



01.12.2023 15:25

№ 2454-01-12-2023

Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's statement and answers to media questions following the 30th OSCE Ministerial Council Meeting, Skopje, December 1, 2023

Good afternoon.

I do not feel like making long opening remarks. If you followed the OSCE Ministerial Council meetings, you had a chance to read my speech. I will not repeat myself.

I regret that we have approached the 30th OSCE Ministerial Council meeting in an atmosphere that is not conducive to anniversary celebrations. We are seeing the complete degradation of everything that has been created within the OSCE (previously within this Conference) in all three security dimensions (military-political, economic-environmental and cultural-humanitarian). I will not cite examples.

We have become convinced that our Western colleagues have not learned any lessons from their disastrous policy line towards destroying the OSCE. They continue to finish it off with a zeal worthy of better use. Yesterday, 95 percent of remarks by our Western colleagues were aimed at this. Only a few “sober” voices recalled that the OSCE was created for the purpose of cooperation and ensuring mutual security. Much was done to this end.

But everything has been destroyed in the military-political area. They refused to ratify the Adapted CFE Treaty and many other agreements that helped maintain a security balance, ensured real arms control and arms reductions in the European “theatre.” Everything has been destroyed in the economic area as well. This second “basket” was demolished by the unprecedented sanctions that the EU and the US have imposed on the Russia Federation.

There is nothing to say about human rights. When after the state coup in Ukraine in February 2014, the Kiev Nazi regime launched its so-called counterterrorist operation to suppress Donbass, the residents of which refused to accept the criminal revolt and the new authorities, no problems at all arose for many years despite the killing of children, women and civilians in general, and

the full trade and economic blockade of Donbass and the suspension of water supplies to Russian Crimea. This discrediting is obvious. It is sad.

While we communicate here, we see what really concerns the West. It is involved in minor squabbles – to extend (or not) the positions of those that head OSCE institutions. They neglected their direct duties, crudely violating the principles of the OSCE in which they were appointed to guide different areas of its activities. Now they are fighting to expand each other's terms in office (the commissioners on media and other affairs) for nine months or a year. This petty fussing has nothing to do with the OSCE's deepest crisis, but it's the only thing on their minds.

The Macedonian Chairmanship set the right motto – “It's about people.” During yesterday's working lunch, I told my colleagues that when talking about people we were referring to all citizens of the OSCE countries and even “non-citizens” that are kept in this shameful status in Latvia and Estonia. In reality, it appears that all this excitement and concern about people is limited to the four heads of the OSCE offices. At any rate, I cannot reach any other conclusion from the nervous activity of our Western colleagues.

I do not care about the outcome of this get-together and the attempts to bargain for an extra day or week to continue the crude violation of all OSCE principles. I am referring to the heads of the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, the media managers and the people dealing with rights of national minorities. I am finishing my remarks on a not very optimistic note.

Question: On the eve of the Ministerial Council meeting, a US representative at the OSCE said Russia would be in isolation in Skopje. Did you feel this?

Sergey Lavrov: It was my colleague, the US Secretary of State who ran away. I didn't go anywhere.

Today, Maria Zakharova showed two different photos from Macedonian newspapers. The first one was taken on the evening of November 29 of this year. They all came for dinner and had this photo taken. Now I understand why this was done – so a newspaper could publish it and write that everyone had come, but that “Sergey Lavrov was in isolation.” But this get-together was on the eve of the meeting. They simply went there to have good Macedonian wine and something to eat. The opening took place in the morning. Other newspapers published a photo from the meeting, showing all the countries behind their signs, including the Russian Federation represented by my colleagues and me. But the participants in the November 29 event also did not include either the Ukrainian or Polish ministers or their colleagues from the Baltic countries. I believe,

Antony Blinken and EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell had also left.

Why is this happening? Apparently, they think that by leaving, they are demonstrating their desire to isolate Russia, but I believe they are just cowards. They are afraid of any honest conversation with the facts in hand. Probably, the same fear explains the twists with the non-issuance of visas to our diplomats for UN events in New York and various UNESCO agency sessions in Paris. This is primitive cowardice.

During the two years of the West's hysterical hybrid war against Russia, people have seen that it has no clear or sensible argument. We presented our arguments in detail yesterday and nobody objected.

Question (retranslated from English): What is Russia's position on Bulgaria's claims to Macedonian identity?

Sergey Lavrov: I am not well-versed in the specifics of Macedonian-Bulgarian relations. I can say that the Macedonian people have a full right to take part in all of the activities on our continent on an equal basis.

