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## **President Putin Speech, Valdai, Asks US To Stop Provoking Russia**

President Putin's speech at Valdai international discussion club and following questions and answers, Valdai 2016, JRL, October 29, 2016.

President of Russia Vladimir Putin: Tarja, Heinz, Thabo, colleagues, ladies and gentlemen, It is a great pleasure to see you again. I want to start by thanking all of the participants in the Valdai International Discussion Club, from Russia and abroad, for your constructive part in this work, and I want to thank our distinguished guests for their readiness to take part in this open discussion.

Our esteemed moderator just wished me a good departure into retirement, and I wish myself the same when the time comes. This is the right approach and the thing to do. But I am not retired yet and am for now the leader of this big country. As such, it is fitting to show restraint and avoid displays of excessive aggressiveness. I do not think that this is my style in any case.

But I do think that we should be frank with each other, particularly here in this gathering. I think we should hold candid, open discussions, otherwise our dialogue makes no sense and would be insipid and without the slightest interest.

I think that this style of discussion is extremely needed today given the great changes taking place in the world. The theme for our meeting this year, The Future in Progress: Shaping the World of Tomorrow, is very topical.

Last year, the Valdai forum participants discussed the problems with the current world order. Unfortunately, little has changed for the better over these last months. Indeed, it would be more honest to say that nothing has changed.

The tensions engendered by shifts in distribution of economic and political influence continue to grow. Mutual distrust creates a burden that narrows our possibilities for finding effective responses to the real threats and challenges facing the world today. Essentially, the entire globalisation project is in crisis today and in Europe, as we know well, we hear voices now saying that multiculturalism has failed.

I think this situation is in many respects the result of mistaken, hasty and to some extent over-confident choices made by some countries' elites a quarter-of-a-century ago. Back then, in the late 1980s-early 1990s, there was a chance not just to accelerate the globalisation process but also to give it a different quality and make it more harmonious and sustainable in nature. But some countries that saw themselves as victors in the Cold War, not just saw themselves this way but said it openly, took the course of simply reshaping the global political and economic order to fit their own interests.

In their euphoria, they essentially abandoned substantive and equal dialogue with other actors in international life, chose not to improve or create universal institutions, and attempted instead to bring the entire world under the spread of their own organisations, norms and rules. They chose the road of globalisation and security for their own beloved selves, for the select few, and not for all. But far from everyone was ready to agree with this.

We may as well be frank here, as we know full well that many did not agree with what was happening, but some were unable by then to respond, and others were not yet ready to respond. The result though is that the system of international relations is in a feverish state and the global economy cannot extricate itself from systemic crisis. At the same time, rules and principles, in the economy and in politics, are constantly being distorted and we often see what only yesterday was taken as a truth and raised to dogma status reversed completely.

If the powers that be today find some standard or norm to their advantage, they force everyone else to comply. But if tomorrow these same standards get in their way, they are

swift to throw them in the bin, declare them obsolete, and set or try to set new rules.

Thus, we saw the decisions to launch airstrikes in the centre of Europe, against Belgrade, and then came Iraq, and then Libya. The operations in Afghanistan also started without the corresponding decision from the United Nations Security Council. In their desire to shift the strategic balance in their favour these countries broke apart the international legal framework that prohibited deployment of new missile defence systems. They created and armed terrorist groups, whose cruel actions have sent millions of civilians into flight, made millions of displaced persons and immigrants, and plunged entire regions into chaos.

We see how free trade is being sacrificed and countries use sanctions as a means of political pressure, bypass the World Trade Organisation and attempt to establish closed economic alliances with strict rules and barriers, in which the main beneficiaries are their own transnational corporations. And we know this is happening. They see that they cannot resolve all of the problems within the WTO framework and so think, why not throw the rules and the organisation itself aside and build a new one instead. This illustrates what I just said.

At the same time, some of our partners demonstrate no desire to resolve the real international problems in the world today. In organisations such as NATO, for example, established during the Cold War and clearly out of date today, despite all the talk about the need to adapt to the new reality, no real adaptation takes place. We see constant attempts to turn the OSCE, a crucial mechanism for ensuring common European and also trans-Atlantic security, into an instrument in the service of someone's foreign policy interests. The result is that this very important organisation has been hollowed out.

But they continue to churn out threats, imaginary and mythical threats such as the 'Russian military threat'. This is a profitable business that can be used to pump new money into defence budgets at home, get allies to bend to a single superpower's interests, expand NATO and bring its infrastructure, military units and arms closer to our borders.

Of course, it can be a pleasing and even profitable task to portray oneself as the defender of civilisation against the new barbarians. The only thing is that Russia has no intention of attacking anyone. This is all quite absurd. I also read analytical materials, those written by you here today, and by your colleagues in the USA and Europe.

It is unthinkable, foolish and completely unrealistic. Europe alone has 300 million people. All of the NATO members together with the USA have a total population of 600 million, probably. But Russia has only 146 million. It is simply absurd to even conceive such thoughts. And yet they use these ideas in pursuit of their political aims.

Another mythical and imaginary problem is what I can only call the hysteria the USA has whipped up over supposed Russian meddling in the American presidential election. The United States has plenty of genuinely urgent problems, it would seem, from the colossal public debt to the increase in firearms violence and cases of arbitrary action by the police. You would think that the election debates would concentrate on these and other unresolved problems, but the elite has nothing with which to reassure society, it seems, and therefore attempt to distract public attention by pointing instead to supposed Russian hackers, spies, agents of influence and so forth.

I have to ask myself and ask you too: Does anyone seriously imagine that Russia can somehow influence the American people's choice? America is not some kind of 'banana republic', after all, but is a great power. Do correct me if I am wrong.

The question is, if things continue in this vein, what awaits the world? What kind of world will we have tomorrow? Do we have answers to the questions of how to ensure stability, security and sustainable economic growth? Do we know how we will make a more prosperous world?

Sad as it is to say, there is no consensus on these issues in the world today. Maybe you have come to some common conclusions through your discussions, and I would, of course, be

interested to hear them. But it is very clear that there is a lack of strategy and ideas for the future. This creates a climate of uncertainty that has a direct impact on the public mood. Sociological studies conducted around the world show that people in different countries and on different continents tend to see the future as murky and bleak. This is sad. The future does not entice them, but frightens them. At the same time, people see no real opportunities or means for changing anything, influencing events and shaping policy.

