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**Briefing by Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman Maria Zakharova, Moscow,
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Sergey Lavrov's upcoming talks with Foreign Minister of the Republic Armenia Ararat Mirzoyan

On March 20, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov will hold talks with Foreign Minister of the Republic Armenia Ararat Mirzoyan, who will be in Moscow on a working visit.

The foreign ministers will have a detailed discussion on further steps to develop bilateral cooperation and strengthen interaction in common integration associations such as the CIS, the EAEU and the CSTO. There are plans to discuss topical issues on the global agenda and the coordination of actions at various international platforms.

The discussion will focus on regional issues, including the settlement process around the Lachin Corridor and Nagorno-Karabakh in general, and the implementation of the trilateral agreements between the leaders of Russia, Armenia and Azerbaijan dated November 9, 2020, January 11, 2021, November 26, 2021 and October 31, 2022.

We hope that the upcoming meeting will help improve the quality of dialogue with Yerevan and promote stronger security and stability in the South Caucasus.

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Upcoming meeting of the Board of Trustees of the Alexander Gorchakov Public Diplomacy Fund

On March 24, Sergey Lavrov will chair a meeting of the Board of Trustees of the Alexander Gorchakov Public Diplomacy Fund. The participants will review the fund's performance in 2022 and approve areas of work for the upcoming period considering the new geopolitical situation.

This fund was created in 2010 in accordance with a Presidential Executive Order to support public diplomacy, promote the participation of Russian non-governmental organisations in international cooperation and actively involve civil society institutions in the foreign policy process. Under the auspices of the fund, scientific and educational programmes for young international experts from Russia, the CIS countries and other countries, conferences, roundtable discussions and expert meetings are held annually. These events bring key Russian approaches to the main issues on the global agenda to the attention of our foreign partners.

I would like to note that we are working out the details of additional talks and meetings on the Russian Foreign Minister's schedule. We will inform you about them separately.

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Ukraine crisis

I would like to wish everyone a happy holiday. This holiday marks the anniversary of Crimea's reunification with the Russian Federation. Nine years ago today, on March 16, 2014, a historic referendum was held on the status and state affiliation of the peninsula. The reason for the referendum was the refusal

of the Crimean authorities to recognise the legitimacy of the government led by the Maidan winners, plus a well-grounded concern for the future of the residents of the Republic of Crimea in the face of rampant radical nationalistic elements in Ukraine, who impacted heavily the decisions made by the country's government, which led to ignoring the interests of the millions of its Russian-speaking citizens. The residents of Crimea were outraged by the atrocities committed by Ukrainian nationalists and spoke in favour of Crimean independence and its return to the native Russian haven. More than 90 percent of voters cast their votes for this. This form of exercising the right to self-determination was the only possible way to protect the vital interests of the people of Crimea. This position is based on international law and is fully compliant with it.

On March 17, following the referendum, the independent Republic of Crimea was declared, in which the city of Sevastopol enjoys a special status. The next day, March 18, a solemn event took place where the Treaty on the Accession of the Republic of Crimea and the City of Sevastopol to the Russian Federation was signed.

March 13 marked another important date in the history of our country. Seventy-nine years ago, Kherson was liberated from Nazi occupation as a result of the Bereznegovato-Snigirevsky Operation. The Nazis killed tens of thousands of citizens, shipped thousands of young people to Germany, and built concentration camps for Soviet prisoners over 31 months of occupation. The central town cemetery alone is the resting place for 40,000 Soviet soldiers and 8,000 local civilians killed by the Nazis.

During the occupation, Kherson was pillaged to the point where everything of any value was shipped to the West.

History repeats itself. Like the Nazis during the Great Patriotic War, the neo-Nazi Kiev regime that is mimicking them now couldn't care less about the city and its residents. The only thing that is of any value for them is what they can put in their pockets, sink their teeth into and then sell. Ukrainian militants are known to wheel in heavy artillery between blocks of flats, to engage in looting, to destroy cultural sites and to terrorise the remaining city residents. Without a doubt, just like in March 1944, Kherson will be liberated and the criminals will be held accountable.

The glorious Russian past of the territories that are called Ukraine now haunts and frightens the self-described leaders of today's Ukraine, who, in fact, represent a Nazi and neo-Nazi regime. I think historians and political scientists will come up with the proper definition. But this is not just a criminal regime, but also a truly null and void regime. The wave of renaming everything that is

connected with our common great history that the regime started has reached crazy proportions. Kiev is seriously pondering renaming Russia into Muscovy. No, this is not a joke or a bad case of mockery or sarcasm. They put this forward as a proposal. These kinds of obsessive ideas make one think that Ukrainian leadership has nothing better to do. In fact, the problem runs much deeper and can be described as a lack of genuine self-identity. This is about an endless attempt to deny everything and use this denial to discover a meaningful narrative. This is the lack of a solid reliance on the historical past, because the past has been canceled by the current Ukrainian regime. Everything they made up to replace it falls apart under the slightest reality test. Clearly, diversion is another goal of theirs where they try to refocus the country residents' attention from their failed domestic policies. Probably, their next step will be to rename Ukraine into the Muscovy Region. I'm not sure what they will come up with next. That would be very funny. You can either laugh at it or mock it. It's up to you. But this is a true description of the philosophy that has been maturing there for decades at the West's behest. After all, people really get used to thinking that way.

The collective West continues to get more deeply involved in the conflict with Russia. On March 7-8 of this year, EU defence ministers met in Stockholm to discuss military assistance for Kiev. According to NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, total NATO assistance for Kiev has reached 150 billion euros since February 2022. What kind of assistance? Military aid amounted to 65 billion euros. As if it were some bloody game, Help Ukraine, where you help in such a way as to need to help more. EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell said 11,000 Ukrainian servicemen would be trained as part of the EU Military Assistance Mission in support of Ukraine by the end of March, and another 30,000 by the end of the year.

On March 14, the European Union announced an increase in the European Peace Facility financial ceiling of 2.2 billion euros, to almost 8 billion euros. The fund is used to finance the supply of weapons to fight our country. We all know that this money is not being used for creation, construction or restoration; it goes for slaughter, for a fight to the last Ukrainian. The absurdity of Western logic is as striking as the hypocrisy and cynicism of using a "peace facility" to sponsor fighting, to bring death and suffering to thousands of civilians.

The Zelensky regime is increasingly using martial law to implement corruption schemes with Western military, financial and humanitarian assistance. It is clear why they need money. Many people question or express doubt that corruption is flourishing in today's Ukraine. In late 2022, the office of the

President of Ukraine actually began to eliminate local self-government. Few people in the West have noticed it. They have more important things to take care of, such as awarding strange prizes to each other, inventing honorary names and titles for each other, and glorifying themselves. At the same time, a purge of the regional elite is taking place. Regional capitals are efficiently implementing pilot projects to concentrate city management powers with heads of military administrations appointed by Kiev. The first such project has been completed in Chernigov. Odessa, Lvov, Kharkov, Dnepropetrovsk and other major cities are following suit. At the same time, regional leaders continue to resign. On March 14 of this year, the heads of the Odessa, Khmelnytsky and Lugansk regional administrations were dismissed (the latter controls the part of the LPR occupied by Ukraine). In fact, what we are seeing is nothing short of an usurping of power by Vladimir Zelensky and his closest associates. What are their reasons and purposes for doing this? It's obvious. They know what is happening inside Ukrainian society and fear a surge of discontent with the policy they are pursuing, or rather the madness they are implementing. Naturally, they are trying to install loyal Gauleiters in major cities to control the situation on the ground. This is one of the many things they took from the 1940s playbook. They are following their idols in the West.

The Kiev regime's sanctions machine is not slowing down either. On March 10, Vladimir Zelensky signed another executive order sanctioning large Russian betting companies and lotteries. I am not joking. This is true. This is how much he is annoyed by Sportloto and even several hippodromes. Sanctions have been imposed on them for a period of 5 to 50 years. In total, the restrictions affected 120 individuals and 287 legal entities. Not all of them are Russians; some are citizens of other countries. Kiev seems to think that the more sanctions they impose on Russia, the greater the final benefit will be. We have to upset them: it won't happen. The longer the Kiev regime entertains its unhealthy and painful fantasies, the closer it is pushing Ukraine to the brink of an abyss.

The Kiev regime continues its aggressive campaign against the canonical Orthodox Church, the largest in Ukraine, but not only against it. It is crudely violating its international commitments on the freedom of conscience and religion. It's not a question of certain commitments or agreements. A total purge is going on. In the past few days, the pressure of the authorities reached its peak. You have seen the video address by the monks of the Kiev-Pechersk Lavra. All of them came out of the church and stood on the steps. They addressed the international community (in fact, they addressed President Vladimir Zelensky) in several languages in the hope of being finally heard although they are facing

total isolation and an information blockade. We noted the unacceptable position – the lack of any comment by the UN Secretariat. Stephane Dujarric de la Riviere is an experienced employee of the Secretariat. He has held this position twice over a long period and now works as Spokesperson for the UN Secretary-General. He said he had no information on what is happening with the Kiev-Pechersk Lavra. I don't think that the UN Secretariat in New York has no internet connection, that its computers don't work, telephones and TV are switched off and newspapers do not arrive. No, everything is up and running. It is enough to look for the latest news on the internet to see what was happening with the Kiev-Pechersk Lavra over many months. It would be useful to read a statement by Russia's Permanent Representative to the UN Vasily Nebenzya at one of the UN Security Council meetings, in which he spoke about total Russophobia that extends to religion. It is also possible to read the statement by Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and his address to the UN Secretary-General. This is not the first statement by the heads of our diplomacy and country. Detailed explanations were given at all levels, starting with President of Russia Vladimir Putin. When we hear that the UN has no information, we are tempted to ask whether the UN Secretary-General was, in fact, in Kiev on March 8? What was he doing there if literally a couple of days later his Press Secretary did not have any information about one of the most tragic events in present-day Kiev? I am always ready to help when there is no information. Mr Dujarric, listen to me. The Ukrainian leadership is going to take the Kiev-Pechersk Lavra from the Ukrainian Orthodox Church before March 29. The use of force is not ruled out. It should be said that this place is a shrine for millions of Orthodox believers but not for the current rulers of Ukraine, which are making such illegal and soulless decisions. Even more sacrilegious is their intention to do something that is even hard to hear, hard to believe and impossible to understand. We find it hard to process it all, though the monks, representatives and parishioners of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church have been living with this for many years. The Kiev authorities actually want to inventory the relics of the saints kept in Lavra. I did not misspeak. I haven't invented anything. They said it themselves. In its Russophobic hysteria, Kiev is ignoring the fact that these are not museum display items but relics of the holy, including Nestor Letopisets, Ilya Muromets and other saints that are revered and prayed to in the entire Orthodox world. This is quite a story. Zelensky probably has said everything himself. At first, he said he didn't understand people who were trying to make Russian speakers speak Ukrainian. We heard him mocking the Ukrainian authorities and the regime when he was not yet president. We remember how he kneeled before the people

of Ukraine with the express purpose of being elected. When he was elected we heard from him many interesting statements on his vision for the development of civil society and democracy in his country. But then a horrible thing happened. He not only renounced his own words but started doing the exact opposite. It would be interesting to know if his current hatred, in part, of the monks of the Kiev-Pechersk Lavra is due to a mental affliction or he's being slipped this hatred, or is a result of his failure to understand anything about faith and its embodiment in religion? He doesn't hear the appeals of the brethren and priests to stop this outrage and give them an opportunity to continue their service to God in the Lavra.