Speaking in general, not just about Macedonian-Bulgarian relations but about the persisting problems in the Balkans in general, they are rooted in the West's actions on the destruction of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. Montenegrins, Slovenes, Slovaks, Serbs and Macedonians lived in that country. They did not have the difficulties that we are talking about now.

I remember that for years Macedonia was called the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM). This was humiliating. Then, North Macedonia was invented. Everyone understands what this was all about. Macedonia does not claim anyone's land – either in Greece or anywhere else.

We know this. But it is up to Macedonians to resolve this problem. Several years ago, the Speaker of the Macedonian Parliament, Talat Xhaferi, proudly posed for a photo in his office and there was an Albanian flag on his table. A problem exists, and everyone knows it.

Our Western colleagues encourage some ethnic groups in the Balkans but occupy an aggressive, dictatorial position as regards others, demanding that they join the anti-Russia sanctions "before it's too late." The West was interested in breaking Yugoslavia apart. It did not need such a unifying force in the Balkans. They have always wanted to set one nation against another there, and they are still doing this with success. However, I am convinced that the people of the Balkan countries have developed a genetic code during their long and difficult but glorious history and eventually will not allow anyone to offend them. They

will not let our Western colleagues set them against themselves, to incite one nation against another.

Look at what is taking place in Bosnia. It was agreed that three state-forming peoples would co-exist there. Now attempts are being made to raze this to the ground. I could speak at length on this subject, but let me assure you that we have kind feelings for the Macedonian people.

I've been here for just two days, but I see your citizens in the streets or at the hotel and feel the warmth they have for us. This feeling is mutual.

Question: Why has the security situation in Europe morphed into what it is today? Does Russia expect the OSCE to play an important role, considering that some European countries have entrusted their security to the United States? What makes other organisations, such as the SCO or ASEAN, different from the OSCE?

Sergey Lavrov: We prepared ourselves for this conversation. I knew our and foreign reporters would be interested in what is really going on.

Some of your colleagues were here when I arrived yesterday morning. There was a crowd out front yelling, "When are you going to free Ukraine," and "When will you stop the war in Ukraine." One doesn't need to be a journalist to do that; all one needs to be is an active member of a propaganda campaign. True reporters want to drill deep into the issue at hand; they want to understand what's happening.

My colleagues from the delegation and I were expecting such questions. I'll give you several quotes:

1. "The Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe was created to preserve a venue where the East and the West could meet for there was no other place for that."

2. This organisation is "a narrow but the most reliable bridge allowing participants in the Cold War not to fall into a hot war."

3. "One cannot create the impression that the West will succumb to the desire to recreate its very powerful bloc, the point of which is domination, and which, step by step, is tightening its international borders around Russia, the borders of major alliances."

4. "To Russians, NATO expansion would mean, and not without a reason, that the military border is approaching their own border. This is indisputable. We absolutely do not want to create an impression that we are looking for a conflict or a reason for causing a rift in Europe, especially with Russia, which does not deserve it. It will be very difficult for us to prevent that country (Russia) from having a feeling that it is being surrounded. It is important to provide Russia

with guarantees, to envisage, and to think about an even stronger agreement aimed at solving future issues between Russia and Western countries. Nothing could be worse than creating an impression that we are recreating blocs.”

Guess what year that is. It's 1994. These quotes belong to then President of France Francois Mitterrand. He issued a warning in 1994, but no one listened to him. Or rather, they tried to at first. They adopted and signed the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe and later its adapted version. After the Warsaw Pact disappeared, they established the Forum for Security Co-operation and adopted the Open Skies Treaty, the Treaty on Personnel Strength of Conventional Armed Forces in Europe, treaties on small arms and light weapons, ammo, and so on. There were many. All of that crumbled because, concurrently with this productive work, which led to specific consensus results (as it should be in the OSCE), the West was persistently leading NATO eastward, right up to our borders.

I mentioned this in my remarks yesterday. In 1999 and in 2010, it was put in writing that no one should be strengthening their security at the expense of the security of others. Your presidents and prime ministers at the OSCE summits put their signatures to a statement that no organisation is entitled to claim dominance in the military-political sphere. We asked them how they were going to fulfill these obligations when they were expanding NATO at the same time. In no way. No one said anything in response. They said these were political statements and declarations which don't mean much, and legal guarantees of security can be provided only within NATO.

