe, but also Canada and Mexico – this is sanctions, in fact. Only the words used are different, but in reality, this is the case. What are they being punished for? Did they “annex Crimea” as many of our partners say? No. This has to do with the pragmatic national interests of the United States, as its current leadership sees them.

Which brings us back to what I have already said, which is the need to work out common, uniformly understood and firm rules of conduct in the sphere of security and in the sphere of economic interaction. An awareness of this process is of course there. When I laid out my theses, if you will, in Munich in 2007, which have often been quoted in the years since, I incurred the anger of many of my colleagues who said it was too tough and inappropriate. But what was I speaking about? I said that the United States was spreading its jurisdiction beyond its national borders, and that this was unacceptable. This is exactly what is happening today, only it is happening to our European and other partners. Why is it happening?

Because nobody wanted, as you said, to listen and nobody did anything to stem this trend. So there you are.

Andrei Kondrashov: They asked for it.

Vladimir Putin: Yes. “Dinner is served, enjoy...” as they said in a popular film, well, I will not quote it precisely because it sounds a bit rude, “enjoy your meal.”

But joking aside, what is important is that there is a growing awareness that it is necessary to sit down at the negotiating table and work out rules of behaviour acceptable to all, rules that will enable the world economy to develop effectively.

Kirill Kleymenov: Mr President, I think London is competing with Washington in terms of anti-Russia rhetoric. At some point London even seemed to confidently occupy first place in this. First, the Brits tried to deprive us of the right to host the World Cup but failed. Then the Skripal case caused a huge outcry all over the world.

I will forward one question on this issue. It came from student Anastasia Fedosova: “What does the Skripal case mean for Russia and will we respond to the accusation?”

Vladimir Putin: I have talked about this many times. I am not sure if I can add anything. If, as Britain claims, chemical weapons were used against these people, they would have died within several minutes on the spot. Thank God this did not happen. So this means we are dealing with something other than a chemical warfare agent. And we are eager to be granted an opportunity to have access to our citizens, Julia in this case, and take part in the investigation as a full participant. Without this it is difficult for us to comment on anything.

Andrei Kondrashov: Mr President, to continue on the issue of the anti-Russia sanctions imposed by the Brits, let’s consider the Russian business people that have large assets in the West and are now in big trouble. To use our word, they have begun to be nightmarised. Roman Abramovich, for one, has faced serious problems. Is this a new episode in the soap opera “The Rich Also Cry?” Incidentally, some of our viewers have asked for your advice.



Vladimir Putin: As for big Russian businessmen, I talked about this several years ago at a public meeting with representatives from business. True, it sounded pretty tough. I will not repeat word for word what I said then. It sounded but a bit rough –let’s put it that way.

But I warned them that developments like we are seeing today were possible. I advised our business leaders to keep their capital at home in Russia where it was made and use it to develop the Russian economy in order to ensure their financial security.

In 2008, when we had to deal with the infamous crisis in the world economy that originated outside our country, many of our large companies found themselves in dire straits because they had taken out a great number of loans from Western financial institutions and had to face margin calls.

Their collateral value dropped drastically and, according to their loan agreements, they had to either repay the loans immediately or add more collateral. Otherwise, they would lose their assets.

What did we do? We increased authorised capital for Vnesheconombank with a special law and took over their loans when many were ready to sell their companies for nothing. Prime Minister at the time, I said: “No, we will help you on certain terms. We will take over your loans and you will be able to pay them off later.” And that happened. When the economy stabilised, they repaid the debt and remained owners of their companies.

The Government reaped benefits because it took that action on certain terms. Overall, everything went well. But we did it, Russia did it, the Russian Government did that with regards to the assets of the companies it considered important for its national interests.

Who will help them abroad? If anything, they are being persecuted there. Conditions are being created for them that make it impossible to do business. This is also a big mistake of those who are doing it in the West. Because what will be the outcome of all these restrictions and persecution of our businesses?

For example, what will come of the complications with dollar transactions? It will undermine the trust of businesses, and not only ours. Everybody is watching what is going on. This is undermining trust in the

economic policies of the leading world economies.

The dollar is a universal reserve currency today. The euro is trying to take over some of its functions and has succeeded in part. However, the dollar remains the only universal currency.

By restricting dollar transactions, the US Government undermines confidence in the dollar. Some fleeting results are possible, though still not guaranteed.

However, they think they can achieve positive results – political results, not economic, mind you. However, in the long term, these measures are undermining trust in this kind of politics.

So here we are. Everybody is thinking now about creating new and universal currencies. Everybody is thinking about doing transactions in national currencies. Essentially, they are biting the hand that feeds them. I believe it is counterproductive and damaging both for those involved and for the entire global economy. But I am certain this, too, shall pass.

Andrei Kondrashov: Let us give the floor to our colleague, Natalya Yuryeva, who is working at the message processing centre.

Vladimir Putin: By the way, sorry, I jotted down one of the questions. Some people think we should help Roman Abramovich and other Russian businessmen in this difficult situation, while others ask us when “these thieves” – they mention names – will bring their money back to Russia.

I would not talk now about those who break the law. We are talking about those who acquired their wealth legitimately. But both groups would live better in Russia, all the more so since we announced a capital amnesty twice, and we are doing this with the business community.

The system is imperfect and needs to be fine-tuned, which we are ready to do. I hope that members of our business community will respond accordingly.

Andrei Kondrashov: They tell me we have a call from one more writer. This seems to be a good day for writers.

Natalya Yuryeva, take the floor.

Natalya Yuryeva: Thank you, Andrei.

Our message processing centre has received a huge amount of questions about Ukraine over the past four years. They come from Russia, Ukraine and other neighbouring countries. But this time we received a question that our editors thought interesting, from a writer who has personal knowledge of the situation in Donbass. Let us watch a video we received from Zakhar Prilepin.

Zakhar Prilepin: Good afternoon. My name is Zakhar Prilepin. I am an adviser to the head of the Donetsk People's Republic and an officer in the Donetsk army. It seems to us here that the Ukrainian army will take advantage of the World Cup to launch an offensive. Can you comment on this situation?

Vladimir Putin: I hope it will not reach the point of such provocations. And if this happens, I think it will have very serious consequences for Ukrainian statehood as a whole.

Once again, to emphasise, I expect that nothing like this will happen. It is impossible to intimidate people who live in these areas in Donbass, in the Lugansk People's Republic, in the Donetsk People's Republic. We see what is happening there, and see how people are enduring it all. We provide assistance to both unrecognised republics and will continue to do so. But what is happening with these territories in general is certainly sad.

On the other hand, this also suggests that the current Ukrainian leadership is unable to resolve this problem. How can they resolve it while at the same time considering these territories their own and organising a complete blockade of these territories? How is it possible to consider this territory and these people as your citizens and keep subjecting them to artillery attacks, causing civilians to suffer? Civilians suffer the most.

Now, the OSCE representatives have recorded an increase in these attacks by the Ukrainian forces. Why do this, when you just need to observe the Minsk Agreements? This is simply ridiculous considering the expected result – restoring the country's territorial integrity. The longer and the further this goes the worse for Ukraine.

You know, sometimes it seems to me that the situation is deteriorating as Ukraine enters a new political cycle, including the upcoming Rada and presidential elections. I would like to stress this again: the current Ukrainian authorities, especially in these circumstances, are unable to resolve the LPR and DPR problem, partly because they do not need voters from these regions, because it is clear that they would never vote for the current government.

However, if the authorities are guided by their narrow political and economic interests, if they continue to rob their people and save their money in offshore accounts in case things go bad, noting good will ever come of it.

Let us see how the situation develops, and we will do our part to ensure that it is resolved within the framework of the Minsk process and the Minsk Agreements.

Andrei Kondrashov: Let's move to Moscow City now. There are people there who wrote a day or two before Direct Line that they are popular bloggers who have a huge audience of tens of millions of people and that they were collecting questions from their subscribers and could forward the most popular ones. So we sent our correspondent Anton Lyadov to these bloggers, he is with us now.

