

# Results of the Year with Vladimir Putin

Vladimir Putin summed up the year's results and answered questions from journalists and the people of Russia in a live broadcast.

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In 2023, the direct line with the people of Russia and the annual news conference have been merged into a single event taking place in Moscow's Gostiny Dvor.

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**Yekaterina Berezovskaya:** We have been accepting questions from across the country for precisely two weeks, and we have received an incredible number of submissions. It would not be an exaggeration to say that this broadcast brings together Russia in its entirety. We are in for a direct, honest, and open conversation.

**Pavel Zarubin:** Yekaterina and I took a very close look at all these submissions by reading thousands of pages and watching so many video messages.

**Yekaterina Berezovskaya:** I can compare what happened over the past two weeks with holding the biggest national public opinion poll. Pavel and I felt as if we were not just journalists but also pollsters.

**Pavel Zarubin:** Of course, answering all these millions of questions would be impossible, but there are cross-cutting topics, of course. What were the most popular ones? It goes without saying that the special military operation came on top. We received messages from the service personnel and their family members dealing with payments, certificates, and supplies. We will definitely discuss all this in detail today.

**Yekaterina Berezovskaya:** As usual, there were traditional – popular – questions about utilities, sports and so on.

So shall we start?

Good afternoon.

**President of Russia Vladimir Putin:** Good afternoon.

**Yekaterina Berezovskaya:** This year, the Russian Popular Front got involved already at the stage of collecting the questions. There is no doubt that all questions and appeals will be processed, and none of it will go unanswered. Activists from the Russian Popular Front have a whole year to do this. And the sharpest, most interesting and topical questions will be asked live today.

**Pavel Zarubin:** “Yesterday morning, I posted a complaint about not getting paid on the moskva-putinu.ru website, and in the evening the money came in.” Many problems were solved proactively, but there are many more that remain unsolved. And most importantly, we all live in a completely different world now and people are naturally concerned about more than social issues.

**Yekaterina Berezovskaya:** What time is better than now, two weeks before the New Year, to review the past 12 months’ results? December is always rich in events.

Mr President, last week you announced your decision to run for president. In this regard, what goals do you consider the most important, at home and abroad?

**Vladimir Putin:** I have spoken about this many times, but it would not hurt to say it once again. For a country like Russia, existence, mere existence, is impossible without sovereignty. Without sovereignty, Russia would cease to exist, at least in the form it exists today and has existed for a thousand years.

Therefore, our main objective is to strengthen sovereignty. But it is a broad concept. For example, strengthening sovereignty on the international stage involves enhancing our defence capability and security on the external contour. It also includes strengthening social sovereignty, which means providing safeguards for the rights and freedoms of our citizens, as well as developing our political and parliamentary systems. And lastly, it includes economic security and sovereignty, as well as technological sovereignty.

I think that right now, to answer your question, there is no need to be specific about all these vectors and avenues, but I am certain that people in this audience and across the country understand perfectly well that Russia would not survive without this. Just like any other country, Russia must assert its financial, economic, and technological sovereignty in order to have a future.

These are the main vectors from a conceptual standpoint.

**Pavel Zarubin:** Since we are discussing the economy, the fact that the Russian economy has not crumbled under pressure from its so-called former partners surprised many people around the world. However, these former partners have been openly seeking to finish their job by exerting even more pressure, as we have been hearing in their public statements.

How strong and resilient is the Russian economy? What is its margin of safety?

**Vladimir Putin:** Big enough so that we not just feel confident but also progress.

This margin of safety, as we have said on numerous occasions, but let me say it again, rests on several components.

The first and most important element is the high level of unity in Russian society.

The second element is the stability of our financial and economic system. As it turned out, and this came as a big surprise to our so-called partners and, frankly, many of us, over the previous decades Russia has accumulated a sufficient margin of safety and stability in finance and the economy.

And the third element is, of course, the growing capability of our security component, that is, the army and security agencies.

**Yekaterina Berezovskaya:** Mr President, what specific economic indicators can we be proud of?

**Vladimir Putin:** You know, I have brought a chart with me, as I usually do. There is nothing we do not know, and I believe the Finance Minister spoke about some figures yesterday. The main indicator of economic growth is GDP, which is expected to have

grown by 3.5 percent as of the end of the year. It is a good indicator, which shows that we have recouped last year's losses (when GDP decreased by 2.1 percent). If it grows by 3.5 percent this year, it means we have recouped the losses and have taken a significant step forward.

Unfortunately, inflation has increased and is expected to reach 7.5 percent as of the end of the year or slightly higher, around 8 percent. But the Central Bank and the Government are taking the necessary action. We can talk more about this, I mean raising the key interest rate and other measures being taken by the Central Bank and the Government. Our expectation is that we will be able to return to our target indicators.

Our industrial output is increasing steadily, at 3.6 percent. I am particularly pleased with the results in manufacturing, where output has grown by 7.5 percent year-on-year. It is a result we have not seen in a long time.

It is especially uplifting to see that investment in fixed capital has risen by 10 percent. What does this mean? The growth in industrial output and GDP are obvious. Plus 10 percent in fixed capital investment, what does it indicate? It indicates there will be sustainable growth in the medium term. Investors provide funding; production will expand; and new jobs will be created. I will talk about the unemployment rate later.

Businesses have added 24 percent in profit, not to mention the banks, which will earn almost three trillion rubles, in fact, over three trillion rubles by the end of the year. Of course, I know that people in the audience and generally across the country will say: banks are rolling in clover and so on. It is true. But it is good news for people who keep their money in Russian banks because it signifies the resilience of the banking system.

Now, real wages will grow by around eight percent after inflation. I understand that it will not be true for everybody but on average across the country, this statistic is accurate. And real disposable income is already on the rise. This indicator depends on more factors so the increase will be around five percent.

I mentioned the unemployment rate. Only recently, we were proud to see it drop to a historic low of three percent. Yesterday, when my colleagues and I were preparing for today's meeting, we noted that the unemployment rate is now 2.9 percent. It is something we have never seen in Russian history. It is a very good integrated indicator of the economy's health.

Since I talked about the rise in real income, I should mention that the minimum wage will be increased by as much as 18 percent from January 1. We do not do this very often.

The foreign debt is decreasing. This also indicates macroeconomic stability, financial stability. Government debt has been reduced from US\$46 billion to US\$32 billion. And private foreign debt has also decreased (our companies are duly repaying all the loans taken from foreign financial institutions) from US\$337 billion to US\$297 billion. That is, repayment is proceeding at a steady pace, often even ahead of schedule.

And this is an integrated social indicator. We will probably have a lot of social issues to discuss today, but still, there is such an integrated indicator – the growth in life expectancy, something we always talk about and strive for.

Look at the dynamics: in 2021, life expectancy in Russia was 70.06, in 2022 it was 72.73, and in 2023 it is expected to be 74 years. Still, this is a measure of how the state's efforts in both the economy and social policy are reflected in the most important social indicator.

**Pavel Zarubin:** The other day you honoured the Heroes of Russia, and we saw you saying that we should save the young men, but we should do it, do it, do it.

For almost two years now, our country has been living under the conditions of the special military operation, and of course there has been a flurry of questions from the public. I will just read out some of them, literally. "How do you assess these two years?" "What is the situation now? What are the dynamics?" "The goals and objectives of the operation – are they the same as they were at the beginning or not?" And of course, the most important thing: "When will there be peace?"

**Vladimir Putin:** There will be peace when we achieve our goals, which you have mentioned. Now let's return to these goals – they have not changed. I would like to remind you how we formulated them: denazification, demilitarisation, and a neutral status for Ukraine.

Look what is happening in terms of denazification. During the negotiation process, there was a certain stage after the drafting of a possible agreement, which was recently

mentioned by officials in Kiev, where, in general they did not agree that some kind of denazification was needed, and they said that there was no fascistisation, no growth of such sentiments. How could there not be? When a national hero – a famous, not just a nationalist, but a Nazi – Bandera is elevated to the rank of a national hero, what do you mean, there is not?

And when the head of today's Kiev Administration in front of the whole world gives a standing ovation to a former SS soldier who directly participated in the Holocaust, in the extermination of 1.5 million Jews in Ukraine, Russians and Poles. Is this not a manifestation of Nazism? Therefore, the issue of denazification is relevant. It is true that during the negotiation process we, our negotiators, were told that in principle they did not rule out the possibility of adopting some legislative acts in Ukraine. That was then, during the negotiations in Istanbul.

Now, as for demilitarisation. If they do not want to reach an agreement, then we have to resort to other measures, including military ones. Today Ukraine produces very little; they are trying to maintain some production, but it is almost non-existent. Everything they get is a freebie, and I apologise for such talk. But these freebies may end one day; in fact, they are already coming to an end little by little. But that is not even the main issue. I believe they will still be receiving these freebies, but they are being destroyed. I will not go into specific numbers for aircraft and air defence systems. They received 400 tanks, around 420 or 430, as promised. By the way, they got everything as promised. Ukraine received everything, and even more than what was promised by the West. But ever since the start of the so-called counteroffensive, we have destroyed 747 tanks. This is as of yesterday evening. We have also destroyed almost 2,300 armoured vehicles of various types. This is what is called demilitarisation. Alternatively, we can agree on demilitarisation and establish certain parameters. We actually agreed on them during the Istanbul talks, although these agreements were thrown out later, but we managed to reach agreement. There are also other possibilities to either reach an agreement or resolve the conflict by force. This is what we will strive for.

**Pavel Zarubin:** There is a short but important question that many people are concerned about: will there be a second wave of mobilisation?

**Vladimir Putin:** I understand that this is a burning issue. Look, we had a partial mobilisation, and at that time we called up 300,000 people. By the way, at first there was a lot of irony, many giggles about the mobilised personnel, and silly nicknames

given to them. I remember this well. But these guys are fighting incredibly well. There are 14 Heroes of the Russian Federation from among those mobilised, not to mention other medals and orders. If I am not mistaken, there are 244,000 soldiers directly in the combat zone, in the special military operation zone. We formed regiments for equipment maintenance because there are many experts in this field who are in great demand. If I am correct, 41,000 were discharged due to mandatory retirement, health reasons, and so on.

After this, we launched a fairly broad campaign to attract volunteer fighters to sign contracts with the Armed Forces. Our goal was to recruit a little over 400,000 people by the end of the year. As of yesterday evening, I received a report that 486,000 have been recruited, and the number of men who are ready to defend the interests of our Motherland with arms in hand is not decreasing. There are 1,500 volunteer fighters being recruited every day throughout the country. So, together with the volunteers there will be about half a million people by the end of this year. This is just a conventional division into two groups: the contract is signed for two or three years, and the so-called volunteers, although, in fact, they are all heroes fighting for the Fatherland, but they have a one-year contract, which is a shorter period. So, what do we need mobilisation for? There is absolutely no need for it today.

**Dmitry Peskov:** If I may, I would like to remind everyone that today's event is a combined format, Direct Line and a news conference with the President, so could we start the Presidential Q&A now?

**Lyudmila Kolieva:** If you don't mind, can a young lady from the Caucasus go first?

**Dmitry Peskov:** Just a second, excuse me.

**Vladimir Putin:** You see, we have a democracy here. (Addressing Lyudmila Kolieva.) You can say what you wanted to say. Mr Peskov, please.

**Dmitry Peskov:** Please pass on the microphone.

**Lyudmila Kolieva:** Good afternoon. My name is Lyudmila Kolieva, I am from North Ossetia.

Mr President, North Ossetia has always defended the interests of our country. Issa Pliev and Hadji-Umar Mamsurov – great commanders and Heroes of the Soviet Union – fought courageously in the Great Patriotic War. And now, people from North and South Ossetia, as well as from other North Caucasus regions, continue to defend the interests of North Ossetia – that is, the interests of Russia.

What I want to say is that a lot of volunteer fighters are involved. We have two volunteer detachments in North Ossetia – Storm.Ossetia and Alania. Today, military personnel who serve under contracts are entitled to numerous benefits and support measures. Will volunteers be able to count on them as well?

Thank you.

**Vladimir Putin:** Actually, I have looked through the questions coming in, but it really is impossible to even leaf through all of them. How many are there, Dmitry?

**Yekaterina Berezovskaya:** Over two million.

**Dmitry Peskov:** Already 2.1 million.

**Vladimir Putin:** Nonetheless, a few days ago, Mr Peskov brought me a pile this tall, and I looked through them, and there were many questions like yours. I would like to repeat my view, and I am sure that there will be more questions like this. All volunteers who have taken up arms to defend Russia's interests, who are fighting for it and risking their health and lives, must be ensured absolutely identical conditions.

There have been a few problems, and we are aware of them. Only yesterday, analysing the incoming letters, I spoke about this with the Defence Minister and the Chief of the General Staff. I also discussed this with Ms Golikova in her capacity as the Deputy Prime Minister who leads the social bloc in the Government. We will need to adopt amendments to laws to address specific issues. We may come back to that. I am sure that the State Duma deputies will support them 100 percent; we just need to formulate them correctly.

We will definitely ensure that everyone has the same conditions and receives the same level support from the state.



I know that both Storm.Ossetia and Alania are fighting valiantly. The head of the region also spoke about this and reported to me.

**Pavel Zarubin:** Can I show you how many questions I have here? These are only those I selected on issuing certificates to veterans proving their status.

I suggest that we hear a question on this topic in a recorded video. Sergei Sobolev from Iskitim, Novosibirsk Region.

**Sergei Sobolev:** Good afternoon, Mr President.

It is a great honour and privilege for me to submit this question to you from Donbass. I am very close to the frontline right now and can hear the war very well. Here with me I have fighters from the Defence Ministry assault brigade, veterans of the brigade which bears your name. All the men here have been taking part in the special military operation for almost two years now. They have been fighting on the frontlines and are now near Donetsk. They have been highly effective in gaining ground, and the enemy is struggling to hold them back, with its defences cracking at the seams, as they say. Every new day brings new achievements.

Mr President, victory is already within reach, and even the enemy understands this. But when the war ends, there will be a need to provide support for the people who fought in it. Take the veterans – these are people with immense combat experience, who represent the example of true patriotism. They could help educate the younger generation and train a new generation of fighters for the Russian army.

Do you think that it would be sensible to create a military and patriotic educational organisation for our young people? Do you have any plans in this regard?

**Vladimir Putin:** First, I would like to thank you for what you are doing. This may sound a bit too formal but trust me – I sincerely mean it. The Chief of the General Staff, as well as other commanders have been briefing me on the situation in specific locations. Now that we have the veterans over there, we will have the situation under control, no doubt about that. These simple words offer an assessment of what you are doing, and what you can do and will, no doubt, accomplish on the battlefield.

As for whether people like you can contribute to educating the younger generation, our school students, young people in general, this is something that is extremely relevant. It is obvious and absolutely necessary for any country when it reaches a turning point in its history, as we have today.

Mentioning Bismarck may not be appropriate here, but there was a time when he served and lived in Russia, even if he went on to become an outstanding German leader. He once said that wars are not won by generals, but by schoolteachers and parish priests. He was absolutely right.

Educating young people in the spirit of patriotism – and I use this term in its most positive sense without referring to any form of crude patriotism – is crucial, and we are already moving in this direction. More than a thousand of your colleagues and comrades-in-arms who have completed their service and returned to civilian life are already working in schools or work with children and teenagers in other formats.

We will definitely continue this work and expand our efforts. It is one thing to read a patriotic book or watch a patriotic film, but teaching patriotism through your own example is quite another matter. The best way to do it is by personal example. There is no one better than you for this job.

**Pavel Zarubin:** We are broadcasting live which means that it goes the way it goes. Go ahead, Mr Peskov.

**Dmitry Peskov:** Thank you, Pavel.

**Vladimir Putin:** Excuse me, Dmitry.

“They’re killing the Volga.” What do you mean? What is wrong with the Volga?

**Pavel Zarubin:** It seems that we will be sticking to this format...

**Yekaterina Berezovskaya:** Indeed, the Volga is among the issues mentioned in the messages we have been receiving.

**Yelena Usmanova:** Good afternoon, Mr President. My name is Yelena Usmanova from Business Online, a business newspaper in Tatarstan.

This year, people living along the Volga region suffered from a disastrous decline in the water levels of the Kuybyshev Reservoir. Throughout the summer, the operator has been releasing water and sending it downstream while arguing that otherwise Astrakhan's fishing industry would suffer.

Do you think that we need to address the issue of the declining water levels in the Volga? Do you think that the way we approach this issue could cost us Russia's most prominent river?

Thank you.

**Vladimir Putin:** I do hope that this never happens. There is a conflict of interest involving the energy sector and other water users downstream. The energy sector wants to keep water levels at a sufficient level in order to generate enough power along the Volga cascade to meet the needs of industrial users and utilities. Meanwhile, there are water users downstream who want water levels to be high over there. Of course, sailors and ship owners want to ensure that Volga remains open to navigation and the deeper its waterway, the better. We know all this.

Trust me, the Government is working on it and will not let this situation spin out of control. Of course, this issue is real. I do agree with you on that.

**Dmitry Peskov:** Moving on, there are many questions, and we need to have some parity here.

**Vladimir Putin:** I suggest that we put Mr Peskov back in charge.

**Dmitry Peskov:** I can see ITAR-TASS in the middle sector. Go ahead, over there in the first row. Representative of the Kremlin pool, by the way. Go ahead, please.

**Yekaterina Korostovtseva:** Mr President, good afternoon. TASS news agency, Yekaterina Korostovtseva. We have a question on international matters for you. It has three parts.

What are the prospects, in your opinion, for bringing relations with the European Union back to normal? It has been becoming increasingly obvious lately that the Western countries have grown tired of helping Ukraine. What do you think about this new factor?

I have another question for you. The right has been gaining traction on the European political stage. What do you have to say about this topic and is this a matter of concern to you?

Thank you.

**Vladimir Putin:** As for normalising relations, it does not depend on us alone. We did not do anything to sour them; it was them who did it and who consistently tried to push us further back, disregarding our interests.