The Permanent Council is now in session, where our representatives at the OSCE are discussing what to do with the four “characters” who are still (until the day after tomorrow) heading the organisation's secretariat bodies. Bargaining is underway about whether to extend their term for a year or for nine months. I believe three months is quite enough to post a vacancy announcement and hire knowledgeable managers who will not look like finger puppets. I don't care how this meeting will end, where the fate of these four people rather than the people of all Europe, is decided. It is sad.

Question (retranslated from English): What do you think will be the geopolitical result of the efforts against Kosovo and Serbia?

Sergey Lavrov: The developments around Serbia and Kosovo fit seamlessly into a trend within the OSCE: first agree on something, celebrate the result and then watch the sabotage unfold, insignificant at first but then major. I gave examples of numerous agreements which had been reached under the organisations' umbrella and were later methodically destroyed by the West.

I remember the European Union, “a great mediator in many situations,” wanted the UN General Assembly to address the EU so as to help build bridges between Belgrade and Pristina. In 2013, an agreement was triumphantly announced on creating the Association of Serb Municipalities of Kosovo. But nothing followed. The people appointed by Pristina to govern this Serb-populated area resolutely refused and keep refusing to implement that agreement. What are the actions of the European Union? Do you think it is demanding that they behave themselves? No. It is demanding that Serbia change its position. The EU has already cooked up a new document about the Association of Serb Municipalities of Kosovo which is radically different from what Belgrade and Pristina signed 10 years ago. This is similar to many situations with OSCE agreements and documents.

At the same time, Serbs are being told that they want to join the EU and have long been on the waiting list. However, new “chapters” for talks will not open unless Belgrade joins all foreign policy decisions by the EU, including sanctions against the Russian Federation. This is the power of persuasion that Europe has. They will not grant EU membership until Serbia recognises Kosovo or at least supports its membership in international organisations. This is serious. It is almost like what’s happening in the next room where they are bargaining for how many months and who will remain in office.

I am very concerned about the Serbian people. When I worked in New York, I happened to go to Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia and Srpska Krajina as a UN Security Council representative. I also visited Belgrade. I saw what had been done to the city by those who are now crying that Europe is witnessing the first war, meaning war in Ukraine. As if it wasn’t a war in 1999. Back then, US and British magazines carried slogans on their covers saying Serbia’s repentance would purify the Serbian people.

I see that this policy continues. Not only towards Serbia but also towards Republika Srpska and those who think about their own people’s interests and want to preserve their human dignity as politicians. Regretfully, their numbers are dwindling. The others are moving in the direction which was once proclaimed to be “the end of history,” the liberal order, “put everyone under the same roof,” “there is only one commander and all others are on standby.”

We do not impose anything on anyone. Every nation has to determine what they are going to do next. Obviously, the European Union has been transformed. It was established as an association of countries who wanted to increase the wellbeing of their citizens more effectively together than on their own. Look where the European Peace Facility’s funding is going. Listen to what

the EU's "great diplomats" are saying, what the European Commission leadership is stating as it basically usurps power. There are many instances when member-states begin to wonder on what grounds the European Commission decides for them.

I am not calling for the breakup of the EU. There is no need for such calls. I am just describing the behaviour of countries that proclaim themselves to be the paragon and pinnacle of democracy. There is no democracy in sight in the EU. They have the discipline of the rod and strict regimentation there, even worse than in NATO. Actually, better than in NATO.

Question: You said at the Primakov Readings on November 27 of this year that the chances to save the OSCE were not great. Now that the OSCE Ministerial Council meeting is over, do you think these chances have increased or decreased further?

Sergey Lavrov: The chances have increased but not for the preservation of the OSCE.

There were many different feelings yesterday during the meeting, the working lunch, and the conversations in the lobby. Today these feelings became stronger. The main feeling is indifference. The organisation has become something that makes me indifferent to its future.

Maria Zakharova: As distinct from the German authorities, we respect the media representatives from all countries. Please, give the floor to the German press, Deutsche Welle.

Question (retranslated from English): You made it clear today that you don't believe in a bright future for the OSCE. You are talking about the collapse of the organisation, saying it no longer plays its key role. Are you planning to pull out, given the situation?

Sergey Lavrov: Quote me correctly. I said I don't care how this OSCE meeting ends.

I don't know where you received your education as a journalist. You asked me if we were planning to pull out of the organisation, and I replied that you should quote me correctly. I was referring to my words that I didn't care about the outcome of the OSCE's current meeting.

I know that in your country, Germany, members of the government are supposed to be clear with journalists on what they should write. We respect our journalists and leave it up to them as to how to express the results of a news conference.

Question: Does your visit to Skopje mean that the West is coming to realise the need to talk to Russia? Is it possible to say that a change has taken

place in this regard?