Yes, formally speaking, modern countries have all the attributes of democracy: Elections, freedom of speech, access to information, freedom of expression. But even in the most advanced democracies the majority of citizens have no real influence on the political process and no direct and real influence on power.

People sense an ever-growing gap between their interests and the elite's vision of the only correct course, a course the elite itself chooses. The result is that referendums and elections increasingly often create surprises for the authorities. People do not at all vote as the official and respectable media outlets advised them to, nor as the mainstream parties advised them to. Public movements that only recently were too far left or too far right are taking centre stage and pushing the political heavyweights aside.

At first, these inconvenient results were hastily declared anomaly or chance. But when they became more frequent, people started saying that society does not understand those at the summit of power and has not yet matured sufficiently to be able to assess the authorities' labour for the public good. Or they sink into hysteria and declare it the result of foreign, usually Russian, propaganda.

Friends and colleagues, I would like to have such a propaganda machine here in Russia, but regrettably, this is not the case. We have not even global mass media outlets of the likes of CNN, BBC and others. We simply do not have this kind of capability yet.

As for the claim that the fringe and populists have defeated the sensible, sober and responsible minority – we are not talking about populists or anything like that but about ordinary people, ordinary citizens who are losing trust in the ruling class. That is the problem. By the way, with the political agenda already eviscerated as it is, and with elections ceasing to be an instrument for change but consisting instead of nothing but scandals and digging up dirt – who gave someone a pinch, who sleeps with whom, if you'll excuse me. This just goes beyond all boundaries. And honestly, a look at various candidates' platforms gives the impression that they were made from the same mould – the difference is slight, if there is any.

It seems as if the elites do not see the deepening stratification in society and the erosion of the middle class, while at the same time, they implant ideological ideas that, in my opinion, are destructive to cultural and national identity. And in certain cases, in some countries they subvert national interests and renounce sovereignty in exchange for the favour of the suzerain.

This begs the question: who is actually the fringe? The expanding class of the supranational oligarchy and bureaucracy, which is in fact often not elected and not controlled by society, or the majority of citizens, who want simple and plain things – stability, free development of their countries, prospects for their lives and the lives of their children, preserving their cultural identity, and, finally, basic security for themselves and their loved ones.

People are clearly scared to see how terrorism is evolving from a distant threat to an everyday one, how a terrorist attack could occur right near them, on the next street, if not on their own street, while any makeshift item – from a home-made explosive to an ordinary truck – can be used to carry out a mass killing.

Moreover, the terrorist attacks that have taken place in the past few years in Boston and other US cities, Paris, Brussels, Nice and German cities, as well as, sadly, in our own country, show that terrorists do not need units or organised structures – they can act independently, on

their own, they just need the ideological motivation against their enemies, that is, against you and us.

The terrorist threat is a clear example of how people fail to adequately evaluate the nature and causes of the growing threats. We see this in the way events in Syria are developing. No one has succeeded in stopping the bloodshed and launching a political settlement process. One would think that we would have begun to put together a common front against terrorism now, after such lengthy negotiations, enormous effort and difficult compromises.

But this has not happened and this common front has not emerged. My personal agreements with the President of the United States have not produced results either. There were people in Washington ready to do everything possible to prevent these agreements from being implemented in practice. This all demonstrates an unexplainable and I would say irrational desire on the part of the Western countries to keep making the same mistakes or, as we say here in Russia, keep stepping on the same rake.

We all see what is happening in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya and a number of other countries. I have to ask, where are the results of the fight against terrorism and extremism? Overall, looking at the world as a whole, there are some results in particular regions and locations, but there is no global result and the terrorist threat continues to grow.

We all remember the euphoria in some capitals over the Arab Spring. Where are these fanfares today? Russia's calls for a joint fight against terrorism go ignored. What's more, they continue to arm, supply and train terrorist groups in the hope of using them to achieve their own political aims. This is a very dangerous game and I address the players once again: The extremists in this case are more cunning, clever and stronger than you, and if you play these games with them, you will always lose.

Colleagues, it is clear that the international community should concentrate on the real problems facing humanity today, the resolution of which will make our world a safer and more stable place and make the system of international relations fairer and more equal. As I said, it is essential to transform globalisation from something for a select few into something for all. It is my firm belief that we can overcome these threats and challenges only by working together on the solid foundation of international law and the United Nations Charter. Today it is the United Nations that continues to remain an agency that is unparalleled in representativeness and universality, a unique venue for equitable dialogue. Its universal rules are necessary for including as many countries as possible in economic and humanitarian integration, guaranteeing their political responsibility and working to coordinate their actions while also preserving their sovereignty and development models.

We have no doubt that sovereignty is the central notion of the entire system of international relations. Respect for it and its consolidation will help underwrite peace and stability both at the national and international levels. There are many countries that can rely on a history stretching back a thousand years, like Russia, and we have come to appreciate our identity, freedom and independence. But we do not seek global domination, expansion or confrontation with anyone.

In our mind, real leadership lies in seeing real problems rather than attempting to invent mythical threats and use them to steamroll others. This is exactly how Russia understands its role in global affairs today.

There are priorities without which a prosperous future for our shared planet is unthinkable and they are absolutely obvious. I won't be saying anything new here. First of all, there is equal and indivisible security for all states. Only after ending armed conflicts and ensuring the peaceful development of all countries will we be able to talk about economic progress and the resolution of social, humanitarian and other key problems. It is important to fight terrorism and extremism in actuality. It has been said more than once that this evil can only be overcome by a concerted effort of all states of the world. Russia continues to offer this to

all interested partners.

It is necessary to add to the international agenda the issue of restoring the Middle Eastern countries' lasting statehood, economy and social sphere. The mammoth scale of destruction demands drawing up a long-term comprehensive programme, a kind of Marshall Plan, to revive the war- and conflict-ridden area. Russia is certainly willing to join actively in these team efforts.

We cannot achieve global stability unless we guarantee global economic progress. It is essential to provide conditions for creative labour and economic growth at a pace that would put an end to the division of the world into permanent winners and permanent losers. The rules of the game should give the developing economies at least a chance to catch up with those we know as developed economies. We should work to level out the pace of economic development, and brace up backward countries and regions so as to make the fruit of economic growth and technological progress accessible to all. Particularly, this would help to put an end to poverty, one of the worst contemporary problems.