The goal of these moves is cynical, simple and pathetic: to ensure the Kiev regime's all-round support for a political project known as "the Orthodox Church of Ukraine," which the patriarch of Constantinople and the US are promoting. Do you remember Victoria Nuland with a candle in 2013-2014? Do you think she did that because she loves God? Not at all. It was a meme they created to make people believe that the US supported Orthodoxy in Ukraine. Zelensky held a candle too, even if we are not sure about his faith and affiliation. He has trampled everything he declared to be his values, traditions and sacred sites. In the past, such people as he were described as heathens, and not only in the religious sense. People said about such persons that they would sell out their mothers. This is what we see Zelensky and his team doing now. We have noticed that the attack on the Lavra Monastery and increased persecution of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church took place several days after US President Joe Biden visited (on February 20) the St Michael's Golden-Domed Monastery in Kiev, which has been taken over by the schismatics.

We strongly condemn such infringements on the rights of and discrimination against millions of Orthodox Christians. We urge the concerned international organisations to influence the Kiev's regime in order to put an end to the persecution of and lawlessness against the Ukrainian Orthodox Church.

Zelensky and his regime have shown in word and in deed that they hold nothing sacred. They are Western puppets who are selling Ukraine at their handlers' bidding, treating Ukrainian citizens as expendables, destroying Ukrainian history and memory, using holy sites for mercenary purposes, and inventorying the holy relics.

When Zelensky made his promises and launched a new policy, he began with de-communisation. He tore down monuments that venerated the Red Army soldiers who perished during the Great Patriotic War, renamed streets in honour of Nazi collaborators, and cancelled our common holidays which people of

different ethnicities in Ukraine hold dear. He did all of that under the guise of de-communisation. Do you remember them trying to erase the Soviet Union's emblem or paint over everything associated with that period? They did that and much more. But they have not succeeded, because the people did not understand and did not accept their motives.

The final revelation is that Zelensky himself has morphed into those he was fighting. The inventory of the holy relics, which they have decided to do, is exactly what those they are waging a crusade against now did a century ago. After the October Revolution, tombs, graves and reliquaries with holy relics were opened and mocked, taken around the country to show that nobody had risen from the dead, and that it was nothing more than ashes and dust. Zelensky and his team are doing the same as part of the de-communisation campaign. I know that this will be difficult to do, but there is still time to stop, wake up to reality and preserve at least a grain of humanity.

I don't think I need to remind you about the goals and tasks of the special military operation. Our leaders have spoken about them again and again.

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Anniversary of the Crimea referendum

Nine years ago, on March 16, 2014, the people of Crimea chose their future. They did so independently and deliberately. Based on the free expression of will by the people of Crimea, the reunification asserted the right to self-determination as stipulated by the UN Charter, the UN Declaration on Principles of International Law, and several human rights compacts. We have spared no effort bringing this fact to everyone's attention, as there are still those who question it.

During the period when Crimea was part of Ukraine, from 1992 through 2013, efforts to promote socioeconomic development on the peninsula lacked a system-wide approach and were largely defined by Ukraine's domestic political agenda. Overall, there were multiple negative trends affecting the economy and inter-ethnic relations, as well as cultural stagnation and environmental degradation.

Over the past years, Russia has succeeded in overcoming and resolving many challenges which piled up in Crimea while it was part of Ukraine. We have gone to great lengths to improve Crimea's economic, investment and cultural appeal and to promote it as a tourist destination, guided in our efforts by

the Federal Targeted Programme titled “Socioeconomic development of the Republic of Crimea and the city of Sevastopol through 2025.”

Already in 2015, Russia responded to the energy blockade Ukraine imposed on Crimea (just to remind you, there was the water issue, and attempts to blow up and mine power lines, and much more) by quickly setting up provisional power supply lines. Today, we have resolved the power supply issue for the peninsula by launching the Balaklava and Tavrida thermic electric power stations in Sevastopol and near Simferopol, respectively, as well as the Saki thermal power station.

A large-scale effort to build natural gas pipelines on the peninsula has been underway since 2014. More communities get connections to the gas distribution network almost every month with the average gas penetration rate in Crimea currently at 76 percent. It is expected to reach 83 percent by the end of 2023.

When Kiev blocked the North Crimean Canal in 2014, water supply remained the only outstanding issue for the peninsula for quite a long time. The water blockade was lifted when the special military operation started. Let me remind you that the dam Ukraine built in 2014 to stop water from flowing into Crimea was destroyed in February 2022. Just think about it. The Kiev regime used to refer to the people of Crimea as its citizens and pretended to care about them, all while stocking up on weapons to attack them and depriving them of water. This is just to explain to you what the Presidential Office in Ukraine means when it talks about liberating Crimea.

All this is now in plain view. We do not need any further evidence on why they were making these preparations. This is my message to those who now pretend that there were no issues, that we made everything up and that everyone lived in peace and harmony. What kind of peace and harmony are you talking about, if people in Crimea lacked water supply? Once again, to those who have forgotten about this, I repeat that power lines were mined to impose an all-out blockade on the people of Crimea.

Do I need to tell you about the Crimean Bridge once again? Probably not. Just a reminder: they started by claiming that it was just a virtual 3D model, and that footage from the construction site was actually produced at Mosfilm studios. Later they switched to staging terrorist attacks against this civilian infrastructure site.

In February 2022, Russia destroyed the dam built by Ukraine. Water from the Dnieper can now flow to the peninsula, enabling it to greatly expand its

arable land. For the first time since 2014, Crimea can plant several crops it was unable to cultivate for objective reasons before, including rice.

Industrial output in the Republic of Crimea almost doubled and increased 2.5-fold in Sevastopol since 2015. This upward momentum in manufacturing is still there, and many factories have benefited from upgrades.

As I have already said, the Crimean Bridge came to symbolise Crimea's reunification with Russia. Completed in record-breaking time, the bridge opened to car traffic in 2018, boosting the peninsula's socioeconomic development. Today, Tavrida, a modern motorway, crosses Crimea from east to west.

One thing to note is the Kiev regime's resentment regarding all these developments. After all, this was a major challenge, and this is how they perceived all this. It was Russia that has been developing its regions for the benefit of the people living there, and who will be there in the future. At the same time, the Kiev regime was shaking in an impotent rage and viewed all this as a major challenge. This was not a matter of competing against anyone. All we did is deliver improvements in civilian infrastructure, manufacturing, the economy, and finances. The media in the West misrepresented all these developments. Make no mistake, we did not want to compete against anyone and always wanted Ukraine to overcome all the crises it faced within its post-2014 borders. However, it seemed that this posture constituted an incredible challenge on the home front for decision makers over there, both those who are independent and not so independent in their actions. Truth be told, they made no secret of destroying all these achievements. How many times have they threatened to destroy all this in their statements saying that nothing will be left, etc?

A series of cultural projects is being implemented in Crimea. Renovations have begun at the region's most significant historical and cultural landmarks, including the Vorontsov Palace and Park, as well as the Livadia, Miskhor (Yalta), East Crimean (Kerch) and Bakhchisaray historical and cultural reserves. Other projects involve repairs of rural cultural centres, art schools, and extracurricular education centres for children and youth.

Crimeans began to receive social and medical assistance according to Russian standards. A system of support for mothers and children has been launched. In 2022 alone, six schools and 118 preschool centres were built, and 15 more are under construction.

The government ensures compliance with all international obligations to protect human rights, as long as this is the standard. The Presidential Executive Order of September 12, 2015, On Measures to Rehabilitate the Armenian,

Bulgarian, Greek, Italian, Crimean Tatar and German Peoples and State Support for their Revival and Development greatly improved the ethnic relations sphere. The document contains a package of measures for the social development of the Crimean ethnic groups. As a reminder, none of this existed before Crimea's reunification with Russia.

In the Russian Crimea (unlike during the Ukrainian period), the general policy to respect linguistic equality and diversity is explicitly documented at the legislative level. Ethnic Ukrainians, Crimean Tatars along with Russians are represented in the executive branch. There has been a significant increase in the Crimean Tatar representation at the regional and local legislatures.

The federal and republican authorities should certainly get the credit for the large number of Crimean Tatar religious buildings that were not legalised before 2014 (as a rule, built on seized land plots without the required documents). Now this problem is gradually being solved. After Crimea's reunification with Russia, the new policy is to return buildings to communities. The government will also pay for renovations, whereas earlier, when Crimea was under the Kiev regime, most Islamic religious sites were built with foreign sponsors' money – international foundations and private donations.

The successful integration of Crimean Muslims into the Ummah of the Russian Federation is also facilitated by the organisation of their annual hajj to the shrines of the Islamic world. Until 2014, no more than 100-120 people could afford the expensive trip. At present, Russia provides substantial financial assistance to pilgrims (in 2022, a quota of 270 pilgrims was allocated to the Muslims of Crimea).

The Crimean Tatar television channel, Millet/Narod, and a radio channel, Vetan/Rodina that are funded from the regional budget, are actively functioning.

The past three years have shown that, despite the anti-Crimea restrictions imposed by a number of Western countries, foreign businesses and socio-political organisations continue to be interested in developing cooperation with the peninsula. Many international guests who visited Crimea have voiced appreciation of the Russian authorities' efforts to promote the region's socioeconomic development, ethnic and religious peace and harmony, and the rights of all nations living in the peninsula. In 2022, more than 70 events with an international audience were held in Crimea, including a number of major international forums and cultural and humanitarian festivals.

Life itself has confirmed that the people of Crimea made the right decision nine years ago to reunite with Russia. The progress Crimea has made and the resolution of problems the region could not have tackled alone make the truth

even more vivid: Crimeans were right to express their free will and make their momentous choice.

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20 years since the start of the US military operation in Iraq

The United Nations Special Commission (UNSCOM) and later the United Nations Monitoring, Verification and Inspection Commission (UNMOVIC) spent a total of 12 years looking for biological, chemical and other types of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) in Iraq. The White House claimed that there were hidden stocks of such weapons there. Baghdad denied it.

In February 2003, US Secretary of State Colin Powell, in a speech before the UN Security Council, accused the Iraqi leaders of producing weapons of mass destruction. He presented a test tube with a white powder as “evidence,” which, according to his allegations, was the bacillus anthracis agent found in Iraq.

On March 20, 2003, the United States and its allies launched an armed invasion of Iraq, which was done in violation of international law under the pretext of the need to destroy those weapons. What happened to Iraq, its legitimate president, and the people of that country? The head of state, Saddam Hussein, was toppled and later executed, while the country was plunged into a years-long internal military and political conflict, from which it has not been able to fully recover to this day.