Sergey Lavrov: I am glad you asked this question. I was amused to read in different media outlets, including ours, that the Poles did not invite Lavrov but that the Macedonians did. This is a substitution of concepts.

When an OSCE Ministerial Council meeting is held, nobody is supposed to invite anyone anywhere. Following its year-long Chairmanship, the host country must ensure the participation of all ministers and their entourage, including journalists (which did not happen here) in this meeting. The distorted character of the OSCE's activities is reflected even in this coverage of the subject (Poland didn't invite Russia but Macedonia did). This organisation used to be called "for security and cooperation in Europe."

As with other issues, they are slowly drumming into public opinion the idea that they can invite Lavrov or not invite him. They have no right not to invite someone. No invitation is necessary. The delegation from a participating country informs the host country when it arrives, by what route and flight, and expects it to perform its host functions. That's it.

Question: Is there a chance to reach an agreement with Ukraine? What needs to be done to get one signed?

Sergey Lavrov: We have discussed this issue many times over many years. There has not been a single major speech by President Putin where he has not been asked this question, and where he has not provided an exhaustive answer.

I will say it again: an agreement was reached in late March 2022 in Istanbul after several rounds of talks. There were three rounds of talks in Belarus and a final round in Istanbul. The fact that it happened exactly that way and an agreement was reached was confirmed by David Arakhmiya who took part in these talks, and currently leads Zelensky's parliamentary party. He was a member of the Ukrainian delegation in Istanbul. In one of his recent interviews, he said they were ready to sign what we had agreed upon. He said that now, in retrospect, he realised the deal was largely beneficial for them. However, Boris Johnson came and said, "No, let's do some more fighting." Everyone knows this. We have discussed this many times. Now, even the Ukrainians have admitted it. So far, we have not seen any signs from Kiev or its handlers that would tell us they are ready to start a political process. Moreover, a year and a half ago, Zelensky signed a special executive order making illegal talks with the government led by Vladimir Putin. It is a punishable offence. He has no plans of rescinding it.

Listen to what the leaders of NATO and the EU are saying: they have to support Ukraine because if Ukraine is defeated, it will be a defeat for all of the West. Lately, they started saying that after Ukraine, Putin will go to the Baltic States, Poland, and other neighbouring countries. This was not some marginal politician who said that, but the head of the Pentagon, Lloyd Austin. He said Russia will not stop at Ukraine, so they have no right to lose in Ukraine. They will either win or lose. They do not hide the fact that they are the ones waging this war.

Just like tango, it takes two to get a political process underway. The guys on the other side, though, are not dancing tango; they are break dancing which takes only one person.

We want to hear answers to the questions that we asked our Western colleagues repeatedly. Yesterday, in my speech, I quoted the Constitution of Ukraine which is still in effect, and which both Petr Poroshenko and then Vladimir Zelensky placed their right hands on when they took the oath. It includes a description of the obligations that the state of Ukraine guarantees to “Russian and other national minorities”: it promotes the consolidation and development of the Ukrainian nation, its historical consciousness, its culture and traditions, as well as cultural, ethnic, linguistic, and religious identity. The content and the scope of existing rights and freedoms cannot be diminished. There may be no privileges based on ethnic, linguistic, or other attributes. The right to receive instruction in the native language is guaranteed. Maybe someone out there will compare these commitments and guarantees provided by the Ukrainian state with the havoc they are wreaking now with regard to the Russian language and ethnic Russians who are citizens of Ukraine? I’m not sure why no one is paying attention to this. Not a single honest journalist, in particular, our German colleagues, have ever thought about it. Maybe they have, but they never spoke their minds or published a word about it.

For example, the first thing the Kiev regime did following the February 2014 coup was announce their plans to revoke the status of the Russian language in Ukraine. This was the first thing they said in 2014 when they grabbed power in complete disregard of Germany, France, and Poland, whose ministers gave guarantees as the foundation for the settlement agreement between the opposition and the president. The opposition trampled upon the guarantees and seized power. We asked our German and French colleagues later why they didn’t call the Ukrainian opposition to order. They didn’t give us a straightforward answer, just hinted that democratic processes sometimes take “unusual zigzags.” Something to that effect.