How did the conflict in Ukraine begin? Let us look back, even though it may take three or four minutes. It began with the state coup in Ukraine in 2014. Before that, we did our best for decades, I repeat, for decades, to develop normal relations with Ukraine, even after the events that amounted to a state coup, when Viktor Yanukovich was prevented from assuming office after he won the [presidential] election in the second round. But they decided to hold a third round. What was it if not a state coup? The [Ukrainian] Constitution did not allow for a third round. It was a gradual coup. But we accepted that.

What happened next? He [Yanukovich] won the next election, and what did our so-called opponents do? They staged a state coup.

Do you see the core of the problem? The problem is, as I have always said and as I am saying today, that despite the current tragic developments, Russians and Ukrainians are essentially one people. What is happening now is an immense tragedy; it is like a civil war between brothers who stand on different sides [of the conflict]. But overall, they are not, to a large extent, responsible for this.

The southeastern part of Ukraine has always been pro-Russian because it is historically a Russian territory. I see a colleague holding up a sign saying “Turkiye.” He knows, and people in Turkiye know that the entire Black Sea region was incorporated into Russia as the result of Russo-Turkish wars. What does Ukraine have to do with that? Neither Crimea nor the Black Sea region has any connection to Ukraine. Odessa is a Russian city. We know this. Everyone knows this. But they [Ukrainians] have concocted some historical nonsense.

Well now, Vladimir Lenin incorporated these regions into Ukraine when the Soviet Union was established. We did not dispute that after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, and we were ready to live within that paradigm. However, this southeastern part is pro-Russian, which was important to us. They always voted for those who advocated a pro-Russian stance in Ukraine's domestic and foreign policy. On the whole, this suited Russia.

But after the 2014 state coup, it became clear to us that they would use force to prevent us from developing normal relations with Ukraine. They spent US\$5 billion on that state coup, as the Americans openly admitted, without any hesitation.

In 2014, three foreign ministers from Europe (from Poland, Germany and France) went [to Ukraine] to sign off as guarantors of agreements between the government – President Yanukovich – and the opposition. They agreed to resolve their disagreements peacefully. Two days later, they carried out a coup d'état. Why did they do it? They could have run and won the next election. But no. They wanted it straight away, and they wanted to create a conflict – that is why.

Who did it? Our American “buddies.” And the Europeans, who signed the agreements between the government and the opposition as guarantors, pretended they did not know anything about it. Today, if you ask them in Europe if anyone remembers this – no, they do not. But we have not forgotten and we will not forget.

That, combined with a burning urge to creep up to our borders and drag Ukraine into NATO – all of this has led to the tragedy. In addition, there has been bloodshed in Donbass for eight years. All this taken together has led to the tragedy that we are now experiencing. They forced us to take these actions.

So, as I say, in a situation where the United States conceived and orchestrated this act with Europe standing by and averting its gaze, or playing along and singing along with them, how can we build relations with them in these circumstances? We would – we did not break off any ties – but they pretend they do not know or remember anything. Only two or three times did they mention the Minsk agreements, saying they were not for real and were never going to be implemented. In 2014, they also signed those guarantees, those agreements between the government and the opposition in Ukraine just like that, and immediately forgot about them or threw them away.

Do you see my point? My point is that they have lost their sovereignty to a large extent, as we can see now, and they are making many decisions to their own detriment. To their own detriment! But they do it, nonetheless.

Outwardly, many European politicians may look like General de Gaulle, who took up arms to fight for his country's interests, who rallied whatever resources France could muster to resist the occupiers. But in reality, they are more like Marshal Pétain – although he was a WWI hero, he became a collaborator and succumbed to the invaders during World War II.

Almost everyone [in Europe] behaves this way, except for a few people. Robert Fico became a new leader [in Slovakia] after the election, and Viktor Orbán in Hungary. I have said many times that they are not pro-Russia politicians, they are pro-national – they are defending their countries' interests. But there are too few politicians like this; I do not know why they do not exist. Maybe this has to do with Europe's excessive dependence on the Big Brother – the United States. But we are ready to build relations with them.

In fact, we are ready to build relations with the United States as well. We believe that America is an important country on the world stage. But this absolutely imperial policy the country pursues is bad for them, not even for us. Why? Because the public expects them to act like an empire, and if they agree to compromise on something or concede something to someone, their voters will see this as a failure or a flaw. That may partly be the reason the elites have to act in this way.

As soon as they change on a deeper level, and begin to respect other people, other countries, start searching for compromises instead of addressing their problems using sanctions and military force, which would create the underlying conditions for restoring full-fledged relations. So far, there are no such conditions. But we are ready for this.

**Dmitry Peskov:** Mr President, not all of our war correspondents are on the frontline. I see Nikolai Dolgachev in the studio. Ask your question, please.

**Nikolai Dolgachev,** Mr President, good afternoon!

I am Nikolai Dolgachev, Vesti correspondent and now the director of the VGTRK affiliate in Lugansk.

The Lugansk Republic has almost been fully liberated. Peaceful life is being restored, but we are worried about the whole front, knowing what heavy fighting is going on in the south and along the Dnieper. People have even been talking for some time about a certain bridgehead on the left bank of the Dnieper, in the Krynki township area. What kind of a bridgehead is it and how do we stand there?

And, I would like to ask you an additional question, with your permission. Large-scale work on restoring social and other infrastructure facilities is really going on in the liberated regions that are already a bit further from the front. We see this with our own eyes and life is changing a lot, but many people ask, and I will join them, what is the future of the new regions of our country? What is the goal? What will they be like in our country in several years?

And we know, Mr President, whatever you say will happen, so please tell us what will happen.

**Vladimir Putin:** It would be good if whatever I say would happen but, unfortunately, this is not always the case. Such is the world's practice. I think everyone sitting here, listening to us and looking at us has the same experience. We talk about something, we want something to happen, and some things happen and others do not. This is normal, but it is certainly necessary to strive to reach one's goals.

Now about Krynki. The enemy announced a big counteroffensive but nothing came of it anywhere. The last attempt – at any rate it looks like the last attempt for now – was to break through to the left bank of the Dnieper and ensure the movement towards Crimea. Everyone is talking about this, it is common knowledge, and it is nothing new. What happened in this section?

The Armed Forces of Ukraine focused its artillery shelling on a very narrow section of the left bank. To keep our men alive and not to subject them to excessive risk, not to sustain losses, the military command decided to retreat for several metres (I will tell you and as a war correspondent you understand what I am talking about). They are hiding their personnel in the forest to save it from unnecessary losses.

The Armed Forces of Ukraine walked into this section. It is small – about 1,200 metres long and some 300 metres wide. I do not even understand why they are doing this – they are simply pushing their people into death. The Ukrainian military say themselves that this is a one-way trip. To get the personnel there – about 80 people were there

the whole time, but now the number is somewhat smaller – they are using only boats, and the boats are under fire from artillery, drones and other weapons. The sanitary losses among our personnel are two or three people, and there were six wounded three days ago. The enemy has dozens of dead. They were simply caught in a “fire bag.” They are throwing their men into it only for political reasons – I believe it’s just for political reasons.

Where does this come from? One can only guess and speculate. Apparently, it has something to do with foreign travel by Ukrainian leaders to beg for more money to keep the country running, to pay for the military component, equipment, and munitions. It appears that their approach is based on the assumption that as long as they travel and beg for arms, everyone will believe that the “counteroffensive” by Ukraine’s armed forces has at least some chances of achieving success, regardless of losses. They are just being driven out of there; that is all there is to it. They can build bridges and pontoons, but they don’t do this because they know these structures will be destroyed instantly, since they are within our reach. That is what is happening.

Here is what I would like to draw your attention to. These are not just servicemen of the Ukrainian armed forces; they are the elite, the assault squads. There are not many of them, actually. If you tally the losses sustained by the Armed Forces of Ukraine over the past 45 days, you will know how tangible it is. I believe this represents foolish and irresponsible behaviour on the part of the country's political leaders. But it is up to them.

This is no longer a secret. Some time ago, I told the Chief of the General Staff, “Do not rush to push them out of there.” I will be open about it: it is good for us if they mindlessly continue to send more troops there. This is unfortunate, but that is the logic of hostilities. But they continue to do so, and it is their tragedy, I think. Nevertheless, the Minister and the Chief of the General Staff said, “No, we will continue to gradually narrow down their latitude of movement.” This is what is happening. I think that everything will be over soon.

Now, you asked me about the overall state of affairs on the front. You already know it yourself, you are an expert. By the way, I watch you there and my heart sinks, especially when I see female reporters on the front line. I think maybe we should tell the main channels to remove women from there; it is a scary sight. Well, ok.



You are aware of the situation. Let us be humble about it, but our Armed Forces are improving their position almost along the entire line of contact. Almost all of them are engaged in active combat. And the position of our troops is improving along [the entire line of contact].

Now, about the future of these regions. There are many questions about this coming from the new regions and from other parts of the Russian Federation: what will become of them? Annually, the federal budget provides for over a trillion rubles for the development of these regions and their gradual integration into Russia's economic and social life.

Of course, the situation in other regions is much better. This is because, for some reason, just like in Crimea, Kiev's previous authorities never focused too much on these regions. However, over a trillion rubles are invested annually and will be invested in the coming years. Plus, these regions and other regions of the Russian Federation have established twin-region relations and these regions have already invested, I think, about 100–140, around 150 billion. Other regions will chip in and invest about 100 billion more.

Here is what I would like to share with you. Importantly, this year these “new regions” paid 170 billion rubles into the federal budget, meaning that the economy of these regions is recovering and getting back to normal. Of course, much remains to be done, and we will handle it.

**Pavel Zarubin:** We are working live and there can always be technical nuances. A little earlier, we saw a video question from VGTRK war correspondent Sergei Zenin.

**Vladimir Putin:** May I?

**Pavel Zarubin:** Of course.

**Vladimir Putin:** I noticed some of your colleagues. The person over there has a sign that says “Turkiye.” Let's hear them.

**Pavel Zarubin:** And then we will get back to the war correspondent.

**Vladimir Putin:** Certainly, I promise.

**Yekaterina Berezovskaya:** Some war correspondents are actually women.

**Dmitry Peskov:** Please introduce yourself.

**Ali Jura:** Ali Jura, Anadolu Agency.

Mr President, as a result of Israel's attack on Gaza, a child dies every 6–7 minutes. Eight thousand Palestinian children and more than 6,000 women have already died. Unfortunately, the UN and world major powers are not able to stop these attacks. Do you think the UN has lost its function?

Also, with respect to Palestine, are Turkiye and Russia working together to ensure peace in the region? What are Moscow and Ankara's common plans on international and regional issues? Do you plan to visit Turkiye any time soon? Thank you.

**Vladimir Putin:** First of all, of course, I am watching the developments in Gaza. I will tell you what I think. In general, I agree with you, but it should be noted that President of Turkiye Erdogan is playing a significant leading role in improving the situation in Gaza. He is certainly one of the leaders of the international community who is paying attention to this tragedy and doing everything to change the situation for the better, so that conditions are created for a lasting peace. This is obvious. He is very active in this matter. And God bless him. Because what is happening is, of course, a disaster.

We were just talking about the Ukraine crisis – and we will return to it later. You and the audience here, everybody in the world can see (compare the special military operation and Gaza and you will see the difference): nothing of this kind is happening in Ukraine.

You mentioned the deaths of thousands of women and children. The Secretary-General of the United Nations called today's Gaza the biggest children's cemetery in the world. This opinion speaks volumes. It is an objective opinion, what else can I say?

As for the UN's role, you know, it is nothing out of the ordinary and I have already said that. During the Cold War, there were different forces and different countries that often blocked decisions promoted by other countries. But the United Nations was initially created for the purpose of finding a consensus. Without a consensus, decisions cannot be made. So, nothing out of the ordinary is happening at the UN; it was always like this,

especially during the Cold War. There is a reason why Foreign Minister of the USSR Gromyko had the nickname, Mr No, because the Soviet Union very frequently vetoed decisions. It is very significant. When there is a veto, no steps that a country sees as hostile towards itself will be taken. And it is important. It is important to preserve such mechanisms in the UN; otherwise it will simply be reduced to a talking shop as happened during a certain period after World War I.

But it does not mean that we cannot and should not seek these consensuses. We should. We, like Turkiye, proceed from the premise that the UN decisions to create a Palestinian state with its capital in East Jerusalem should, after all, be implemented, and this is extremely important. It is necessary to create the foundations for an Israeli-Palestinian settlement.

Now let us talk about plans. President Erdogan and I are in constant contact on these issues, and our positions are very similar. I think that we will manage to meet; in fact, I am planning to do just that. I also planned this quite recently, but I can say – there are no secrets in this regard – that it did not work out on account of President Erdogan's busy schedule. I was prepared to take a flight to Turkiye, and I told him so, but it failed to transpire because of his busy schedule. He was unable to meet, not me. This happens sometimes. But we continue to have talks and perhaps we will arrange this visit early next year.

And now let us look at our efforts. As you may know, I visited two Arab countries not so long ago and had consultations with our friends in Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. We are also in contact with Egypt.

First, it is necessary to keep people in Gaza.

Second, it is necessary to bring humanitarian aid on a massive scale to these people.

When I was on my visit to the Emirates, it transpired that the UAE had opened a field hospital in Gaza, not far from the Rafah border crossing and the Egyptian border. We discussed whether it was possible for Russia to open a hospital of its own at a stadium in the same area. But for this to happen, we need to have consent from both Egypt and Israel. I talked to the President of Egypt, and he is in favour of this idea. I also talked to Prime Minister Netanyahu, and they consulted various armed agencies. The Israeli side believes that opening a Russian hospital in Gaza is not safe.

But this does not mean that we will discontinue our efforts. If today this is not safe and the Israeli side does not support the idea, we nevertheless have agreements with the Israelis, and they asked us to step up our deliveries of medical equipment and medicines, and we will certainly do that. So, we are in contact with all parties involved under the current developments and will work actively on this.

**Pavel Zarubin:** We would like to say a few words about our brave young women, our war correspondents. They are real reporters. We have a link with Channel One correspondent Valentina Solovyova who is working in the Zaporozhye Region again.

**Valentina Solovyova:** Good afternoon.

We are visiting the Melitopol Regional Oncology Clinic. Here is one of its wards. Look at the beds squeezed inside. We see three beds here, and another six over there.

Allow me to introduce Konstantin Lakunin, the Head Physician of this Clinic.

**Konstantin Lakunin:** Good afternoon.

**Valentina Solovyova:** Mr Lakunin, we can see that you have many patients. What is the situation like with doctors?

**Konstantin Lakunin:** We have many patients, and, of course, we are hard-pressed for doctors, as everywhere in Russia. However, our situation is perhaps even more dramatic: we are not only short of oncologists, haematologists or child oncologists. Actually, we just do not have them at all, so the clinic has to assume all these functions. We would like to thank the federal research centres that provide clinical and methodological assistance and take our patients for treatment.

**Valentina Solovyova:** How many patients does one doctor treat?

**Konstantin Lakunin:** A doctor receives 50 to 60 people every day compared to the standard 30-patient quota. Their workloads have increased by about 100 percent. Doctors at hospitals have similar loads, with one doctor treating at least 20 oncology patients; this also exceeds the standard care quotas by about 100 percent.

**Valentina Solovyova:** Nevertheless, you continue to develop, and I see that you are receiving new equipment.

**Konstantin Lakunin:** Yes, we are renovating our surgery ward on a large scale, and we have already received the new equipment for it under the federal programmes. It is already here, including an operating table for the new operating rooms. So, we believe we will see new successes in our work.

**Valentina Solovyova:** You are facing serious personnel shortages. What is your question?

**Konstantin Lakunin:** Here is my question and proposal: it would be appropriate to discuss the issue of drafting a special federal programme for attracting human resources to the new regions, to healthcare and social sectors. This might imply housing projects, the provision of land plots or low interest mortgage loans. It is necessary to attract qualified people here through various methods.

**Valentina Solovyova:** Do you offer competitive wages?

**Konstantin Lakunin:** Our current wages are very competitive; to be honest, specialists come here and sign up because of the salary. We can't say that nobody is coming, they do come, but these measures are obviously not enough.

**Valentina Solovyova:** Thank you very much. So, this is our question.

**Vladimir Putin:** The question is clear. You know what was pleasant to hear? When the doctor said that we lack professionals, doctors, all across Russia, he said. That is, he considers his region part of Russia. From this point of view, I would like to note this question.

The problem is clear. The proposal to create a special federal programme that would help purchase housing, etc. I do not know whether it is necessary to create a special programme, but I agree that we need to pay attention to this issue. We have preferential two percent mortgage for these regions, it is more than preferential and even better than for families with children overall.

But what is the problem there, as I understand it? The problem is that the preference only works for new housing, and there is not much new housing being built there. So, it is necessary to extend it to the pre-owned property market as well, like in the Far East; it will then work quickly and take effect immediately. This is the first thing.

Second, regarding the creation of additional incentives. If the salary is competitive, as the doctor said, what do we need?

(Addressing the audience and commenting on the poster.) Shumbrat. Shumbrat is “hello” in Mordovian. Yes, I will answer your question in a minute.

So, what is it necessary to do? It is necessary to increase the relocation allowance for participants in the County Doctor programme, like in the Far East. Increase it to two million rubles for doctors, and one million rubles for paramedics. I think this would be a good incentive.

I will definitely discuss this with the Government; the budget has already been adopted but we still can give it some thought and come up with solutions for the short term.

**Yekaterina Berezovskaya:** Mr President, we see that our colleagues cannot even wait until you finish your answer. Let’s give the floor to...

**Dmitry Peskov:** Mr President, you said “shumbrat,” right?

**Vladimir Putin:** Yes, I promised. You are from Mordovia, right?

**Dmitry Peskov:** Let us give the microphone to the young lady in red, please.

**Anastasia Vidyayeva:** Mr President, good afternoon.

**Vladimir Putin:** Good afternoon.

**Anastasia Vidyayeva:** I am Anastasia Vidyayeva from the Mordovia State Television and Radio Broadcasting Company, branch of VGTRK. I represent our multi-ethnic republic.