But it was not a natural internal conflict, which can arise for a number of reasons in any country or a national state. No. It was a conflict that, first, took place during the occupation of the territory in question by the United States and other countries of the anti-Iraq coalition, and, second, it was directly fomented by the Western countries without any reasonable justification.

As a result, they found no weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. So, let us go back to Baghdad’s original tenet: there were no weapons [of mass destruction] in the country. The leaders of the countries involved in the invasion attempted to justify their criminal actions by claiming that they had been given inaccurate information by their own intelligence services.

I would like to remind you that the Western participants in the anti-Iraq coalition – the United States, the United Kingdom, Poland, and many others – had no common border with Iraq. It will be recalled that Ukraine also sent representatives of its armed forces to Iraq (although few people would bring it

up today). We would like to remind the Bankova Street administration, who are making noises in defence of international law, that the Kiev regime had trampled this international law underfoot by sending its military (not doctors, nurses, or humanitarian missions, but soldiers) to the territory of Iraq to fight Iraqis on their soil. What was the fate of international law there?

What I will tell you now may seem incredible to some people. I have mentioned this repeatedly; let me reiterate it once again: the notorious sniper, Nadezhda Savchenko, was one of those whom the Kiev regime sent to fight Iraqis on their soil. It is hard to believe, isn't it? You may remember how the West hailed her as a superstar, a pacifist, a person born to defend human rights, Ukraine, the regime, and so on. The very same Nadezhda Savchenko, who directed artillery strikes and was later sentenced in this country for killing Russian journalists – also participated in hostilities in Iraq.

According to Western sources (I would like to stress that indeed those were Western sources), the invasion and the subsequent occupation of Iraq resulted in anywhere between 100,000 and 205,000 violent civilian deaths, with indirect civilian losses amounting to about 650,000. This data was provided by official agencies. But the figures are even higher when the number of victims among the civilian population is calculated by various NGOs. First, these organisations state that the civilian losses have not been calculated at all and that nobody has ever intended to calculate them. Second, they say that the actual figure is likely to exceed one million. I would like to stress this once again: it is important to understand that we are not talking about the Iraqi military, or members of the regular armed forces, or mercenaries, or security service agents. Nothing of the kind. They were peaceful civilians, who died as a result of the US Iraqi campaign.

These military operations also resulted in the destruction of that country's basic infrastructure, a disastrous decline in the national health system, and a surge in crime. This has led to a profound, protracted socioeconomic crisis. The number of Iraqi refugees (in Syria and Jordan) and that of internally displaced persons has reached 1.5 million and 2 million, respectively.

At the same time, Washington consistently disregarded the International Committee of the Red Cross' reports about cruel treatment of Iraqi prisoners and investigations conducted by Western NGOs, including Human Rights Watch, which implicated US service personnel in Iraq in systematic killings, torture and rapes of civilians. The Americans tried to hush up absolutely everything. They hushed up scandals caused by media leaks about torture at the Abu Ghraib and Camp Bucca prisons, including the Iraq War Logs published by WikiLeaks. But

the truth surfaced all the same. Years later, this was what the WikiLeaks founder, Julian Assange, who posted the relevant content on his website, paid for, falling victim to US lawlessness.

Washington also cynically covered up crimes committed by the personnel of US private military companies. In December 2020, US President Donald Trump pardoned four employees of Blackwater, a notorious private military company, despite condemnation by the UN Working Group on the Use of Mercenaries. The four individuals were found guilty of killing 14 civilians on Nisour Square in Baghdad in 2007.

Apart from completely demolishing Iraqi statehood and the country's military, economic and social foundations, the aggression against Iraq irreparably damaged its cultural and historical legacy. Should I also mention the environment? I don't think I will this time.

After US forces seized Baghdad on April 9, 2003, rampant looting and robberies swept the city. The National Museum and other cultural sites in the capital were also hit hard. These crimes later spread to major Iraqi archaeological sites. US television channels savoured the situation. Numerous incidents involving US military personnel smuggling out ancient artefacts have been documented.

As I am sure you understand, everything that had been plundered and smuggled out at that time is now part of private Western collections. Is anyone in the West conducting an inventory of what has been plundered and smuggled out from Iraq? Of course, not. These artefacts will remain in the West forever, just like those smuggled out by the British and other Westerners from Greece and Egypt. Egyptian and Greek museums and state agencies have been demanding, requesting, pleading and begging for a long time that the West return their cultural legacy. However, the answer they get is always the same: it isn't yours anymore.

The British also plundered the Acropolis, paying for some artefacts and grabbing others for free. Notably, British diplomats took advantage of their diplomatic immunity to smuggle various items out of Greece, and now they are on display at the famous British Museum.

US service personnel smuggled ancient artefacts out of Iraq. A large number of artefacts was smuggled out during the entire period of occupation – plane loads of items, using special aircraft. Officers and soldiers of the coalition openly plundered them while they served in the armed forces, at the request of specialised agencies and private US collectors. According to the management of

the National Museum alone, 15,000 exhibits are reported missing. Not more than 6,000 have been returned to date.

However, we realise that this is just a small share that has been estimated and calculated. The scale of plunder is so huge that it will be impossible to establish how many artefacts have been destroyed, plundered and stolen.

Consequently, the Americans have failed to fulfil their promise to establish the so-called prosperity in Iraq. However, they destroyed a way of life that had evolved over centuries, and undermined the fragile inter-denominational balance. The country turned into a hotbed of regional instability for many years, giving rise to ISIS, a notorious terrorist organisation which is banned in Russia.

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The monument to the Soviet Army in Sofia

On March 9, the Legislative Assembly of Sofia adopted a decision to dismantle the monument to the Soviet Army in the centre of the Bulgarian capital. The mayor of the city was instructed to submit a proposal to the governor of the Sofia region to relocate the monument.

This outlandish initiative is known to be coming from the Euro-Atlantic supporters from the Bulgarian capital's representative body. Its interconnection with the upcoming early parliamentary elections in Bulgaria and the push by individual contenders for power to demonstrate their ability to quickly pick up and immediately act upon the expectations of their Western partners who have a significant influence on the domestic political processes in that country can be clearly seen. The monuments to the liberators of Bulgaria have become a political bargaining chip.

The head of Bulgaria's technical government called for putting off the decision concerning this sensitive and controversial issue until the time after the election. There is no political will to say "hands off" the monuments to those who made life for the current generations possible. It is not about comfortable or prosperous life. No. It's about the very existence of the people.

Naturally, we took note of the fact that ordinary Bulgarians had formed a human chain to protect the monument, which local politicians turned into another target for blasphemous abuse.

This patriotic move by the citizens of Bulgaria – not a pro-Russian move, but a patriotic move with Bulgaria in mind – clearly shows that despite the unbridled anti-Russian propaganda efforts people cannot remain indifferent to manifestations of neo-Nazism that reared its head in Ukraine. They remember

and honour the exploits of the Russian soldier who brings freedom, peace and justice. Indeed, this is a collective image. But when we say “Russian soldier” or “Red Army,” or “people’s feat,” we mean the feat of the Soviet people, the multiethnic, multireligious people who did not draw a line between the right or wrong people, members of a particular religion or confession, or people with a particular skin colour or tone either inside the country or outside it. No, they just knew that they had to protect their own people. There were destitute and humiliated people who were subjected to inhuman torture and sentenced to annihilation. And there was the enemy that made the life of humankind unbearable in the middle of the 20th century who had to be fought against. Everyone whose life was in danger had to survive.

We are grateful to the Bulgarians who stood up in defence of the monument. We see this as a show of commitment to tradition and close ties between the peoples of our countries.

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Persecution of activists from the Russian-speaking community by the German authorities

We are watching with concern the ongoing political persecution and a public smear campaign against activists of the Russian-speaking community in Germany. The number of cases is on the rise.

In 2022, a wave of Russophobia started by the German media and aggressive rhetoric coming from officials and politicians swept over Germany. It quieted down largely thanks to the efforts of our compatriots, for whom Russian is their native language and who understand that Russian culture is part of the world culture. Now, the German authorities are trying to take revenge on them.

In one of the most recent egregious cases, the prosecutor’s office in Cologne opened a criminal case against a native of Dnepropetrovsk and an activist of the Russian-speaking community Yelena Kolbasnikova for her statements in defence of Russia on May 8, 2022, during a rally on the occasion of Victory Day. She has been living in Germany for many years now and is facing a prison sentence of up to three years. The court date is set for March 29, 2023. Notably, the Ukrainian media controlled by the Kiev regime joined in the choir of voices jubilating over the exposure of a “Kremlin agent” by the German authorities.

Clearly, Yelena Kolbasnikova’s criminal prosecution is politically motivated and is designed to intimidate activists from the Russian-speaking

community in Germany, who openly express disagreement with the ongoing demonisation of Russia, which is their cultural and historical homeland, in Germany.

We stand in solidarity with the “Russian Germany.” We call on official Berlin to immediately stop political reprisals against its own citizens. We join in the words of support addressed to the people who are persecuted by our German “partners”, as we used to believe. Now, we know who they really are.

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Lithuania’s decision to block online access to Russian television channels

The other day, the Radio and Television Commission of Lithuania instructed local internet providers to block IP addresses with access to Russian television networks – Rossiya-1, Rossiya-24, RTR Planeta, NTV, and Channel One – targeted by the unilateral EU sanctions. The providers have five days to do that. Violators of the “sanctions regime” will face administrative and criminal punishment. Local censorship bodies are already imposing large fines on legal entities and private individuals for giving access to Russian television channels.

This is what democrats and liberals are doing. Do you remember the slogans they used to destabilise the Baltic republics when they were part of the Soviet Union? I will refresh your memory. They said that they wanted more “freedom of speech,” that not all channels and radio stations were accessible in the Soviet Union, and that “the chains must fall”. They have pluralism, freedom of speech and civil rights now. How many years have passed since then? 200, 500 or two million? No, only several decades have passed since the mid-1980s, but these people – the very same people – are banning media outlets. Five years ago, they claimed that these channels were guilty of “violations.” They invented incredible explanations, that a political analyst said something bad, or that a show did not properly express certain views. Today, they do not even look for a pretext or any reference to laws. They simply ban them.

They are also persecuting journalists, like Marat Kasem, in Lithuania. In Latvia, he has been thrown into prison. He marked his birthday on March 14. We congratulated him and launched an information rally in his support.

What has happened to these people? How can it be that the same people have changed their views to directly opposite the ones they held during their lifetime? Frothing at the mouth, they demanded access to everything in the information environment, saying that nobody can ban their access to information

sources and resources, that they have a right to receive any information, and that they alone can decide if it is right or wrong. The very same people in the very same countries and with the same zeal are now not only blocking the broadcasting of analogue and digital signals, but also the viewers' ability to go online.

I would like to remind you that we are not talking about information that is available to everyone, like the second- or third-most important TV channel in the country, which could be construed as a national threat. We are talking about the internet, where everyone can find anything to their liking without any pressure from media outlets or communication resources. People must have a degree of freedom to choose information resources. But they have been prevented from doing this. What has created the situation we are witnessing? This is shocking, and I believe that it is important to talk about it.