It is also absolutely evident that economic cooperation should be mutually lucrative and rest on universal principles to enable every country to become an equal partner in global economic activities. True, the regionalising trend in the world economy is likely to persist in the medium term. However, regional trade agreements should complement and expand not replace the universal norms and regulations.

Russia advocates the harmonisation of regional economic formats based on the principles of transparency and respect for each other's interests. That is how we arrange the work of the Eurasian Economic Union and conduct negotiations with our partners, particularly on coordination with the Silk Road Economic Belt project, which China is implementing. We expect it to promote an extensive Eurasian partnership, which promises to evolve into one of the formative centres of a vast Eurasian integration area. To implement this idea, 5+1 talks have begun already for an agreement on trade and economic cooperation between all participants in the process.

An important task of ours is to develop human potential. Only a world with ample opportunities for all, with highly skilled workers, access to knowledge and a great variety of ways to realise their potential can be considered truly free. Only a world where people from different countries do not struggle to survive but lead full lives can be stable.

A decent future is impossible without environment protection and addressing climate problems. That is why the conservation of the natural world and its diversity and reducing the human impact on the environment will be a priority for the coming decades.

Another priority is global healthcare. Of course, there are many problems, such as large-scale epidemics, decreasing the mortality rate in some regions and the like. So there is enormous room for advancement. All people in the world, not only the elite, should have the right to healthy, long and full lives. This is a noble goal. In short, we should build the foundation for the future world today by investing in all priority areas of human development. And of course, it is necessary to continue a broad-based discussion of our common future so that all sensible and promising initiatives are heard.

Colleagues, ladies and gentlemen, I am confident that you, as members of the Valdai Club, will actively take part in this work. Your expertise enables you to understand all angles of the processes underway both in Russia and in the world, forecast and evaluate long-term trends, and put forward new initiatives and recommendations that will help us find the way to the more prosperous and sustainable future that we all badly need.

Thank you very much for your attention.

... (comments at end)

Vladimir Putin: I would just like to make a quick response to what Mr Fischer has just said.

He mentioned discussions in the EU on the trade agreement with Canada. This is an internal EU matter, but if you permit, I would just like to make one small remark.

I know that some in Europe find Wallonia's position irritating, after all, the region is home to only 3.5 million people, but these 3.5 million people are blocking a decision on an issue of global importance, namely, this trade agreement with Canada. But when Belgium took part in the EU's creation, it did so on the basis of particular principles, including that Belgium overall, and Wallonia, would have certain rights.

The EU has grown greatly since then and has a much different membership now, but the rules have not changed. Perhaps these rules need to be changed, but in this case, you would first have to give the people who created this organisation a chance to change it through a democratic process and then obtain their approval.

As for the dispute itself, I am not as familiar with all the details as the Europeans are, of course, but whatever the prerogatives of the EU supranational bodies (note that I have already spoken publicly on this point), the European Parliament adopts a far greater number of binding decisions with regard to the member states than did the USSR Supreme Soviet with regard to the Soviet Union's constituent republics during the Soviet period. It is not for us to say whether this is good or bad. We want to see a strong and centralised Europe. This is our position. But in Europe itself there are many different views, and I hope that this whole issue will be resolved in positive fashion.

On the matter of the UN, I have said before but will say again now that we must return to what is written in the UN Charter, because there is no other such universal organisation in the world. If we renounce the UN, this is a sure road to chaos. There is no other universal alternative in the world. Yes, the world has changed, and yes, the UN and the Security Council do need reform and reconstruction. But as they say in our Foreign Ministry, we can do this in such a way as to preserve the organisation's effectiveness. We can do this on the basis of broad consensus. We need to ensure that the vast majority of international actors give their support to these reforms.

Today, we must return to a common understanding of the principles of international law as enshrined in the UN Charter. This is because when the UN was established after World War II, there was a particular balance of power in the world. Later, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the United States decided that there was no one to coordinate things with and they did not really need to get anyone's approval on fundamental matters. This was the start of everything.

First, in the 1990s, we had the airstrikes against Belgrade. I will not go into the humanitarian aspect that preceded these decisions, but just seeing airstrikes carried out in the heart of Europe at the end of the twentieth century seemed to me simply barbaric. This was all the more so as it was done in violation of the UN Charter and without approval. When this happened, people immediately started saying that the old rules were outdated and something had to change.

Things got worse from there with the events in Iraq. Did the UN sanction the operations in Iraq? No. Before this there were operations in Afghanistan in 2001. Yes, we all know the tragedy of September 11, 2001, but even so, under existing international law, a relevant UN Security Council resolution should have been sought first, which was not done.

Then came Iraq, and then came the resolution on Libya. You are all experts here, you have read the resolution on Libya, and know that it was about establishing a no-fly zone there. But what kind of no-fly zone can we speak of if airstrikes began against Libyan territory? This was a flagrant violation of the UN Charter. And then came Syria.

It was either Tarja or Heinz who said that the operations in Aleppo are only increasing the number of terrorists. But did the terrorist ranks start swelling only with Aleppo? Were there terrorists in Iraq? There were no terrorists there until the country's state structures were

destroyed. The same was true of Libya, where there were no terrorists at all. But as soon as this country's statehood was destroyed, who came along to fill the vacuum? Terrorists. The same is happening in Syria.

I understand the insinuations made about our action in Aleppo or elsewhere. But let's remember that as soon as the conflict began in Syria, and it began long before we became involved, terrorists appeared there and began receiving arms supplies. I mentioned this in my opening remarks. Attempts were made to train these terrorists and set them against al-Assad, because there were no other options and these groups were the most effective. This continues today because these are the most effective fighting units and some think that it is possible to make use of them and then sort them out later. But this is an illusion. It won't work, and this is the problem.

I would also like to respond to the absolutely proper developments in Finland, for instance. Bells are tolling for those who have been killed in Aleppo. Bells should also be tolling for those now losing their lives in Mosul and its vicinity. The operation in Mosul is getting underway now. As far as I know, the terrorists have already shot more than 200 people in the hope of stopping the offensive on the town. Let's not forget this. And in Afghanistan? Whole wedding parties of 120 people were wiped out with a single airstrike. A single strike! Have we forgotten this? And what about what's happening in Yemen? Let the bells toll for all of these innocent victims. I agree with you here.