I want to invite you to visit our pavilion at the Russia exhibition.

**Vladimir Putin:** Thank you.

**Anastasia Vidyayeva:** First, I want to thank you for this idea; the feedback is amazing, Mr President. A poll has been held recently: 97 percent of Russians pride themselves [in Russia's achievements] after visiting this expo. Of course, the regions have a lot to be proud of.

Thanks to your support, Mordovia has been developing innovative production. It includes import substitution, the production of fibre-optic and other cables, as well as pharmaceuticals, and the calling card of Mordovia, our black diamond – fumed oak. We harvest it from the bottoms of rivers and create beautiful things from it.

Mr President, this expo is not only an opportunity to see beautiful things, but also to discuss various issues, resolve issues with the business community, etc. So, I invite you to visit it and I would also want to be there myself. Every girl, even a grown-up girl, dreams of a New Year miracle. So, I think you will not refuse the invitation.

**Vladimir Putin:** Ok. Thank you very much for the invitation. It is true, Mordovia is a very beautiful republic. I very much like how the local people treat their traditions and their culture, national dress, and the traditions in the broad sense of the word.

As for the regions and the regional part of the exhibition, it is really a success. Regional expos at VDNKh are probably one of the most interesting places for visitors. I agree with you, and I will try to visit the exhibition.

Thank you very much.

**Dmitry Peskov:** Before we go back to answering people's questions, here is another one from the media, Match TV. I would guess it has something to do with sports, judging by the channel name.

**Maria Korobova:** Good afternoon,

I am Maria Korobova from Match TV. Obviously, my question is about sports as there is something to be asked and addressed.

A week ago, the IOC introduced very strict eligibility conditions for Russian athletes to take part in the 2024 Olympic Games. Meanwhile, no special restrictions or requirements were introduced for, say, Israeli athletes. Given this, is it worth going to the Olympics at all? And overall, what are the developments around elite sports in our country?

And another one we cannot omit, as we receive many questions from the regions. Amidst the challenging situation, will efforts continue to implement the programme for the development of physical fitness and sports, particularly in Russia's remote areas? Thank you.

**Yekaterina Berezovskaya:** Mr. President, before you respond, let me say that you are a person that engages in sport, calling judo your first love. This is so, indeed. We have many requests from parents, coaches and even kids, who say they have the will to compete and win – but that there is no place for training and that the conditions are simply poor.

Let's watch a video message from Crimea.

(Video is shown.)

**Artemy Doroshenko:** Mr President.

We are people from Crimea; we live in the village of Solnechnaya Dolina in the urban district of Sudak. We are athletes who play football and field hockey; we have competed in several events, including regional and national events, and have always won medals, cups, certificates and even first place.

The gym in the club building has always been our workout place, but this year training there has become completely impossible for us. The gym has not seen any upgrade for over 40 years and now has long-rotted floors, walls covered with mold, broken windows, and water dripping from the ceiling. It is even colder in the building than outside. Our coaches have sent requests to various authorities, but the local and other officials ignore them. Now, in December, we are holding our training sessions outside.

We are asking you to provide assistance in renovating our gym, and help us to be heard and receive help. We are willing to grow up strong and healthy to defend and support



our Motherland. We wish you victory!

**Vladimir Putin:** Good. I will now answer these athletes, of course.

As for the IOC and comparisons with other athletes such as Israelis and others, first, everything international officials are doing towards Russian sports totally contradicts and distorts the words spoken by Pierre de Coubertin, "Oh sport, you are Peace!"

This is why the Olympic movement was created in the first place: to unite people, not separate them. Today, international officials have become too consumed by the business aspect of sports movements, having become vastly dependent on sponsors. The latter care about the cost of ads per minute on TV and so on. They have enough problems of their own. If they continue acting this way, they will bury the Olympic movement. The very idea of Olympism has been tarnished.

You have mentioned Israel and Israeli athletes in this connection, despite the events in Gaza... If I supported this in any way now, I would have been like those international sports officials. Sport should be beyond politics, it is designed to unite people.

That is why we, just like... You know, we say that it is not nice to count money in other people's pockets. The same goes for this case as well, it is not nice to point your finger at other athletes. There are problems there, as your Turkish colleague and I have spoken about just now. But what do athletes have to do with this? Let them go and take part in competitions without any restrictions. And the same should be done with regard to Russian athletes.

But this isn't happening; yielding to the influence of Western elites, they adopt decisions that suit them but are not beneficial to global sport. Likewise, European politicians adopt decisions that benefit the United States and its economy but are detrimental to themselves. The same is happening in this sphere as well.

So, should athletes take part in these competitions or not? There is one more detail here. It is necessary to take a close look at what the conditions are, including the flag and the anthem. I always said that athletes train for years and should be given an opportunity to take part in major tournaments, including the Olympic Games. Everyone knows whose flag it is, and everyone knows that these are our athletes. This

is obvious. And this is why I supported, in principle, the idea that our athletes should take part in such competitions.

But today we must scrutinise the conditions the IOC is pushing. If these artificial conditions are politically motivated, artificial conditions that are designed to cut off our leaders, our athletes who are capable of winning gold, silver or bronze medals, to decapitate our national team, in this case... For example, our athletes from CSKA or Dynamo could be unable to compete because they are allegedly connected with our Armed Forces, even though CSKA has no relation to our Armed Forces now, it is a private organisation.

They can invent any reasons, but if their goal is to cut off our leading athletes and to show that Russian sport is not progressing or is even deteriorating, our Ministry of Sport and the National Olympic Committee of Russia should analyse the situation and adopt a balanced decision.

**Yekaterina Berezovskaya:** Mr President, you promised to respond to the video address from Crimea.

**Vladimir Putin:** Yes, from Crimea, I certainly will do that.

I have taken note of their address, and I would like to tell them that we must develop sport and all our programmes. Incidentally, I believe that about 1.5 billion rubles, or even more, 1.7 billion rubles, were allocated from the federal budget in the past years for the development of regional and municipal sports. This year, the [sports] budget is less than 700 million rubles.

But we must certainly resume this funding, which will be done, incidentally in the next presidential programme. We must do this by all means, and we will do this.

As for this particular question from Crimea, I will discuss the matter with Mr Aksyonov, and we will provide federal assistance. We will definitely address this issue in a targeted manner.

**Yekaterina Berezovskaya:** There are many such questions here. Here is a whole stack of them, including some regarding hockey in the Tyumen Region and other sports.

Mr Peskov, back to you.

**Vladimir Putin:** Their question has reached us, and we will help them.

**Dmitry Peskov:** The Russian Popular Front will be tasked with processing all these requests throughout the following year, as we have said.

Friends, I see Dmitry Kulko, who is also a frontline correspondent. Seeing him wearing a suit and a tie is quite unusual. Can he have the microphone, please?

**Dmitry Kulko:** Dmitry Kulko, frontline correspondent for Channel One. Good afternoon, Mr President.

**Vladimir Putin:** Good afternoon.

**Dmitry Kulko:** I have several questions from fighters deployed in the special military operation zone, if I may.

First, do you think that the system for paying military personnel has been running smoothly? Can it be improved? I know people who have not received money for months.

My second question deals with the wounded and the Defenders of the Fatherland foundation. Its purpose is to support the families of those killed in the special military operation and its veterans. What is your assessment of the way this foundation has been working?

Mr President, if you will allow me, I would like to submit a proposal. As a matter of fact, today fighters who get wounded and get hospital treatment must then return to their units in order to be examined by a military medical commission. This means that they must return to the special military operation zone after suffering severe wounds. This applies to those who, sadly, have lost arms or legs. This is a major challenge for them. It would be better to have these men undergo this examination where they get their treatment or rehabilitation.

My last question is about drones. There is still a deficit of drones on the frontline, Mr President. The fighters have been pleading for more all the time, and we have been

running fundraisers to make it happen. People have been willing to donate – and I would like to thank them for their effort. Still, there is not enough.

For example, we have recently held a fundraiser together with the Popular Front and delivered several dozen drones to the 4<sup>th</sup> Brigade, which is fighting courageously in Kleshcheyevka right now. Regretfully, in less than a month, they only have a half of the drones left. The troops have to sacrifice the drones they have all the time: operators have to fly them during assault operations regardless of rain or electronic interference, since it is our men, our youngsters down below. There is no way we can leave them without the intelligence they need. When will we see any improvements?

Thank you very much.

**Vladimir Putin:** You surely must have noticed some improvements. Things are getting better, are they not?

**Dmitry Kulko:** They are, but in present-day warfare...

**Vladimir Putin:** This is a fact, but you are right, of course, we do not always have enough, and not everything works out the way it was supposed to.

As I have already said, the frontline is almost 2,000 kilometres long, you know. And it may well be that we are not always able to supply all of it on time. In fact, this is what is happening. But the production volumes have been growing. By the way, private actors have been buying many drones, including abroad. The state, the Defence Ministry, manufacturers are also proactively involved in these efforts, of course.

You also know that there are many new things in terms of electronic warfare too. You know these designations probably better than I do. We currently install the Lesochek systems on almost all combat vehicles as far as possible. Of course, we will expand their use.

As concerns public response and the Popular Front and its work, an entire movement was created called Everything for Victory. You know, of course, the state could do without this sort of support, but it cannot be stopped. With all my heart, I want to thank our citizens who are so passionate about the needs at the front and our people fighting for Russia's interests.

People have donated more than ten billion rubles. Of course, the state has this kind of money, especially now when our economy is on the rise. But the fact that people send their own money, weave nets, knit mittens and socks and send all this... Three million children have sent letters to the front, three million! And you know how much these letters warm our fighters' hearts. We will support this in every way possible. I want to express gratitude to all volunteers.

Perhaps glitches happen occasionally. You know it, we meet with you on a regular basis, I mean with war correspondents, and you monitor the situation there. I hope that these contacts will continue, and you will, along with the Defence Ministry, communicate any problems to me.

As for the fact that wounded soldiers have to return from hospitals to military units for paperwork, I have seen these questions in letters. The situation has changed though. Either you have outdated information or I have inaccurate data. The Defence Ministry told me that paperwork can be obtained in rehabilitation centres rather than at hospitals, because after hospital, they are immediately sent to rehabilitation centres. I was told the process is running well.

I will certainly check that all is working well when it comes to housing and benefits, as well as paperwork, so they do not have to return to their military units. But if this is still happening, I will certainly speak to the Defence Minister. Changes must be made.

As for the Defenders of the Fatherland foundation, it operates well. There is a strong team of people. I met with the director, Anna Tsivileva, and visited a regional branch [in Veliky Novgorod]. These people are wonderful and very passionate about this positive work. Their responsibilities are limited though. Under the foundation's constituent documents, they have no direct involvement formally. For example, I have always been against them managing any funds. But I think they should have broader rights with respect to controlling allocations and controlling the result of allocations, including funding for rehabilitation.

I do not want to go into detail, but I know that State Duma deputies are also dealing with this matter after my visit to one of the branches. We will be improving this foundation and ensure that it becomes an effective tool for protecting the interests of our people involved in combat operations.

**Yekaterina Berezovskaya:** Mr President, you mentioned earlier the enormous role that volunteers play in the current circumstances, and their generous spirit. They have submitted many questions.

Marina Makeyeva from the Moscow Region has the following question for you. Today, people are widely engaged in helping the armed forces by sending humanitarian aid, building materials, supplies, and transport. Why are ordinary people doing this rather than the state?

**Vladimir Putin:** I just covered this and think I answered this question. The state accounts for 99.9 percent of these efforts. But people do so of their own volition. We welcome this and will not put any restraints on it. I just want to thank them for that.

**Yekaterina Berezovskaya:** You said a few words about electronic jamming devices. Wounded assault unit member Andrei Nikishin from the Omsk Region asks you to provide electronic jamming devices against drones. They simply do not have them.

**Vladimir Putin:** Give me the specific information later. What location is in question? We will check. There may be a shortage at some point in a particular unit. Again, the contact line is over 2,000 kilometres long, and there is a force of 617,000 deployed in the combat zone. So, yes, of course, there may be setbacks somewhere. Please give me the specifics, and I would like the war correspondents, whom I meet with regularly, to update me on his matter as well. We will definitely look into it.

**Pavel Zarubin:** And let us follow up on an important video call. Sergei Sobolev from the Novosibirsk Region.

**Sergei Sobolev:** Mr President,

Sergei Sobolev here. On November 13, 2022, I signed a six-month contract with a private military company. Upon returning home, I contacted the military commissariat of the town of Iskitim to obtain a combat veteran certificate, but my request was turned down. I then reached out to the Defenders of the Fatherland Fund, but was turned down again. I contacted the Social Support Centre of the town of Iskitim and was turned down this time, too.

Please help me sort this matter out as most of my comrades-in-arms also served in this private military company.

**Pavel Zarubin:** There are many questions like this.

**Vladimir Putin:** You know what the problem is all about? There is a problem. I think these are setbacks that the Defence Ministry should have prevented.

The problem is that formally and legally there are no private military companies in Russia. They are not provided for by law; that is the problem. This is my first point.

Second, the military who participated in the hostilities as part of private military companies, so to speak private military companies, did not conclude contracts with the state. This is the main problem. Commanders of these private military companies were in some kind of a relationship with the state. Unfortunately, payments were also made in cash. And that is also a big problem. It is very difficult to even establish any lists of the personnel serving in these military units.

However, all these people, I know these people firsthand, children of some of my close associates fought in private military companies. Among the people around me who work with me, there were family members, some of whom have given their lives for the Motherland fighting as part of this private military company.

By all means, their rights must be reinstated. They are entitled to the kind of social benefits and support from the state that other participants in hostilities enjoy. There is no doubt about it; it is my absolutely principled position.

I will not delve into details now, but it needs to be done. The Defence Ministry is aware of this, and the Government is aware of this approach. If needed, and maybe this is the only way to go, we will have to amend the law, and we will amend it, we will definitely make it happen. In any case, I promise, we will do our best to make it happen.

There are lines appearing on the screens, and one just read, "Yelpatyev, Yaroslavl Region: please connect us to gas." We will definitely consider this. Perhaps, we need to return to the issue of gas supply infrastructure. I already marked Yelpatyev, Yaroslavl Region.

**Pavel Zarubin:** Let's make a video call now. Yulia Bereza, village of Rysaikino.

Ms Bereza, if you can hear us, please ask your question.

**Yulia Bereza:** Mr President, good afternoon, sir,

I am an active military member, and I am not in Rysaikino right now, but in Lugansk. Junior Sergeant Yulia Bereza, medical motor rifle battalion.

Ever since the beginning of the special military operation, I have been making every effort to go to Donbass as a volunteer, like my husband. On May 10, 2022, I signed a voluntary mobilisation paper at the enlistment office in Donetsk and was enlisted in the rifle regiment of the People's Militia of the DPR. I will say right at the outset that both of us joined up due to our convictions – to defend our Motherland and people, to protect our loved ones, as well as to uphold truth and justice.

However, because we were mobilised in the DPR, and not in the Russian Federation, I could not apply for benefits as a special military operation participant. I wanted to ensure benefits for my mother who is still in Rysaikino. In particular, I have obtained a war veteran identification card in the DPR, but it is valid only in the DPR. When I tried to login to my military member profile to apply for benefits, I found there was no such service member with the number on my personal file. My husband is in the same situation.

Therefore, I am appealing to you to facilitate the procedure for obtaining benefits for our mothers. Thank you very much.

**Vladimir Putin:** Thank you for your question.

Here is the problem. As you are saying, you were enlisted in the People's Militia of the DPR. The People's Militia, so that everyone understands, is mostly the same as the Armed Forces – they have been active on the line of contact and they still are.

But the problem is that you signed your contracts before the Lugansk People's Republic and the Donetsk People's Republic became part of the Russian Federation. As far as I understand, Comrade Senior Sergeant is a citizen of the Russian Federation, but it is an even bigger problem for those who did not have Russian citizenship.



The papers you have entitle you to benefits in the DPR or LPR. One way to change this could be to have them recognised in the Russian Federation. But there is another way to solve the problem – to issue relevant documents directly on behalf of the Russian Federation.

Relevant commissions have been set up in the Donetsk and the Lugansk republics, and these commissions are considering such issues. As far as I know, about 4,500 people in the DPR have had their rights confirmed, and 17,500 more in the LPR. In Donetsk, several thousand ID cards have already been issued, about 2,000, I think, and another 1,700 in the Lugansk Republic.

We are already moving in this direction and we will step up the work to restore and confirm the rights of war veterans. You should have no doubts about that. If something is still pending, I am sure that we will get it done. But if you have any difficulties with contacting your commission, you just need to tell us what these difficulties are, and we will resolve them.

**Vladimir Putin:** I suggest that we go with “the North.”

**Darya Shuchalina:** Good afternoon, Mr President.

I am Darya Shuchalina from the Komi Republic. I represent the municipal newspaper Panorama of the Capital and am a member of the Civic Chamber in our region.

I am passing on a question that people in our northern territories – Inta and Vorkuta – instructed me to ask. You know, unfortunately a very important programme for resettling people from the far north and areas with the same status is being carried out too slowly. This concerns the whole country, not only our region. We have six such municipalities in Komi. Naturally, people who have spent their entire lives developing the North and are now in well-deserved retirement would like to spend their pension time in areas with a milder climate.

I will cite only two figures. People in our republic received only 129 housing certificates this year, but there are 21,000 people on the waiting list. Obviously, it would be unrealistic to ask you to resettle every applicant instantly, so I will suggest two alternatives.

Option one: give priority to two categories on the waiting list – people with disabilities and pensioners. These two categories in our region should really enjoy priority.

Option two: either find the possibility of additional funding in our already tight federal budget for next year or, if this is too difficult, our region is prepared, if our authorities receive a budget loan with a low interest rate, to resettle Inta and Vorkuta residents within the region, for instance, in Syktyvkar, our capital, or south of Komi where the climate is more or less acceptable.

Is it possible to consider one of these two alternatives? Maybe there are some other options. Thank you.

And thank you for resolving our issue of transferring the Vorkuta Airport complex to the federal authority. This was a long-awaited, very important decision. Thank you very much for that.