Anton Lyadov: Good afternoon everyone! Today, perhaps for the first time in Direct Line history, we are working with representatives from the youth internet community. We have bloggers gathered at a spectacular venue with a beautiful view of Moscow, watching Direct Line from the very beginning, and commenting. Some of them upload pictures, some shoot videos.

Each of them has their own channel, where they post videos filmed on their phones, but today they use professional equipment. The important thing is that their total audience is about 20 million people. Just think of that! A huge figure. Pay attention, they are doing live reporting on the internet right now. That's how it works.

Shortly before Direct Line they asked their audiences what they would ask the President. They have come here today with these questions.

Next to me is a representative of the internet community Gusein Gasanov. His overall audience is about 7 million people. This is Natalya Krasnova. She is from Chelyabinsk. Her audience is about 2 million people. Hello! Go ahead please.

Gusein Gasanov: Good afternoon, Mr President.

We have opinion leaders here today. I would like to ask a question. To share a concern. There are rumours on the internet about the planned shutdown of popular social networks such as Instagram and YouTube. What do you think about this? Is this a possibility?

Vladimir Putin: I understand your concern and understand the concerns of those that you work with on the internet. We are not going to shut anything down. I am well aware of the situation with Telegram.

What can I say? You are in your place and you just said that you are concerned. And I'm concerned in my place too, do you know why? I am concerned for people's security. Suppose law enforcement agencies and special services report to me after a bomb attack on the St Petersburg metro that they could not track the terrorists' correspondence, that they could not make a decision in time because it is encrypted, and the terrorists use this. How am I supposed to react to this? After all, security comes first, does it not?

At the same time, I used to work in special services and I know that it is easy to ban something, but it is more difficult to find civilised solutions. So, I will encourage my colleagues to follow this path, the special services themselves and law enforcement agencies, to use modern investigation methods, to prevent terrorist attacks without limiting freedom, including on the internet.

Andrei Kondrashov: Another question. Can you hear us?

Natalya Krasnova: Good afternoon, Mr President. My name is Natasha Krasnova and I am from Chelyabinsk. I am 38 years old, and I consider myself a responsible adult. I have a PhD, but I currently

work as a blogger, which is not a proper job in Russia. Will it someday become a proper job?

Vladimir Putin: Natasha, you said that you are an adult, although you look much younger. Honestly, I am surprised that you are 38 years old. You said that blogging should one day become a proper job.

But we know how bloggers earn their living: by advertising, right? And you seem to be good at this. Whether the job gets recognition or not, it is still your source of income and, probably, a good one, if you do this.

So if your question is about a legislative solution to provide social security for the future, perhaps we can talk about this. In fact, I think you are right, because, if it is a regular job, the state is interested in formalising it accordingly.

Andrei Kondrashov: Thank you, bloggers. Perhaps we will return to you today.

And now back to the call centre and Natalya Yuryeva.

Natalya, please.

Natalya Yuryeva: Thank you.

We are monitoring the reaction of people in social media. As of this moment, the number of posts with Direct Line's hashtags has hit 550,000 and even higher. The most active users are in Moscow, followed by – we will see this in a moment – St Petersburg, my home city, and Tatarstan. We received another 918 messages while I was speaking.

I suggest taking a video call from... No, I am told that we have the latest post we can see now. It came through just now. The text says, "Without Putin, the problem with growing petroleum prices probably will not be resolved. Noting how much time it will take for 92nd to cost less than 45 roubles." This is

from Pyotr Shumatov.

And now I suggest taking an online video call.

Hello. Please, introduce yourself – tell us your name and where you are from, and ask your question.

Vladislav Khristolyubov: Good afternoon, Mr President.

Vladimir Putin: Good afternoon.

Vladislav Khristolyubov: Vladislav Khristolyubov, a lawyer from St Petersburg.

Everyone knows that Russia was one of two world powers with the technology to launch reusable spacecraft. We succeeded in launching the unique spacecraft Buran into orbit and safely landing it. In my opinion, energy and especially space are among the most important sectors for any economy. Therefore, if I had the opportunity to give all my strength to this common cause – to the maintenance and, most importantly, development of these industries – I would, without hesitation.

In this regard, I have a question. Is it possible to revive the space shuttle technology? And what are Russia's general plans for expanding its presence in space? Thanks.

Vladimir Putin: Vladislav, you are certainly right. The development of outer space and space technologies is extremely important for any country, and even more so for our country, which has significant, maybe even unique competencies in this area.

It was no accident that the first satellite was Soviet, and the first man in space, Yury Gagarin, was our compatriot. These technologies continue to be developed and commercialised. In this respect we need to take many steps forward, including with regard to the quality of satellites, the quality of the equipment. We need to regain and firmly uphold our leadership in space launches. There is now competition in this

sphere. Our French friends and partners use Guiana actively, while in Asia and the United States, space technologies are developing very rapidly. This is all very good and normal. We work with our partners, we have various plans. Despite all the difficulties, say, in relations with the US, American and Russian scientists are working together, working on the study of deep space, including planets like Venus.

We have our own programme, a very good programme. The is the new programme, Sfera, which envisages the launch of 600-plus satellites in the next few years that will deal with global positioning, Earth probes and communications. It will be a breakthrough altogether.

This is another area where we can make a breakthrough because the quality of communications with this technology makes it possible to replace cable and the new system wouldn't be worse in quality and coverage but would be more cost-effective and accessible. As a whole, it could lead to a revolution in communications.

We have good programmes related to the development of deep space. By 2022, we plan to test a medium-class carrier rocket and by 2022 these should be launches in an unmanned mode and by 2024, manned space vehicles should be used. In general, Russia has very ambitious space exploration plans.

I assure you, Russia will continue pursuing this path. It is not accidental that we have spent quite substantial funds and resources to create a new space port in the east of our country, Vostochny. We will develop it as a civilian component of our space exploration activities.

Kirill Kleymenov: Mr Putin, actually, there are many questions about space, including about Rogozin who is now the head of Roscosmos Corporation. Some people have doubts about him because he is a journalist by training, whereas others think highly of his leadership skills and think he can move this industry forward, but...

Vladimir Putin: You know, I think now is not the time to comment on this. Nevertheless, if such questions are asked I will say: yes, maybe his education is not applicable, but Mr Rogozin was involved in the defence industry for six years and paid a lot of attention to space activities in this industry. So, he is quite competent in this area.

But, of course, one man on the field does not a warrior make, and he and I have talked about this. He will



involve others in this work and create a team capable of resolving technological tasks at the level required today, as well as production organisers that will deal professionally with the administrative side of the company. I hope he will manage.

Andrei Kondrashov: There are many more jokes and questions about Vitaly Mutko.

Here is a message from seamen: “Mr Putin, allow us to paint Mutko’s portrait on our warships to make them unsinkable.”

Vladimir Putin: Our warships are already unsinkable or hard to sink. Credit for this goes, first, to our shipbuilders and the training of our crews. I hope this will be the case and will be improved in the future.

As for Vitaly Mutko, there is indeed a lot of talk and gossip about him and I am fully aware of this. At the same time, I would like to draw your attention to the fact that although his English definitely needs improvement, it is enough to see what he did and built for sport and physical fitness during his years of work as Minister of Sport and Deputy Prime Minister.

Concentrate on the factual side of what he did, and not the emotional side. If we really look at what he did, we will see that it was significant. Take the facilities of the Sochi Olympics. Kozak also worked on them, but Mutko did, too. Just recently we talked about what has been done and how, about the functioning of these facilities, the effect of their presence for the region and how efficiently they are being used.

As for stadiums completed for the World Cup, credit for this largely goes to Mr Mutko. So I understand everything, but I focus on the reality, not opinions coloured by emotion. Needless to say, Mr Mutko should probably go to great lengths to display his best qualities in the new position and I hope this will be the case.

Kirill Kleymenov: Let us see what other questions we have.

Vladimir Putin: Sorry, there is one more point. We know how he was attacked over the doping scandal

and so on and so forth. In these conditions, it is impossible to send him into retirement; and again, he has good potential. Let him do his job.

Kirill Kleymenov: Let us once again go to the Call Centre. Let me say once again that volunteers are also there. Let us hear what questions they are working on.