We keep hearing Aleppo, Aleppo, Aleppo. But what is the issue here? Do we leave the nest of terrorists in place there, or do we squeeze them out, doing our best to minimise and avoid civilian casualties? If it is better to not go in at all, then the offensive against Mosul shouldn't go ahead at all either. Let's just leave everything as it is. Let's leave Raqqa alone too. Our partners keep saying, "We need to take back Raqqa and eliminate the nest of terrorists there". But there are civilians in Raqqa too. So, should we not fight the terrorists at all? And when they take hostages in towns, should we just leave them be? Look at Israel's example. Israel never steps back but always fights to the end, and this is how it survives. There is no alternative. We need to fight. If we keep retreating, we will always lose.

Regarding what Tarja said on the subject of security in the Baltic Sea area, I remind you that this matter came up not on our initiative but during my visit to Naantali in Finland, and on the initiative of Mr Niinisto, the president of Finland. Quite out of the blue, he requested that Russian aircraft do not fly with their transponders off. For those not familiar with military matters, I note that transponders are instruments that signal an aircraft's location in the air. Of course, if aircraft fly with their transponders on, this increases security in the Baltic Sea region. This is the truth of the matter. I responded immediately then, noting firstly that there are far more flights by NATO aircraft in the region than by our aircraft.

Secondly, I promised the Finnish President that we would definitely raise this issue with our partners at the next Russia-NATO Council meeting. I can tell you that we did this. The result was that our NATO partners rejected Putin's proposal, as they said. But this has nothing to do with Putin. They rejected the proposal made by Mr Niinisto, the president of Finland.

This was not such a straightforward matter for us either, I would say, because there is a technical dimension involved, a purely military dimension. But I did give the Defence Ministry instructions to find a way to do this without detriment to our security. The Defence Ministry found a solution, but our NATO colleagues rejected it. So please, direct your questions to the NATO headquarters in Brussels.

Vladimir Putin: I think that intervention by any country in another country's internal political process is unacceptable, no matter how these attempts are made, with the help of cyberattacks or through other instruments or organisations controlled from the outside within the country. You know what happened in Turkey, for example, and the position taken by President of

Turkey Recep Erdogan. He believes that the coup attempt in Turkey was undertaken by groups inspired by and with the direct help of an organisation run by a certain Gulen, who has lived in the United States for the last 9 years. This is unacceptable, and cyberattacks are unacceptable.

But we probably cannot avoid having an impact on each other, including in cyberspace. Your question was about the very specific matter of the electoral system though. I think this is absolutely unacceptable. How can we avoid this sort of thing, if it does happen? I think the only way is to reach agreement and come up with some rules on which we will have a common understanding and which will be recognised at the government and state level and can be verified.

Of course, the issue of internet freedom and everything related to it arises, but we know that many countries, including those that support internet freedom, take practical steps to restrict access out of concern for people's interests. This concerns cybercrime, for example, attacks against banking systems and illegal money transfers. It concerns suicides too, crimes against children and so forth. These are measures taken at the national level. We can take appropriate measures both at the national level and at the intergovernmental level.

Vladimir Putin: On the question of favourites in the US presidential campaign, you said that the media have created this view. Yes, this is the case, and this is not by chance. In my observation, it is a rare occasion that the mass media forms a view purely by chance. I think that this idea, inserted into the public consciousness in the middle of the US presidential campaign, pursues the sole aim of supporting those defending the interests of Ms Clinton, the Democratic Party candidate, in her fight against the Republican Party candidate, in this case, Donald Trump.

How is this done? First, they create an enemy in the form of Russia, and then they say that Trump is our preferred candidate. This is complete nonsense and totally absurd. It's only a tactic in the domestic political struggle, a way of manipulating public opinion before the elections take place. As I have said many times before, we do not know exactly what to expect from either of the candidates once they win.

We do not know what Mr Trump would do if he wins, and we do not know what Ms Clinton would do, what would go ahead or not go ahead. Overall then, it does not really matter to us who wins. Of course, we can only welcome public words about a willingness to normalise relations between our two countries. In this sense, yes, we welcome such statements, no matter who makes them. That is all I can say, really.

As for Mr Trump, he has chosen his method of reaching voters' hearts. Yes, he behaves extravagantly, of course, we all see this. But I think there is some sense in his actions. I say this because in my view, he represents the interests of the sizeable part of American society that is tired of the elites that have been in power for decades now. He is simply representing these ordinary people's interests.

He portrays himself as an ordinary guy who criticises those who have been in power for decades and does not like to see power handed down by inheritance, for example. We read the analysis too, including American analysis. Some of the experts there have written openly about this. He operates in this niche. The elections will soon show whether this is an effective strategy or not. As for me, I cannot but repeat what I have said already: we will work with whichever president the American people choose and who wants to work with us.

Question: Mr President, my question follows on the subject of security addressed just before. Obviously, cooperation is an essential part of this, and we realise that cooperation is not always easy. We saw an example just before with the case of the transponders. The planes can still fly at least.

But there are areas of vital importance, areas where innocent people's lives are at stake. You mentioned recently the case of the Tsarnayev brothers. As far as I know, Russia passed on information but no action was taken. Does this mean that practical cooperation in security is now in a critical situation?

Vladimir Putin: I spoke about this matter at a meeting with French journalists, if I recall correctly. Yes, we passed information on the Tsarnayev brothers on to our American partners. We wrote to them but received no response. After we wrote a second time we got a reply that they are US citizens and so it was none of our business and they would take care of everything themselves. I told the director of the FSB to archive the file. The response we received is still there, in the archives.

Sadly, a few months later, the Boston marathon terrorist attack took place and people were killed. It is a great shame that this tragedy took place. If contacts and trust between us and our partners had been better this could have been avoided. The Americans came here immediately following the attack and we gave them the information in our possession. But it was too late. People had already lost their lives. This partly answers the last question too. We do not know if those who say they want to work with us really will or not, but they do say quite rightly that this is essential for all of us, especially in the fight against terrorism. In this sense, we welcome all who declare such intentions.