**Vladimir Putin:** The important thing is that it develops.

**Darya Shuchalina:** Yes.

**Vladimir Putin:** Because it happens that when we transfer something to a region, it all gets stuck there and then the region comes and asks us to give it federal money for development.

**Darya Shuchalina:** The administration of our republic is very proactive and, considering that Mr [Vladimir] Uyba asked you about this, all the decisions have already been taken.

**Vladimir Putin:** Yes, I know.

Mr Uyba is a very proactive and well connected person. He worked in the federal government, and he can do a good job in his current position.

Can you repeat your proposal, please? You suggested focusing attention during the relocation programme on two...

**Darya Shuchalina:** Yes, on two groups of people waiting to be relocated – people with disabilities and pensioners. There are two possibilities, as we see it.

The first one is very simple: to request additional funding from the federal budget.

The second option, which we can implement with regional funding, is to relocate the people who are taking part in this programme within Komi. To do that, we need a government guaranteed loan at a low interest rate, so that we can give these people housing in Syktyvkar or in the south of the republic. Komi is a large republic, and relocating people from the north to the centre or the south is an acceptable solution.

**Vladimir Putin:** You know, if the Finance Minister was with us today, he would say that there is no money available. The Finance Ministry never has money available. However, we can and should consider expanding this programme, of course. Indeed, those who have been working all their lives in the north want to move to regions with a milder climate at a certain period in their lives. This is understandable.

First of all, we will continue the programme. This is the key point.

Second, regarding the allocation of additional funds, this issue needs to be analysed. The budget for next year has been approved. I hope there will be additional revenues. It is this part of the budget that we should look at.

As for relocation within the republic, it is a possible solution. We will discuss this matter with the head of the republic. I will also talk with the Government. Loans are a complicated thing, but it could be a simpler way to help the region and not so burdensome on the Finance Ministry, although it will be a burden, nevertheless. But we should consider this option and try to implement it.

As for focusing attention on people entitled to benefits, it is the right decision. We will discuss it with the Government by all means. Thank you for your proposal.

**Dmitry Peskov:** Mr President, if I may, can we come back here, please? I suggest that we give the microphone to the young man over there. I think he is in the third row. Please, introduce yourself.

**Vladimir Seroukhov:** Vladimir Seroukhov, RBC. I have a currency-related question, if I may.

Javier Milei was elected President of Argentina the other day, and one of his main campaign promises was to replace the peso with the US dollar. Russia, on the contrary, has adopted a policy to dedollarise its economy by moving away from both the dollar and the euro in its international settlements.

What do you think about this process? Do Russia's settlements with its economic partners in rubles and national currencies of countries friendly to us make any sense and offer us any benefits? Since we are talking about the ruble, what are the factors that affect the rate of the ruble the most, pushing it up or down? What are the main driving forces today?

**Vladimir Putin:** Allow me to begin with Argentina, so that we do not have to come back to this question later. Indeed, we all know about the idea that Argentina's President-elect had to introduce the dollar in his country. Every country makes its own sovereign decisions, of course.

However, inflation in Argentina stands somewhere around 143 percent, I think, which creates a lot of challenges, as the country's preceding leaders told me, in terms of repaying the loans Argentina contracted here and there. So the logic here is quite clear.

But this means that the country loses much of its sovereignty. If today's leaders in Argentina do not see any other solution for addressing the country's financial and economic woes, this is their decision to make. Still, this would substantially undermine their sovereignty.

There is also a socioeconomic aspect here. You are from RBC, right? Your channel specialises on these matters, so you have specialists who will understand what I am about to say, and ordinary people will also understand because this is not rocket science. You see, even pegging your national currency to the dollar can have serious socioeconomic consequences.

There was a time when Argentina faced major financial challenges, and people went as far as to attack banks. But what will happen if they switch to the dollar or peg their currency to the dollar? Any government seeking to solve its economic issues always thinks about honouring its social commitments.

I can note with satisfaction that the Government of the Russian Federation has been able to fulfil its social obligations in full despite the fact that defence spending and security costs have increased to a certain extent. Of course, some may say that this is not enough and that we must do more, like in Komi, for example, as I have just said, where we need to allocate more funds for relocating people, and so forth. That said, whenever the state promises something, it delivers on its commitments and honours them.

As for the dollar peg, there is non-discretionary spending: pensions, salaries for public sector employees, social benefits, and the like. Quite often, a state does not have enough money to cover these expenses. So what happens when you peg your currency to the dollar?

If they have a national currency – the peso, they have a tool to slightly increase inflation. True, this is certainly not very good, but still, it is a tool for balancing between a healthy economy and the fulfilment of social obligations.

But if you do not have a national currency, you cannot print more money. This leaves the government with only one option – to cut social spending, slash wages, pensions, benefits, spending on medicine, on roads, other things, and on internal security. There are no other options. And in this regard, any government puts itself in a very difficult position in terms of domestic political stability. If our partners make this choice, it is their right; any country can determine what it should do and how it should be done.

As for us, you said that we were the ones who rejected these settlements, but we have not rejected anything. The situation is that they have been creating problems with foreign currency settlements for us. By the way, in doing so, they are once again shooting themselves in the foot. Why are they seeking to restrain the dollar and the euro's standing as universal currencies, as international reserve currencies? First of all, the dollar, of course.

In 2021, if I remember correctly, we used 87 percent of foreign currency to service our exports, including the dollar and the euro. The ruble, I think, accounted for about 11 – 13 percent, and the yuan, about 0.4 percent. As of September 2023, the ratio was as follows: the ruble, 40 percent; the yuan, 33 percent; and the dollar and the euro combined, 24 percent. Their share dropped from 87 to 24. Why did they do this? I repeat: they shot themselves in the foot.

Is this bad for us or not? Not really. Actually, the more we use the national currency in economic and financial transactions, the better. This boosts our sovereignty and our capabilities.

What does the exchange rate depend on? We have a floating exchange rate and it depends on market conditions, on the prices of our export goods, on growing demand within the country – and demand is growing. There is one more aspect – the Executive Order that was designed to regulate the foreign currency situation has played a role, and that, too, partly influenced the exchange rate.

What is the reason for this? In previous years, there was no need for any restrictions, because we received enough information from the countries that imported a significant volume of our goods, and we could track the movement of capital. Now we do not get any information from them because they cut off access. The Government and the Central Bank have no way of seeing what happens with the money that our exporters receive. The Central Bank and the Government have a legitimate interest in observing the ruble amounts accumulating, coming and going. In this sense, the Executive Order did introduce a few controls. But I believe that things will return to normal, so this is a temporary situation.

Overall, the financial market is generally stable. It is our priority to ensure this stability and predictability. And I believe we are succeeding in this.

**Dmitry Peskov:** Let's take one more question from the hall.

**Vladimir Putin:** Yes, go ahead, please. The sign reads "Kuban."

**Maxim Zhmutsky:** Good afternoon, Mr President.

**Vladimir Putin:** Good afternoon.

**Maxim Zhmutsky:** I am Maxim Zhmutsky, TV Channel 'Krasnodar,' Krasnodar Territory.

Mr President, this year, the resorts in Kuban have broken yet another, this time, historical record – 17.5 million tourists spent their vacations in our region. This was in the summer alone. Now we are having an intensive winter period. Of course, this is

a huge burden on the infrastructure, primarily transport, especially in view of the closed airports.

Mr President, are there any federal plans for developing transport accessibility to the south of the country? Maybe high-speed roads or railways?

I am bound to ask you the following question: literally yesterday, there was a report that a test flight will take place tomorrow, on December 15 from Moscow to Krasnodar Airport, and if, God willing, everything goes well, our Krasnodar Airport will be opened. How true is this?

Thank you.

**Vladimir Putin:** As for opening airports, the main criterion here is passenger safety. Passenger safety is the top priority when making a decision to open an airport. This applies to the Krasnodar Airport as well. Although it is far from the area of hostilities, the Defence Ministry has been instructed to continuously monitor the situation and eventually make the decision. If they are getting close to it, they will report to me and we will act then. It is necessary to look at this situation and analyse it again.

As for the development of other means of transport – air service, railways and autos, they are all making progress. You mentioned a high-speed railway. Yes, we are planning to build this. The first stage will be Moscow – St Petersburg, and later it will be possible to go south. I mean it is not just possible but we are planning for it. But right now we must do the main thing – create an effective, capable structure that can take charge of this and that will draft a good business plan and a development model.

This is all possible. The Government and the initiators of this process are thinking about it and offering solutions. I am referring to Sberbank, the Moscow Mayor's Office, and the Government, I repeat, is getting involved in this work.

Of course, if it takes two hours and 15 minutes between Moscow and St Petersburg – people spend more time getting to work in Moscow – this will be a completely different story, a completely different development. The same applies to the south of the country: Krasnodar, Kuban as a whole, the Stavropol Territory, the Rostov Region and Crimea as well. So, we are working on this. I hope it will be effectively continued.

Now, regarding the development of transport and passenger volumes. They are growing. Air service is seeing record numbers of passengers, increases of more than 16 percent; I think 16.4 percent in one year. Railway growth is second – plus 10 percent – 10.4 percent, and roads – cars and buses – plus about 7 percent – 6.4 or 6.5 percent. To sum up, passenger transport volumes are growing substantially.

Of course, everyone involved in this process should think about the next tourist season and do all they can to meet the interests of travellers. Domestic tourism is being developed at a good pace. I would like to thank all those who work in this area, including those who work in Kuban, for upgrading the quality of their performance. I hope, they will continue working like this in the future.

**Dmitry Peskov:** Let us take another question. Please, pass the mic over here, the first row. “Life” is sitting right there, the very bottom, first row.

**Alexander Yunashev:** Good afternoon, Mr President. Alexander Yunashev, Life.

We realise that we are living in unusual times. There are so many war correspondents in the audience, one could say, it is wartime, and much is required from everyone, triple the usual amount. There are the Criminal Code articles that were written in the 1990s. According to them, murder can get you 12 years, while the Prosecutor's Office may seek 14 years in prison for online extortion. Like, for example, for a seriously ill journalist, Alexandra Bayazitova, accused of being paid to block “negative” content about banker [Alexander] Ushakov who, it should be noted, works at a bank servicing the state defence order. She did not use a soldering iron in a garage to extort money from him, did she?

**Vladimir Putin:** So, are you trying to justify what she did?

**Alexander Yunashev:** I'm not trying to justify anyone. I am just stating the facts. To what extent do her actions match these extremely high sentencing requests made by the Prosecutor's Office? Is it not time, perhaps, to rewrite some of the Criminal Code articles? Maybe the threshold for particularly large amounts needs to be revised? Where is the line that separates bringing actual wrongdoers to justice and launching a witch hunt?



**Vladimir Putin:** You are taking this too far, what witch hunt are you talking about? I am not familiar with the details, but why a witch hunt? Did she do something so big that she now needs to be hunted down? Is she a major opposition figure? What did she do that she must be hunted down now? I am sure no one is after her.

All lawyers know: *dura lex, sed lex* – the law is harsh, but it is the law.

You know when you say such things – I know there are 14 to 15 year sentences for economic crimes... Frankly, I was stunned when I heard about it, I know about it, it is clearly too much. But in many countries, economic crimes, tax crimes, and crimes in the antitrust sphere, the fight on cartels, they add up these sentences, and perpetrators get time that is beyond belief, like a hundred years.

But why does it happen? Because society and the lawmakers proceed from the assumption that at some point of the development of society or the economy, the public danger of such actions is so great that it calls for an appropriate, as the legislators believe, response to put a stop to this unlawful activity.

This specific case (or other cases of similar nature) raises questions with me as a citizen. I am not sure it is necessary to put a person behind bars for 14 years. Or, they tell me about a former minister who was given more than 19 years for certain violations. He or that woman did something wrong. Do they need to spend 19 and a half or 14 years behind bars? The lawmaker should give it some thought. True, this needs to be thought about. As long as the law exists, it must be followed.

Remember the wonderful film that we all love, *Belorussian Station*? In it, the actor Anatoly Papanov plays an accountant at a major Soviet enterprise, and he is constantly pestered by a young director who pleads with him to break some rule. Papanov's character responds to him: you are a young and energetic person, and maybe you are right. But if you are right and so full of energy, go and get this rule changed, but as long as it remains in force, I will follow it.

There is something to that. It is about the stability of the legal system and how it is appraised in public opinion and what society thinks about the committed crime. But it does not mean that you should be stuck with it forever and not change anything. I agree with you, and I will ask lawmakers, the State Duma, to reassess this and to respond accordingly. I agree with you in general.

**Yekaterina Berezovskaya:** Mr President, we have been live for almost two hours. I suggest having a little fun, in the good tradition of Direct Line.

**Vladimir Putin:** Please.

**Yekaterina Berezovskaya:** Our people send various questions that do not fit into the usual topics. For example, Yaroslav from St Petersburg: “Today our country and you personally are being denigrated and insulted in the world. Do you think that in the future someone from some German town will say: “Damn, Putin did everything right.” Or, for example, one more question to follow. “How do you cope with stress when the entire rotten world is against you?”

**Pavel Zarubin:** There is also: “Do you play chess? If so, who did you play with last time and who won?” and “What do you recommend Russians do on long holidays, such as New Year’s?” Lots of questions, yes.

**Vladimir Putin:** So, a German city... And then what?

**Pavel Zarubin:** How do you cope with stress when the entire rotten world is against you?

**Vladimir Putin:** Stress. Next?

**Yekaterina Berezovskaya:** How do you stay motivated to do everything?

**Pavel Zarubin:** Do you play chess? If so, who did you last play with?

**Vladimir Putin:** Chess.

**Pavel Zarubin:** And what do you recommend Russians do during the long New Year holidays?

**Vladimir Putin:** Holidays.

Why just a German city? I not only believe, I know that not only in German cities, but also in many other cities in Europe, and in the United States, not to mention other regions of the world, many people believe that we are doing everything right. We are not

afraid to fight for our national interests without encroaching on others. And a lot of people support this. First.

Second, we have a huge number of supporters in the world for the way we protect our traditional values. And the number of them is increasing exponentially.

A sense of duty is what helps me survive stress, or the fact that we are being attacked, I can say this without fanfare. Over many years, I have taught myself that I need to strive to choose the most important thing and do everything to achieve my goals, without paying attention to all the fluff. Of course, this field of vision must nevertheless be wide; everything must be understood and analysed. But you need to confidently move towards your goal if you believe in what you are doing, and I believe in what I am doing.

Regarding chess. You know, I recently asked a young man: “Want to play a game of chess?” He says: “Sure.” I ask: “Do you think I will win?” He looked up at me and said: “Doubt it.” What does this mean? This means one needs to constantly work on himself. I will try to do this.

New Year. You know, I think that on New Year you must think more about your family and loved ones, do something together, and find something common to do: exhibitions, theatres, sports, of course, and have an active lifestyle. I think it would be good to spend it with your family.

**Pavel Zarubin:** There has already been a quick response to the issues that were raised in the course of our programme. People from Crimea who study at the school of governors have already called the Direct Line centre. They are ready to go and repair this gym in Crimea.

I believe people are expecting a similar quick response to the following question as well. Price increases are not a new subject, but this year there are definitely more signs of this problem – many, many complaints about price increases on a particular product. This is what people are saying: “It is very sad to buy eggs in our country,” grieves Andrei Samoilov from the Tomsk Region. Anastasia Plastinina from Ivanovo asks: “Are these eggs laid by golden hens or what?”

And a video question from the Krasnodar Territory. Let’s watch.

(Video demonstration.)

**Irina Akopova:** Good afternoon, Mr President, my favourite President,

My name is Irina Akopova and I would like to ask you to intervene. Ten eggs in our region cost between 180 and 220 rubles. Where and when have we ever had such prices? Chicken breasts were 165 rubles per kilogramme, and now it is 350 rubles. Wings were 165 rubles and now they are 250 rubles.

Mr President, have pity on pensioners. Our pension does not run into the millions. Put things in order. There is nobody else we can ask for help. It is not good that you conduct this only once a year, but this is the website we have. We should have such lines three times a year so people can talk to you.

I am very grateful to you and hope you can help.

**Vladimir Putin:** Ms Akopova,

You said, “once a year,” but believe me, I spoke to the Minister of Agriculture recently and asked about the egg situation. They told me everything was fine. I told him, and I am being frank with you – this was my direct response: “But our citizens have problems. The price of chicken eggs has increased by 40 percent and even more in some places. Prices are much higher for chicken meat as well.”

This is what happened. As I said, we had a slight increase, but still an increase in income, the level of salaries and so on. The demand went up. This is a relatively cheap source of protein; it is popular with people. I am happy to eat scrambled eggs myself, and at one time, I could easily gulp down ten at once in the morning. But what happened? Demand grew but production did not. This is the first point.

The second point. Imports were not started soon enough or in the needed volumes. Incidentally, some Turkish companies are now offering us additional imports. We are developing our economic ties, including in agriculture, very well. Other countries, including Belarus, also have proposals. But we didn’t start our imports on time. We should have resolved these problems within the EAEU.

Decisions were made, I think the other day, but at any rate they must be made in December, so the situation is bound to improve – there is no doubt about this. I am hoping for this very much. Because these conversations with the Ministry of Agriculture took place at least two weeks ago.

I am sorry about this and want to apologise for this problem. This is a setback in the Government's work. Although they say this is not the case, I still think it is – the problem is related to a failure to increase imports enough. Apparently, they hoped to make more money, but they promised to fix this soon.

**Yekaterina Berezovskaya:** Mr President, housing and utilities prices are also of concern to our citizens. They write with such bitter irony that the light at the end of the tunnel has become more expensive. But in reality, of course, this is no laughing matter. Many point out that pensions will be indexed by 7.5 percent, but utility prices will be set higher. They see this as unfair.

Let us watch the video message.

**Vladimir Leontyev:** Mr President!

In 2024, our pensions will be increased by 7.5 percent. At the same time, from June 2024, our city of Novosibirsk plans to hike our utility bills from 9 to 14 percent, which will effectively eat up the 7.5 percent indexation of our retirement benefits. Please take note of this.