Tatyana, please.

Tatyana Remezova: Thank you, Kirill.

“Practically every one of us has relatives or friends or friends of friends afflicted with this disease – cancer.” This is from your Address, Mr President, where you proposed to implement a special national cancer programme.

This topic raises many questions. Each one speaks to the heart, there is no other way to say it. Alevtina Kiseleva, a healthcare worker, helped to clarify the main ones. She helps look after patients at hospitals. Alevtina is an aspiring oncologist.

Alevtina Kiseleva: Indeed, we have received many questions on cancer.

First, the lack of oncology centres and qualified help in the regions. For example, the oncologist in Apatity sees patients for two hours per day. You remember Darya Starikova from last year, she is from Apatity. Or take Kaliningrad, where it takes three months to see an oncologist.

We still lack medicines in hospitals and ambulances. Yekaterina Trofimova from Crimea writes that the only chemotherapy course is in Simferopol and can only be done with the available medicines.

As a doctor, I know that the treatment must be tailored to each patient. Vera Kuprina’s mother from the Yaroslavl Region died of shock from the pain only because there was no medicine in the ambulance.

Misdiagnosis is another important problem. Marina Potseluyko from Bryansk was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis, and only several months later was a malignant brain tumour found.

Mr President, I am 24 years old and this year I graduate from Sechenov University with honours. I want to dedicate my life to oncology. It is very important for me know how we will save patients in the future. As we can see from the messages, the chain “patient – doctor – diagnosis – treatment” does not work. How can we resolve this problem?

Vladimir Putin: Yes, you are certainly right, this is one of the most pressing and sensitive issues in healthcare. We are setting complicated and, without exaggeration, ambitious objectives on extending the life span of our people – we want to reach the best figures by 2024 – 80 plus.

Needless to say, this is impossible to achieve without modern treatment techniques, including technology to counter such personal tragedies as oncology. Compared to other diseases that affect life span, for instance cardiovascular ailments, we probably have fewer results, but a positive trend is still there.

What should we do in this respect? You mentioned this to some extent. Incidentally, there will be the same questions for Kaliningrad and Krasnodar – when will oncology centres be built?

In this context, I would like to make a point, and as a specialist you know this. But I will mention it again so our citizens know what road we are on.

First of all, this implies early diagnostics. If we can do this, we will ensure... Ms Skvortsova is on the screen. We will ask her to correct me if I am not being accurate about anything. Today, early diagnostics is at over 30 percent but we need to increase this to 50–70 percent, in which case we could provide a normal lifestyle for our cancer patients at least for five years, or more.

Now, we cure more than 90 percent of children with onco-hematology after the construction of the onco-hematological centre in Moscow and before that – I am afraid to say it – this figure was about 30 percent or less. And now it is over 90 percent. In other words, it is possible to achieve results. What should be done for this?

First, as I said, early diagnostics is critical. Second, we need to pay more attention to nuclear medicine because examinations with the latest techniques make it possible to identify a disease at an early stage or curb what has already developed.

Now about medicines and chemotherapy. We need effective domestic products that meet modern requirements.

Of course, we must work to attract people like you to medicine, that is, young professionals who love their jobs and who are needed in their area.

Here is what I will tell you. We certainly need to build more cancer centres and upgrade the existing ones. We are preparing this programme. It will cost approximately 1 trillion rubles until 2024 of the additional 8 trillion rubles I mentioned.

How should we invest these additional 8 trillion rubles, which we expect to receive soon? Let us ask Ms Skvortsova to comment on the issue you have raised. Ms Skvortsova, you have the floor.

Healthcare Minister Veronika Skvortsova: Thank you, Mr President. Of course, you were correct that we must start with early disease diagnosis, which allows us to provide effective treatment.

Thankfully, the early detection rate for all types of cancer is 56 percent, and the figures are as high as 70 to 80 percent in some areas.

The number of undetected cancer cases has decreased dramatically in the country. Regarding the most common types, the detection rate of the last stage of female reproductive cancers has decreased to 5–9 percent. But that rate is still too high.

This is why we launched a cancer screening programme as part of regular health examinations in 2013. This year, we have changed the regulations for these health examinations.

People in the age groups where the cancer risk is especially high can have high-quality free health screenings every other year.

Moreover, women's health clinics offer annual examinations that include ultrasound, cytological and microbiological examination.

We must raise general practitioner awareness of cancer symptoms. With this goal in view, we created an illustrated online programme a year ago.

A total of 85 percent of primary care doctors were certified under this programme in 2017. Our goal is to teach them to take notice of unusual symptoms, no matter what the patients come in for, and to compare them to cancer symptoms.

Andrei Kondrashov: Ms Skvortsova, please excuse me, but we have a report on the subject you have raised.

In general, we have many medical questions. One of them caught our attention: Maria Bondareva works there and comes to us live.

Maria Bondareva: Good afternoon, Mr President.

We are now in the town of Strunino, this is in Vladimir Region. Local residents have turned to you because of this hospital. It is not just the only hospital in Strunino with its population of 14,000, but also for the four nearby towns, 30,000 in total.

Not long ago this hospital was merged with the regional one, and it has ceased to be an independent unit, and because of this, as you can see, it has not been repaired in a very long time, and the buildings are very dilapidated. The picture is about the same inside, although everything is ready to treat patients.

I have written down that, as of today, the surgery, gynecology, inflections and pediatrics departments, as well as the laundry, cafeteria and even the maternity ward that once was here, are all closed. The skin disease and ophthalmology departments as well as the out-patient clinic may also be closed. The closest regional hospital is in Alexandrov, a 30-minute train ride, never mind how long it takes to get there door-to-door.

So the local residents have created a taskforce to resolve this problem. They have been protecting these walls for several months and have finally decided to turn to you, because we all heard and know your Address to the Federal Assembly and your May executive orders where you spoke in detail about developing and, as you say, achieving a breakthrough in healthcare and protecting our hospitals and medical institutions.

I have several representatives of this group here with me right now, such as Anna Pogodina. She has ten children and eight grandchildren. She was the one who sent the video to the call centre. And we decided to come here to give her a chance to address her question directly to you.

Anna Pogodina: Good afternoon, Mr President.

This is a very important issue for me: the closing of the paediatrics department. I have 18 children. I am a mother and a grandmother. Moms have to travel to Alexandrov. It is hard work getting to the station with children and then waiting in a long line. No treatment helps. We have to ask for an appointment 4–6 weeks in advance and then have to wait for a place in hospital. We have established a taskforce headed by Irina Bandalag. Can we give her the floor?

Vladimir Putin: Please.

Irina Bandalag: Mr President, we had an excellent hospital in Strunino with all the necessary departments. When it was merged with the regional centre, its departments started to close down. And we want all of them back, because not everyone can afford going to Alexandrov. We do not have enough medicine, equipment or specialists. We are very worried that the departments that remain will be closed, too, and we will have no medical help at all. The polyclinic is in bad condition here. We would like to build a new one, but because there is not enough money for that, we want at least to repair the old one so that we have a place to go for medical help. We ask for your help in this problem. Thank you very much.

Vladimir Putin: Thank you.

What is the population of Strunino? How many people?

Irina Bandalag: 14,000 plus nearby communities, up to 30,000 in total.

Maria Bondareva: Up to 30,000 who are treated in hospitals.

Vladimir Putin: I see.

Look, the issue is the most acute for small settlements where no more than 100 or 200 people live. To reiterate, in these places we plan to implement new programmes to establish mobile complexes and new paramedic centres, with 10 billion rubles allocated for the first programme and 7.4 billion for the second.

But in your case, we are speaking about a larger town. Of course things should be upgraded, and it must be clear who can provide what help and where. I totally agree with you. Without question, this is what the regional authorities must do.

The governor is already on the screen. Please, Ms Orlova, I would like to give you the floor.

Governor of Vladimir Region Svetlana Orlova: Good afternoon, Mr President.

As of today, we are not shutting anything down in Strunino. We have allocated 68 million: 20 million on renovating the pediatric clinic, 40 on the hospital and the dermatology unit that needs to be repaired. The hospital was built in 1929. It is already hazardous to take children into the pediatric clinic.