As I have also said in the past, the Americans have provided us with real help, during the preparations for the Olympic Games in Sochi, for example, and we are grateful to them for this. Our cooperation was very efficient here, on site and at the level of our intelligence service heads. There have been other good examples of cooperation too. Overall, we have quite a good situation in this area with our European partners. We have open and professional contacts with the French intelligence services, for example, and exchange information. In general, the situation is not bad, but it could be a lot better.

Sabine Fischer: There was discussion about sending a policing mission to Donbass, and also emphasis on the roadmap that we saw in Russia, for example, in the media and in political debate. I think this was really a case of diverging interpretations of the results.

Vladimir Putin: This is no secret. I can tell you how it was. I might leave something out, so as not to put anyone in a difficult position or interfere with the process itself.

As you know, the Minsk agreements, which I think the experts have all read, say in black and white: "Thirty days after the signing of the Minsk agreements Ukraine's Rada must adopt a resolution outlining the geographical boundaries of areas where the law on the special status of these unrecognised republics would become effective immediately." Because the only thing needed for it to work was the description of those geographical boundaries.

That had to be established, not by law, but by a parliamentary resolution, and the resolution was finally adopted, even if past the deadline. So one would think that this law was to take effect immediately. It was passed, I would like to remind you, by the Parliament of Ukraine. The lawmakers voted for it, and it was coordinated with the unrecognised republics, which is very important, and in this sense, in my view, makes it viable legislation and a key element of a political settlement.

But after passing this resolution, Ukraine and its Parliament adopted an amendment, a paragraph to Article 9 or 10, which said the law would take effect only after municipal elections in these areas. That once again postponed the law's enforcement. I repeat, in our opinion, that law is absolutely key to a political resolution to the crisis in southeastern Ukraine. Moreover, that was done without even consulting anyone, least of all the unrecognised republics.

We discussed this very actively a year ago in Paris. I insisted that this be done then and done immediately, as it was part of the Minsk Agreements and is, in our view, a key component.

But the Ukrainian president said that this was not possible and everything ended up in a dead end. In this situation, everything could have ended then and there a year ago in Paris, but Mr Steinmeier, the German Foreign Minister, suddenly proposed a compromise.

He suggested that we agree to have the law come into force on the day of the local elections in these regions, temporarily, and have it come into force permanently after the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights recognises the elections as having taken place in accordance with OSCE rules. This was not at all what was set out in the Minsk Agreements, but in order to get us out of the deadlock we were in, I expressed my agreement and said we would settle the matter with Donetsk and Lugansk, which we did.

But then in Berlin, the Ukrainian president suddenly also attempted to change this proposal, already the result of a compromise. He went even further, essentially renouncing the law's implementation whatever the case. We thus found ourselves back in the same crisis we had in Paris a year before. But I want to note the Federal Chancellor's role here. She found arguments to persuade everyone present that we could and should keep to the agreement we reached and said that it was not possible to change what we'd already agreed on a year later, or we would never reach an agreement. But we agreed to bundle the nuances and details of how it would be implemented together with the concept you spoke about, and which still has to be worked through.

That is it, really. But in principle, a lot was accomplished in terms of ensuring security. We reached agreement on nearly every point. We made very little progress on humanitarian matters. These regions remain tightly blockaded and are in a very difficult situation. But the so-called civilised world prefers not to notice this. I do not want to get into debate on this matter now. As far as the [Normandy] format goes and whether it is useful or not, we simply have no alternative.

Yes, the discussions proceed with difficulty, and this is not very effective, I agree, but we have no other option, and if we want to make progress, we have to continue working in this format. As for the question of getting any other actors involved, our position is that we are not opposed to the idea of others taking part, including our American partners. But we have reached an agreement with all participants in the process that we will work in parallel with our American colleagues. My aide and Ms Nuland have regular meetings, discuss these issues and look for compromise. This is not being done in secret though, of course. All participants in the Normandy format meetings are informed and we take into account our American partners' position too, of course.

Angela Stent: This question is for President Putin. I'm Angela Stent; I'm a professor at Georgetown University in Washington. Mr President, Russia recently withdrew from an agreement with the United States to dispose of weapons-grade plutonium, but at the same time, the Russian Government said that it would consider re-joining the agreement if three conditions were met: firstly, that NATO troops should withdraw to the level that they were before 2000 in Europe; secondly, the Magnitsky Act should be repealed; and thirdly, that the sanctions imposed on Russia after the beginning of the Ukraine crisis should be lifted, and Russia should be paid compensation for them. So my question is: we will have a new President on January 20, I'm optimistic about that. Are we to understand, in the United States, that these three conditions would form the basis of an initial negotiating position on the Russian part with the American president, when she re-establishes high-level relations with the Kremlin? Thank you.

Vladimir Putin: One can tell straight away that you are an academic and not a diplomat. If you ask the diplomats, they will tell you about the concept of 'starting position'. As for our decision on the Plutonium Management and Disposition Agreement, we did not withdraw from it. The United States withdrew from the missile defence treaty, but we did not withdraw

from the plutonium agreement, we suspended it. Why did we do this? What were this agreement's provisions? Under its terms, both countries were to build facilities for disposing of the surplus weapons-grade plutonium that had accumulated in both Russia and the USA. Not only did the USA not meet its obligations under the agreement, but said that it would not do so because of financial difficulties. As if Russia does not have financial difficulties of its own, but we built our facility and are disposing of this plutonium using industrial methods. Without any prior coordination with us, the United States made a unilateral announcement that they would not dilute this weapons-grade plutonium but would store it in some beds and so forth.

This means that they retain what the experts call return potential, in other words, the plutonium could be returned and re-enriched at any moment. But we are eliminating our plutonium using industrial methods. We built our facility and spent money on it. Are we wealthier than the United States? There are many issues it has become difficult to discuss with the current administration because practically no obligations are met and no agreements are respected, including those on Syria. Perhaps we will be able to come back to this. We are ready, in any case, to talk with the new president and look for solutions to any, even the most difficult, issues.

Question: Mr President, my question is on Russian policy towards Asia. The emphasis today in Russian foreign policy is on the construction of a multipolar world. But do you also give some thought to the importance of a multipolar Asia? Both in your speech today, and the general construction of the Russian foreign policy, points, I think, to the growing, deepening contradictions between the US and the West on the one hand, and the Eurasian situation. But it's also a fact that there are internal contradictions within Eurasia. The rise of new powers is creating a lot of fears; the breakdown of the old order in some parts is releasing primordial forces. These are internal to Eurasia. But is there a danger that Russia, by its emphasis on a multipolar world, is underestimating the dangers of a unipolar Asia, and the need for great powers to work together to construct a genuinely democratic multipolar Asia?