In 2014, too, a coup was attempted in the African nation of Gambia. It failed, but the US State Department minced no words, making it clear that the United States would never come to an agreement with the authorities in any country that came to power by unconstitutional means. In 2015, there was a coup in Yemen. President Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi fled to Saudi Arabia. For many years, the entire progressive Western community demanded that he return to Yemen and retake the presidential office. They've been pushing for that for seven long years and eventually decided to create a "transitional presidential council." We asked why the president of Yemen enjoyed such support, whereas no one is demanding the return of President Yanukovich in order to start the political process. Yanukovich was also toppled, and he is also an absolutely legitimate head of a UN member state. They told us he left Kiev, that's why. He left Kiev for Kharkov (everyone knows this) to participate in a congress of his party. This still does not exonerate our Western "friends" with their double standards. Simply put, they needed this anti-Russian, neo-Nazi coup in Ukraine, while in Yemen, they needed to fight to preserve the existing regime. That's all there is to it.

I already quoted Ukraine's Constitution. This is what adviser to Vladimir Zelensky's chief of staff, Mikhail Podolyak, said in May 2022: "As I see it, people in the Kharkov, Lugansk and Donetsk regions should forget the word 'Russians' for good." Ukrainian Ambassador to Kazakhstan Petr Vrublevsky said in an interview: "We are trying to kill as many Russians as possible. The more Russians we kill now the fewer will be left for our children to kill." Has any influential media outlet in the West paid attention to this? No. Vladimir Zelensky said: "Those in the Kremlin will come to a bad end. I don't know how but I wish this could happen as soon as possible. They definitely will not die in their beds." It is interesting, isn't it? I can continue quoting. Secretary of the National Security and Defence Council of Ukraine Alexey Danilov said: "Everything will be ablaze, burning, until Moscow has been burnt to ashes." The President of Ukraine's chief of staff Andrey Yermak said: "The Russians are inhuman beings and have no right to rank among the civilised people of Western countries." In this one sentence he classified all others, except people in the West, as "uncivilised people". Did the West utter a word, based on its historical achievements, regarding its claims to be a global leader? The West did not take the trouble to respond in any way.

Vladimir Zelensky was asked what he thought of people living in the east of Ukraine where they refused to recognise the [2014] coup and with whom the Minsk Agreements were signed. He asked in response if they could be called

human beings. There do exist representatives of people but not all of them are human beings, rather they are subhuman, “specimen”. How do you like racist language like this? No one paid attention to this. The pinnacle of Vladimir Zelensky’s approach is what he said in August 2021, long before a special military operation began. Quote: “I believe, for the sake of the future of your children and grandchildren, that if you love Russia and while living all your life in Ukraine you regarded it as Russia, you should realise, for the sake of your children and grandchildren, that you need to go to Russia and find a place there to settle in.” That is, get out of here! Here is a man whom members of the Western political elite call “the hope of democracy” and a man who stands up for “European values” in his fight against Russia; the values of Nazism, fascism which are now being given a new lease on life through the Ukrainian elite with active encouragement from quite a few NATO and European Union member countries.

Maria Zakharova: Surprisingly, the question about Ukraine was not the first or the second to be asked but the seventh. Vladimir Zelensky is deeply afraid that he will be forgotten. We will not allow this to happen.

Question: Vladimir Zelensky said Ukraine is moving to building defensive structures along the entire frontline. What do you think this signals? Has the Kiev regime admitted its defeat and given up its rapacious plans?

Sergey Lavrov: I read news about that. I proceed from the premise that the commanders of our special military operation know the goals they are trying to achieve. The operation is constantly supervised by the Supreme Commander-in-Chief. We do not see any reasons for our goals to be revised.

If only to bring these people back to honouring their own constitution. So that the Western press finally makes some noise about it. How can it be? The “solution” which is at the heart of the Ukrainian state in practice has been repeatedly trampled on. And the entire free media is somehow silent. In fact, those in the OSCE responsible for freedom of the media, national minorities, human rights and democratic institutions are also silent.

Question (retranslated from English): You spoke about security and stability in the Balkans. In September 2022, Serbia signed a foreign policy agreement with Russia. Serbia was a source of inter-ethnic clashes and grave instability, at least for the Balkan countries, including Kosovo. Recently, an armed aggression against the Serbs took place in northern Kosovo. Does Russia give instructions to Serbia? Do you instruct them as regards destabilisation in the Balkans?

Sergey Lavrov: Did you say Russia signed an agreement with Serbia?

Question (retranslated from English): Yes.

Sergey Lavrov: On what issue?

Question (retranslated from English): Regarding consultations on foreign policy, in September 2022, with Foreign Minister Nikola Selakovic.

Sergey Lavrov: It's a profound misperception. We signed a plan of consultations between our foreign ministries with Minister Nikola Selakovic in New York. It says, for example, that in January, heads of the departments in charge of European cooperation hold a meeting. In March, there will be a meeting of the department heads in charge of the Mediterranean, and so on. This is not policy alignment.