The Lithuanian regime's frantic attempts to use total censorship to isolate Lithuania's media environment from undesirable information, this time by blocking access to online resources, are evidence of the regime's impotence and fear of people's natural desire to get a personal impression of the developments in their country and the world, rather than accept the pathologically Russophobic propaganda being aggressively imposed on them by the authorities. However hard they try, they cannot silence the inconvenient truth. It is impossible in the modern-day world, as the footage of people laying flowers on a destroyed Russian tank in the Lithuanian capital has clearly demonstrated.

These acts of censorship are evidence of the Lithuanian authorities' disregard for the people's legitimate rights and interests, which were not imposed on Lithuania and its people but which they themselves formulated. The authorities are turning themselves from a legally elected power into a dictatorship because they have adopted these laws freely and without any external pressure or "imperial diktat," as they like to say. No, they did this independently. But why violate the laws they themselves formulated? This is evidence of their inability and unwillingness to ensure not only the freedom of opinion and media plurality in the country, but also of the chronic legal nihilism and inability to deliver on the lofty promises they made at high places.

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Opening of Russian Seasons in Kazakhstan

On March 2 in Astana, a festival of Russian art and culture, Russian Seasons, opened at the Astana Opera. The opening event included the

Tchaikovsky Gala Concert and the Planet of Tchaikovsky exhibition organised by the Russian National Museum of Music.

Throughout the year, the festival programme will offer film screenings, creative laboratories, workshops by major Russian cultural institutions and tours by Russian theatres marking the 125th anniversary of the Moscow Public Arts Theatre founded by Konstantin Stanislavsky and Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko.

This large-scale and socially significant project initiated by the Russian Ministry of Culture in 2017 is a modern version of the world-renowned Russian Seasons by entrepreneur Sergey Dyagilev. This festival offers new opportunities for international cultural cooperation.

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Letter for Russian Soldier-Liberator campaign in Bulgaria

Letter for Russian Soldier-Liberator, a campaign marking 145 years since the liberation of Bulgaria from Ottoman Oppression in the 1877-1878 Russo-Turkish War, was recently held in Bulgaria. The Russian Embassy in Sofia received moving letters, postcards, children's drawings and traditional Bulgarian talismans, Martenitsas, for the Russian military personnel fighting in the special military operation.

These sincere and sentimental messages from the residents of Bulgaria who care, offer important emotional support to our troops who, like their heroic ancestors during the Great Patriotic War, courageously fight against Nazis cultivated by the West.

Thank you to everybody who took part in the campaign. We deeply appreciate the efforts of the organisers and participants.

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Green Eurasia

We would like to draw attention to Green Eurasia, the first international climate competition organised by the Eurasian Economic Commission (EEC) and the autonomous non-profit organisation Agency for Strategic Initiatives to Promote New Projects. The competition is expected to become one of the biggest climate events of the year for the members of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU).

The main objective of the competition is to promote effective climate-related technologies to ensure the sustainable development of the EAEU member states in such industries as energy, industrial production, agriculture, construction and finances, etc.

The competition will be held in several categories, including clean energy and energy-efficiency, clean industrial production, sustainable agriculture, low-carbon transport, green construction, green financing, effective waste management, environmental culture and climate agenda engagement, environmental and climate monitoring, and a state low-carbon development policy.

Commercial and non-profit organisations, state-run institutions and individuals are welcome to participate by submitting an application, before March 31, on the Eurasian Economic Commission website.

An expert group and the presidium of the competition will determine finalists and winners in each category. The awards ceremony will be held on the sidelines of the 2nd Eurasian Economic Forum on May 24-25, 2023, in Moscow.

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International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination

On March 21, the international community observes International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, proclaimed by the UN General Assembly in 1966.

The Russian Federation firmly condemns any manifestations of discrimination and intolerance based on race, skin colour, ethnic background, or citizenship.

We regret to note that despite the harsh lessons learned during World War II and the shameful colonial legacy, racism, discrimination, xenophobia and the intolerance that comes with them have been on the rise in various parts of the world. In some countries, ethnic and racial supremacy theories, with their false narratives, have been placed at the core of state identity, shaping ideologies and political agendas in these countries on a system-wide basis, penetrating all strata of government and affecting all social interactions. This includes attempts to rewrite history, including efforts to revise and distort the outcomes of World War II.

In this context, we believe that campaigns driven by this agenda to glorify the Nazi past in any form, the Nazi movement, or neo-Nazism, including the installation of monuments and memorials, holding demonstrations, and elevating

Waffen-SS members and those who fought against the Allies and collaborated with the Nazis to the rank of heroes are unacceptable, sacrilegious and cynical.

Russia proceeds from the premise that preserving the truth and memory of the immortal achievements by those who sacrificed their lives during World War II to the fight against Nazism is the best tool for preventing the resurgence and spread of this ideology. It is for this reason that the Russian Federation has been sponsoring the resolution titled “Combating glorification of Nazism, neo-Nazism and other practices that contribute to fuelling contemporary forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance” at the UN General Assembly every year.

The entire international community must focus on waging an uncompromising fight against the contemporary forms of racism, including neo-Nazism as its ugliest manifestation.

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Republic of Namibia Independence Day

March 21, 2023, marks 33 years since the declaration of independence by the Republic of Namibia. The Europeans claimed a stake in their expansion on Namibia’s territory in the mid-19th century. In 1878, Britain took control of the area near Walvis Bay. The rest of Namibian territory became part of a German protectorate in the 1890s called German South West Africa. It existed for 30 years. In 1904-1907, the indigenous people undertook an uprising against the German colonial administration. The effort to defeat the uprising resulted in 65,000 casualties for the Herero tribe, or up to 80 percent of its population, and left 10,000 Nama people dead, or 50 percent of this tribe.

In 1960, patriotic forces in Namibia established SWAPO – South West Africa People’s Organisation, which entered the struggle for independence. The UN supported its efforts. In 1967, the UN created the Council on South West Africa (on Namibia starting in 1968).

The fact that their Independence Day coincides with another important date – 33 years since Russia and Namibia established diplomatic ties – is highly symbolic. We were one of the first countries to extend a helping hand to Namibia in its fight for independence and self-determination. In 1960-1980, the Soviet Union provided military, financial and organisational support and supplied SWAPO with specialised equipment, transport, small arms and ammunitions, and its members studied in the USSR.

The country held its first presidential and parliamentary elections in November 1989. SWAPO, the country's leading political force, won the vote. The Republic of Namibia was declared on March 21, 1990.

Since that time, there has been upward momentum in the bilateral ties between our two countries. We have accumulated a solid potential for working together in many spheres, including geology, mining and diamond extraction, hydropower, agriculture, fishing, transport, tourism, and education. The Russia-Namibia Intergovernmental Commission for Trade and Economic Cooperation has been proactive in its efforts.

We would like to convey our congratulations to our Namibian friends on their national holiday and wish wellbeing and prosperity for the people of Namibia.

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80 years since the Khatyn massacre

On March 22, we will mark a dark page in the history of the Great Patriotic War. On that day 80 years ago, the Nazi butchers burned the village of Khatyn and its 149 residents, including 75 children, in Belarus. But several witnesses of that horrible and inhuman massacre have survived. Thanks to their testimony, we were able to establish many of the details of that tragedy.

Millions of people not only in Russia and Belarus but around the world remember Khatyn. But it was not the only one to suffer at the hands of Nazi butchers. Tens of thousands of villages and towns in the occupied territories suffered the same fate, like the village of Khatsun in the Bryansk Region.

Not only German war criminals took part in burning Khatyn and shooting its residents. The main perpetrators of that massacre were Nazi accomplices, primarily, Ukrainian collaborators who had pledged allegiance to Hitler. Regrettably, some of them escaped punishment by hiding in the vast expanses of our country or finding shelter in the West, where they felt relatively safe.

The Belarussian investigative authorities, working together with their Russian colleagues, continue to hunt for, find and expose the crimes of the Khatyn butchers in the relevant criminal cases. We believe that such cases do not and cannot have a statute of limitations.

After the Great Patriotic War, we thought that the Nazi plague had been routed and that humanity would never again come up against the cruel manifestations of Nazism. But today it has become necessary to stand up against this threat.

The West is stubbornly ignoring the continuing growth of neo-Nazism in Ukraine and the Baltics and is fostering the spread of Russophobic ideology in the pseudo-democratic regimes it is patronising and among its own citizens. Today's Ukrainian nationalism has shown its inhuman nature more than once, like during the burning of about 50 civilians in the House of Trade Unions in Odessa on May 2, 2014. Not surprisingly, some media outlets have described this tragedy as "a new Khatyn massacre."

In this context, there should be no doubt about the justifiable reasons for the special military operation and the vital necessity of achieving its goals and objectives.

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Answers to media questions:

Question: At the beginning of this week, the governments of Poland, Latvia and Lithuania released a joint statement calling for lowering the price cap on Russian oil. Can you comment on this initiative?

Maria Zakharova: We were taught that the energy sector and the economy in general should be liberal, self-regulated, or at least market-regulated. Contrary to its usual pro-market rhetoric, the West, incited by Washington, decided to create a "buyers' cartel" and "cap" the price of crude oil and petroleum products.

I'll remind you what this sounds like. Try to organise a "buyers' cartel" next time you go grocery shopping. Take a few more people with you, come into a store and announce you will now be buying milk, cheese, and butter for as much as you deem appropriate, not what the store's price tags say. There you go – you've just set a "price cap" on cheese, milk and butter. What will the store owner do to you? Can you guess?

Clearly, those, let's face it, small players in the energy market such as Poland, Latvia and Lithuania, are making this kind of call to please their overseas handlers who seek to punish Russia with all their might. In fact, this initiative is as far from economic reality as can be, and only embodies the Russophobic sentiments prevailing in countries that can afford to pursue irresponsible policies.

When the state pursues a responsible policy, when its leaders take into account the many factors behind their actions, they will act differently. Not out of fear, not even out of tact, but out of responsibility.

Any so-called downward adjustment to the "price cap" will only lead to a further escalation of tensions in global energy markets, to their destabilisation, and the final destruction of whatever is left of the international trade rules.

Russia does not intend to agree with the Western countries' arbitrary demands. On December 27, 2022, a Presidential Executive Order prohibited oil exports under contracts that include the capping mechanism. We intend to continue to respond harshly to the illegal restrictions imposed against our country by unfriendly states.

Look at what's happening to their economies. The United States has seen two of its major bank failures. Now regulators in Switzerland are trying to rescue their second most important bank, hit by the collapse of the US banks. I have not yet seen a full-blown domino effect, but analysts are already saying that the stock exchanges and the banking system in the West and in other parts of the world are already being affected. It would be better for them to deal with these issues instead of trying to undermine what is still holding together without their interference. If Poland, Latvia and Lithuania feel they are strong enough, morally and financially, to bring more stability to the world, why don't they get busy supporting the failing American or Swiss banks?