This is why our department is working with local residents and with this taskforce. We will also look into the logistics, we will add mobile medical centres under the federal programme. Thank you very much.

We have over 20 such mobile centres. There are first aid stations operating in the townships. The hospital in Alexandrov was renovated last year; the paramedic station was also renovated. The paramedic station in Strunino was relocated to a new building due to the unified dispatcher call system. Of course, as the pediatric clinic is in the centre of Strunino, it is an inconvenience for moms, but this is temporary. And we will certainly keep a close eye on this.

We allocate the most funding to all things medicine. We have already built 17 first aid and obstetric stations in the villages, furnished practically all the equipment that was lacking, and we also allocated 60 million on medicine recently. In addition, we are working on the design and planning documentation of a new outpatient clinic. Strunino is certainly a small town with 14,000 residents, it is 15 kilometres away from the main centre, Alexandrov, and during the summer season when holidaymakers arrive, there is high demand for healthcare, so we send additional ambulances there. I think we will definitely work on getting an outpatient clinic there, all the more so as the foundation was dug there ages ago. It is needed.

Vladimir Putin: I am very pleased that you finished with the words “it is needed.” Judging by what I see, the need is urgent because regardless of what you said – and I assume that things are really that way, all the positive moments you mentioned are surely real. But what we see now on the screen clearly requires your special attention.

And, Ms Skvortsova, about the resources that I have just mentioned, the 10 and 7.4 billion – there are other areas to be supported in the regions. I would like to ask you to consider this carefully and, together with the Governor, find a solution to this problem. We cannot simply eliminate primary care.

This issue is just as sensitive in many other regions as well, and it concerns not only primary care. The same thing is happening, by the way, in general education, in schools. I think we will come back to this issue a bit later.

I expect you to pay close attention to this. And I will see what happens next in actuality, in practice.

Andrei Kondrashov: Maria, tell me please, is the group you are speaking with happy with the answers of



the Minister, Governor and the President?

Maria Bondareva: Yes, Andrei, they were very eager to add something while you were listening to the Governor of the Vladimir Region.

Anna Pogodina: Well, the department is not working. They told us that it is not closed, but it is not working; it is, in fact, closed. They do not admit children, so we have to go to Alexandrov instead.

Maria Bondareva: What is your question for the President?

Svetlana Orlova: We would like him to help us restore everything that was destroyed. We would like everyone to help us.

Vladimir Putin: Listen. Undoubtedly, this medical institution ought to operate as a modern one, and actually help people. Together with the Governor and the municipal authorities, with the support of the Healthcare Ministry, we will have to decide at the regional level what should be restored and to what extent. Ms Skvortsova is listening to all this right now.

I presume all these things will be done. And I would like to draw the attention of my colleagues to something: I am asking you to personally oversee this, so that there are no discrepancies of this kind in the future – whether the department is working or not.

It obviously must be hard to oversee every single municipality, but in this case, this must be done – it is people's health that we are talking about.

Andrei Kondrashov: Mr President, Kirill and I have selected a series of quick questions. Call it a blitz. Ready?

Vladimir Putin: A blitz?

Andrei Kondrashov: Yes.

What do you do when you do not know what to do?

Vladimir Putin: You know, there is a rule used by motorists: better safe than sorry. The price for error is very high for people in my occupation.

So, if I do not know what to do, I try to find a solution after all and come all the same to a firm opinion about what is really needed and expedient.

Kirill Kleymenov: Mr President, many people have noted your wonderful sense of humour. Have you ever had to laugh at yourself?

Vladimir Putin: I often do this.

Kirill Kleymenov: What was the best joke you've heard lately?

Vladimir Putin: I do not know, I would need to think about it. We have discussed some international issues, some of them really funny I think. Recently, one of the most famous and popular media sources in Germany wrote that President Trump was pushing Europe into Putin's hands.

If we combine this with an earlier joke that Russia interfered in the US election, all this sounds funny enough: we allegedly tampered with the presidential election in the US, and he gave us Europe as a reward. Complete nonsense. Or a joke, because it can't be serious.

Andrei Kondrashov: Is there any question that you do not really have an answer for?

Vladimir Putin: It is difficult to answer your question. But I can tell you that if I do not have an answer, I try to find one anyway. And I try to do this with my colleagues.

Kirill Kleymenov: Mr President, this is a very personal question from one of our viewers: What advice would you pass from your father to your grandchildren?

Vladimir Putin: Never lie.

Andrei Kondrashov: Can you tell us when you believed in God?

Vladimir Putin: Now this is a very personal question. It is very difficult to talk about it with the public, but, in my opinion, every person is born with faith in God deep down, everyone is born with it, but people begin to understand this at different times and under different circumstances.

In any case, say, during the Great Patriotic War, when even the most hardened and stubborn atheists stood up in the trench and charged, I am sure that each of them was thinking about God.

I admit there are people who realise this without any extreme situations, but for sure, when a person finds themselves in an extreme situation, almost everyone thinks about God.

Kirill Kleymenov: One more question: Mr President, what does one have to sacrifice to be President?

Vladimir Putin: Sacrifice? The privacy of a personal life, this is inevitable. But there is also very powerful compensation – this is compensated by the realisation that you are engaged in a very important, necessary, unique business aimed at improving the welfare of millions of people and strengthening what is most important of all – their Motherland.

Kirill Kleymenov: Let us once again give floor to our television spectators. The Call Centre, please.

Tatyana Remezova: Kirill, thank you very much.

By now we have received over 1,300,000 calls, 500,000 SMSs and 250,000 questions on the website: over 2.3 million in total.

And now I would like to show how our volunteers process questions. As you can see, all folders here have subjects, and every five minutes they come here and place questions in the right folder: environment, demography or medicine.

I would like to point out that every fifth question concerns social issues, including many questions about pensions. For example: “Why has indexation stopped for working elderly people?” from Noginsk. Or from the Tula Region: “How long will the investment part of the pension remain frozen?” And probably the question everyone is talking about. Alexei Goncharov from Kursk is on the phone.

Mr Goncharov, you are on the air. Ask your question.

Question: Good afternoon. Alexei Goncharov from Kursk.

Mr President, will the pension age be raised? No one will employ you if you are older than 50. Will early retirement be cancelled for miners, railway workers and security workers?

Vladimir Putin: First of all there were several questions from our host: working elderly people and so on. During the Soviet era, as you know, working seniors were not paid [pensions], unfortunately, and the government does the same today, whether it seems appropriate or not.

But we should certainly think about this, first of all, because these are mostly people who work at low-paying jobs such as nurses in hospitals or kindergartens. I mean the situation on the labour market and the

low income of these citizens. Of course, we should think about it.

Speaking about the pension age, you know my position: I have always been extremely careful and clear on this, and I continue to be.

I would like to highlight a key task I have charged the Government with: to increase elderly people's incomes, and significantly.

The Government definitely will have to see to this in the near future, because it would involve solving another task: reducing by half the number of people living in poverty.

We will find out what measures the Government will propose to resolve this key task in the very near future. I hope that this will be done, and we will be able to discuss this and speak about the proposed measures.

But let me stress once again that the key task for the entire pension system is to significantly increase elderly people's income.

Andrei Kondrashov: Now on Direct Line we have one of Russia's most classified centres – the famous Kurchatov Institute or as its employees tenderly call it, Kurchatnik. It recently marked 75 years since being founded. Our correspondent Dmitry Kaistro is there. He is live on the air.

Dmitry Kaistro: Good afternoon.

This is the laboratory of the legendary National Research Centre Kurchatov Institute. It is here that the unique biosimilar technology is being developed. This is indeed a new word in science. It is being created by the youngest scientists and I will introduce some of them to you today. This is Yulia Dyakova who is in charge of the research department and Timofei Griogoryev who heads the section that is developing this unique biosimilar technology.

Timofei, what do you have in your hands?