Nobody was concealing anything. There were Russian and Serbian journalists present who filmed the signing of the plan. Meanwhile, Washington promptly made threatening noises: How dare the Serbs sign a plan of consultations with Russia who is an aggressor. And you had it stuck in your head that it was policy alignment. I am really asking you not to let your masters down if you represent an outlet you believe is respectable.

Question (retranslated from English): There have been reports that US Secretary of State Antony Blinken held a meeting with the National Security Council of Israel. Can you comment on the fact that such meetings take place and the unconditional US support for Israel? I think this is an example of policy alignment.

Sergey Lavrov: In fact, what is happening in and around the Gaza Strip is a dire situation. The statistics released by the heads of the UN and its various departments working in the Middle East are appalling. The number of dead civilians, children has already exceeded 6,000, and more than 4,000 women.

We have spoken out on this topic a number of times. We categorically condemned the terrorist attack on Israel on October 7 of this year. But we also categorically oppose the idea that terrorism can be fought by any means, including gross violations of international humanitarian law. Our Israeli colleagues are well aware of that. Virtually all other countries that care about the region hold the same position.

I've heard US representatives, including Antony Blinken, make their statements. This morning, I watched the Al Jazeera news which pointed out that the Americans are urging the Israeli leadership to minimise consequences for civilians. Perhaps, that is the least that they can do. We tried to take it a step further. Soon after the military operation began following the terrorist attack, we submitted to the UN Security Council a proposal to declare a humanitarian ceasefire. We were not allowed to go ahead with it. The United States was

against it. Then, Brazil came up with a similar resolution. The United States vetoed it. Then the countries of the region (primarily Arab, Muslim countries) submitted a draft resolution to the UN General Assembly. Its language was not as strong as the resolutions the Americans vetoed in the Security Council. It provided for a humanitarian truce rather than a ceasefire. This resolution was adopted.

Brazil then came up with another resolution at the UN Security Council. We had to abstain because it was weaker than the General Assembly's position. This was not good for the UN Security Council's standing.

We hear the Israeli leadership make statements to the effect that they will not stop until they destroy Hamas. I won't delve into details about what analysts and professional military have to say about it. The laws of warfare have not been canceled. This should be kept in mind.

We have invariably been invested in the security of Israel, which is in an utterly vulnerable position. This vulnerability is rooted in the fact that the UN Security Council resolution to create the Palestinian state is not being implemented. It says that the Palestinian state within the 1967 borders with its capital in East Jerusalem should live in peace and security with Israel and all other neighbours.

Under the Arab Peace Initiative advanced by King Fahd bin Abdul Aziz Al Saud of Saudi Arabia in 2002, once a Palestinian state is created, all Arab (and Muslim) countries will establish good relations with Israel. It seems like a way forward to a stable and secure situation in this long-suffering land. But so far, we have not had any success.

There once was a Foreign Minister of Israel by the name of Yair Lapid. He was part of a coalition with Prime Minister Naftali Bennett for some time. They won the elections and divvied up offices. Bennett was Prime Minister, and Lapid was Foreign Minister. He came to us. He and I sat down for a meeting.

When the special military operation began in Ukraine, Yair Lapid made several statements: "There is no justification for the violation of Ukrainian sovereignty and the killing of innocent civilians." He put it just like that, bluntly: no justification. On his Twitter page, he wrote: "Israel expresses deep concern regarding the dire humanitarian situation in Mariupol and calls for Russia to stop the fighting and allow for the evacuation of civilians to safety." He condemned the "Bucha Massacre" even though it has been clear to everyone for a long time now that it was not a massacre but a staged event.

You write about Bucha. I call on the journalists who are covering international affairs. In early April 2022, two days after Russian servicemen left

the town, bodies were shown strewn on the central street of this town. They showed them and said that “Russian butchers killed civilians.” Sanctions were announced. This was also announced as one of the reasons why Ukrainians refused to sign a ceasefire agreement.

Since then, I have been asking only one and the same question at news conferences, in my addresses to the UN Secretary-General, and during the UN Security Council meetings. Eighteen months have passed since then. No one is investigating anything. No one is telling anyone anything. Can we at least get a list of the names of the people whose bodies were shown in Bucha as “tortured and killed”? Deafening silence.

I urge the journalistic community which is interested in learning the truth to conduct a “little” journalistic investigation. Demand the names of those whom British television showed in the Ukrainian town of Bucha on April 4, 2022.