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Question: Can you comment on the recent statement by Estonian Prime Minister Kaja Kallas, who has compared Russian actions in Ukraine to the 1944 bombing of Nazi-occupied Estonia by the Red Army Air Force?

Maria Zakharova: The Soviet air attacks against Nazi facilities in Narva and Tallinn bombing in March 1944 were part of the Baltic offensive launched to liberate the Estonian Soviet Socialist Republic from the Nazi occupiers. Estonians – the 8th Estonian Rifle Corps – actively participated in that operation. The Baltic region was strategically important for Hitler because it supplied Germany with food and oil products and ensured a connection to Northern Europe. This is why strikes were carried out primarily on the Gestapo and Abwehr headquarters, air defence systems, naval arsenals, powder depots and communications centres.

While highlighting the damage done during the Soviet liberation operation, Kaja Kallas deliberately keeps silent about the destruction wreaked in Estonia by the Hitler forces' air raids and artillery attacks. Why doesn't she want to speak about that? I know that she is not just biased but also has blood ties to those whom she should regard as the enemy of her people, considering the horrible destruction the Nazis visited on the Baltics. But she is not condemning them, which is logical, because Tallinn no longer makes secret of its sympathies in that war.

This is why we are not surprised at the ideological kinship of Estonia's nationalist leaders and the Kiev regime. They have a common desire to glorify

Shukhevich, Bandera and Estonian butchers from the Waffen SS as “liberation heroes.”

We are fully aware of this. However, Kaja Kallas as the leader of Estonia is not protecting the interests and wishes of her people but rather what she was taught to embrace in her childhood, the position of the Kallas clan that was always close to power during the Soviet and post-Soviet periods, an inner, inherited feeling.

I would like to remind her that the verdict on those guilty of Nazi atrocities was delivered during the Nuremberg Trials in 1946. There is no need to indulge in fantasies. You must simply know history. History will eventually and inevitably pass its judgement on the current crimes committed by the Ukrainian Nazis and their Western patrons.

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Question: On Tuesday, Prime Minister of Armenia Nikol Pashinyan expressed concerns about Armenia’s position in the Collective Security Treaty Organisation. He said that he fears that the CSTO may quit Armenia rather than vice versa. According to the Russian Foreign Ministry, what does Mr Pashinyan’s statement indicate? Does Russia intend to take additional steps to settle disagreements between the CSTO members?

Maria Zakharova: You quoted Nikol Pashinyan who said that he fears that the CSTO may quit Armenia. When I read this statement, two other quotes by classic authors came to mind: one by Mikhail Bulgakov (“Who stood on whom?”) and one from Konstantin Stanislavsky (“Love art in yourself rather than yourself in art”). I want to leave this part of your question for you to elaborate further. Please try to understand who stood on whom.

As for the second part of the question, I would like to remind you that on September 13 and October 28, 2022, the CSTO Council held extraordinary sessions via videoconference. A mission headed by then CSTO Secretary General Stanislav Zas and Chief of the CSTO Joint Staff Anatoly Sidorov visited Armenia. A plan for a CSTO monitoring mission was developed. A corresponding decision was almost finalised at meetings of the CSTO charter bodies in Yerevan in November 2022. However, due to the specific demands by our Armenian colleagues that were challenging for other CSTO members, the decision failed to be adopted.

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Question: In other words, Russia does not plan to put forward any additional proposals from its side, does it?

Maria Zakharova: I told you what has been done. If there are any other ideas for discussing practical steps by this Organisation, they will be considered collectively.

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Question: Nikol Pashinyan stated that Russia is a guarantor of security for Nagorno-Karabakh. Does the Foreign Ministry consider this claim justified, considering that there is no such provision in the trilateral statement?

Maria Zakharova: There's no need to imagine things or beat about the bush. All the obligations undertaken by the Russian Federation and the Russian Peacekeeping Force are clearly stated in the trilateral statement of the leaders of Russia, Azerbaijan and Armenia of November 9, 2020. One should simply open this document and review Russia's obligations. It is that simple.

Russian peacekeepers do everything they can to prevent escalation and stabilise the situation on the ground in the area of their responsibility. However, a lot depends on the actions and statements of all stakeholders. We believe that these statements must be constructive and geared toward our common success. If statements are made that are contrary to the primary goal, which is to bring peace and stability, overcoming disagreements, we always note this.

We try to do it diplomatically not because of diplomatic traditions but for the sake of achieving the main goal, which is peace, stabilisation and global stability. Behind all of our statements, however diplomatically truncated they may be, there are meticulous efforts and tremendous work to fulfill all the agreements.

We consider the statements by the Armenian leadership you mentioned as the continuation of the course set at the summit in Prague in October 2022, under the aegis of the European Union. Attempts to shift responsibility for the fate of Nagorno-Karabakh to third countries should remain on the conscience of the Armenian leadership.

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Question: Is it legitimate to assume that the Russian Federation must protect Nagorno-Karabakh even if Azerbaijan decides to take control of the new territories that are now under the peacekeepers' control?

Maria Zakharova: The subjunctive mood is inappropriate in these circumstances. There are specific obligations that have been committed to paper. And there is specific work that is being carried out on the ground. We can

comment only on what is happening on the ground in our area of responsibility and what has a clearly identified measure of implementation.

Speculating about what something might look like if something happened is wrong, harmful and out of place. If there's a reason for our response, we will provide it. Modeling developments is extremely dangerous.

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Question: AUKUS and its impact on nonproliferation and the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. What are your lawyers saying, and can it be used in the anti-American propaganda campaign? Is there any hope for the IAEA keeping in mind the way they acted during the Zaporozhye NPP-related events?

Maria Zakharova: Let's look at AUKUS from all sides. We are closely monitoring the situation around it. This is more than a defence technology platform. This is a bloc-based foundation for forming NATO-centric infrastructure in the region with far-reaching implications for the stability and security of the Asia-Pacific region. In fact, this represents a violation of the balance which has ensured stability in that region. We cannot guarantee one another that there won't be minor issues between us. This is life. But stability in the region was guaranteed. And the balance of power guaranteed it. What we are seeing the West do now is a classic case of upset balance.

The expansion of the above association, AUKUS Plus, is cause for serious concern. Japan, New Zealand and the Republic of Korea are the key stakeholders. By the way, after the Madrid NATO Summit in June 2022, they launched a new mechanism together with Australia, a kind of a "group of friends" of the North Atlantic Alliance, known as the Asia-Pacific Four, or the QUAD.

Top Tokyo officials have repeatedly assumed the obligation of ensuring the irreversible nature of NATO expanding to the Asia-Pacific region. We understand why Tokyo is doing this. The country is occupied by US military bases and the democratic component is fully suppressed. They have to say and do as told. As a reminder, in June 2022, Japanese Defence Minister Nobuo Kishi spoke about that following Chair of the NATO Military Committee Rob Bauer's visit to that country.

I would also like to note plans that are being implemented by the AUKUS countries to create pseudo-civilian partnerships allegedly for the sake of ensuring the well-being of particular areas of the Asia-Pacific region, including the island portion of the Pacific. They rely on the same confrontation and containment principles rather than the economic integration and conflict-free

joint development principles that remain the region's key objectives. The falsification of civil society is underway, where quasi-civilian structures are being created to provide "soft support" for hard power in the form of spreading the bloc-based ideas of NATO and the entire AUKUS.

In conjunction with the partners mentioned before, the AUKUS troika is acting as a lynchpin for a variety of multilateral military-political tracks that have been specifically branded to fit the Indo-Pacific Region concept. I'm talking about conferences of chiefs of general staff, commanders of ground forces and the air force, as well as heads of military intelligence from the Indo-Pacific countries. The attempts to introduce official NATO representatives into these formats are quite notable. To reiterate, the goals pursued by the West are clear. They are about extending their activities to a region in which they, for obvious reasons, have no history of being present. And there has never been any need for them to be present there.

Such destructive efforts and schemes are objectively working against the positive peaceful potential stored up in the region over the past decades. It has relied on the architecture of inclusive stability, security and cooperation mechanisms built around ASEAN. Our lives were "too peaceful" from the Western point of view.

Russia and China are closely coordinating their positions in the international arena. We are painstakingly analysing the Westerners' actions in the Asia-Pacific region, including their efforts to advance AUKUS under the auspices of Washington.

We believe it is necessary to have AUKUS members strictly comply with their commitments regarding non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and their means of delivery and renounce any steps that could destabilise the situation and adversely affect the strategic balance.

Everyone is talking about the project for the construction of nuclear submarines for Australia as part of the AUKUS partnership. I believe everyone is aware of the implications. The questions posed by Russia and China have remained unanswered at a time where they have clear answers.

Australia will be given nuclear materials and installations, which must be under IAEA safeguards in non-nuclear states that are parties to the Non-Proliferation Treaty. Speaking of questions to which there are no answers, I'm here to reiterate that there is no clarity whatsoever with regard to how these guarantees will be implemented, and whether the IAEA inspectors will have full access to everything related to the submarine project.

To reiterate, we have articulated these questions. Other countries have posed them as well. The public in many Asia-Pacific countries asked their leaders about what they should think about this. No answer was provided.

In addition, we raised this question publicly as well wondering how it relates to the green agenda and environmental concerns. Australia, the green continent, got its name from being an environmental oasis. Now, nuclear submarines may be deployed there. That country has never had the necessary supply lines to service, create or develop them. How will it unfold? How does this align with the Western programmes that were based on the word “environment” just a couple of years ago? There was so much fuss about it. “Environment” was part of everything. No matter what project, programme or start-up business was discussed, the environment came first. Rest assured no one has heard anyone utter a single word about the environment in the context of building nuclear submarines for Australia.

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Question: Norway and the Nord Streams. This neighbouring country is undoubtedly a leader in terms of experience on underwater work on the shelf. It is a member of NATO, it competed with Gazprom for gas deliveries to Europe, and finally, it is spying together with the US on Russia’s Northern Fleet. Maybe we should use the famous “highly likely” phrase in our dialogue with this unfriendly neighbour when speaking about the sabotage? It is also said that it is possible that the unloading and selling codfish in Norwegian ports will be stopped?

Maria Zakharova: As for fishing, I will point you to our comment of February 10, 2023.

As for the Nord Streams and the investigation underway. You know that we have distributed relevant materials and requests among countries that are supposed to be part of the investigation in the UN Security Council and the public space as a proof of our activity and desire to find the truth.

We have been hearing a lot of speculation and misinformation in the media that the sabotage was allegedly carried out by private Ukrainian companies. Interesting, are these companies taking other orders? This is absurd. How can such deep-sea sabotage against civil infrastructure in the area of NATO’s responsibility be carried out by some diving company or snorkelers? Who are these people? What is the name of this “organisation”? We will demand an international investigation, seek out the truth, ask questions, launch our own investigation and pay a great deal of attention to this matter.

I do not recall anything like this case of blowing up gas pipelines in the first quarter of the 21st century. Outside of wars nothing like this has ever happened. Yes, there were horrible terrorist attacks that claimed the lives of hundreds, there were devastating, high-profile terrorist attacks, but there was no destruction of civil infrastructure that provided energy to an entire continent.