Timofei Grigoryev: Good afternoon, Mr President. I have a device that puts fine fibre on a wound or a burn. This fibre creates a coating that protects a wound or a burn from the loss of moisture and warmth and from infection while a patient is being taken to the hospital. Using the same technology we developed frames of bio artificial organs – trachea, skin, a diaphragm. When inserted into the body they are overgrown by cells and vessels and eventually dissolve leaving what amounts to living tissue. We are also working a lot on biodegradable polymers. Using biodegradable composites we designed screws and plates to fix broken bones or torn tendons. By the time they degrade by design, they will be replaced with bone tissue and the patient will not have to undergo a second operation to remove them. Such intramedullary screws are being tested on large laboratory animals.

Dmitry Kaistro: Thanks to these innovations Russia is now on the verge of a scientific breakthrough. Yulia, is this unique technology already being used in production, medicine or in hospitals?

Yulia Dyakova: Regrettably, not yet.

Mr President, the main problem here that we have a very long and complicated certification procedure that can go on for years, whereas our foreign competitors can complete it in six to eight weeks.

We also think it would be important for the state to spend part of the funds used to purchase medical devices on developments by Russian scientists. This applies not only to medicine but also to other innovative areas.

For example, here at the Kurchatov Institute we have created unique technology that makes it possible, using the microbiological industry and microbiological synthesis, to process a grain surplus into important products, for instance, fodder additives, all of which are currently purchased abroad. We suggest studying possible ways of supporting a couple of pilot companies, supporting the creation of these companies, where grain surpluses can be processed into important microbiological products, including fodder additives.

Dmitry Kaistro: It will not be an exaggeration if I add that there are dozens of innovations here. And you can literally see them with your own eyes.

Timofei Grigoryev: Yes. And while we were talking, we applied this coating. Look, it is absolutely atraumatic, you can remove it without disturbing the injury. So, if every second ambulance has this device, if these shafts and screws are used in average injury care centres, it will make the lives of the Russian people better.

Vladimir Putin: Yes, this is indeed interesting, this is promising and we need it. As you know, I visited the Kurchatov Institute not long ago and Mr Kovalchuk told me about your innovations. I know that there are problems with certification, that's true in practice – despite the fact that we have adopted regulatory standards requiring that these innovations be introduced at a much faster pace than in some of other countries, our competitors. According to our regulatory standards, our innovations must be introduced faster than in those countries, but in practice we do have problems.

As regards this particular case, our colleague has just said that tests on animals, as he put it, are currently under way. That means that you have not yet submitted your development for certification. But for us to reach a final conclusion about how the certification system works in this case, you need to go through the technological preparations envisaged by the law in order to commercialise your product.

But you are right in saying that we must properly focus on this. Ms Skvortsova has repeatedly appeared on our screens today. There is no need now to switch back to the Healthcare Ministry again, but we will work on this. And the fact that your inventions need support, including in terms of commercialisation, we will certainly do that.

I want to congratulate you on these achievements. These are indeed important achievements, and I hope that our medical institutions will be widely using this in the near future.

Kirill Kleymenov: Thanks to Kurchatov Institute for that.

Mr President, one of the serious issues we face during preparations for Direct Line is defrauded housing equity holders. The problem does exist, and it is serious.

But we should note that there are regions where this has been successfully resolved, where the necessary

mechanisms and methods were found. For example, the Yaroslavl and Tyumen regions.

With their approach, developers who agree to complete unfinished buildings are granted new land for construction for free. Also, a system of special tax incentives is in place. Developers who complete these buildings have the right to sell the flats that were not sold by the previous developer.

And indeed, the situation has improved; people move to these flats and finally get what they should have received years ago. A roof over a warm corner is the most important thing.

Andrei Kondrashov: In fact, there are also negative experiences. We have a lot of them, but I will just read a couple of examples.

Lipetsk, Yevgeny Zaitsev: “About 1,500 defrauded housing equity holders in the Yevropeisky District in Lipetsk are looking to you. We all entered into co-funded construction agreements with the SU-5 group. The building has not been completed yet.” Here are the details.

Vladivostok, Yulia Matveyeva: “These is our unfinished housing behind us built under the Housing for Russian Families in Vladivostok federal programme. The Snegovoi District. The programme was launched in 2014, and 700 families invested in it. Nothing has been built so far, although the houses should have been commissioned over eighteen months ago. And we want to live there. Please help us.”

These are requests for help.

Vladimir Putin: I will put it on record, I promise you, I will put on record these questions, these requests, and I promise you that we will respond to them. The federal centre helps the regional leaders, and we will pay attention to these issues.

But the problem is much broader than the specific cases that you mentioned, because there are a lot of them. Why is this? It is due to insufficiently clear regulations that have been in place until today, and the volume of construction is very large.



Look, we had about 79 million square metres built last year. Industrial construction accounts for around two-thirds of that. What is called industrial construction is primarily construction of residential houses.

Overall, we have over a million, I think 1.1 million, agreements on co-investing construction of a residential house. And the amount of money there is, I think it is 3.4 trillion rubles. These are huge amounts, and funds are not always efficiently used by developers.

Governors bear an enormous responsibility. What I mean to say is that we must eventually start employing civilised methods of residential housing construction without involving taxpayer money.

We face a difficult problem already this year – to reach 88 million square metres, and in the following years until 2024 we will have to achieve a much more ambitious number of 120 million square metres per year.

We must ensure that approximately five million families could improve their housing situation, so that each family in need could improve their housing conditions once every ten years. This is a very complicated task but it is attainable because now about 3.5 million families have this opportunity.

However, if we take immediate steps now to reduce the use of taxpayer money, we are going to face several problems. The first one is an increased number of complaints from people because developments already launched will be impossible to finish. And the second problem – we will sharply decrease the overall volume of development.

This is why we made a decision to stop signing co-investing construction agreements as of July 1, 2019, and to channel only funds from financial institutions and banks to that end.

But I already see our new Construction Minister on the screen. Let us ask Mr Yakushev to comment on what I said and what he would like to add. Please, go ahead, Mr Yakushev.

Vladimir Yakushev: Thank you, Mr President.

Indeed, a number of amendments have been drafted to the Federal Law 214 On Shared-Equity Construction under which we must resolve two crucial tasks that made this market and the shared-equity construction process non-transparent.

First, it is moving away from the “common pool method”; one construction permit – one settlement account. Second, it is banking support. The two tools must start working from July 1 of this year. And as you rightly said, from July 1, 2019 the so-called special accounts will accommodate the funds of the shared-equity construction participants, but the developer will have no authority over the account.

This money is blocked, and the developer uses it as a guarantee to open a credit line at a bank to finance the construction. And this account will be used to settle the credit line and, respectively, the developer will get a profit only after the keys are handed over to the shared-equity construction participants.

This is the mechanism that will allow for using share-equity holders’ money and to keep it intact in the best possible way and to avoid the “pyramids” we have today. We will have to adopt the amendments on June 27 and start working with the new mechanism immediately.

This will clear the market and initiate a very ambitious task – building 120 million square metres of housing. A number of mechanisms are envisaged for this that will be included in the Housing and Urban Environment programme.

And as you instructed, we will prepare the necessary regulatory framework by October 1 in order to achieve this.

Andrei Kondrashov: Thank you, Mr Yakushev.

Let’s continue with the subject of housing by talking about mortgages, or rather, about subsidising mortgages. Our correspondent Ivan Prozorov is now in Ivanovo, and there is a continuation of this subject there.

So, Ivan Prozorov is on the air.

Ivan Prozorov: Hello colleagues.

We are now in Ivanovo visiting a large family of the Verkhovskys. They are building their own house, and have already moved into it. But they live, so to speak, in field-like conditions. This is the future master bedroom. But now the construction materials and equipment needed for renovation are being stored here. In fact, very few rooms have been completed so far, only two. This is a common bedroom and a living room where the family with three children has to be cooped up, and a kitchen where the whole family has gathered. So we have the opportunity to get to know everyone better now.

This is Margarita, mom and wife. She is holding baby Lada in her arms, who is just over a year old. Look, she is glad to see guests, new people; she is looking at the camera with interest. A radiant and sunshiny baby who charges everyone with happiness.

This is Andrei, he is 13; he finished the sixth grade and is on vacation; next year he will be a seventh-grader.