I am enclosing the draft resolution by the Governor.

Best regards.

**Vladimir Putin:** Our interlocutor did not introduce himself, did he?

**Yekaterina Berezovskaya:** Vladimir Leontyev.

**Vladimir Putin:** Mr Leontyev, I agree. I will look into the utility prices in Novosibirsk (I can see them on the screen). We will definitely look into this situation and analyse it.

Indeed, the plan is to index pensions by 7.5 percent, and I hope that this will not be below inflation. But I would like to point out that we indexed retirees' benefits by 10 something percent for previous years very recently, in December 2022. Last spring, again, we added more than 4 percent to compensate for inflation, and in January 2024, there will be another indexation of 7.5 percent. Utility prices, on the other hand, have not been raised since last July, and will be only increased in July 2024. That is a year and a half. Over this period, there will be three indexations of pensions, by a total of over 23 percent. Right? Approximately.

I know how important the timing is, and utility bills must grow comfortably over time, while people's incomes must grow at a faster pace.

There is one more point here. There is a law that says, if a family's utility bill exceeds 22 percent [of income], the family is entitled to a subsidy. Hundreds of thousands of people took advantage of this opportunity last year. In some regions, this threshold is even lower than 22 percent – if a family spends 15, or maybe 20 percent, they can apply for a subsidy.

Again, I will need to look specifically at the ratio of these figures in the Novosibirsk Region. We will definitely do so, I promise.

**Pavel Zarubin:** Is it right that you also have to pay a bank commission for such a basic service, paying utility bills? There are many such questions.

**Vladimir Putin:** This is certainly wrong, especially when it comes to pensioners. The decision has just been made: Retirees will not be charged any bank fees when paying their utility bills.

**Pavel Zarubin:** That is news. Big news.

**Dmitry Peskov:** We have forgotten about the audience a bit. BAM, please.

**Irina Voroshilova:** Blagoveshchensk, Amur Region, gateway to China. Irina Voroshilova, Amurskaya Pravda.

Mr President, our question is this. Next year will mark the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of The Construction of the Century – this is what the Baikal-Amur Mainline was called.

But today, you see, there is an injustice. Today the BAM is divided between the Far Eastern and East Siberian railways. Don't you think it's time to return the BAM to the map of Russia? Today we have construction projects along the BAM; the BAM-2 and BAM-3 are wonderful projects that are very important to our country in today's situation.

**Vladimir Putin:** Please explain what you mean, "return it to the map of Russia"? What does that mean?

**Irina Voroshilova:** There is no single BAM. There used to be a Baikal-Amur Mainline; it was there. It was later divided and removed in the 1990s. Today the BAM is also divided: part of the BAM route belongs to the East Siberian Railway, and part to the Far Eastern Railway. There is no single section called the BAM. And now the BAM Association (this organisation includes hundreds of thousands of people from the post-Soviet space) proposes creating a Baikal-Amur Railway from Taishet to Sovgavan as part of Russian Railways. BAM veterans believe this would speed up the implementation of the BAM-2 and BAM-3 projects and would kickstart the construction of new railways in the east of Russia.

**Vladimir Putin:** You know, to be honest, I have never paid any attention to this; this is the first I'm hearing that such a problem exists, that it is divided between different sections of the railway. After all, it is still all part of Russian Railways, one way or another. Oleg Belozеров, head of Russian Railways, has never mentioned this to me. Nevertheless, I will talk with him, and with Minister Savelyev, and I will ask Mr Belozеров if they think it is necessary to merge it, if so, they can do it, I have nothing against it.

**Irina Voroshilova:** On the contrary, single out the BAM, the Baikal-Amur Mainline.

**Vladimir Putin:** I understand that it is necessary to create one line, as you said, from Taishet to Sovgavan.

**Irina Voroshilova:** This includes funding, projects; everything at once.

**Vladimir Putin:** I see, but this should be initiated by Russian Railways or the Ministry of Transport. No one has ever raised this question. Please. I will talk to them: I will talk

to Minister Savelyev, and to the head of Russian Railways. If it makes sense, they should do it; I would not object. This is the first time I am hearing about this.

Will this help new construction? I do not really understand how this would help with our projects there. They constantly have, excuse the bad manners, tiffs about whom, how much and who will build, and on what terms. This is something Deputy Prime Minister Khusnullin is working on. I am generally aware of what is happening. I hope these projects continue on schedule.

It continues in difficult conditions too, but our goals will be achieved. I definitely promise you that I will look into this. It is just that this is the first I am hearing about this problem, but we must treat it with respect, especially since it's coming from BAM workers. We will definitely look into it. And, of course, we should properly celebrate the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the BAM.

Here's BRICS, Tatarstan. What do we have?

**Artur Khalilullov:** Artur Khalilullov, Tatar-Inform.

Mr. President, as we know, the BRICS [summit] will be held in Kazan. I have two related questions.

First, what impact will the summit have on changing the world order based on so-called rules, primarily Western rules, as we understand, right?

And the second question. Is the choice of Kazan related to the fact that the capital of Tatarstan has recently become a kind of diplomatic hub in relations with eastern countries and countries of the Muslim world? Thank you very much.

**Vladimir Putin:** No, it is simply because Tatarstan is developing well, and Kazan is one of the best examples of such development. The conditions are good. Both the former President and the current one Minnikhanov have been doing good work, and we can see the results.

I remember when I visited Kazan with Mr Mintimer Shaimiev, we went to people's homes. Do you know what pleased me then? You could hardly call them houses – they were actually dugouts. It was in the early 2000s. Dugouts in the full sense of the word.



But they were so clean, we went into the house – it was clean, everything was tidy. I still have this feeling of respect for people who lived in such modest conditions and kept everything at such a level, you know? That level of internal culture of the people is not what strikes you, but it inspires respect. I think that this is the reason for the confident development of Tatarstan, the capital of Tatarstan – Kazan, first of all.

The city is in good condition, the infrastructure is developed. Kazan has held a number of major international events, both sporting and general political events. It is naturally becoming a center of attraction, if you prefer the word "hub" – here you are, hub. Tatarstan is a multi-ethnic, multi-religious republic, relations between different faiths are properly arranged, a good example in principle for the whole country. And this is why Kazan was chosen.

As for the rules-based world order, there are no such rules in reality. They change every day depending on the current political situation and the immediate interests of whoever is talking about it. How will this affect the situation? It will affect it in the right direction. It will show that there are quite a large number of forces in the world, powerful countries that want to live not by these unwritten rules, but by the rules prescribed in fundamental documents, including the Charter of the United Nations, and those that are guided by their own interests and the interests of their partners. They do not impose anything on anyone, do not create any military blocs, but create conditions for joint effective development.

This will be the focus of Russia's work as BRICS chair next year.

**Pavel Zarubin:** What planes will we fly to this summit on? After all, among the hardest hit by Western sanctions is aviation, and it quickly became clear that our airlines, which, in previous years, you literally forced to buy Russian planes, and they, frankly, were not eager to comply, have now queued up to buy the Russian-made planes. So far, we have been mainly flying foreign aircraft, and people now have safety concerns. Any news about an aviation incident now causes much more of a stir.

I suggest that we take a video call now. Maxim Saltykov from Moscow. Maxim, go ahead with your question if you hear us.

**Maxim Saltykov:** Good afternoon, Mr President. My name is Maxim. I am a cadet at a civil aviation flight school.

What will become of our civil aviation in the current geopolitical circumstances, sanctions, where our airlines are unable to purchase Western-made planes? The domestic MC-21 and Il-96 are undergoing a certification process and will not be mass-produced anytime soon. And the service life of the planes currently operated by Russian airlines will eventually come to an end.

In this regard, there is one more issue. A fairly small percentage of flight school graduates find jobs with our airlines, despite the fact that training schools undertake good-faith and consistent effort to prepare us for feats of labour.

To sum it up, will we fly, Mr President, and what on?

Thank you.

**Vladimir Putin:** We will, of course, we will.

Regarding foreign-made aircraft, indeed, Pavel [Zarubin] mentioned the fact that I had unending disputes with our companies, which were making unchecked – with reservations, of course, but nevertheless – too many, if you ask me, purchases of foreign-made aircraft, backing their decision up with valid reasons, such as efficient engines, compliance with international noise standards, and so on – they came up with multiple arguments. However, they would be better off now had they made timely moves to create a market for domestic aircraft.

We have been talking about this all the time and managed to create this market. But, indeed, our aircraft fleet is overstocked with foreign-made planes. I think our companies did the right thing and chose not to respond to the unlawful moves by leasing companies. Nonetheless, the process is ongoing: no one wants to lose revenue, and we are buying back some of these planes and they become the property of Russian airlines.

We must expand our own aircraft manufacturing. I hope that all our plans – we plan to produce more than 1,000 aircraft by 2030, our own aircraft, MC-21, and to re-equip existing aircraft with the domestic PD engines. Now, we need to move on and make the next more powerful engine – PD-35 – with a powerful thrust. This will help us increase the number of long-haul aircraft, including the Il-96–400. By the way, it is

already in service as a cargo version. It has a longer body, almost 12 metres longer. So we need to work on it. We have all we need to implement all our plans.

To reiterate, I hope all these plans will get implemented, and both pilots and passengers will have something to fly on. Of course, we should also work on small aircraft for regional flights.

**Pavel Zarubin:** The audience is close to the boiling point.

Mr Peskov, please.

**Dmitry Peskov:** One more question from the audience. I actually saw the New York Times. Pass the microphone, please.

**Vladimir Putin:** No, let Xinhua go first, and then the New York Times.

**Liu Kai:** Good afternoon, Mr President.

**Vladimir Putin:** Good afternoon.

**Liu Kai:** I am delighted by this opportunity to ask you a question. China News Agency Xinhua. My name is Liu Kai. I have two questions for you.

First. As we know, Russia will take over the BRICS chairmanship next year. What do you think is the significance of interaction and coordination between China and Russia in BRICS, and in general?

And the second question: what are your expectations for the expansion of Chinese-Russian relations next year?

Thank you.

**Vladimir Putin:** We know – just to repeat, since I must – that the level of our cooperation with the People's Republic of China is unprecedented. We have said many times that we hope to reach US\$200 billion in trade next year. We will actually get there this year, not next year, over US\$200 billion this year. We will do the calculations in the first quarter, and I think we will have US\$220–230 billion. This is a very decent

level. Last year, we achieved a 31 percent increase in trade, and we will see a 30 percent increase this year.

We are steadily deepening our economic ties across the board. I am also pleased at the diversification of our relations. We are expanding ties in infrastructure, building bridges and roads, and cooperating in high-tech industries, and we will continue in the same vein.

Chinese President Xi Jinping's visit last March gave a significant boost to our relations, and the progress continued thereafter. We have agreed that we will consistently expand ties in eight core areas. Relevant documents have been signed. The governments of Russia and China are deeply involved in achieving the goals that we set together, my friend President Xi Jinping (also Russia's friend) and I. The work is progressing rapidly, steadily and confidently.

As for BRICS and our role, I will not say anything new here either, but this axis is obviously strengthening, namely, Russia-China relations constitute a major factor in guaranteeing global stability.

We see what is happening around Russia and China. We see the West's attempts to redirect NATO's activity to Asia and towards Asia; these attempts clearly go beyond the statutory goals of this organisation, the North Atlantic bloc. It is called the North Atlantic bloc – what business can it have in Asia? But no, they are looking to interfere in Asia, using provocations, escalating the situation, creating new military-political blocs with various members.

I would rather not repeat what everyone knows: Russia and China are not doing anything of the kind. Yes, we are engaged in military, economic and humanitarian cooperation, but we are not creating any blocs. And our friendship is not directed against third countries – it is aimed at benefiting ourselves, but not at harming anyone.

Unlike us, the West is always trying to use its friendships against third countries. We are closely monitoring their actions and will be sure to respond together, effectively and promptly. No one should have any doubt about this.

**Dmitry Peskov:** We promised to give the floor to The New York Times.

**Vladimir Putin:** Yes, The New York Times, go ahead.

**Valerie Hopkins:** Valerie Hopkins, The New York Times.

For almost a year now Western journalists have been unable to take part in events like this. I am very happy that we can attend [this news conference] today. Thank you.

**Vladimir Putin:** It is Mr Peskov's fault. (Laughter.) I am an open person with democratic beliefs and views.

**Valerie Hopkins:** We will talk about this. Let me please ask a question in English.

**Vladimir Putin:** You are welcome.

**Valerie Hopkins:** My colleague, a Wall Street Journal correspondent Evan Gershkovich, has been held in Lefortovo prison without a trial for 37 weeks. The extension on his detention was today, again, upheld. Paul Whelan, another US citizen, has been in prison for nearly five years.

A spokesman for the US State Department, which considers both men wrongfully detained, recently said that Moscow had rejected what it called a substantial offer to return both of them to the United States. Is that true? What will it take to bring them home? And do you think that finding an agreement with the United States to bring them home to their families can be a way to improve the severely strained relations between the United States and the Russian Federation? Thank you.

**Vladimir Putin:** You mentioned your colleague from a journal. Which one is it?

**Valerie Hopkins:** The Wall Street Journal.

**Vladimir Putin:** You said that he was kept in jail without trial, and at the same time you said that his detention term had been extended. But if his detention term was extended it was done under a court ruling. So, it is incorrect to say it was done without trial.

Regarding the possibility of extraditing these people to their native countries, you said: "Why not let them go back to their countries?" I'd say, why don't they avoid violating the law in the Russian Federation? But this is all just rhetoric. It is not that we have

refused to send them back – we have not, but we want to come to terms [with the American side] and we want these agreements to be mutually acceptable to both sides.

We keep in contact on this issue with our American partners, and we are maintaining a dialogue on this issue, and it is not an easy one. I will not go into detail now but, generally we seem to be speaking a language that is clear to each other. Hopefully, we will find a solution. However, I want to repeat that the American side should hear us and take an appropriate decision – one that considers Russia’s point of view.

Of course, humanitarian considerations should underlie these decisions. I could not agree more with you on this point.

**Yekaterina Berezovskaya:** Mr President, I have a season-related issue: winter, low temperatures, everyone is sick (we are jumping from subject to subject, but this is the format).

Rospotrebnadzor is recording the incidence of influenza and coronavirus simultaneously. In addition, there is a record incidence of measles this year: 300 times as high as last year.

**Vladimir Putin:** 30 times?

**Yekaterina Berezovskaya:** 300 times as high.

**Vladimir Putin:** 300?

**Yekaterina Berezovskaya:** Yes, for measles. And our citizens, quite reasonably, associate this with a shortage of vaccines.

For example, we received the following message from the Samara Region.

“The Samara Region has lacked vaccines for measles, rubella and mumps for more than four months now.” And a few words about medicines for good measure: we receive a great number of requests from our citizens who need Western medicines that have left the Russian market. Not all analogues are suitable; sometimes, unfortunately, they have the opposite effect. How is our pharmaceutical industry adapting in this regard? How are these things going?

**Vladimir Putin:** As for immunisation medicines against measles, the mumps and rubella, unfortunately, there is also a technical failure here. What's the reason? Oddly enough, this is also due to the lack of eggs, because chicken eggs are the raw material for measles vaccines. We need to have enough high-quality eggs to produce medicines. But we just failed to resolve this problem in a timely manner. This is the first point.

Second. The decisions have been made regarding this issue, and I believe that the problem will no longer be relevant soon.

You mentioned mumps and rubella.

**Yekaterina Berezovskaya:** A three-component vaccine.

**Vladimir Putin:** Well, this is a vaccine against three diseases at once. I believe this problem will be resolved in the near future. In general, we have no problems with vaccinations and vaccines. One issue arose, but it will be resolved soon. That's first.

Second. By the way, there is a wave of measles in the world every four years. Why is this? Unfortunately, this is due to low immunisation in the native countries of labour migrants, as well as in Ukraine, because millions of people have also moved to Russia from Ukraine. But Ukraine had a very low immunisation rate, and it is probably even lower now. This is also a real problem, as is our technical failure. I hope all this will be resolved soon, as our experts have told me.

Yes, a number of companies left our market, and this is a problem. However, if I am not mistaken, there are only 14 vital medicines on the list. But the industry is actively working at this, and we have not suspended any imports. Our Health Ministry and the Government see these problems; a special commission on import substitution was created, and is functioning. They assure me that they do understand what is happening, and that they are doing and will ultimately do their best to satisfy the needs of people who require certain medicines.

As for replacement, yes, sometimes something goes wrong, and it is necessary to look for alternatives; and industry must operate, and doctors must work on this, too. It often happens that psychologically a person has grown used to a certain medicine; but this is important, even the psychology is very important. A person either believes

in a medicine or does not, I understand that. We will both purchase imports and produce our own, and the volume is growing.

**Pavel Zarubin:** Medicine and the state of primary care remains a hot topic; there are many questions coming even from large cities on how impossible it is to get access to specialists, that there are not enough doctors and nurses; and there is a flood of requests from towns and villages.

Let us call Yegor Perminov from the Sverdlovsk Region, the urban-type settlement of Reftinsky. Yegor, if you can hear us, please ask your question.

**Yegor Perminov:** Good afternoon, Mr President.

My name is Yegor, I am from the urban-type settlement of Reftinsky in the Sverdlovsk Region. Our trouble and problem is with healthcare, or rather, the lack of it. The authorities are actively working on landscaping, but not the hospitals, which lie in ruin: lack of equipment; salaries leave much to be desired; most of the renovations took place back in the Soviet time; and everything is falling apart before our eyes. We cannot receive normal medical care in these conditions. We are asking you to help. Thank you.

**Vladimir Putin:** Where is this?

**Pavel Zarubin:** The Sverdlovsk Region.

**Vladimir Putin:** I will definitely look into this; what exactly it is about and what specific settlement.

**Pavel Zarubin:** Reftinsky it is not far from Yekaterinburg, as far as I remember.

**Vladimir Putin:** Give it to me later; I will write it down now: Reftinsky, right?

**Pavel Zarubin:** Yes.

**Vladimir Putin:** We have a programme to modernise primary care, with very substantial funds allocated. I think 14,000 vehicles alone were provided. Paramedic centres are being built and upgraded. This is probably not enough. And, by the way, we will



definitely extend the programme to modernise primary care; this will also be part of the future presidential programme.