The actions were carried out at a level that only special services with the necessary equipment can manage. This is not about private companies that operate in the economic and financial sphere, but agencies that have resources. No firm or private organisation could have done this without the assistance of someone powerful.

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Question: Will Russia raise the issue of the expulsion of monks from the Kiev-Pechersk Lavra in international organisations?

Maria Zakharova: Russia has already done that. Our Permanent Mission to the UN (Vasily Nebenzya and staff) are actively working on this agenda in the United Nations. The OSCE and UNESCO are also involved.

As for the practical diplomatic work: on March 14, 2023, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov sent relevant letters to UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, OSCE Chairman-in-Office Bujar Osmani, OSCE Secretary General Helga Maria Schmid and President of the UN General Assembly Csaba Korosi. Similar letters, signed by the Foreign Minister's Special Representative for Cooperation in Protecting the Right to Belief Gennady Askaldovich were sent to United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights Volker Turk, Director of the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights Matteo Mecacci, UN Assistant Secretary-General for Human Rights Ilze Brands Kehris, Personal Representative of the OSCE Chairperson-in-Office on Combating Racism, Xenophobia and Discrimination, also focusing on Intolerance and Discrimination against Christians and Members of Other Religions Regina Polak, and many others.

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Question: Do you expect any contacts with the United States Department of State regarding the Black Sea drone incident?

Maria Zakharova: On March 14, the United States Department of State invited Russia's Ambassador to the country, Anatoly Antonov, who firmly rejected the insinuations put forward by the United States, and set forth the position of the Russian Federation. He emphasised that "the American UAV was moving deliberately and provocatively towards the Russian territory with its

transponders turned off violated the boundaries of the temporary airspace regime established for the special military operation, which was communicated to the all concerned users of international airspace in accordance with international norms.”

I would like to note that the United States has recently initiated contacts on this matter between the Russian and US defence ministers, as well as the chiefs of general staff of the two countries. I refer you to the Russian Defence Ministry’s website and social media accounts where you will find Russia’s statements to this effect.

We believe in the importance of keeping communication channels open. Russia does not seek confrontation and stands for pragmatic cooperation in the interests of our people. That said, we do know how to defend our interests.

I would also like to draw your attention to a recent comment by Sergey Lavrov for Moscow. Kremlin. Putin television show.

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Question: Two banks have closed one after another in the United States recently. The United States Secretary of the Treasury recognised that this was mainly caused by the Federal Reserve’s move to set higher interest rates. It all comes down to the fact that rapid rate hikes over the past 14 months created problems for Silicon Valley Bank and Signature Bank. CNN reported that “the biggest systemic risk to the United States lies not in its banking system but in its polarized politics.” What do you think about this? Has the United States entered a recession?

Maria Zakharova: I believe that it is not for Russia or its Foreign Ministry to comment whether a recession has started, continues, or reached its peak. We need to remember that US journalists have been asking the Biden administration recession-related questions for many months now. But the officials have been unable to answer these questions.

White House Spokesperson Karine Jean-Pierre made a remarkable statement when she argued that if you refrain from using the word “recession,” a recession would not happen, but if you do not, it may materialise. What a convenient position. If a problem does not exist, there is no need to comment on it. And the problem would not exist, if no one talked about it or is not supposed to do that. It is up to American and international specialists to determine whether the US economy is in recession. This is not a question for the Foreign Ministry. It is clear that US experts, people and journalists want the Biden administration

to share its assessment of the situation. Unfortunately, they have not succeeded so far.

We are keeping a close eye on this situation, since this can have a direct bearing on the entire global economy considering the place the United States has in global trade and finance. We have seen this before. Let me remind you that the initiative to establish the Group of Twenty came as a response to an economic crisis caused by the collapsing US real estate market: the bubble burst shattering the entire economy. As usual, those who will suffer the most if the crisis spreads outside the United States will be the least developed countries and the most vulnerable social groups.

According to the information we have so far, we are not seeing a domino effect. The markets took the failure of the US banks you mentioned very seriously. I think that everything is possible, but it is primarily up to specialists to comment on this topic.

The current situation demonstrates that global businesses are losing confidence in the dollar as a reliable reserve currency and a tool for insuring against risk. We know that investors used to focus on the US dollar and treasury bonds whenever the markets became unpredictable. This time, however, something went wrong.

Clearly, the US administration's domestic and foreign policies are directly affecting the country's financial system, its stability and foothold on a global scale. Everyone has been watching years of battles as part of their electoral cycle. These battles are not about destroying political opponents; they are actually destroying everything else – the economy, the humanitarian sphere, international treaties, agreements and obligations – for the sake of defeating them.

The lack of government attention to internal “problems” while focusing on external ones has apparently played an important role in setting the trends that we are seeing now in the American economy and banking system. Did they think their experiments with sanctions wouldn't have a boomerang effect? When you throw a stone into the sea, there are circles on the water. But the stone won't come back, will it? Only this isn't just a stone thrown into the sea. In many cases, these unilateral sanctions and prohibitive measures are enormously destructive to their initiators, especially when it comes to the energy or banking sectors. This isn't even a reverse “wave.” How many people who were keeping their savings at foreign banks or using them to finance trade and services have been shut out of the payment system and the insurance system overnight because

the US Treasury Department adopted another amendment (put an asterisk on something or merged something)? Who thinks about them? No one does.

We all know about the historic imbalances and risks in the US economy, including the colossal level of public debt, at several trillion, the record trade deficit and budget deficit. American economists admit that the system relies on printing more dollars, which is often done to compensate for problems because nothing else works. This is not propaganda, and I am not saying this to spite them or something. This is a fact. They are creating an unsecured money supply. This policy of paying whatever it takes to continue living grandly, largely at the expense of others, with the Federal Reserve System printing more and more dollars and releasing unbacked money into the national and global economy while manipulating the interest rate, should fail at some point. In fact, it is already failing. Someday, this will lead to disastrous consequences. Perhaps the recent events are heralding more changes.

There are also questions for US regulatory authorities, which used to be hailed as model policy-makers. Remember how they said the United States alone could decide which bank was good, where there was no corruption and everything was done right? Where are these regulators now? How about their direct responsibility, which is overseeing, auditing and verification? Three financial institutions have closed. This did not happen amid a natural disaster, man-made accident or another emergency.

Where are the international rating agencies and audit companies created based on American models? Where are their conclusions and analysis? I urge everybody who is working on research papers, dissertations or theses to review the American analytical data of major corporations and rating agencies of the past few years. Check if they have offered any opinions. It will be an objective indicator of their value on the market. They were also the ones who meticulously reviewed reports of the major banks mentioned. Either they did not review the reports or the banks misled them. There must be a fault somewhere. These agencies repeatedly gave these banks a green light to continue their “successful and effective” financial activity.

A question that needs to be answered is how many more banks there are in the United States with seemingly impeccable reporting and reputation attested by financial institutions created by Americans. During a long-term period of cheap money and occasional negative interest rates, it seemed easy and logical to compensate mishaps and financial gaps by refinancing loans.

But the situation has changed. Capital markets are exhausted and expensive, interest rates have grown in response to inflation. Why the inflation?

On the one hand, the pandemic caused substantial problems for large capital holdings. Unsecured government bonds that were equated with money were handed out to keep voters content. Everybody understood that there was no security.

Then sanctions were imposed. In the globalised world economic system, sanctions always boomerang, especially since they targeted such major players as Russia and China. We are economic centres of gravity for a huge number of countries. We are bound together. It is as simple as basic arithmetic.

It is important to understand the mentality of Western regimes and “democracies.” Only this moment right now is important. All bets are on a short-term result relevant today or tomorrow. What happens in a week does not matter. Remember *Gone with the Wind*? Scarlett O'Hara said, “I'll think about it tomorrow.” It is the same thing here: postponed thinking and analysing important things some time later. Perhaps in certain life situations it may be necessary but definitely not in this case, when the whole world was offered a game of roulette.

It is a sensitive subject. We understand that the failure and crash of the American financial system, markets, banks, stock exchanges, companies and corporations will spill over national borders. Take 2008 or the collapse of non-American stock exchanges (the Hong Kong Exchange) and its consequences all over the world. It is wrong and dangerous to ignore an emerging trend that is obvious. The liberal economy susceptible to manipulation, political processes affecting the economy, and breached economic, financial or legal customs and obligations. This is what the outcome looks like.

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Question: This month, the United States, Great Britain and Australia issued a joint statement announcing Australia's intention to buy five US nuclear submarines within the next few years. This will make Australia the world's seventh nation with nuclear-powered submarines. What do you think about whether Australia needs nuclear submarines? What will be the consequences of the United States, Great Britain and Australia working together on nuclear-powered submarines?

Maria Zakharova: I have already shared my comments on this matter. However, allow me to elaborate on it. On March 13, 2023, United States President Joe Biden joined the leaders of Great Britain and Australia to unveil the plan of the AUKUS partnership to build a fleet of nuclear-powered submarines for the Australian Navy. In the medium term, it provides for the

acquisition of five submarines by Canberra. What is the usual procedure? Usually, it is up to the country in question to announce its needs, based on domestic development strategies, economic planning and budgets. If this involves contractual obligations towards other countries, there are bilateral agreements for that. What we are seeing is the emergence of a trio with the United States and Great Britain, i.e., the Anglo-Saxon world, telling Australia that it will buy five submarines from Washington and London. They will also decide whether Australia will need more down the line. And these must be nuclear-powered submarines. No questions on why no one needed them before will be accepted. They did not need them before, but they need them now. This is something that must be emphasised in order to keep in mind how to present this story to Australians. The plan provides for the forward deployment of US submarines in the region, training the Australian military to operate these submarines and building the relevant infrastructure in Australia.

But who will own all this? The United States or Great Britain? One thing is for sure: it will not be Australia, who will be involved only indirectly, to the extent that it is allowed to be involved. Has something similar happened before? Why, of course! The history of the United States deploying nuclear weapons in European countries is repeating itself. The US deployed nuclear weapons in Italy. Do you think that the Republic of Italy had anything to do with this? Can it operate these weapons, or does anyone seek Italy's advice on whether to upgrade these weapons or not, or show Italy the nuclear-control systems? No. The United States deployed nuclear weapons and so be it. We will see the same situation in Australia.

Since the beginning of the 20th century, Australia has sided with Washington and London in all major conflicts, and hoisted the Australian flag across the globe, from the Antarctic to the Arctic Ocean. Therefore, this plan would alter the strategic balance beyond Asia-Pacific. Transferring submarines to Australia is just a way for the United States to have Canberra shoulder some of the US military spending. Has this happened before? Why, of course. What about US President Donald Trump coming to NATO to tell its members that they would have to increase their defence budgets to 2 percent of their GDP? When asked why, he said that the United States ensures their security and that this has a price attached – 2 percent of their GDP. What can I say? Nothing. Don't they understand what is going on? Don't they have calculators? Don't they want to make independent choices? They have, and they do. But the simple truth is that the US has its bases on their territory, and deployed nuclear weapons in some countries. This freezes their will.