Vanya, he is three. A real fidgety boy. It is quite difficult to watch him get quiet. But now, he's probably excited by the camera, and has calmed down a little.

And finally, the head of the family, Dmitry Verkhovsky. I want to draw your attention to the fact that everything we see here was made by Dmitry himself. He himself is building this house. He really has gifted hands. But in fact, the construction is not moving very quickly due to the lack of funds for this large family. And this is not just because Dmitry is the only one working, while Margarita is a housewife and cares for the children. The family has a mortgage, which Dmitry talked about in his request through Direct Line.

Dmitry, in what format did you record your request?

Dmitry Verkhovsky: We wrote through a mobile app, via a mobile phone and sent it to the President's Direct Line.

Ivan Prozorov: And your question for the President is connected with the mortgage, with mortgage rates. Your question please.

Dmitry Verkhovsky: Good afternoon, Mr President. My name is Dmitry Verkhovsky. My wife and I have three children. Apart from the children we also have a 13 percent mortgage rate that we took out several years ago. Recently we learnt that in accordance with your instruction the Government issued Resolution 1711 (I have it printed here, I have specially printed it out) which allows for cutting the mortgage rate from 13 percent, as we are paying now, to six percent. It would be a great help for us. But when we went to the bank, we were told that, unfortunately, we are not eligible for this programme since we already have three children, and if we have a fourth child, the benefit is not applicable to us. Because clause 9 in the resolution says that the benefit applies only after the birth of a second or third child, whereas nothing is written about the fourth, fifth or sixth child. This is a problem for many families with many children. A friend of mine has 10 children, and he also cannot count on this benefit.

Mr President, we would like to ask you to somehow change clause 9 so that it reads as follows: the benefit of reducing the mortgage rate to six percent applies to persons who have a second or subsequent child, subsequent children. Then families with many children will also be eligible as are those with two and three children now.

Thank you very much. We really rely on you.

Vladimir Putin: What can I say. You are right. The decision you quoted from the Government's resolution – I might disappoint the Finance Ministry now – is wrong, and it should be rectified. It will cost, if I am right, about 9 billion rubles. This is not so much money. Well, it is a lot of money, of course, but not so much in view of the need to support families with children and settle demographic issues and problems facing the country. I will surely talk to the Prime Minister about that issue. We will do it, we will correct it. And I would like to wish all the best to your family and those families like yours.

Kirill Kleymenov: Well, that issue was [resolved] very quickly and promptly.

Vladimir Putin: Is this the Ivanovo Region? Governor Voskresensky. Let's ask him as well. Please tell us briefly, in a few words, about this situation. Though this is not within the governor's competence, but what does the governor think about resolving these problems? I would also like to ask you to pay attention to the situation and simply to support families with children. Go ahead, please.

Ivanovo Region Governor Stanislav Voskresensky: Good afternoon, Mr President. Good afternoon, Dmitry,

We have positive trends in the mortgage sector. The recent figures show that the number of mortgages in the first quarter of this year grew by about 30 percent compared to the same period in 2017. By the way, new housing commissioning more than doubled in the first quarter of 2018.

This is related to what is, regrettably, still a partial solution to the housing equity holders' problem. I am monitoring these problems. For the time being we have not resolved all the problems but we are paying much attention to them. It goes without saying that we will look carefully into Dmitry's situation and follow up on it.

Dmitry just spoke about the interest rate. It is rather high. The banks now lend at less than 13 percent, of course. So, I will certainly meet with Dmitry to see how we can in general support such families.

Vladimir Putin: Indeed, the volume of mortgage loans is growing steadily and an increasing number of people choose mortgage to resolve their problems. I have already talked about this and will not return to it. But we will have to do this.

I see First Deputy Prime Minister of the Russian Government, who is Finance Minister at the same time, Anton Siluanov has appeared on the screen. Mr Siluanov, go ahead please.

Finance Minister Anton Siluanov: Indeed, we are doing all we can to reduce mortgage interest rates. Now the average rate is about 9.73 percent. Let me recall that some time ago this was a two digit figure. Indeed, we are adopting programmes to reduce it further for some categories of our citizens who require such support. I am primarily referring to families with children, families with two, three or more children. You have given us the instructions and we will make a relevant decision in the Government.

However, our main goal is to make mortgages accessible to the majority of people. The task for us and the Central Bank is to further reduce interest rates in the economy and keep inflation low. This will allow us to expand the use of this instrument of improving housing conditions of our people. We are pursuing our budgetary and monetary policies with this in mind.

Vladimir Putin: I think I mentioned in the Address that we should orient ourselves to a mortgage interest rate of about 8 percent but should strive to keep it down to 7 percent. This is a succinct statement. We have had many debates on this issue. This is linked with budget expenditures but the Government and the Central Bank should strive for 7 percent.

As for the Government's resolution you mentioned, it should certainly be amended, and we will do this.

Andrei Kondrashov: Mr President, relocation is another issue related to the housing problem. What do you think of the Moscow relocation programme?

Vladimir Putin: This is a large-scale project, with almost a million people involved, and Moscow will allocate 400 billion rubles for this in the next several years.

I know about all the disputes and questions, at least, about the main ones Muscovites asked the Moscow authorities. As of today, I think that the main concerns are settled; the programme has begun and I count on it to be implemented through to 2024 and beyond in the interests of Moscow and its residents, with the same speed and quality as the Moscow Government has been demonstrating so far.

Mr Sobyenin is live, please.

Moscow Mayor Sergei Sobyenin: Mr President, good afternoon. I would like to thank you for supporting the adoption of the Federal Law on Relocation. This law really guarantees about a million Muscovites that they will be relocated from dilapidated housing.

As of today, we have issued all the necessary regulations and, as you have said, allocated finances to implement the first phase of the programme. The city has begun the large-scale work to develop the construction documents in all the relocation districts at the same time.

We must provide comfortable living conditions for those who are part of the relocation programme and those who live in the neighbouring buildings. I mean transport, social and utilities infrastructure. This is very important.

In addition, we have chosen and started developing and building at 250 starting sites, which will give the first impetus to the subsequent relocation wave. This year, we will relocate almost 10,000 Muscovites who will be given comfortable housing to live.

So thank you very much, Mr President. We will do everything to implement the programme, to make it comfortable for people and provide all the guarantees envisaged in the Federal Law.

Vladimir Putin: Thank you, Mr Sobyenin. I wish you success. I am sure that the programme will be implemented as it was conceived.

But in conclusion I would like to return once again to what I already said, namely: this does not mean that this programme will be implemented in Moscow, while we forget about all the other regions when it comes to improving the living conditions of our citizens in other territories.

I will return to what I said. We aim to build a total of 120 million square metres of housing, and five million people should be able to improve their housing conditions. At the same time, the mortgage rate should drop to eight, or even better, to seven percent.

In addition to this, we will work to attract new, infrastructure-equipped land. A number of other steps will be taken, including from the point of view of the effective operation of financial institutions, banks directly related to this business.

This whole system, including effective work of the governors (which I really expect), will allow us to

solve the problems of housing construction not only in the capital cities of Moscow and St Petersburg, but throughout the Russian Federation.

Kirill Kleymenov: Mr President, and one more topic that is related to our previous Direct Line. If you remember, we then talked about families from the Stavropol Territory who after the flood had to pay money for certificates and damage assessment.

It turned out that this is not the only bureaucratic wall that people have to overcome, and that is why our crew went to the village of Levokumka, Stavropol Territory. Our colleague Mikhail Akinchenko works there.

Mikhail Akinchenko: Indeed, exactly a year ago we were here in the Stavropol Territory on the banks of the Kuma River as part of the Direct Line TV crew. Let me remind you, that back then people were complaining about the issues they shared after last year's flooding – they could not have their papers processed to receive compensation for the property and homes they lost.

After Direct Line last year, the problem was successfully resolved for the majority of people, however, not all – far from it. Lots of people are still being left in limbo, waiting for their documents to be processed.

This year as many as 17 families from the village of Levokumovka contacted Direct Line. For more than a year now they have been living in homes that are simply unfit to live in. Better, listen to what they say about their problem. Next to me is Yevgeniya Lavrik, the owner of one of the flood-damaged homes.