Back then Yair Lapid condemned the massacre in Bucha and said: “Intentionally harming a civilian population is a war crime and I strongly condemn it.”

But when asked about Gaza, about the thousands and thousands of civilians, a military officer (not the top-ranking military official) said it was a “tragedy of war.” Remember that?

US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan said: “The United States of America when we transfer weapons to another country, whether it’s Israel or anyone else, requests, requires an assurance that those weapons will be used in accordance with the law of armed conflict, and we seek accountability to ensure that that is the case, we will continue to do that. We will also work around the clock to try to make sure that life saving humanitarian assistance gets to people in need. ” Also, Jake Sullivan had to say the following, but this time not about Israel, but about Ukraine: “We have not placed limitations on Ukraine being able to strike on its territory within its internationally recognised borders. .” There are restrictions on Israel, but there are none on Ukraine. Even in this regard, Ukraine outdid everyone else.

When asked whether the United States thinks the Ukrainians committed a terrorist attack by bombing the Crimean Bridge, John Kirby, Coordinator for Strategic Communications at the National Security Council in the White House, had the following to say: “And we don’t tell them what is or what isn’t legally a legitimate target. They determine their targets for themselves.” Spot the difference.

Question (retranslated from English): During your speech yesterday and your opening remarks this morning, you accused the Western countries and

Western diplomats of undermining the OSCE's fundamental principles. You spoke about the hypocrisy linked with the situation in Ukraine and so on. You said it takes two to hold a meaningful dialogue. There are always two sides in an armed conflict as well. As for the Russian aggression in Ukraine, who displays more hypocrisy – the Western countries, Russia or both sides? As a country, do you recognise your responsibility for the situation in the OSCE, for undermining the institutions designed to guarantee peace in Europe, and in general, for undermining peace and stability in Europe?

Sergey Lavrov: You may publish your question. Your managers will welcome it.

Our Western colleagues are fond of “cancel culture.” Those who recently started to be included in a “civilised world” in the form of the EU and the North Atlantic alliance are actively learning from them.

I have already cited examples where Ukraine cancelled everything Russian at one point. They even started to eradicate everything Russian in violation of the Constitution, and physically. Clergymen of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church are being killed there. What the West doesn't like, does not exist. This “cancel culture” is also applied to the drafting of political positions.

A bloody state coup took place in Ukraine in February 2014. I will emphasise again that at that time they didn't give a damn about Germany, France or Poland that guaranteed the agreement between the opposition and the government with their signatures just a day before the coup. The first act of the putschists that came to power and were supported by the US and Britain was a statement on cancelling the status of the Russian language.

After that, people in Crimea expressed their categorical disagreement with these events. In the east of Ukraine (part of Donbass), people refused to live under the control of the illegal authorities. Armed militants were sent to Crimea. They tried to assault the Crimea Supreme Council building. They were removed from there. Assistance came from the Russian military at our naval base in Sevastopol. The Crimeans held a referendum. Apparently, for the West and for your editorial office, the history of this starts with this referendum. It was instantly followed by loud cries: “Russia has annexed Crimea.” And the prelude to this voting (the referendum) does not seem to exist at all, as if there was no such step in this history.

The same happened over the seven years (or more) since – this time did not exist, either. Meanwhile, during all these years Ukraine publicly refused to fulfil the UN Security Council resolution on the Minsk agreements. Incidentally, these agreements were also concluded by Germany, France, Russia and Ukraine.

The Germans and French emphasised the whole time that they were just mediators and that the dispute was between Russia and Ukraine. However, in reality, the Minsk agreements were concluded between Donbass (the two self-proclaimed republics) and the Ukrainian authorities.

Later, in 2022, former German Chancellor Angela Merkel and former French President Francois Hollande proudly, with pleasure, admitted in public that nobody on that side had any intention of fulfilling the Minsk agreements or the related UN Security Council resolution. It was just used to gain the time to arm Ukraine. Does anyone recall this when they feign the impression that the whole story started on February 24, 2022? No. You are obviously interested in history but you have a small gap in your knowledge.

Let's return to the Balkans. As in the case with the Minsk agreements when France and Germany announced that they were the mediators on behalf of the EU, the EU was also a mediator between Belgrade and Pristina on approving the decision to create a Community of Serb Municipalities (CSM) of Kosovo. This was in 2013, and the Minsk agreements were signed in 2015. These events took place in about the same time period. In both cases, the EU was the mediator, and in both cases, its mediation led nowhere. It only revealed how helpless it was.