**Pavel Zarubin:** You can see footage from this settlement right now.

**Vladimir Putin:** A lot has been done, in fact; but judging by what we see now, it is clearly not enough. I would like to say again: we understand this problem; that's why we created a special programme for primary care, and we will carry it on.

Here, it is very important to pay special attention (it is envisaged in the programme, by the way) to rural areas and settlements, of course. A little more than half of all funds allocated for the development of primary care go there. This is what we will continue to do. And, of course, we will work on specific facilities.

**Dmitry Peskov:** Let's come back to journalists. Mr President, RT is here. Let's give them the floor because they are sitting on the very edge and nobody will notice them.

**Murad Gazdiyev:** Thank you.

Mr President, I am from the Russia Today TV Channel, my name is Murad Gazdiyev. This question is particularly painful for us as an international channel and for our country as a multi-ethnic community. Mr President, what do you think about the growth of nationalism in Russia and the rest of the world, and not only nationalism but also anti-Semitism?

I will simply say that we don't have this problem at the front. A Jew, a Christian and a Muslim can sit in one trench or a tiny dugout and they are all fine. But once you come out of it, this is a growing problem in both Russia and the whole world for some reason. What should be done in this respect, Mr President?

**Vladimir Putin:** You know, I think the latest VCIOM studies show that 96 percent of the Russian citizens believe that inter-religious and inter-ethnic accord in our country is a greatest competitive advantage over other parts of the world. It is enormous. This is indeed the case.

This is so primarily because we (I will now turn to our traditional values from this side) cherish traditional values. And traditional religions are making a big contribution

to the preservation of this situation and relations between representatives of different ethnic and religious groups.

As for the growth of Islamophobia, anti-Semitism, Russophobia and other similar manifestations, they really exist and tend to grow. Do you know what it is linked with in my opinion? This is because people encounter some injustice.

Look what is happening in Gaza – there is a definite reaction to these events in the whole Islamic world and the number of people with radical ideas is going up. This growth is obvious. The number of such people is on the up. There is nothing good in this and yet this is a result of the policy pursued by certain elites, a failure to resolve issues for decades and the absence of a solution to the Palestinian problem. The reaction of the Islamic world is followed by the growth of these anti-Islamic phobias. This is very bad.

As I have already said, religions and our appeal to our traditional values are playing an enormous role in our country. But our balanced policy at home and in the international arena is also playing an important role. After all, we are doing all we can to achieve justice in all of these areas. And I believe people still appreciate this. This is exactly why we are in this situation.

As for Russophobia, it is one of the vectors of struggle against Russia, one of the areas. Yes, it exists in the world. At home, we must do everything we can to prevent anything like this and nip in the bud any attempts to shake our society from within. This is what we will do.

TF1. Is it a French company?

**Jerôme Garro:** Thanks.

Jerôme Garro, for TF1, the French TV.

Mr Putin, you have been in contact for a very long time with Emmanuel Macron. Could you tell us, how do you perceive France and its President today? Do you plan to meet him once again?

**Vladimir Putin:** Yes, we used to have fairly good and friendly working relations. As you know, I have been to France, and Mr Macron has visited Russia. We have always had a busy bilateral and international agenda to work on. We are ready to continue to interact with France.

However, at some point, the President of France stopped communicating with us. It was not us, not me who stopped talking with him. He did. If there is an interest, we are ready to resume our relations. If there is no interest, we will manage without it. That is all; there is nothing unusual here. We are not avoiding contacts. If European countries, and the President of France, in particular, do not wish to communicate with us – so be it, no means no. We have things to work on and to keep ourselves busy. If there is an interest, we are ready to reciprocate.

Please go ahead. Let us pick the Magadan Region.

I have a request to make. Try not to announce ourselves so loudly, otherwise everything gets lost in the cacophony.

**Alexander Orlov:** I apologise. But, as we know from practice, sometimes it works.

**Vladimir Putin:** Yes, it helps.

**Alexander Orlov:** Alexander Orlov, Kolyma-Plus, Magadan Region.

Good afternoon, Mr President.

**Vladimir Putin:** Good afternoon.

**Alexander Orlov:** I would like to begin by saying that the Magadan Region fully feels the support of the Government, partly because we see federal projects being implemented in our region, which is good for its development and is also good for the image of the President among our people. Frankly, that includes me as well. We all support your decision to run for president next year.

**Vladimir Putin:** Thank you.

**Alexander Orlov:** Because, as long as I can remember, you have always been at the helm, so to speak.

**Vladimir Putin:** Thank you very much.

**Alexander Orlov:** Perhaps, I should now move on to the questions.

The first question. The connection with the mainland is very important for our region. Few people from the Far East and the Magadan Region (I think my colleagues from the Far East will agree) spend their vacations at home.

This is where we start running into difficulties. Magadan has three subsidised flight destinations including Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky, Blagoveshchensk, and Moscow. However, such important destinations as Khabarovsk, which is nearby, and Novosibirsk, are not on the list of subsidised destinations. Because of this, one flight to a destination can take more than a day, and it can also set you back a hefty sum, because it is much cheaper to fly to Moscow than to Khabarovsk, which is close by.

For residents of the Magadan Region, like me, who have neither children nor disabilities, and are ineligible for discounted ticket – I am 22, and I cannot fly as a young, promising person.

**Vladimir Putin:** Start a family then.

**Alexander Orlov:** I agree with you. I am working on it.

**Vladimir Putin:** That is the way forward to solve the problem and have access to flat rates.

**Alexander Orlov:** Yes. But we have Far Eastern rates.

**Vladimir Putin:** You are a young, active, handsome young man. What are you talking about?

**Alexander Orlov:** Is it possible to expand the list of subsidised flights for passengers from the Far East, given that it can also help promote tourism in our region? To fly

across the Far East using subsidised rates. This is my first question.

And second. I believe everyone in the Arctic regions and the Far East knows that we also receive northern supplements to our salaries; this is no secret. Each region has its own way of calculating the maximum coefficient. But in general, you need to work about five years to get the maximum. The problem is that we, the people who were born and work in the Far East, are just as likely to earn this coefficient as the visiting specialists, but without getting it right away. Is it possible to bring back the law that was in effect before? That is, those who were born in the Far East and the Arctic used to receive all the coefficients at once. Is it possible to bring back this law? Thank you.

**Vladimir Putin:** You know, your question is clear. This is being discussed in the Government, and I would do this. I would not wait for a certain period of time to pass, to live, to work. This would help keep people in the Far East, which is beneficial to the country, and which is necessary for Russia. This is a question of fiscal capacity and the possibilities in terms of the federal budget. But we will think about it. And I will once again ask the Government to put this back on the agenda.

As for flat airfares. First, I want to say that this will be extended. This is usually done at the end of the year, after my consultations with Aeroflot, and primarily with the other companies and the Ministry of Transport. We will certainly extend the flat airfare directive.

Of course, I understand this, it would be good to extend it. This is also just a matter of additional budgetary funding. We'll see, okay? But we will extend it, that's for sure.

Although I understand that the region is huge, it's simply breathtaking. The Far East is a separate world. And of course, it's not easy to travel such large distances, even internally, I understand. We'll take a look, okay?

Thank you very much.

**Vladimir Putin:** Veliky Novgorod. The girl holds the poster as if she has nothing to do with it. (Laughter.) She was surprised.

**Natalya Khmelyova:** It's the first time I was lucky.

Natalya Khmelyova, Novgorod Regional Television.

We have a question on the healthcare sector. The situation in our region has been improving in recent years: equipment is being purchased, and measures to support young specialists are also being taken. But still the key, a very significant part of mortality rates is cardiovascular disease.

In this regard, we also have a question about the federal program: maybe we can create a federal program for the construction of cardiac centers in the regions? This would be very helpful in our region. I think that other regions would also support us, but unfortunately, we will not be able to do this without federal assistance. Thank you.

**Vladimir Putin:** Thank you.

I will, of course, talk to Andrei Nikitin, the Governor, and the Ministry of Health. I don't know whether it is necessary to create a separate programme specifically for cardio. Yes, we have a separate program for cancer, and it works well. Cardio is really one of the problems and one of the causes of a high mortality rate – vascular, cardiovascular diseases. We will certainly look into it. But the first thing we need to do is extend the programme for the development of primary healthcare. And maybe there should be a separate area that would ensure health maintenance for people subject to certain risks, timely detection, dispensary and subsequent decision-making. Let's take a look. The Ministry of Health deals with cardiac diseases very intensively. I think the number of fatalities is decreasing.

But I heard what you said. We will see.

**Dmitry Peskov:** Alexander Gamov, Komsomolskaya Pravda.

**Vladimir Putin:** Go ahead.

**Alexander Gamov:** Thank you very much. Alexander Gamov, Komsomolskaya Pravda internet radio station and newspaper.

Thank you very much for having supported the initiative of war correspondent Sergei Zenin, who is in Donbass now. He suggested that the authority, knowledge, experience and heroic deeds of participants in the special military operation be used for peaceful

purposes, so that all of this is not lost in the work being carried out to promote the patriotic education of our youth, our children.

I have the following question. First, why, in your view, Mr President, did we need a new history textbook? History is following its own course. Does it matter to history what type of history textbook we write?

Second, next year we will mark the 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary of lifting the siege of Leningrad and ten years since Crimea returned to its native harbour as you put it. In 2025, we will mark the 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Victory in the Great Patriotic War. What does each of these events mean to you personally?

Well, in passing, since I am already holding the microphone, we invite you to the celebration of the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Komsomolskaya Pravda, which will be marked in 2025. Maybe you can tell Mr Peskov to enter this date on your schedule, and we will look forward to seeing you.

Thank you.

**Vladimir Putin:** Thank you for your invitation. 2025 is a long way off.

**Alexander Gamov:** It is just around the corner.

**Vladimir Putin:** Well, around the corner from the historical perspective but it is quite a lot of time in one's life. Anyway, I will do my best, with God's help, and everything will be alright.

Regarding the anniversaries you mentioned, I believe that they are of immense moral and ethical importance not only to me but to all Russian people and even to all peoples of the former Soviet Union. They also have a personal dimension for almost every Russian family. For example, as you know, my older brother lies in a mass grave at Piskarevskoye Memorial Cemetery in St Petersburg; of course, I have never seen him because I was born much later but, nevertheless, it also means a great deal to me personally.

What was the first part about?

**Alexander Gamov:** I just thanked you on behalf of Komsomolskaya Pravda for supporting Sergei Zenin, a popular frontline reporter for the VGTRK state television and radio company, who is now in Donbass. And he said that this human capital, these men now fighting in the special military operation – that capital should be used for peaceful purposes, they should teach at schools. I remember my military instructor at school, a Great Patriotic War veteran, who embodied the state programme for patriotic education.

Thank you.

**Vladimir Putin:** I already touched on this, there is nothing to add. Wars are won by teachers, and education – especially at the hands of those who directly took part in combat operations and risked their own lives, who fought for the Motherland – is of particular importance.

When I studied law in Leningrad, we had professors who had fought in the Great Patriotic War, and we listened with attention and special respect to what they had to say and looked up to them. They were the best role models. We will certainly use these men the same way.

**Pavel Zarubin:** This is definitely new for your news conference and Direct Lines...

**Dmitry Peskov:** Excuse me. (Addressing Alexander Gamov.) You also asked about the textbook.

**Vladimir Putin:** Yes, about the textbook, why we needed the new textbook.

**Alexei Gamov:** Yes, why do we need a new history book?

**Vladimir Putin:** I got it. There were more than 60 versions, 65 versions of textbooks I think, and Russian audiences will know what I mean... We have just talked about our anniversaries related to the Great Patriotic War, among other things. Many of those books mentioned all kinds of things – the importance of the second front and the opening of the second front – but never mentioned the significance of the Battle of Stalingrad, or mentioned it only in passing. Is this normal?



Of course, we need a fundamental state-approved version of history that all those who read this textbook will need to know. Today's child is tomorrow's citizen; you must realise that. This is extremely important. So, yes, we did need a new textbook.

I know that there have been questions and even criticism, which is normal. It is up to the academic community and the teaching community – preferably with the involvement of the parent community – to think this over, to finalise and amend the book taking into account the current reality. All the complicated historical issues – like any country, Russia has had its share of historical and internal problems – need to be treated with gentleness, benevolence and patience. We all need to be tactful and good-natured about all this. But still, all these textbooks must tell the truth, they must be accurate, and not serve anyone's interests, as used to be the case.

**Pavel Zarubin:** Well, this is certainly something new for Direct Line and for news conferences generally – people have almost stopped complaining about the condition of Russia's federal roads and are even happy with them.

We are expecting the opening of the Moscow-Kazan motorway very soon, and an extension is planned. The Rostov-on-Don bypass and the motorway to St Petersburg have been completed. In general, a lot has been completed in this area.

But people do have questions about the new toll roads. Why are they so expensive? Why are the tolls to use them so high? We are calling Sergei Gvozdev-Karelin from Moscow.

Mr Gvozdev-Karelin, ask your question.

**Sergei Gvozdev-Karelin:** Good afternoon, Mr President. I am from Moscow.

My question is on the tolls for using the long-awaited M-12 Moscow–Kazan motorway. The toll for a recently opened section of this road is seven rubles per kilometre on average. So, we expect a trip from Moscow to Kazan to cost about 6,000 rubles, which is, of course, very expensive for most drivers. A year ago, Avtodor cited a toll of four rubles per kilometre and the cost for the whole trip would have been between 3,000 and 4,000 rubles. I think this was more reasonable.

Mr President, please consider the possibility of instructing the relevant departments to reduce the tolls for the M-12 to make it affordable for a broad range of people. Thank you very much.

**Vladimir Putin:** Mr Gvozdev-Karelin, frankly, I don't know where you got this figure – 6,000 rubles for the trip from Moscow to Kazan. Has this been publicly...

**Sergei Gvozdev-Karelin:** Look at this: Moscow–Arzamas is 2,800 rubles. Double it and you get 5,600 rubles for the Moscow–Kazan trip.

**Vladimir Putin:** Maybe, the toll will not be the same for each section because I know that the cost should be 4,000 or 4,500 rubles. I will check it. But it seems to me that such simple arithmetic probably doesn't apply here. I will check. I will certainly look at it.

**Sergei Gvozdev-Karelin:** Thank you.

Look, it costs less than 4,000 rubles to drive to Crimea even though it is such a long way. It costs less than 4,000 rubles to get to St Petersburg. So it would be nice if Kazan does not become an exception in this respect.

**Vladimir Putin:** It is so nice to see Muscovites feel concern for Kazan. You see, everything is developing harmoniously.

**Sergei Gvozdev-Karelin:** A lot is connected to Kazan, thus our concern.

**Vladimir Putin:** But let me repeat – I don't quite understand why you're saying 6,000 because in reality they promised to charge 4,000.

**Sergei Gvozdev-Karelin:** I said about 6,000, sorry about that.

**Vladimir Putin:** I understand. According to my information, it is supposed to be no more than 4,500. I will definitely check it out, Mr Gvozdev-Karelin.

**Sergei Gvozdev-Karelin:** All right, thank you very much.

**Vladimir Putin:** But generally, according to the law, there can only be toll roads when there are alternative roads available. So, there is always an opportunity to avoid a toll and drive free, though there may be other issues.

Nevertheless, the road authorities try to avoid imposing an excessive financial burden. You mentioned Kazan, I think to the south of Kazan they have built a bridge, and until now there was a ferry. The ferry cost 300 rubles, and driving across the bridge will cost around 260–270 rubles, which is a bit cheaper. I will definitely keep pushing the service contractors and the appropriate services on this. But I will check the Moscow-Kazan motorway.

**Yekaterina Berezovskaya:** Mr President, now that we are talking about roads, as Pavel and I were coming to this event through the peak hour traffic congestion, it was impossible not to see a huge number of Chinese-made vehicles, like a real invasion. Analysts say that literally 60 percent of our market has been taken by Chinese cars. They are by no means cheap, but domestically produced cars are not much cheaper. Many people write and ask a very reasonable question: why have AvtoVAZ prices have gone sky high?

**Vladimir Putin:** Not “sky high,” but I do think they went up around 40 percent.

**Pavel Zarubin:** There are very few mid-class cars left, it is impossible to buy a car under 1 million rubles.

**Vladimir Putin:** Right, I agree. But 40 percent is also a lot, I understand.

What is the reason for this? I do not think an explanation is really needed as everything is clear to everyone. However, if you still have a question, I will talk about it.

Obviously, when the European, Japanese and South Korean brands left Russia, several issues cropped up. They left with all their components. Developing the capability to make these parts and components on our own became an urgency. I will say that AvtoVAZ manages to produce enough vehicles, but the higher the output, the lower the price will be.

Certain costs are still caused by the fact that the manufacturer has to dig and scrape for these imported components one way or another, but at a different cost, and this

leads to an increase in prices, and small quantities at this point. The higher the volume, the cheaper the product, and AvtoVAZ is following this path. I hope that this will lead to lower prices. But it is instrumental that we create our own platforms and develop them. This is what AvtoVAZ and other carmakers are doing, but this effort takes time. I do hope and I am even certain that this will materialise and will lead to lower prices.

The second crucial goal is to create our own parts and component industry, because we put too much faith in our “partners,” and almost lost our auto parts and components industry, and now need to recreate it. The Ministry of Industry and Trade is working on it. You know, I am trying to speak cautiously.

**Yekaterina Berezovskaya:** Not to get anyone’s hopes up.

**Vladimir Putin:** Correct. If I say tomorrow, and they will not get it done by tomorrow, people will say: see, he promised and failed to deliver on his promise. But rest assured, the Ministry of Industry and Trade is working hard on it, and the manufacturers are working hard as well. I am sure they will deliver.