Vladimir Putin: We are actively developing relations with Asian countries not because of tension in relations with Europe or the United States, but simply because life itself dictates this choice. Why do I say that life itself dictates that we expand these contacts?

The Asian countries' development and influence is growing and will continue to do so, and, what's more, they are growing fast. With a sizeable part of its territory in Asia, Russia would be foolish not to make use of its geographical advantages and develop ties with its neighbours.

China is our neighbour and I mentioned this in my opening remarks. We have longstanding good relations with India and it would be a mistake not to make use of this and develop solid long-term relations with India today. We have many common interests. We can naturally complement each other in politics and the economy.

As for the question of a multipolar or unipolar Asia, we see that Asia is not unipolar and this is very evident.

Life is very diverse and complex in general and is full of contradictions. It is important to resolve these contradictions in a civilised fashion. I think that the Asian countries' leaders today have sufficient common sense to work in just this way with each other, and we are ready to work the same way with them all.

I visited India just recently and our Defence Minister has just returned from India. We have cooperation between our defence ministries and also between industry in the defence sector, as well as in the civilian sector, where we have many common interests with India, China, Vietnam and other countries in the region. These ties are extensive and promising.

Thomas Gomart: In September 2014, at the Valdai Club, you described the relations between Ukraine and Russia with the following sentence: “Two countries, one people”. Today, how would you describe the relations between the two countries? Thank you very much.

Vladimir Putin: I will not go into who is to blame for what now. I have always considered, and still do today, that Russians and Ukrainians are really one people. There are people who hold radical nationalist views both in Russia and in Ukraine. But overall, for the majority, we are one people, a people who share a common history and culture and are ethnically close. First we were divided, then we were set against each other, but we are not to blame for this. We must find our own way out of this situation. I am sure that common sense will prevail and that we will find a solution.

Question: Mr President, before putting my question, I would like to pass on my young students’ words. Two years ago, you came to Shanghai on other important business and our students missed the chance to meet at the university with you and ask their question, but they asked me to tell you that they would be happy to see you any time, regardless of whether you have retired or not.

My question is as follows: We have discussed the philosophical matter of international relations today. Humanity has already gone through different types of international systems. In your view, to what extent will future systems resemble past ones? What are the positive components we should emphasise in particular? Should we seek more universality or more diversity as far as principles go? What kind of combination of components would you prefer to see?

And I have a specific question too. We have been actively discussing here the relations between Russia, the West, and China.

Vladimir Putin: Heinz said that this is a very philosophical question and that we could spend a long time discussing it.

Will tomorrow’s world resemble the past? No, of course not. How is this possible? Does today’s China resemble the China of the 1960s-70s? They are two completely different countries, and the Soviet Union is gone today too.

Mr Mbeki spoke about Africa before. I share his arguments. But Africa cannot be some kind of peripheral place. If anyone thinks this way, they are deeply mistaken. If we follow this kind of thinking, we can expect very serious trials ahead. We already hear the talk about refugees and Syria. I saw today the news about the latest incident in the Mediterranean, where the Italian coastguard rescued refugees from Africa. What has Syria got to do with this? Africa’s future and the world’s future are very serious issues. The same goes for relations in Asia, where there are also many conflicts or potential conflict situations.

I want to repeat what I have just said. The question is whether we have the wisdom and the courage to find acceptable solutions to these various problems and complicated conflicts. I certainly hope that this will be the case, that the world really will become more multipolar, and that the views of all actors in the international community will be taken into account. No matter whether a country is big or small, there should be universally accepted common rules that guarantee sovereignty and peoples’ interests.

As for our relations with our partners in Europe, the United States, America in general, and the Asian countries, we have a multi-vector policy. This is not just in virtue of our geographical location. Our policy with regard to our partners is built on the basis of equality and mutual respect.

Alexei Mukhin: Alexei Mukhin, Centre for Political Technology.

Mr President, Ukraine is constantly trying to prohibit things Russian. We get the impression that everything Russian is being squeezed out of Ukrainian life. In this respect, I have a philosophical question too. Petro Poroshenko said that he plans to sell his Russian business

interests. Does this business actually exist? What is your view on this?

Vladimir Putin: We seek to respect ownership rights. Mr Kudrin is a staunch advocate of property rights, seeing it as one of the pillars of economic policy, and I fully agree with him. We have not always been entirely successful in this area and we still have improvements to make and much legislative work to do, but we will always keep working in this direction. The same concerns our foreign investors, including from Ukraine. Mr Poroshenko is one of our investors in the sense that he is the owner of a sizeable business in Lipetsk Region, the Roshen factory. Actually, there are two businesses there. The second is engaged in selling the products, as far as I know. There are a few problems there concerning non-return of VAT, and the courts have imposed some restrictions, but the factories are operating, paying wages and earning profits, and there are no restrictions on using these profits, including transferring them abroad. I do not recall the figures now and do not get into such detail, but I know the business is turning a profit and is working with success.

Pyotr Dutkevich: Pyotr Dutkevich, Canada

Mr President, I already put this question yesterday to the Deputy Foreign Minister, but I realise my mistake, because you are the only person this question should really be addressed to.

My question is as follows: We have heard reports, I do not know how accurate they are, that you discussed a ceasefire in Syria at your meeting with Mr Obama in September. I do not know how accurate this information is, but it seems a 7-day ceasefire was proposed. You expressed doubts and said that it would not be possible to separate the radicals from the moderates in such a short time and that this task would likely prove impossible. You were given the answer then that if we failed in this task, you would have a free hand. Can you recall this conversation? It is very important for the history of what is taking place in Syria now.

Vladimir Putin: Yes, I do not need to recall it because I never forgot it. It was a very important conversation. There was indeed talk on the lines that Russian and Syrian aircraft would cease their airstrikes against terrorist targets in Aleppo until the healthy opposition forces could be separated from the forces of Jabhat al-Nusra, a terrorist organisation recognised as such by the United Nations and included on the list of international terrorist organisations.