Incidentally, it was about approximately the same thing. The two republics wanted to have the right to speak Russian and use it to teach their children. They wanted to have mass media in Russian, and their own local police and law enforcement bodies. They wanted to be consulted on the appointment of judges and prosecutors.

These requirements were practically identical to the rights that the Serbs were supposed to receive in the Community of Serb Municipalities of Kosovo. In both cases, the EU struck the timpani, saying that it had played a decisive role. In reality, the EU only revealed its helplessness and complete incompetence.

It is impossible to ignore the root causes of any situation. We have talked for years about the reasons for the crisis in Ukraine, warning that NATO's expansion was unacceptable (nobody listened to us). We said it was unacceptable to indulge the neo-Nazi regime that came to power as a result of the state coup, that it was necessary to compel it to fulfil the Minsk agreements. Nobody listened.

The propaganda campaign has acquired an industrial scope. You have it imprinted on your mind that Russia "woke up one morning and decided to start." We had been talking about the toxicity of drawing Ukraine into NATO and

creating direct threats to the Russian Federation on Ukraine's territory. There were plans to build an American military base on the Black Sea and a British one on the Sea of Azov. If you look at the map, you will see that it would be unacceptable under any circumstances. I have already quoted former French President Francois Mitterrand who warned about this 30 years ago. Nobody listened to him.

Regarding the fact that there was no intention to implement the Minsk agreements as they would have undermined the unitary foundations of the Ukrainian state, which our Western colleagues aim to preserve. Recently, French President Emmanuel Macron visited Corsica and expressed support for granting the island an autonomous status, reflecting it in the French Constitution. Among other things, this status entails the use of the Corsican language and the delegation of some administrative functions to the local Corsican assembly.

The Minsk agreements stipulated exactly the same actions with regard to the eastern regions of Ukraine. The ideas are in the air but nobody draws any inferences.

We are ready to advocate and stand up for our truth. However, engaging in discussions with those who have chosen to retreat and limit themselves to efforts to Ukrainise the entire OSCE agenda seems futile. They made a decision – Russia must be strategically defeated on the battlefield. And that's what they are doing.

Question (retranslated): What is your position on the unification of all Serbs in the Balkans? Do you support the idea of bringing together Serbs not only within Serbia but also those in neighbouring countries such as Kosovo, Montenegro, and Bosnia and Herzegovina?

Sergey Lavrov: This matter should be left to the Serbs themselves, considering the interests of both the Serbian people and the diverse populations in the Balkans. Their history has been tumultuous, and, unfortunately, the process is not unfolding smoothly. We are closely monitoring the discussions on this issue, including in the Republika Srpska.

Recently, there have been serious discussions about “swapping” territories between southern Serbia and Kosovo. If an agreement can be reached that satisfies both Serbs and their neighbours, then not only we, but all the states in our region will be happy to support it. Well, maybe not all countries. The EU generally believes that any involvement in the Balkans is paramount to an invasion of its area of responsibility. Prior to Josep Borrell, the post of High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy was held by Federica Mogherini. She openly declared that when the EU takes

charge of the Balkans, there is nothing for others to do here. That reflects a certain sense of ownership, given Serbia's expressed desire to join the EU, doesn't it. However, the decision ultimately rests with the people themselves.

Question (retranslated): President Putin mentioned that you were on the verge of finalising a peace agreement with Ukraine in Turkey. What caused a disruption in those talks, preventing the agreement from being reached?

Sergey Lavrov: Have you just got here?

I have previously explained in detail what happened after Istanbul. Allow me to reiterate. A week ago, a Ukrainian negotiator involved in the Istanbul talks in late March 2022 — that ended in an agreement on the key principles of a settlement — admitted they were ready to sign the document. However, at that moment, British Prime Minister Boris Johnson arrived and prohibited it. He said they should keep fighting for a little longer, asserting that if Vladimir Putin is seeking an agreement, they should wear him out even more.

Question (retranslated): The Russian Federation designated Macedonia as an unfriendly state. Have you sensed this unfriendliness in the country?

Sergey Lavrov: Regarding the list of unfriendly states. A state is associated with its government. We do not consider any countries or peoples as unfriendly. There are governments that make decisions on behalf of the state that we consider unfriendly, and it is those governments that we place on the respective list.

I began with saying that I feel very comfortable in Macedonia. I first visited a long time ago. I spent most of the time in the city of Ohrid. It's a fantastic city.

Russian Ambassador to Macedonia Sergey Bazdnikin told me that they have to close churches there due to a lack of parishioners. This is sad. It is a beautiful city where one feels closer to God.



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