**Pavel Zarubin:** LADA Granta seems to be available for under a million.

**Yekaterina Berezovskaya:** Yes, you can find it at that price.

**Vladimir Putin:** But still, the growth is around 40 percent.

**Yekaterina Berezovskaya:** If you read the incoming messages, you could get the impression that everyone wants to drive nothing but Aurus. There were several messages saying that.

**Vladimir Putin:** Aurus is a very expensive vehicle produced in limited quantities. It is now produced abroad as well. There is an Aurus assembly line in the Emirates. Our friends in the Emirates like this car among others. We have a whole line of Aurus vehicles including limousines, sedans, SUVs, and a minivan is coming up.

All of this exists, but these vehicles need to be mass produced and prices will go down immediately. But this takes time. In any case, here is what I would like to emphasise: I think those who thought that everything in Russia would collapse are disappointed. Nothing collapsed.

As for Chinese cars, our Chinese friends are aware of what is going on. This is typical not only of Russia. Chinese manufacturers have a prominent presence on the global markets and have already begun to push out European manufacturers, including on the European market. Look at what is happening in the automotive cities in Germany: their situation is deteriorating.

More and more electric cars are being sold. US factories are opening there. It is not clear how this meets the interests of European, especially German, manufacturers. At some point, a few years ago, an attack was launched in the United States against Volkswagen. So what? They have caused enormous damage. How does the government protect the car manufacturers? The traditionally powerful German and other European car makers? It does not. They have left them hanging, and that is all there is to it.

The Chinese government is working hard to support its car manufacturers, and they are ousting Europeans from the market. This is happening not only in Russia. Price considerations matter as well. And the quality is improving. The quality for price allows our motorists to choose what they want. We will work as a team.

The young man opposite me has his hand raised. Go ahead, please.

**Andrei Klimenyuk:** Andrei Klimenyuk, GTRK Slavia, Novgorod Region, Veliky Novgorod.

My question concerns the region's power grid. Most power lines were built in the post-war years; they are now obsolete. The current level of power line wear is about 70 percent. The slightest snowfall can lead to blackouts in entire districts in the Novgorod Region, affecting thousands of residents. A major outage occurred in December 2021, when several districts had no electricity for two or three weeks.

Governor Andrei Nikitin asked you to help improve the reliability of power grids. You supported his appeal. Six months later, in the summer of 2022, an agreement was signed between the regional government and Rosseti. The plan was to allocate 6 billion rubles to upgrade power lines and purchase the necessary equipment.

It has been a year; nothing has changed. So, I would like to know how soon power companies will begin to carry out your instructions, and the Novgorod Region will have an upgraded power grid.

Thank you.

**Vladimir Putin:** Rosseti is quite active throughout the country. To be honest, I do not know about the 6 billion rubles or what Rosseti was planning. I will find out. I will look into this and definitely talk to the management of Rosseti and the governor. We will try to support the region and help with the implementation of these plans.

The power grid sector in Russia is huge, due to our vast territory. But this is the European part, and there have been failures. We also have heavy snowfall now, and that also puts a heavy burden on it.

I will find out how much they planned to allocate – they have plans for regions and territories, and Mr Nikitin and I will certainly discuss this. I will try to help and support you.

Young man over there, please.

**Alexander Zarubin:** Good afternoon, Mr President.

My name is Alexander Zarubin, but a multi-million audience know me as Alexander Stone. I am an actor at Gazprom Media Holding and a resident of the Insight People production centre. I represent the blogosphere.

This sphere has been developing rapidly, especially recently, gathering momentum very fast. There is various information and widely different news, with new platforms opening and old ones closing. I would like to ask your opinion about the future of the blogosphere and what I personally can do for it to continue working, developing and producing new ideas, and for our operation to be fully transparent so that there are no questions to us.

**Vladimir Putin:** If there are no questions, what is there to talk about? But the blogosphere is a free and extremely democratic area. The main thing is for the state not to interfere with your work. If it does interfere, tell us about it, and we will try to help. But if everything is developing as you said and as you want, bless you. We will continue working to create this atmosphere and such conditions for the operation of the blogosphere.

The only thing I would like to say is... We understand that those who work in this sphere have a colossal responsibility exactly because the state is not controlling them. But there must be corporate ethics and self-restraint. You know what I mean because the matter concerns morals, ethics, and the safety of children. This is obvious. Therefore, the best option is for the professional community [in this sphere] to be organised on the same principles as in the sphere of high technologies and so on. But if there is anything you need help with, please formulate your wishes and we will try to help.

**Alexander Zarubin:** There are very many issues and many different opinions. Many young people become popular very quickly, and there is no one around them who has life experience or business experience to help with simple things such as how to pay taxes or register a sole proprietorship. Regrettably, there are many young people in this sphere who are not aware of this responsibility, as you have pointed out. It would be good if the majority of people working in this sphere could receive advice and recommendations, so that we adopt a responsible attitude to our work and continue working creatively.

Thank you.

**Vladimir Putin:** They need somebody they can rely on who could give them competent and professional recommendations. Very good. Incidentally, this is very important. You have highlighted an issue that should certainly become a priority for the state. I have taken note of that.

Thank you very much.

**Dmitry Peskov:** I suggest that we take one more question from the audience. I see Mir – so Mir it is. After all, this media outlet covers the vast CIS space.

**Elina Dashkuyeva:** Thank you.

Good afternoon, Mr President. Good afternoon, colleagues.

Elina Dashkuyeva, Mir Interstate Television and Radio Company.

Russia will be presiding over the CIS in 2024. On October 13, you said in Bishkek that Russia is committed to upholding its efforts to preserve and enhance the CIS as a prominent platform. But Moldova has been talking about possible withdrawing from the CIS, while Prime Minister of Armenia Nikol Pashinyan has been a no-show at all the leaders' summits held by the CIS, the EAEU and the CSTO lately.

To what extent does Yerevan's position matter for the CSTO? What is your general assessment of the integration associations in the post-Soviet space?

Thank you.

**Vladimir Putin:** We, I mean Russia, designed all our integration plans based on our unwavering commitment to the principles of voluntary and mutually beneficial cooperation for all those participating in them.

EAEU countries have been steadily expanding trade between them. We are opening up our markets, including in terms of labour, capital, and mutual cooperation. We also make efficient use of our shared infrastructure, including in the transport sector, but not only, inherited from the Soviet era, which is also an advantage. We also have a language we can all use to enable our people to communicate with one another. President Tokayev came forward with the initiative to create an international institution for promoting the Russian language, and we are grateful to him for this proposal. All these factors make us more competitive on international markets and help us not only deliver on our economic agenda but also to meet our social objectives and improve the wellbeing of our people too.

If Moldova does not want to be part of this process, and this is what Moldova's leadership chooses, so be it. Moldova is one of Europe's poorest countries. Only recently, it was the poorest of them all. Today, Ukraine holds this title. But if one of Europe's poorest countries which has been buying our energy resources at a price that was quite low wants to follow in Germany's footsteps, go ahead. Today, Germany buys its energy resources from the United States and pays 30 percent more compared to what it imported from the Russian Federation. So, if they have some extra money to spend over in Moldova, let them go down this road. The same goes for other sectors, for example in agriculture: farmers in Moldova are quite active on the Russian agricultural market. But if they do not want to work with us, they do not have to. But where will they sell their products?



You can see that in Europe, in countries pretending to be Ukraine's allies, people are blocking roads to stop Ukrainian agricultural products from entering their territory, even transit shipments. They just blocked access. They have their own interests and those willing to fight for them. Where will the Moldovans go with their goods?

There was a moment when they started talking about giving up on Russian gas imports, but as a matter of fact they are not giving up on anything. Let them do as they please. For us, Moldova's CIS membership does not create much added value, but we are ready, and we are not turning our backs to anyone or pushing anyone out. If they want to work with us, be our guests. If not, this is their choice, not ours.

As for Armenia, there are complex processes underway over there, connected with Karabakh. We can all relate to these issues. However, we were not the ones who left Karabakh to its devices. It was Armenia which recognised Karabakh as being part of Azerbaijan. They did so on purpose, to tell you the truth, without warning us that they were about to take this decision. This is just a way of presenting facts, since there are both pros and cons here. This is how it goes – there are complex processes underway in Armenia's domestic politics. I do not think that withdrawing from the CIS, the EAEU, or the CSTO would be in Armenia's best interests. But, at the end of the day, it is up to Armenia to choose.

As for Armenia's Prime Minister's attendance at these summits, we do know, or as far as we know, that this is attributable to certain developments inside Armenia and cannot be viewed as their willingness or unwillingness to continue working within these integration structures. Let us wait and see how the situation unfolds.

**Pavel Zarubin:** There are a lot of questions. We need to move faster.

Small and medium-sized businesses have also been instrumental in helping Russia to withstand the blow from sanctions. Let us watch a video sent by Vasily Babintsev from Izhevsk.

**Vladimir Putin:** Let's do it.

**Vasily Babintsev:** Mr President, good afternoon.

My name is Vasily, I am from Udmurtia and I represent the Bungly Boo brand.

We make clothes for adults and children, for example, like these beautiful and stylish jumpsuits that mothers and children love. Recently, we won the Znai Nashikh contest organised by the Agency for Strategic Initiatives. The prizes we received were just what we needed to promote our products on marketplaces and enabled us to boost sales considerably. I would say we were lucky to win just the right prizes.

I have a similar example involving my colleagues – the Splav company, which manufactures clothing for tourists. After the start of the special operation, they, too, were able to increase sales due to a new category of consumers – the military and the mobilised. Again, we can say that it was a fortunate coincidence.

So here is my question. Is it possible, in today's circumstances, to build a comprehensive support system for domestic brands and entrepreneurs to help them grow instead of relying on a chance luck?

**Vladimir Putin:** Look, you have just said that you have achieved success, and not you alone. You mentioned a contest held by the Agency for Strategic Initiatives; in fact, it was co-organised by VEB (Vnesheconombank), which is a state agency. The Agency for Strategic Initiatives, although an independent agency, is also supported by the state. Those two agencies held that contest of national brands after it was agreed upon and supported by the state.

The presence of our local brands in our domestic market has grown by more than 30 percent, 31 percent, I think. But you are right that this process should continue and that it must be comprehensive.

In this regard, we certainly need to involve not only federal agencies but also regional agencies in this work. I am now addressing the heads of the regions – colleagues, we need to take this under review and promote regional brands in every possible way. This should significantly diversify our market, make it more vibrant, rich, and more attractive to consumers.

We have a lot to be proud of in our regions. One of my colleagues here, I think from Mordovia, spoke about the Mordovia pavilion at VDNKh and invited everyone to visit, to see what is being manufactured in the regions. We need to promote this. Each region needs to have its own programme to support small and medium-sized companies, to support and promote our brands.

**Pavel Zarubin:** We are closely watching the development of artificial intelligence and one must admit that many people are quite apprehensive about it.

Arina Simonova from the Volgograd Region has a question.

(a video comes on)

**Arina Simonova:** Good afternoon, Mr President.

My name is Arina and I am eight. I was told at school that in the future, humans may be replaced by robots. What if they replace me, my mum, dad and my grandparents? Should we be scared of robots?

**Yekaterina Berezovskaya:** Mr President, before you answer, we have another, very impressive, video on this topic. Let's have a look.

**Video question:** Good afternoon, Mr President.

I am a student at St Petersburg State University. I am curious: is it true that you have many doubles?

Also, what do you think about the risks that artificial intelligence and neural networks bring into our lives? Thank you.

**Yekaterina Berezovskaya:** The young man from St Petersburg did not introduce himself.

**Vladimir Putin:** I see that you can look like me and speak in my voice but I have thought about it and decided that only one person should look and speak like me. And that person is me. This was a joke by one prominent figure.

As for artificial intelligence, yes, this is my first double, so to speak.

Answering Arina's question, I can say one thing for certain: Arina, remember that nobody can replace your grandma. It is impossible.

Should we be afraid of artificial intelligence? Preventing the evolution of artificial intelligence, including superintelligence that has feelings, can recognise scents and has cognitive functions and self-development capability – preventing this is impossible. You cannot prevent development. It means we should take the lead. At any rate, we must do everything to become leaders in this industry. Nobody knows the outcome. This is the reality, at least today.

Yes, there may be potential restrictions and self-limitations but it is important for leaders to reach agreement so as not to create any conditions that could jeopardise humanity.

Back in the day when nuclear energy was transformed into a nuclear bomb and people realised that those possessing this weapon are facing growing threats, people started to negotiate. This threat and this damage become unacceptable. People started to negotiate. It will probably be the same with AI: when leaders of the industry realise that threats have emerged, they will probably begin to negotiate. It is unlikely any tangible agreements can be reached before that stage. Although we should start thinking about it today.

**Dmitry Peskov:** Let us return to the auditorium and the journalists.

**Vladimir Putin:** Please.

**Dmitry Peskov:** Mr President, I suggest we have two questions at this end: we'll give the mic to RIA Novosti and next to the Republika Srpska, our friends.

**Yelena Glushakova:** Good afternoon, I am Yelena Glushakova, RIA Novosti.

Generally, the grand agenda includes extensive discussions on both the special military operation and the new regions. In principle, today's news conference reflects this agenda.

But there are regions facing no less difficult problems and complications. Yet, they are not much of a talking point, they are mentioned less frequently. I am referring to the Belgorod Region and the Kursk Region, which are exposed to [Ukrainian] shelling and have to exist under very difficult conditions.

I talked to my colleague from the Valuyskaya Zvezda newspaper, and she said that the shelling was a regular feature of their daily life, their normal everyday existence.

Do you think enough is being done to support the residents, protect their rights, and rebuild their houses?

My second question is about the businesses that continue functioning over there. There is a huge factory in Shebekino, there are businesses in other areas and districts of the Belgorod Region that regularly comes under artillery fire. Do you think the Government is doing enough to help them? Is it at all necessary to continue to work and promote business enterprise over there, given that the special military operation is still in progress? Thank you.

**Yekaterina Berezovskaya:** Mr President, we happen to have a video from Shebekino with questions from entrepreneurs.

**Vladimir Putin:** Ok.

(A video is being screened.)

**Oksana Kositsina:** I am Oksana Kositsina, factory director, Shebekino.

Last June, many businesses in Shebekino came under terrorist attack from the armed forces of Ukraine and were seriously damaged.

In this connection, we want to ask and draw your personal attention to this problem. Please help us to receive federal grants that will help us restore what has been destroyed and preserve over three thousand jobs. The grants will also contribute to reviving unique manufacturing facilities for food products, which are currently on the sanctions list. We produce these food products in the Russian Federation, in particular in Shebekino. It is also necessary to create a special economic zone in Shebekino for at least the next three to five years to help restore businesses after Ukraine's terrorist attack.

**Vladimir Putin:** I will answer briefly. I think we should support the idea to create a special economic zone in Shebekino. I will ask the Government to submit their proposals in this regard in the nearest future. It is necessary to preserve jobs there

and restore the economy within a brief timeframe, including in the zone you have mentioned.

(Addressing Yelena Glushakova.) This seems to be an answer to your question, as well.

**Dmitry Peskov:** I promised to Republika Srpska...

**Vladimir Putin:** Just a second. While this question was being asked, I read another question on the big screen on the left here. It is a very important question. A family with children, with two children, and the preferential mortgage programme is almost over... It is true that the family mortgage programme is ending. I believe it will end next July, and the Government is thinking about extending it. Of course, the Government must also consider the real possibilities of the federal budget, but I think it would be reasonable to think about extending the family mortgage programme. The programme stipulates the lowest possible down payment, only 20 percent, and the annual interest rate is 6 percent. If a family has three children, as I have pointed out, the family gets a subsidy of 450,000 rubles.

Therefore, we must certainly think about [extending it], and I will definitely give an instruction to the Government to prepare and submit proposals regarding this.

**Dmitry Peskov:** Let us give the floor to Republika Srpska and after it, to some other region.

**Vladimir Putin:** Yes, good, let us do this.

**Darinka Petrovic:** Good afternoon, Mr President. My name is Darinka Petrovic, I am a journalist at Alternativna TV, Republika Srpska.

You have spoken just now about the serious situation in the world, with conflicts raging on an area from Ukraine to the Middle East. All this also has an impact on the Balkans, further complicating the already serious and complicated situation there, especially in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Republika Srpska.

You know very well about the political situation in Bosnia, which is actually a Western protectorate. There is an illegitimate Office of the High Representative. The Serbs have been accused of supporting Russia, that is, for having good, fraternal and friendly

relations [with Russia]. Russians, as well as our citizens and the Government of Republika Srpska have been accused of promoting the malicious Russian influence, as they put it. So far, there are no Russian media outlets or NGOs in the republic. At the same time, Western media and other organisations are mushrooming there.

I would like to ask you about your vision of the future of Republika Srpska and the region as a whole and to comment on the situation considering that all the biggest wars began in the Balkans.

I have many other questions, but I will not take up my colleagues' time. I will leave my questions for the day in the future when you can grant an interview to us.

Thank you.

**Vladimir Putin:** Thank you. I will try to give a brief answer. We are aware of the situation in Republika Srpska and in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and our views on this situation coincide with the opinion of your political authorities. This is the first point.

Second, the regarding Russian media. It is true that none of them have a presence there, which is regrettable. I do not know if you can watch RT in your republic. You cannot? We must think about this; I will ask our colleagues, Mr Dobrodeyev at the VGTRK, to think about what can be done in this sphere.

As for the future, it is for the people who live there who must determine their future. No matter what decisions from the past or present day are forced on the people who live there or in any other territory, the bottom line is that if we want to live in a balanced world where the interests of all people are respected, primarily the people who live in a particular area, we must take their sentiments, plans and wishes into account. Our policy towards that region, including Bosnia and Herzegovina and Republika Srpska, will be based on these principles.

**Vladimir Putin:** LPR, DPR, please, go ahead.

**Yevgeny Murilev:** Good afternoon, Mr President.

**Vladimir Putin:** Good afternoon.

**Yevgeny Murilev:** My name is Yevgeny Murilev, Lugansk 24.

Thank you so much for giving me the floor. Let me be honest: we came here without a question, since we do not have one. I believe that today the Lugansk People's Republic has nothing and nobody to complain about.