In this respect, I note that it is no secret that our American partners promised to do this. First, they recognised the need to do this, and second, they recognised that part of Aleppo is occupied by terrorist organisations – ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra. We can see this for ourselves from the news reports, where you see the banners of ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra in some parts of the city. They recognised that this needs to be done and assured us that they would do this. After this, we agreed that we would decide right there on the battlefield who the moderates were, and we would not touch them, and who the terrorists were, and we and our American partners would target the terrorists. They made repeated promises. These promises were made at the level of our defence ministers, foreign ministers, intelligence services, but unfortunately, this fell through each time and they did not keep their promises.

The question was raised again during our meeting in China. Yes, my American partner, President Obama, did indeed propose separating these different forces once again. But he insisted that we must first declare a D-day, cease hostilities, stop the airstrikes, and then, within 7 days, they would take on the responsibility of separating the moderates from Jabhat al-Nusra. I will not go into detail here because I do not think I have the right to make these details public. After all, when we have talks like these, there are always some things we say in confidence. But the fact remains.

Instead of separating the Jabhat al-Nusra terrorists from the healthy opposition, our American

partners broke the ceasefire themselves. I had originally insisted that they first separate the terrorists from the moderates and we would then end the airstrikes, but in the end, I decided to agree with the American proposal at the talks. They were persistent and I decided to accept a compromise, said that we would go with their proposal, declare a ceasefire first and stop the airstrikes, giving them the seven days they asked for.

The ceasefire was declared on September 12, I think, and on the 17th, American aircraft carried out a strike against Syrian troops, and this was followed by an ISIS offensive. We were told that the strike was a mistake and that the ISIS offensive was only a coincidence. Perhaps this is so, but the ceasefire was broken and we are not to blame for this.

As for what the US President promised or didn't promise, you should ask him. I imagine that he will speak with our European partners about this when he goes to Europe. I think this should be done openly and honestly and not simply in an attempt to use this to influence our position on Syria.

By the way, do you realise that Russian and Syrian aircraft have not been carrying out any operations around Aleppo for 9 days now. We gave them not 7 days, but already 9, soon to be 10 days. But where is the effort to separate the terrorists from the moderates? You have to realise that if we do not meet our obligations we will never succeed in this fight against terrorism.

I realise that this is not an easy task and we are not looking to make any accusations, but we do have to try to keep our promises. In any case, it should not be we who end up accused of every possible sin. This is simply indecent. We have been showing restraint and do not respond to our partners with insolence, but there is a limit to everything and we might have to reply at some point.

Vladimir Putin: I can turn to Tarja and Heinz who know very well how the OSCE works. But I will give my opinion.

President Poroshenko has advanced the initiative of a so-called policing mission for the duration of the possible future elections in Donbass, Donetsk and Lugansk. I was the only one there who supported him. It is another matter that I do not describe this as a policing mission because the other parties in the process have objected to it. They objected not because they do not want to help Mr Poroshenko, but because the OSCE has never done anything like this before. It does not have the experience, the people or any practice in implementing policing missions.

At this point, the other parties in the process have not supported the idea Mr Poroshenko advanced, while I did. However, we do not describe this initiative as "a policing mission" but as an opportunity for those responsible for the elections and security during the campaign to carry weapons. Those who objected to this initiative pointed out that it could provoke others to use weapons against the armed people.

They believe that the power of OSCE observers is not in weapons but in the fact that they represent a respectable international organisation, and the use of weapons against them when they are not armed is absolutely unacceptable and will be seen as the least acceptable behaviour. This is their power, not their guns.

On the other hand, if Mr Poroshenko believes that this would help the cause, I agree with him. However, I was the only one to do so. The situation is strange; it is the only issue on which I agree with Mr Poroshenko. I have spoken about this more than once; there is nothing new here. Ultimately, all parties have agreed that it can be done, but only after careful consideration, including at the OSCE. I think this has never happened before in OSCE history. If I am wrong, Tarja can correct me. What do you think, Tarja?

T.Colton: Representative from Beijing, please.

Question: Thank you. Just now, former President of Austria Mr Fischer said that the

relationship between the EU and Russia is not as expected 25 years ago. It's unfortunate, and it's hard to be optimistic. So I want to ask you, Mr President, from your point of view, why is this so? And were the expectations or the assumptions 25 years ago wrong, or did something go wrong along the way? And from a philosophical point of view, what do you think is the lesson to be learned for the next 25 years?

Vladimir Putin: What was done correctly and what was not? Expectations were high after the Soviet Union switched to a policy of openness, since ideological differences, which were considered the main cause of division between the Soviet Union and then Russia, and the Western world, have disappeared. Frankly, we, in the Soviet Union, under Gorbachev, and then in Russia, believed that a new life would begin for us. One of our experts rightly said that there are things that, as we found out, run even deeper than ideological differences, namely, national and geopolitical interests.

Could we have done things differently? Yes, indeed. During our previous meeting in this room, I said that there was a German politician, Mr Rau, a well-known figure from the Social Democratic Party of Germany, he is no longer with us, but he used to engage in lively discussions with Soviet leaders. Back then, he said (we have these conversations on record, but cannot get around to publishing them, which we need to do), that a new international security system should be built in Europe.

In addition to NATO, he said, it is imperative to create another entity, which would include the Soviet Union and former Warsaw Pact countries, but with the participation of the United States in order to balance the system out. He went on to say that if we fail to do so, ultimately this entire system created during the Cold War would work against the Soviet Union. He said that it bothers him only because it would unbalance the entire system of international relations, and security in Europe would be jeopardised in a big way.

What we have now is what this old gentleman warned us about in his own time. The people who worked on transforming the world, some of them did not want to change anything, as they believed that they already were riding high, while others did not have the political will to act on these absolutely correct ideas of this wise and experienced German politician.

However, I hope that as the global alignment of forces in the world changes, political, diplomatic and regulatory support for these changes will follow. The world will be a more balanced and multipolar place.

Heinz Fischer: I can also add that 25 years ago was the early '90s. And in the early '90s, the European Union had 12 members: Sweden, Finland and Austria joined only in '94 or '95. It was a sort of honeymoon time between Russia and Europe, in particular Russia and Germany, and Russia and other important European countries. It was the time before the economic crisis; growth rates were bigger. It was even the time before the introduction of the Euro; the Euro is very important, but the Euro is also accompanied with some problems, if you look at Greece or at Italy, etc. So these factors also have to be taken into consideration. Thank you.