AUKUS has never made any secret of its true purpose. This cooperation framework is designed to enable its participants to rapidly boost their military capabilities, citing threats in the Asia-Pacific Region to justify what they do. They pretend that these threats come from Russia, China and the DPRK. Of course, Washington stands to reap the most benefits from this undertaking. Not only is the US selling its submarines and expanding its military and political presence in the region, but it's also lining up its allies under the banners of new military alliances to serve its own selfish geopolitical interests at the expense of regional and global security. What a strange game. And do not forget about the green agenda. As far as we can see, this is the focal point for the Democrats who currently control the White House.

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Question: The Russian authorities, including representatives of the Foreign Ministry, say that they intend to insist on fully implementing the grain deal as a package after it is extended. At the same time, we remember that the Russian Foreign Ministry has repeatedly said that the Russia-related part of the grain deal has never been fulfilled since it was initially signed. What methods will Russia use in the international arena to change this situation? Does Russia have any real leverage for this?

Maria Zakharova: Clearly, our methods are diplomacy and negotiation, and related steps. These are the methods we will use. They provide ample opportunities. We hope that they will lead to the desired results.

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Question: Some time ago, news agencies reported that Spokesperson for the UN Secretary-General Stéphane Dujarric said that, according to the text of the grain deal, it provides for a 120-day extension, not 60, as Russian representatives say. Could you comment on that?

Maria Zakharova: It's 60 days. The deal was extended by 60 days.

Question: But Stéphane Dujarric says 120.

Maria Zakharova: He also says he has no idea what is happening in the Kiev-Pechersk Lavra. That's also him. Is he sufficiently competent?

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Question: The Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine said that Russian forces "committed indiscriminate and disproportionate attacks" on Ukraine, resorted to "wilful killings" and "torture." This is not the first such statement. Could you comment on that?

Maria Zakharova: I have to read that document to know what you are talking about. You are right, we regularly hear such accusations. Only they did not begin in 2022, but much earlier. We were to blame for everything. We were to blame for selling our gas and shipping it across the territory of Ukraine. Remember those? Remember how all the contracts had to be agreed until late at night. For some reason, we were accused all the time. Only it was unclear what we had done. Maybe we shouldn't have been selling gas, but giving it away for free, I don't know. We were to blame for the ugly infighting in the Ukrainian political establishment and for large segments of Ukrainian society wanting to develop ties with Russia. That was our fault, too. We viewed Ukraine as a sovereign state and signed a lease on the Black Sea Fleet base and paid for it in good faith. Again, we were in the wrong, somehow. This makes no sense. We are always to blame for everything. What is most surprising is that neither the various Kiev regimes, nor those behind them have ever borne the blame for all the deplorable results of the experiments the West conducted in Ukraine. This is symptomatic.

Tell me, is there anyone who can assert that the Ukrainian forces (the Armed Forces of Ukraine, the Security Service of Ukraine or other special services) are good knights, “without fear and beyond reproach,” or that they meet the highest military standards? Can anyone say that? Of course not. Never. So anyone who is behind such reports and who releases them must first decide if they are genuinely unbiased. If they are, we will be ready to sit down and discuss specific cases, answer their questions, present our data, statistics and facts. If they aren't sure, meaning they are biased and are promoting one point of view, then they are service personnel and there is no point in reacting to what they write. We will certainly make a note for ourselves and comment from the point of view of the historical process and our audience. We will investigate it.

It only makes sense to debate with someone who hears you, who is interesting in finding out the truth, not tampering with it. In such a case, we would debate. But if it is like it has been before – for example, after the events in Bucha, neither the Ukrainian side nor the UN could provide any factual information when we asked them for the lists of names of the people who died there, [for their version of] how it happened, for their investigation results – what is the point of empty talk? What was the point of talking about the Malaysian Boeing? We have been sending factual material for years, including data from Almaz-Antey and testimony. But the wreckage is still scattered, and no one is bothering to collect it. It took an incredible effort on our part to attract attention, and only after that did some people go there to explore. So, what's the

point of discussing these things seriously while being excluded from the investigation? Remember how Malaysians were not allowed to investigate for a month. And it was their flight.

We see the same situation with Salisbury and Amesbury. The cases involved our citizens, but we were not allowed to investigate them, and many of our questions remained unanswered.

When it came to Alexey Navalny's alleged poisoning (also a Russian citizen), do you know how many requests we sent to Berlin, to the prosecutor's office? Have we received any answers? No.

The Nord Stream 1 and Nord Stream 2 were joint projects that involved Russian investment and Russian gas, but Russia is not allowed to investigate. They aren't even sharing information, just throwing in some "leaks" about some private Ukrainian agencies that sabotaged the pipelines. Those are just media manipulations.

Therefore, the answer is as follows: if we are talking about a serious study of every aspect – the case involves the widest scope of aspects of warfare – we are ready for an earnest and open discussion. Maybe using the word unbiased would be a little far-fetched because the situation breaks everyone's hearts, but at least, it would be a professional discussion. We are always ready for it.

I have just cited the most high-profile cases. And we were ready every time. I am afraid to imagine how much money the Almaz-Antey company spent on reenactments and visualisations of the evidence base. Where did it all go? Who cares? Articles and books have been written, and films have been made. As to Navalny, where did all the evidence go? There were some bottles found by [his associate Maria] Pevchikh, some lab tests – no one knows anything. But they award Oscars. If they award Oscars at this level, for political pulp fiction, then there is no point in discussing anything. But if it's about real research and investigation, if it's about answering questions without informational or political manoeuvring, then there is.

Again, we will analyse it and comment.

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Question: Russian officials have repeatedly aired their suspicions that the United States is behind the Nord Stream blasts. Has Russia asked Washington for explanations?

Maria Zakharova: We have repeatedly commented on this issue. We would like to draw your attention to our comment of February 21 of this year, which says: "It was emphasised from the Russian side that the US should give explanations about the explosions on the Nord Stream 1 and Nord Stream 2 gas

pipelines and not interfere with an objective investigation to identify the perpetrators.”

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Question: Could you comment on a report in The New York Times, which says with reference to current and former officials, who are not authorised to divulge this in public, that the International Criminal Court intends to initiate two cases on war crimes related to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and request arrest warrants for several persons?

Maria Zakharova: The New York Times churns out versions on a daily basis. I don’t know how they cope filling their printer cartridges. Please note that this was a comment ascribed to certain former or current officials, rather than a quote. This is what is known as “managed leaks.” The UK’s information work is based on this. Regrettably, the United States too is now carrying out this same practice on a large scale. Earlier, they would not permit themselves to do this. There was an institution of journalism. Today, it is increasingly overpowered by the “managed leaks.” What is this about? “Someone has said.” Someone? Who? What official? What is his or her agency? This is not specified. Some official, either former or current... It’s all obscure. Why don’t they say which agency has leaked this? Because the agency in question can be presented with an official request and asked to clarify its official position. All of this is needed to endlessly keep a topic afloat and avoid responsibility.

You know US laws. They do not reveal their sources. There were just a few cases where a source was revealed. But to achieve this, you have to put the entire judicial system on its haunches. But it’s convenient! You plant a story and no one is responsible for anything. “Let’s keep going!” Next day, you plant another story, before the public has time to figure out the previous one, and so on and so forth. This is the general rule. Someone has said something. This is the first point.

Second, even if the International Criminal Court is indeed preparing a ruling of this sort, it will be of no importance to our country, including from the legal point of view.

Russia is not a member of the Rome Statute of the ICC and has no obligations under it. Russia is not cooperating with this body and its possible arrest “prescriptions” will be null and void as far as we are concerned.

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Question: You have touched upon Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan’s statement...

Maria Zakharova: I haven't. Please address all your questions to him. I mentioned my personal emotions and asked everyone to address all clarification-seeking questions to the Armenian leaders or colleagues from their press service.

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Question: Prime Minister of Armenia Nikol Pashinyan has said that if Moscow cannot guarantee security in Nagorno-Karabakh for objective reasons it should turn to the UN Security Council. What does Russia think about Pashinyan's idea? Would Russia turn to the UN Security Council for help?

Maria Zakharova: This is the first time I have heard this. Where should we turn to?

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Question: Nikol Pashinyan said that if Russia as Armenia's ally and friend cannot guarantee security in Nagorno-Karabakh for objective reasons, it should take the matter to the UN Security Council. What does Russia think about this idea of Armenia's prime minister?

Maria Zakharova: I can only describe this as a tailspin. This is the word that comes to mind. I won't even try to analyse or draw conclusions about what this could mean and how it relates to everything else. I will not remind you about the agreements reached and arrangements made. I won't do it. The idea is so inexplicable that I won't try to explain it. Incredible juggling skills.

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Question: The EU is drafting a foreign influence law. According to Politico, nongovernmental and non-profit organisations in the EU will be obliged to disclose any non-EU funding. What is Moscow's attitude to Brussels' idea?

Maria Zakharova: I would recommend that Politico's journalists ask European institutions – the EU, the European Commission and other bodies headquartered in Brussels – for an official confirmation or refutation of this information.

We have also, with great interest, read that article, according to which the EU is drafting a law to oblige NGOs, consultancies and academic institutions to disclose non-EU sources of funding. It is difficult to believe that Politico has got it right.

In this case, criticism of Tbilisi over a similar law appears to be discordant with or even contrary to the EU's actions. On March 7, EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell said that Georgia's draft law on "transparency of foreign

influence” was a “very bad development” for the country and was “incompatible with EU values and standards.” A statement delivered on his behalf at the European Parliament on March 14 said that the withdrawal of the Georgian draft law on foreign influence was an inspiring and positive signal.

I can describe our position, which is that we called for the termination of such laws. We wanted to live in an open and globalised world where nobody interfered in others’ affairs. And then we saw that there were two trends. First, the US administration was applying its 1938 Foreign Agents Registration Act almost entirely towards Russian journalists (plus a few Asian media outlets). And second, interference in our internal affairs was proceeding at full speed. We had to defend ourselves because grants, assistance and subsidies issued for presumably noble purposes were used to undermine our society.

When we put two and two together, we saw that we had to make a choice. Either we have the right to adopt a similar law to protect our internal environment, like the laws that are being actively used in the United States do there, or everyone should abandon such laws. But we will not live according to Rudyard Kipling’s paradigm, where some are more equal than others and can do whatever they wish on the external range while closely protecting their internal territory. It won’t do. Either all countries have similar laws, or all countries abolish them.

That was our position. I explained it many times when commenting on the foreign agents law, which we have adopted and are implementing. Incredible pressure has been put on us over that law. Many people argued that it was not the best option. We explained why we adopted that law. We said that we would have had no need for that law if similar laws were not in force in other places. Unlike the United States, where this repressive law has not been changed since the 1930s, we held public discussions on this law during which amendments were proposed, which subsequently led to changes in the law. There is much to be said about its drawbacks, but the fact is that we have ameliorated many of them.

If all countries refuse to abolish these laws, we believe that it will be a good thing for our people to know about the funding sources of different organisations, considering that the countries that issue these grants have such laws as well.