Yevgeniya, you are on, and the President sees you and can hear you, so you can tell him about your problem and ask questions.

Yevgeniya Lavrik: Good afternoon, Mr President.

I will show you what my problem looks like, rather than just talk about it. On May 24, 2017, our homes were damaged by severe flooding. Water remained in our homes for about five days. The current was so



strong that it even carried our threshold away.

Because of high humidity, part of the floor in our home has caved in. In the spring, new residents moved in; I am talking about frogs. My child, Nastya, is already on friendly terms with them, playing games.

We have to cover the floor with boards because we are not really interested in this relationship. As soon as our home started to dry up, things became more complicated as new cracks emerged – just look here. There are more cracks with each passing day.

Let me introduce my mother and my daughter Anastasia to you. Here we eat and here we play – it is kind of a play area. We chose this place because it is the safest – at least, no bricks have fallen yet. These are the awful conditions we live in.

As the water receded, a commission arrived and issued an act confirming that our housing was hazardous and unfit for living as a result of the emergency. We were put on the waiting list for housing certificates, but, to our great regret, we were taken off the state housing certificate list because we had been in the non-residential property group since 2002. In fact, it turns out that our house was excluded from the housing stock in 2002 ...

Mikhail Akinchenko: Just show the documents, Yevgeniya. Tell us.

Yevgeniya Lavrik: I registered ownership of this house in 2014, and my daughter was registered as a resident with me in 2016. Nobody ever told me about this, that my house was in a non-residential category. We pay gas and electricity bills like everyone else. Nobody told us anything, that we are living in a non-residential property and basically should not be there.

This is why we tried to see our governor for a year. Our governor, unfortunately, as his assistants explained to us, does not receive citizens, so we could not get in to see him for a whole year. Then just a week ago he heard us, and came to discuss our problem. But all he said was that he would try.

Kirill Kleymenov: The issue is clear. Mr President, please.

Vladimir Putin: Look. In general, problems like this do get resolved, but there are flagrant cases like the one you just described.

I do not know of course the specifics of the administrative system within which local authorities qualify your housing conditions, whether your building is in the housing fund or not.

But if your house is recognized as hazardous due to a natural disaster, then of course, your problems should be dealt with. All the rest is bureaucratic excuses and delays.

Maybe it is also due to a lack of coordination between regional and federal authorities, including the Emergencies Ministry, because the Emergencies Ministry must decide if all the residential buildings on the list comply with the decision to provide new housing or pay a compensation, whether to approve the list or not. If the lists are rejected, the regional authorities must somehow quickly amend them and make sure that money is allocated from federal sources.

I would like to assure you that in your case we, of course, will get things straight, and I will be waiting for a report from the Governor of the Stavropol Territory. But on the whole, the system is more general. We will see how the interaction between the regional and federal authorities works. And I would like to thank you for bringing up this problem, I mean, the need to find a solution for your family, but we will see what we can and must improve in general. Let us hear what the Governor has to say on your case.

Mr Vladimirov, please.

Governor of the Stavropol Territory Vladimir Vladimirov: Thank you for the question. It is actually very helpful.

It is true that the house that belonged to Yevgenia Lavrik's stepfather was in the flood zone in 2002. In 2011, the court ruled that it be returned to the housing fund. The stepfather gave the house to her, but, unfortunately, it was damaged in another tragic flood last year. Today the documents were returned to us. They were returned on May 21 because a state housing certificate was earlier issued for this address.

Mr President, I slightly disagree with this. I have made a request to the Emergencies Ministry and the Finance Ministry asking to exclude this situation from the grounds for denying a state housing certificate. In addition to this problem, there really are 17 people there. There are people who honestly acquired housing that was flooded but then returned to the housing fund. This is why your help will be necessary to break this wall and to provide these 17 families with state housing certificates. Thank you very much.

Vladimir Putin: Do this quickly and in accordance with the corresponding regulations. Of course, such families need help, and we will provide it.

Kirill Kleymenov: Mr President, by the way, what do you think of the fact that the President has to go into issues that, if truth be told, should be handled by the local authorities?

Vladimir Putin: This is not entirely true, because (the governor is right here) this is an aberration, as I just said, between the regional authorities and the federal authorities. We just need to work harder on both sides.

Andrei Kondrashov: Now let's return, as we promised, to our young bloggers in one of the Moscow City skyscrapers. Anton Lyadov is there.

Anton Lyadov: Hello again.

The bloggers are indeed closely following everything that is happening here. They are commenting, broadcasting live from here, using their smartphones to communicate.

One of them uploaded a video about an hour ago and it already has more than 100,000 views. These bloggers have huge audiences, a total of about 20 million people are subscribed to those here today. They have asked their viewers, their subscribers what they would like to ask the President.

Next to me are the bloggers Artyom Kholikov and Andrei Glazunov. They shoot entertaining videos, I

was told. Go ahead please.

Artyom Kholikov: Hello!

My name is Artyom Kholikov, I'm a blogger.

I have a question about cryptocurrency. This issue is of interest to all young people. So the first question is, will Russia have its own cryptocurrency? Second, will this be somehow controlled by the government? And third, do you think that in the near future cryptocurrency will completely replace standard money?

Vladimir Putin: The question your subscribers asked is somewhat incorrectly phrased, because Russia cannot have its own cryptocurrency by definition; no country can, because if we are talking about cryptocurrency, this is something that transcends national boundaries. First.

Second, so-called mining is not regulated in Russia, and we generally try to handle it with care. In the vast majority of countries, cryptocurrency is not a means of payment. Experts say it is used in some rare cases somewhere in Japan, but in other countries it does not work.

You know the Central Bank's attitude to so-called cryptocurrencies. The Central Bank believes that cryptocurrencies cannot be a means of payment or settlement, cannot be a means of saving, and that cryptocurrencies are not secured by anything. All this shows that we must treat this very carefully.

Nevertheless this phenomenon exists in the world, and it is developing. We must carefully analyse it, review what is happening, and then look at some stage how we could participate in this process and how we can use it, among other things, to avoid restrictions in the sphere of international financial activity.

Kirill Kleymenov: An exhaustive answer.

Andrei Glazunov: I think that we, bloggers, and our audience can really be used to draw more attention to

some problems and solve them. I would like to ask you about the environment. I live near a forest and can feel how clean the air is. But as soon as I come to a place with a lot of cars, the air becomes a bit different. And another question about electric cars that are so unpopular here that only 28 of them were sold last year. I am really interested in this. The question is, will there be subsidies for electric cars? Maybe free parking or even tax exemptions, because they run on electricity?

Thank you.

Vladimir Putin: It is true that, in order to improve the environmental situation, many countries incentivise the development of eco-friendly means of transport, including electric cars. And we can see what happens in this area around the world. Russia is a bit of special case, however. Why? Because a primary source is necessary to produce electricity and charge the electric car. And here we run into a paradox, because what is the most popular source of electricity? Coal. And coal is not the most eco-friendly kind of fuel. I think that, for Russia and many other countries, natural gas is the primary and much more eco-friendly source. This is why if we are speaking about improving the environmental situation in this area, we should switch to natural gas instead and encourage the development of this direction worldwide.

There are some issues, primarily related to filling stations. This is an accounting matter and Gazprom is working on it. In general, the idea is also supported by the federal government and the regions, but, as of today, this is not enough to make introducing this mode of transport economically viable. Many things will depend on the work in the regions and various provinces. Unfortunately, or maybe fortunately, the number of filling stations in some countries, in this case natural gas filling stations, is much higher than in Russia, although Russia is a natural gas producer, a leader, but lags behind a bit in this respect. We are working on this and will definitely be moving towards this.

Andrei Kondrashov: Thank you very much to our bloggers.

Now on to the problem that was reported by the tens of thousands of people who contacted Direct Line. We will not tell you what this is about straight away. Now we go to the city of Bataisk in the Rostov Region, where our colleague Maria Gladkikh is working.

Maria Gladkikh: Good afternoon, Mr President.

Southern Russia welcomes you. We are in Bataisk, a small city in the Rostov Region with a population of about 120,000.