Tarja Halonen: I will also add that 25 years ago, Russia was different, and the European Union was different. Russia joined the Council of Europe after quite a long process, and I was myself also involved in that. So I think that one lesson that we could perhaps learn, also on the EU side, and from the Council of Europe side, is that this was a very good time to make an enlargement. But perhaps we should, to be fair, invest more in the enlargement process, not only before the enlargement, but also afterwards, and perhaps then the process could be easier today. But you know, sometimes things have to be hurried up, and you have not quite enough time. But we cannot take back the past, we have to try to build further on how it is now.

Gabor Stier: My question to President Putin is about Ukraine.

In the past few years we have often talked about Ukraine and the safety of Russian gas exports. Will Ukrainian flats be warm? Will Kiev pay for the gas? Are talks on gas exports to Ukraine underway? Was this discussed with Ukrainian President in Berlin?

Vladimir Putin: We are concerned about what is happening now with this very important energy component in Ukraine because in our opinion, in the opinion of our specialists – and they are no worse than Ukrainian experts because in Soviet times this was a single complex – we do realise what is going on there. To guarantee uninterrupted supplies to Europe, it is necessary to pump the required amount of gas into underground gas storage facilities. This gas is for transit, not for domestic consumption. This is the technological gist of what was done in Soviet times.

The amount of gas in these facilities is too low. It's not enough. It is necessary to load from 17 to 21 billion and I think now only 14 billion have been loaded. Moreover, they have already started to syphon it off. These are grounds for concern. I discussed gas shipments to Ukraine with the Ukrainian President at his initiative. He wanted to know whether Russia could resume deliveries. Of course, it can do so anytime. Nothing is required for this.

We have a contract with an annex. Only one thing is necessary and this is advance payment. We will provide timely and guaranteed energy supplies for Ukrainian consumers for the amount of this advance payment. But today the price for Ukraine – and we had agreed on this before and said so last year – will not be higher than the price for its neighbours, for instance, Poland.

I do not know the current prices but when we had this conversation Poland was buying gas from us for \$185 or \$184 per thousand cubic metres in accordance with the contractual commitments that are still valid. We could sell gas to Ukraine for \$180. I mentioned this price – \$180 per thousand cubic metres of gas. But we were told that they prefer reverse supplies, so be it. By the way, this is a violation of Gazprom's contracts with its partners in Western Europe but we are turning a blind eye to this and showing understanding.

If they prefer reverse supplies, okay, let them get that, but as far as I know the cost of gas for end users – industrial enterprises – has already topped \$300 per thousand cubic metres. We sell gas for \$180 but they do not want to buy it from us yet.

I have reason to believe that the middlemen in these reverse deals are close to certain executives in Ukraine's fuel and energy complex. Good luck to them; let them do this but, most importantly, they must guarantee transit to European countries.

Question: I have a question about the INF Treaty, which is under a lot of pressure today as I am sure you are aware; there are lots of bitter mutual recriminations, and so on. In this regard, it is important to understand Russia's general approach to this treaty. Does Russia see any value in this treaty, and if yes, then what exactly? Is it even worthwhile to be part of this treaty?

Vladimir Putin: It would be of great value to us, if other countries followed Russia and the United States. Here's what we have: the naive former Russian leadership went ahead and eliminated intermediate-range land-based missiles. The Americans eliminated their Pershing missiles, while we scrapped the SS-20 missiles. There was a tragic event associated with this when the chief designer of these systems committed suicide believing that it was a betrayal of national interests and unilateral disarmament.

Why unilateral? Because under that treaty we eliminated our ground complex, but the treaty did not include medium-range sea- and air-based missiles. Air- and sea-based missiles were not affected by it. The Soviet Union simply did not have them, while the United States kept them in service.

What we ultimately got was a clear imbalance: the United States has kept its medium-range

missiles. It does not matter whether they are based at sea, in the air, or on land; however, the Soviet Union was simply left without this type of weapons. Almost all of our neighbours make such weapons, including the countries to the east of our borders, and Middle Eastern countries as well, whereas none of the countries sharing borders with the United States, neither Canada nor Mexico, manufacture such weapons. So, for us it is a special test, but nevertheless we believe it is necessary to honour this treaty. All the more so since, as you may be aware, we now also have medium-range sea- and air-based missiles.

Vladimir Putin: Yes, of course. I fully agree that we should at least try to break this vicious circle. But we were not the first to start drawing it. Quite to the contrary, we opened up completely in the mid-1990s.

We expected to have an equal dialogue, that our interests would be respected, that we would discuss issues and meet each other halfway. It is impossible to offer only unilateral solutions and press towards your goal at all costs.

You mentioned the bombing of former Yugoslavia and Crimea. Thank you for this example; it is wonderful that you have said this. The bombing of Belgrade is intervention carried out in violation of international law. Did the UN Security Council pass a resolution on military intervention in Yugoslavia? No. It was a unilateral decision of the United States.

Now tell me what you meant when you mentioned Crimea. What was it you did in Yugoslavia, when you split it into several republics, including Kosovo, and then separated states from Serbia? In Kosovo, parliament voted on secession after the end of hostilities, intervention and thousands of casualties. But they made their decision, and you accepted it. There were no hostilities in Crimea, no bombing raids and no casualties. No one died there. The only thing we did was to ensure the free expression of will by the people, by the way, in strict compliance with the UN Charter. We did almost the same you did in Kosovo, only more.

In Kosovo, parliament approved a secession resolution, while people in Crimea expressed their opinion at a referendum. After that, parliament ratified the decision, and Crimea as an independent state asked to be reintegrated with Russia.

Of course, we can keep exchanging caustic remarks, but I think this vicious circle must be broken. I have said this more than once, and I am prepared to say it again. Yugoslavia, Iraq, Libya, Afghanistan and NATO's expansion – what is this? And then promises are forgotten, and we are again provoked into protecting our interests, after which “aggressive” Russia is accused of doing this or that. Why are you provoking us into taking action to protect our interests? Let us negotiate solutions instead. But it is impossible to agree on anything. And even when we agree on something, these agreements are not implemented.

I would like to have different relations with the next US administration, a partnership based on mutual respect for each other's interests.