This is all I have to say about the dualism, hypocrisy and double standards of the Brussels “beacon of democracy.” The NGOs that are working in non-EU countries exclusively to Western order are like Caesar’s wife, that is, above suspicion, and also beyond any control by the national authorities. At the same

time, the organisations that ensure political pluralism in the West, protect minorities and express views that differ from the political mainstream will be open to Brussels' strict and manifestly biased control if such a law is drafted and adopted.

Just take a look at the Baltics, where any dissent is clamped down on, prohibited and silenced even without such laws. Western Europe, the Old World, is more scrupulous. It has civil societies and the vestiges of democracy that developed there in the 17th-19th centuries. They cannot just blot out dissent; they need a legal justification for doing that.

This is a brilliant illustration of Josep Borrell's neocolonial concept of the world divided into a garden and a jungle. The primitive logic is that everything that takes place in the EU and the West as a whole is good by default and exactly how it should be, while everything that takes place outside the EU is only good if Brussels gives the go-ahead, which it will only do if this is to its benefit. Nothing else matters to them.

I would like to point out that I was commenting on the Politico article. I believe that Brussels itself should say if it is drafting such a law and plans to adopt it, and how this law would be applied. But if this is true, it is a disgrace for all the EU institutions, which demand that other countries abolish such laws and criticise them in non-EU societies, while drafting similar laws at home and keeping silent or lying about that to their own people. This is unacceptable.

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Question: Russia was supportive of the idea of extending the grain deal by another 60 days. In turn, Türkiye resumed the transit of goods to Russia. What can you say in this regard? Is it possible that the Turkish side was waiting for the grain deal to be renewed for another 60 days before unblocking transit?

Maria Zakharova: I have made several comments on the Black Sea Initiative-related developments today. There is nothing I can add to that.

We reaffirm our commitment to implementing it, but it should involve both parts of the deal.

Russia is committed to expanding mutually beneficial trade and economic cooperation with Türkiye. The relevant Russian and Turkish agencies maintain close communication in order to find a solution to associated practical issues, including the one you mentioned.

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Question: The International Russophile Movement congress, with Sergey Lavrov's participation, was held in Moscow on March 14. In what way will the Foreign Ministry support this movement? What will cooperation look like?

Maria Zakharova: We have emphasised on multiple occasions that this movement was not created at the behest of the Russian public bodies or organisations. It is the brainchild of the people who love and know our culture and are willing to support it at a time when it is theoretically facing the threat of being “cancelled.”

This initiative has been repeatedly discussed for quite a long time. I heard about related discussions being held outside Russia. We had letters coming to us. Now, it has come to pass as a result of conjugated efforts of different people in other countries. After that, it was supported by Russian nonprofit organisations. When the decision was made to hold its first congress, to institutionalise the movement and to appoint the delegates, we were asked to step in and to send or to invite, as guests of honour, officials from various branches of government who are in one way or another involved in international activities, culture, and upholding truly humanistic values all over the world. We complied with that request.

You have had the chance to see the scale of representation of the Russian branches of legislative and executive power. Its prospects? This is a question for the people behind this initiative. I was invited to take part in several of their events. I heard them say they planned to grow bigger, branch out and establish a network of delegates in different countries. Their potential is vast. They want to expand and cover multiple areas. You should contact them. We will respond to their proposals. Should they need our help, we will provide it, within the legal framework, no questions asked.

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Question: Reportedly, and your ministry was cited in that media report, Russia's Ambassador to the United States Anatoly Antonov was summoned to the US State Department in connection with the US drone incident in the Black Sea. It goes without saying that Washington considers itself right on every count and accuses Russia of breaking the law. What legal aspects are the US authorities referring to?

Maria Zakharova: I'm not aware of the existence of any international legal aspects in the US claims.

I'm aware of the US experts talking about Russia violating the Agreement between the Government of the United States of America and the Government of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics on the Prevention of Incidents On and Over the High Seas dated May 25, 1972.

This agreement remains valid in Russia-US relations. We should operate based on the following premise.

As follows from the preamble of the Agreement, the Parties entered into this agreement with the aim of ensuring safe navigation of their naval ships on the high seas and flights of their military aircraft in the airspace above them. According to the terminology set out in Article I of this agreement, the term "aircraft" for the purposes of this Agreement means "all military manned heavier-than-air and lighter-than-air craft, excluding space craft." This provision means that the 1972 Agreement does not cover drones or other unmanned aerial vehicles operated by the two Parties.

This quote contains the key term to answer your question which is "manned craft." In that case, it was a drone. The US analysts' assumptions do not cut it in this particular case.

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Question: Russia's ability to build a broad cross-regional coalition of friends with our priority partners will determine whether our foreign policy delivers, as well as whether there will be stability in international affairs in the years to come. The effort to move away from the West creates conditions for wider cooperation with other major civilisational platforms: China, the Arab and Muslim world, the Indian and South Asian civilisation, Africa, Latin America, and the geopolitical region shaped by ASEAN. Is Russia becoming more relevant as a country with its own unique civilisation capable of ensuring a global balance?

Maria Zakharova: We could devote an entire two-week international conference to the question you have raised. Let me give you a brief answer.

In 2022, Russia passed the test regarding what you refer to as its geopolitical relevance. Considering the pressure the West has been exerting on all countries, they could well have turned their backs on Russia, saying that they did not need Russia in international affairs. Could they do that? Yes, they could. And they had a pretext for that. Maybe it would not have been honest or sincere on their behalf, but the pretext was good enough for getting rid of something they did not need and saving face. They could have said that it had been a long time since they had needed Russia, but they did not share this with us in view of

our friendship. But now they could finally speak their mind because they were under pressure and values were at stake – the economy, finance, stability, security and sovereignty were under threat. But things took a completely different turn. On the contrary, despite all the pressure, many countries and regions across the world reaffirmed their commitment to sovereignty, to choosing their partners on their own, deciding who could be trusted with resolving the issues they face on the international arena and to adopting a neutral position, as they have been saying, in order to enable the parties to the conflict to resolve the issues between them on their own, or to act as peacebuilders and mediators.

Anyway, they have reaffirmed that they understand the situation resulting from the endless provocations fomented by the West, which caused the crisis to explode in the open. They showed that they respect Russia and understand that without it the world would have long since have fallen into the abyss of global conflict and problems. In 2022, they reaffirmed this position. Moreover, this did not happen during a period of prosperity and wellbeing, but at a time when it seemed that everyone must focus on defending their own interests. We have passed this test. By “we” I mean Russia’s role in the world order.

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Question: Can I ask you to comment on what the UN’s chief human rights defender, Volker Türk, said during the UN Human Rights Council when he talked about the demise of Russia’s civic space, when he referred to Novaya Gazeta shutting down, and criminal prosecution for the defamation of the Armed Forces, the foreign agents acts, and the fact that legislation prohibiting so-called “propaganda of non-traditional relationships” was extended. In your opinion, what could change this rhetoric?

Maria Zakharova: I will not even try presenting any arguments to counter this narrative. If by civil society he meant those who promote Western ideas, alien and destructive as they are for our country, it is true that many of these people have left or fled Russia. Here, I am not talking about voicing criticism, but about spreading destructive views, which is totally different. After all, there can be constructive criticism for improving things. Such criticism can have a salutary effect, but what we have here are destructive ideas, plans and projects.

If we define civil society as non-governmental organisations, as well as structures and civil activists seeking to resolve our internal challenges without getting money or orders from abroad, but because this is what they want to do, because they are patriots, care about others, there is nothing wrong with that.

If you narrow down an entire sector to specific media titles, this means disrespecting all the rest. Who gave him the right to turn a blind eye to Russia's major media outlets and regional media? I think that he must come to Russia to see for himself how many mass media outlets we have here and what they are doing. Of course, there are media moguls with their huge media conglomerates and branched television networks, digital platforms, etc. There are also many regional media outlets, and many of them have been unable to attend conferences in the West. This is to answer your question.

Indeed, they referred to the closing of specific media outlets. But what about looking at their own statements when they said that they did not want or could not issue visas to Crimean journalists, who have the latest information about Crimea, so that they could travel to this international organisation? What about their efforts to erase them from their agenda? By the same token, they sanctioned so many Russian civil society figures, journalists, and blocked civil society activists with their videos, online channels and materials. Have they mentioned this? If not, they have adopted a biased position. There is nothing to discuss as long as there is this bias.

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Question: Many EU citizens (I cannot reveal their countries or names, because they will be persecuted) are asking about the upcoming Victory Day. Will the Immortal Regiment processions be held again? How can they make preparations in advance and obtain Saint George's ribbons abroad? Won't Moscow be afraid that it will be accused of interfering in the internal affairs of other states if it distributes the ribbons in countries where they are banned?

Maria Zakharova: This year, Russian compatriots in more than 120 countries have launched preparations for the commemorative events dedicated to the 78th anniversary of Victory in the Great Patriotic War.

Yes, they are under immense pressure and the reprisals are hair-raising, but they are firm in their intention to hold these events. They are aware of their exceptional importance for preserving historical truth and countering the falsification attempts.

The Immortal Regiment is the most spectacular event. It unites the diaspora and symbolises the tribute of memory we are paying to those who sacrificed their lives in the fight against Nazism. It can be held in any format (in-person or online). Absolutely magnificent creativity and fantastic prowess have been displayed. A number of other events, such as St George's Ribbon, The

Candle of Memory, and Garden of Memory, as well as wreath-laying ceremonies at monuments to Soviet soldiers, car rallies, “lessons of courage,” photo exhibitions, and film shows are being planned. To support these events, the Foreign Ministry of Russia will supply sets of relevant symbols, including St George’s ribbons, to the organisations of Russian compatriots in friendly countries. In unfriendly countries, we will also find an opportunity to distribute what they regard as “prohibited items” and what in reality is a symbol of the victory of human spirit over insanity and beastliness.

We see the authorities in a number of countries wishing to create obstacles to those who want to honour the memory of heroes of the Great Patriotic War. Last year, the Baltic states and Moldova, among others, imposed a legislative ban on all mass-scale events held on the occasion of May 9. This was done in spite of the UN General Assembly resolution declaring May 8 and 9 Days of Remembrance and Reconciliation to be marked each year as a tribute of memory to all those who sacrificed their lives during World War II. I am not speaking about the internal, national memory and disrespect for their own populations on the part of these countries. The UN General Assembly has proclaimed this day as a day of remembrance and reconciliation. Wearing St George’s ribbons is also banned in these countries.

We urge the authorities of foreign countries to approach the upcoming events in a reasonable and constructive manner, because this has nothing to do with interference in their internal affairs. The events are intended as a way of making it possible for all those wishing to do so to pay a tribute of memory to the winners in the fight against Nazism, to those who saved the people of those countries, whose governments are irresponsibly destroying their relations with Russia.

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Question: Are Moscow and Beijing planning coordinated steps for the eventuality of AUKUS further shattering security in the Asia-Pacific Region?

Maria Zakharova: We have discussed this topic with our Chinese friends. We are coordinating our public response to these things at international organisations, including on the non-proliferation track.

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