We have come here at the request of a group of people whom you can see next to me on either side. They have been brought together by the same problem, so they came here with their families and their children. We spoke to them beforehand.

For example, all of them had to move here, although initially they did not plan to live here but they had to flee war-stricken Donetsk and Lugansk. Tatyana, I know it must be four years that you have not seen your husband. You are holding his photograph in your hands...

Remark: Yes, exactly four years ago I left Donetsk because my home was only five kilometres from the airport on the demarcation line and it was very dangerous to stay there. This is our family photograph. Unfortunately, I had to leave.

Maria Gladkikh: Natalya has also ended up in a difficult situation. She also had to leave her home with her child. I know that every day your brother when leaving home for work still has the habit of bidding farewell to his family, just in case.

Of course, it is very difficult for those of us who have not lived through this to understand what it is like to flee your home. Please tell your story in a few words, if possible. I know life is not easy for you and you have problems with your child.

Remark: We came here four years ago. When we were crossing the border during the hostilities, my child – he was 18 months old at the time – suffered severe psychological trauma. Now he needs treatment.

He suffers from developmental delay and his sight is worsening. So, at the moment I cannot go back with a sick child and expose him to another psychological trauma.

We want to be useful here but we have run into serious problems trying to have our documents processed. First, I mean the law on 90 days, under which we must leave the country for 90 days. And we have to go

back despite the hostilities there.

I cannot leave for 90 days with a sick child. It takes a long time to have documents processed here. Plus the certificates we have to obtain – they are costly and we have to earn money to be able to pay for them.

It is kind of a vicious cycle: to obtain a certificate, so that we can work here legally and be useful, we must earn money but at the same time they cannot take us on because we have no documents.

Please take note of us and our problem, so that the procedure for obtaining citizenship might be simplified for the people from the Lugansk and Donetsk people's republics.

Thank you very much.

Vladimir Putin: We have already spoken about the situation in the Lugansk and Donetsk people's republics, about the overall situation in Donbass. This is a tragedy, a huge tragedy for Ukraine, the Ukrainian people and our compatriots. You know, I have always treated Ukraine as a brotherly nation, and I consider Ukrainians and Russians to be practically one people. We have a common past, and I am sure, a common future despite any tragedies of today.

Yet there are certain people, certain problems. You know, I actually feel uneasy listening about problems, say with employment, that continue to this day. We have addressed this issue a number of times, and I already instructed the migration service to pay attention to that, to make respective proposals, to address those issues, if necessary, in current law.

All that must be done. I am saying this again to the Interior Minister and the leadership of the migration service itself. We have different draft laws on this but, unfortunately, they are still stuck. I will try to have the problem taken care of in your case, but the problem is much bigger than that.

I am deeply convinced that we must move in the direction of liberalising everything connected with obtaining Russian citizenship. This has a humanitarian dimension, it also has an economic dimension.

In view of the difficult demographic situation in Russia this problem is becoming not only medical and not only social, it is acquiring a clear economic dimension.

The number of Russian women of childbearing age will decrease by over 25 percent by 2032. It becomes a constraint to economic growth. And not because something negative is occurring in the economy or in the social sphere.

On the contrary, it is the result of a severe decline in births in the 1990s – and I am sorry to use such words but we cannot escape it – the number of women of childbearing age has plunged. Now they are approaching the age when they can become mothers but their number fell in the 1990s, and we cannot do anything about it.

One of the few solutions to this problem is getting our compatriots to return to Russia. Of course, this means people without regard to ethnicity or religious affiliation, but also people who consider themselves to be closely tied to the Russian world, who speak Russian, want to work in our country and have the requisite skills.

This is why radical steps need to be taken in this sphere, of course, with account of the interests of the Russian Federation residents living in certain areas, I mean the labour market situation. We have the Interior Minister with us via a video linkup.

Mr Kolokoltsev, I am not going to make you say anything or comment on that now. You heard what I said, I know that much has to be worked through at the legislative level, and this may not directly involve your ministry, but you must initiate all the processes that are related to your ministry and the migration service.

Let me reiterate, when we took the decision to merge the migration service into the Interior Ministry, we presumed that they understand not just the law enforcement aspect of the matter, but also understand the processes that occur in the labour market and in the economy.

Here we have the Governor of the Rostov Region on the line as well as the Mayor of Rostov-on-Don. So



I would ask you to work with these people and do everything to safeguard their interests and help them. They are in a tough situation, and they are not strangers to us.

Kirill Kleymenov: Mr President, we have an enormous queue of people eager to call our studio and ask their question at this very moment.

Let us move to the Call Centre. Tatyana, please.

Tatyana Remezova: Thank you, Kirill.

At this point we have received 2.5 million calls. Back to the refugee topic and the Donbass issue. Just like in Donbass, people in Syria are also looking forward to peace. Our viewers have been following the developments in that hot spot with equal attention and trepidation partly because our military is stationed in Syria. Sergei Mikhailov from Karachayevo-Circassia is on the line. Hello, Sergei! You are on the air. Go ahead, please.

Sergei Mikhailov: Good afternoon! Mr President, my name is Sergei Mikhailov, I am a working pensioner from the Karachayevo-Circassian Republic. Since you are the Supreme Commander-in-Chief, please answer, Mr President: when will the Russian military contingent be fully withdrawn from Syria?

Vladimir Putin: Our contingent in the Syrian Arab Republic is not just military...

What I want to say is this. First, the use of our Armed Forces in combat conditions is a unique experience and a unique tool to improve our Armed Forces. No exercises can compare with actually using the Armed Forces in combat conditions.

Yes, we know that the use of the Armed Forces in combat conditions means losses. We will never forget about those losses and will never leave the families of our comrades, who have not returned home from Syria, in trouble.

But that was an important and noble mission aimed at protecting the interests of the Russian Federation and our citizens. Let me remind you that thousands of militants, natives of Central Asian countries, with which we have no controlled borders, are massing on Syrian territory. It was better to deal with them and destroy them over there than confront them with lethal force here. That is first.

Second, our combat efforts have helped stabilise the situation in the Syrian Arab Republic. Today, the Syrian army and the Syrian government control the territory with more than 90 percent of the country's population.

Large-scale combat operations, particularly with the use of the Russian Armed Forces, have ceased. They are no longer necessary. A settlement through peaceful means is currently on the agenda, and we are working on that too.

As regards the presence of our military, again, it is more than just a military contingent. These are two deployment sites: one in the port of Tartus and the other is an air facility in Khmeimim, which is there in full conformity both with the treaty with the Syrian government and international law.

Our military is there in order to secure Russia's interests in this vitally important region of the world, which is very close to us, and they will be there as long as it benefits Russia and in pursuance of our international commitments.

So far, we are not planning to withdraw those units, but I am drawing your attention to the fact that I did not call these sites bases. We are not building long-term structures there and can withdraw all of our service members quickly without material loss.

So far, they are necessary, they are fulfilling important tasks, including ensuring Russia's security in that region and ensuring our interests in the economic sphere.

Kirill Kleymenov: Mr President, what lessons from the Syrian campaign would you call the most important for our Armed Forces?

Vladimir Putin: These are not lessons. This is an invaluable experience as I mentioned – the use of the armed forces, and the use of advanced weapons systems.

I have to make a reservation before we go any further. When I talk about the latest weapons systems, I do not mean a testing ground. Syria is not a shooting range for Russian weapons, but we are still using them there, our new weapons.

This has led to the improvement of modern strike systems, including missile systems. It is one thing to have them, and quite another thing to see how they fare in combat conditions.

As I said, and I will repeat, when we started to use these modern weapons, including missiles, whole teams from our defence industry companies went to Syria, and worked there on-site (it is extremely important for us!) to finalise them and figure out what we can count on when using them in combat conditions. That's first.

Second, our commanders – we had a large number of officers and generals go in Syria and take part in these hostilities – began to understand what a modern armed conflict is, how important communication, intelligence, interaction between all-arms units and formations is, how important it is to ensure the effective operation of the aerospace group, aviation, ground forces, including special operations forces. This has enabled us to take another major step in improving our Armed Forces.

To be continued.