We came here just to thank you personally for the fact that today Donbass is part of the Russian Federation. I would like to thank the Government for the work it is carrying out. The integration and the related processes are all running as smoothly as possible. I have a special thank you for our sponsor regions. They have done a great deal and have been working day and night. Our children can finally play outside and have new playgrounds, as well as modern kindergartens and schools.

Thank you so much. Please accept our deepest gratitude and a friendly handshake on behalf of Donbass in its entirety. Thank you very much.

The question I have is in fact very short: When will you come visit us?

**Vladimir Putin:** Thank you very much. I will be happy to visit you. To be honest, I have already been there, even if in a somewhat confidential manner. Still, I did have a tour of Lugansk and saw the city.

Let me reiterate what I have already said. You know that it all looks quite modest compared to Moscow. But Moscow is one of the world's best megacities, and this is how it looks today. Lugansk is a much more modest place, but everything is tidy and clean, and very neat, which tells you a lot about the way people who live and work there behave. I do not have to explain what kind of people live in Donbass, including in the Lugansk People's Republic. They have been fighting for all these years, never giving up, and now they are winning the field. I am certain that victory will be ours, and this will be our shared victory.

I would like to thank you and people in Donbass and to wish you every success.

**Pavel Zarubin:** We are still getting so many questions. I suggest that we take a look, please.

**Vladimir Putin:** Hold on, there is a man standing over there.



**Mikael Minasyan:** Good afternoon.

My name is Mikael Minasyan. I am a volunteer from the Donetsk People's Republic.

For the past nine years, we have always been there for Donbass, ever since hostilities started there.

During a humanitarian mission, I lost some of my friends, who were also volunteers. I was wounded myself and saw them die. Mr President, we are hanging between life and death every day while performing our humanitarian missions. There are volunteers from other regions who join us, and when they arrive, they are issued insurance policies, so that if they die or get wounded, their family members can get the insurance money.

There have been no insurance programmes of this kind for LPR and DPR residents so far, which means that we are risking our lives just like the men from other regions, but the only difference is that we are doing this in our home region. In this context I would like to ask you to guarantee equal treatment for all volunteers from across our vast country.

**Vladimir Putin:** I fully agree with you. I have already expressed my views on a similar topic. Everyone must be treated equally. Does it make any difference where a person lives? Even if a person was not a Russian citizen when he or she was wounded, it does not matter, and it matters even less in your case. This has special importance for volunteers who chose to help our men and civilians on these territories and are willing to risk their lives and health. Of course, we must do this. We will definitely move in this direction. I will make sure that we enact the corresponding regulations.

**Mikael Minasyan:** Thank you very much.

**Vladimir Putin:** And thank you very much.

**Pavel Zarubin:** We are receiving a great number of calls and video messages. Just a second please, I beg your pardon, these are very important questions, including those coming from rural communities. Let us see one more.

**Vladimir Putin:** Just a second, may I?

**Pavel Zarubin:** Yes, of course.

**Vladimir Putin:** I read on the large screen: “When will microfinance institutions be closed?” But is it necessary to do this?

Yes, there may be a lot of problems there but they occupy a certain niche and help many people. It is different if they abuse people’s confidence or do things that they should not do, then they must be brought to their senses, it is true.

I will raise this issue once more – I have talked many times with our financial authorities about how these microfinance institutions work. We will look at this again.

**Pavel Zarubin:** Now, a question from rural residents.

**Vladimir Putin:** Go ahead, please.

**Dmitry Panin:** Mr President,

My name is Dmitry Panin, and I am the head of the Sokol Agro-Industrial Company, a Don Cossack from the village of Serebryansky, Volgograd Region.

For several years now we have been working to kick-start a cattle farm for the meat and dairy sector. Basically, all is going well. As I see it, farms with 100 to 200 livestock are the best option for developing the meat and dairy industry in the future.

In this context, I have the following question: Does the Agriculture Ministry plan to come up with new programmes to support farms like this?

My second question is about the lack of roads, which makes it immensely difficult to transport milk, as we must use tractors. I would like to ask you whether I shall be so happy as to live to see the road they have been promising to build for many years.

In the conclusion I would like to send my regards to our fellows, soldiers from our Cossack village. We are waiting for them – our entire host – to return as soon as they win.

Long live Russia!

**Pavel Zarubin:** May I add another question to this one?

**Vladimir Putin:** Where was this question from?

**Pavel Zarubin:** This question was from the Volgograd Region.

There is another question, which has also been asked by rural residents: “Would it be right to say that the issue of food security in the country, as far as staple foods are concerned, has been resolved?”

**Vladimir Putin:** First, I will answer Mr Panin’s question.

To begin with, the Ministry of Agriculture has many programmes to support agriculture, and the state has been investing heavily in this sector. That said, we would have achieved nothing if not for the active and dedicated efforts by our farmers in the rural areas. The overall results are quite positive.

As for smaller farms, they account for 40 percent of the funds allocated by the government to support agriculture. True, farmers supply more and more agricultural products – if I am not mistaken, it is 15 percent of the total – to the domestic market, which is quite a lot. This is my first point.

Second, their produce tends to diversify our domestic agricultural market. This is very good.

I would like to address everyone who works in rural areas, at large agribusinesses and small farms, to all farmers: I would like to thank you for the results of this year’s work.

This year, Russia again saw a record harvest – more than 150 million tonnes of grain. This is its bunker weight though, before drying and cleaning; the clean weight total will be about 146 million tonnes. This includes the so-called new regions, which will produce about 5–6 million tonnes. The result is very good.

I have mentioned the leadership of the Agriculture Ministry when we talked about eggs and poultry shortages here today. They deserve criticism in some areas of their work,

but on the whole, the sector's performance exceeded expectations again this year, and therefore deserves approval and praise, as do the Agriculture Ministry's efforts.

The Government is providing assistance to small livestock companies – there are a number of support programmes they can take advantage of. If something is missing, we can talk about it later. I will even ask the Ministry officials to contact this particular company and discuss this. There are other options for supporting such farms. Do they need more? They just need to take advantage of what is already in place. But again, I want Mr Panin to know that we will continue this work. The top officials at the Ministry will contact you and talk about this.

So, we can say in all confidence that Russia has ensured its food security. There are a few problems with seeds, for a variety of crops. There is a lot to work on here; we need to develop several seed breeding projects. We have a seed programme, until 2030 I believe, and it is being implemented. The necessary financial resources are being allocated for this purpose. This is a problem that we must resolve. It is being addressed, and we will resolve it once and for all.

**Yekaterina Berezovskaya:** Mr President, next year is the Year of Family in Russia. It is a wonderful occasion to once again think of our families and friends. You once said that there is nothing better than a family with many children. This year, I became a mom myself, my daughter turns 6 months today.

**Vladimir Putin:** Congratulations.

**Yekaterina Berezovskaya:** But, you know, the issue of having children is very sensitive. It happens that when a woman finds out that she is pregnant, she has her personal, serious reasons to terminate the pregnancy. The abortion issue is currently a very hot topic in the country; our citizens are concerned about it.

I will read out several messages from Moscow: "Please stop the mayhem with banning abortions. The ban on conducting terminations at private clinics will lead to an increased load on state clinics, whose number is being reduced due to healthcare reforms," "Bans will lead directly to back-alley abortions and increase the mortality rate among women. It is simply irresponsible."

What is your position on this issue?

**Vladimir Putin:** Well, do we have a ban?

**Yekaterina Berezovskaya:** Not yet. But it is possible that the number of abortions performed by private clinics will decline.

**Vladimir Putin:** So why are they talking about some mayhem, bans? There are no bans.

As for bans, I just recalled the ban on alcohol. We remember what it led to: people began drinking surrogate alcohol, make moonshine themselves and get poisoned by these surrogates. As regards abortions, we also need to act very carefully.

Naturally, I know the position of the Church; it cannot have any other position. The Church fights for the life of each person, and it has its own stance on abortions, which is understandable. But at the same time, I just spoke about the sad results of the alcohol prohibition campaign, and we need to keep them in mind.

But the state is interested in dealing with the demographic problem so that women, after learning about their pregnancy will decide to keep their baby. This is obvious. But, I reiterate, the rights and freedoms of women also must be observed.

I think that the solution to this problem lies in at least two areas. The first has to do with addressing our traditional values, which include, first of all, a large family. They teach us that children are a gift from God for both women and men. And the other area is the financial wellbeing.

We spoke about primary healthcare earlier. But in addition to that, it is necessary to pay attention to women's health clinics: there is much to be improved, and it is necessary to do so. We need to think about in what way and how fast it is necessary to improve maternity wards in regional hospitals and outpatient clinics. This area requires our attention.

And the third thing: it is necessary to find more ways to support families with children. This includes mortgage, subsidies and the further improvement of all the measures developed by the state over the past years to support families with children. This is my approach in brief.

**Dmitry Peskov:** I suggest returning to the regions and the journalists again.

I see Pivot to the East in the middle row. Please introduce yourself and the media outlet you represent.

**Pavel Zaitsev:** Hello, Mr President,

I am Pavel Zaitsev, Obshchestvennoye TV (Public TV) of the Primorye Territory. I am not as young as my colleague from Magadan, but hopefully I am no less energetic.

Mr President, Pivot to the East is a global strategy that was discussed in the previous period. Today, however, it is being implemented in a planned and consistent manner, particularly in the economy.

You have already broached many issues and fields, including rail and air transportation, the automotive industry, and so on, which is a matter of great concern for people who live in the Russian Far East. One of the main indicators has to do with Russian natural gas supplies to friendly countries in Asia.

You have also mentioned gas infrastructure development. This is another essential issue, including for the Russian Far East. What promise does the Asian market hold for our country? What possible advantages are there for the Russian Far East?

At the same time, I would like to ask this. Many Russians, including Internet users, wonder why one of our most important resources, natural gas, continues to be supplied to the West, given the immense sanctions pressure brought to bear on Russia in the current geopolitical situation. You mentioned Moldova as well as the Ukrainian transit to Europe...

Wouldn't it be easier to focus on friendly partners in Asia and on developing gas infrastructure in Russian regions? Thank you.

**Vladimir Putin:** First of all, we have been expanding gas infrastructure for some time now. I already addressed this point and can repeat what I said: 450,000 households have been connected to gas mains and another million have been technically enabled to do so. This work will be continued.

Why do we supply gas to Europe? Gazprom is a reliable partner. It has contractual obligations, and it has always met its contractual obligations and is meeting them now.

The fact that Europe receives less gas than it needs is their problem. Strange as it may seem, they attempted to blame us for this shortfall in deliveries. This is absolute nonsense, because it was not us but Poland that shut down the Yamal-Europe pipeline and not us but Ukraine that shut down the second gas pipeline running through its territory. Neither did we blow up the Nord Stream 1 and part of Nord Stream 2 pipelines. More likely than not, this was done by the Americans, or by someone else at their instigation. It is not we but Germany that failed to open the Nord Stream 1 pipeline, because at least one pipe in this system is in a working condition. Germany is reluctant to do that – let them, we couldn't care less. They are facing price rises, and whole industries are shutting down: glass-making, chemical, metals industry and all related branches are being affected as well. They are confronting real problems.

Most likely, the German economy will slip into the red, slightly but it will. It is their decision, not ours. Gazprom fulfills all its obligations, including obligations concerning gas transit via the territory of Ukraine.

We also receive money. Of course, Ukraine receives transit fees. We may not be supplying gas to Ukraine directly but in fact, they are consuming our gas.

Do you know how Ukraine's gas network works – and it has since Soviet times? It is linked to the main gas pipeline running to Europe. So, when gas enters the territory of Ukraine, it is immediately distributed across the country. And the gas that Ukraine accumulated over the summer in the underground storage facilities at its Western border goes to Europe as if directly from Gazprom. This is how obligations to consumers are fulfilled.

First of all, Southern Europe. Why would we punish Hungary or Slovakia? We have no such intention; moreover, they pay us like clockwork – and pay decent money. So, we have never done anything for political reasons and are not going to.

As for turning east, I have said it many times, it did not happen because of the escalation around Ukraine. No. It started a long time ago. The Power of Siberia pipeline was not built because of Ukraine. We started building it earlier. Why? Because we can see development trends in the world economy. New centres of economic growth are being created and it is where our primary consumers are emerging. We send our supplies where our oil, gas and coal are bought. I hope all the economies consuming our energy and paying us do well. We are thinking about expanding supplies to China and looking to other countries as our potential customers.

By the way, Japan has not refused our supplies. And it is welcome to take them. We do not mind. In the Arctic, Novatek is still developing relations with certain European partners in addition to partners from Asia. China is also present there, actively involved and intending to work further. We welcome that. So, our situation is stable and is not based on the current political conditions. In fact, Russia is seriously interested in, and oriented toward the world's emerging economic centre.

**Pavel Zarubin:** To be sure, we cannot help but mention one more issue that is making people quite worried, specifically, labour migration. Heavy snowfalls have now hit largest megacities, and many people are grateful to migrants who helped with snow removal (local residents are highly unlikely to work in this field). However, to put it very mildly, there are people concerned about the number of migrants and the consequences of this migration. Some regions are even restricting the work of migrants. What do you think about this issue?

**Vladimir Putin:** This is a complicated issue. It is typical of many countries, including Russia. According to various estimates, over ten million labour migrants live here. As I said at the beginning, the national labour market features low, 2.9 percent unemployment rates, meaning there is almost no unemployment, while the labour market has its needs. But this does not mean that we should address economic issues at any price and solve labour market problems to the detriment of the local population. Is it necessary to attract migrants here? Yes, it is. Of course, we are mostly interested in skilled workers. It appears that we cannot do without unskilled workers too. However, we need to start working with our partners in countries (where these workers come from) well in advance. One should say that our friends from these countries wholeheartedly support this approach. They open Russian-language schools, as well as affiliates of our higher education institutions and universities. We welcome all this, and we will do our utmost in every way. They are in need, and they are asking us to send our teachers, to expand these programmes and curricula and to supply them with textbooks. We need to prepare for this in advance. This is the first thing.

Second, all migrants should, without reservation, respect our laws and traditions of the peoples of the Russian Federation, and the relevant institutions of state authority should monitor compliance with these requirements, and they should respond to violations on time.

Third, it is necessary to create normal human conditions for these migrants. I saw a question on the screen here: How much will we spend on resolving social issues



of migrants' families? Yes, of course, I realise that this is a sensitive issue. However, the situation would hardly be better were we to leave these people, these children, and the wives of migrants to their own devices. How will things develop? We are better off influencing them.

Yes, all aspects of this issue are not that simple; they are not painted in white or black. More and more children of migrants enrol at certain schools, and their number exceeds that of local children. However, we need to address these issues in advance, we need to work with them, instead of pretending that these problems are emerging only now.

Quite possibly, we need a special agency, not just the Interior Ministry, which deals with technical legal issues. We need a special agency that would analyse this entire issue, and that would find timely solutions for every aspect of this issue.

This amounts to large-scale work. However, we should be guided by the interests of the local population, citizens of the Russian Federation, in the first place. I would like to draw the attention of representatives of all branches and levels of authority to this aspect.

**Pavel Zarubin:** Incidentally, Yekaterina and I have noted that there are very many messages and requests for Russian citizenship from citizens of various European countries and the United States.

**Yekaterina Beresovskaya:** We received some from Italy, Sweden, and Germany, and the stories they have reported are absolutely horrible. For example, a family in Sweden was evicted from its own house when the special military operation began. These people want to return to Russia and to live here permanently.

**Vladimir Putin:** We have rules and legal regulations on granting Russian citizenship. We will welcome such decisions and all law-abiding citizens of other countries who decide to move to Russia, to live and work here, and to tie their fate and that of their children with Russia.

The number of such people is probably not as large as the masses of migrants from Africa and the Middle East moving into Western Europe or from Latin America into the United States. This is changing the ethnic composition there and will soon change it irreversibly. The balance of ethnic groups in the United States will inevitably change,

and the share of Latin Americans there will inevitably increase. We should monitor this situation closely. As for the people you are talking about, those who knowingly want to move to Russia, and not even for economic reasons, we will welcome their decision, but we will also act in accordance with our laws.

**Yekaterina Berezovskaya:** Mr President, we have been talking more than four hours now.

**Vladimir Putin:** It is time to end this.

**Yekaterina Berezovskaya:** Maybe a few blitz questions?

**Vladimir Putin:** Yes, please.

**Yekaterina Berezovskaya:** What did you dream of becoming as a child?

**Vladimir Putin:** I have already spoken about this. Every person's view of the values surrounding them change in different periods in their lives. I wanted to be a pilot. But when I was in high school, I mostly wanted to become an intelligence officer, and, as you now, I became one.

**Pavel Zarubin:** A New Year question then: What do you like more, dressed herring or Russian salad?

**Vladimir Putin:** It depends on what you are drinking.

**Yekaterina Berezovskaya:** What is the best present you received from Father Frost?

**Vladimir Putin:** The best present? I think that very many people in this room and those who are watching us will agree that the best present is our children and the children of our children. They are a gift from the Almighty.

By the way, regarding presents. It is not the presents we receive but the presents we give that please us the most, because we look at ourselves in the mirror and pat ourselves on the back. I am sure that people, especially the male part of this audience and the country, like to give presents more than to receive them. On the other hand, both instances are pleasant.

**Pavel Zarubin:** What advice would you give to young people?

**Vladimir Putin:** Well, we have folk wisdom, sayings, very many of them. One saying is “a good name is sooner lost than won.” You know, that would be my general advice. One should think today about what will happen tomorrow.

I would also add, always set ambitious goals. Set goals that may look unachievable. Having set such goals, a person will strive to achieve them and will certainly succeed.

**Yekaterina Berezovskaya:** Mr President, what are you reading these days?

**Vladimir Putin:** I will re-read the Criminal Code because some people believe that for some insignificant, as your colleagues think, wrongdoings, punishments are too harsh.

I have little time for reading. I have a Lermontov book on my nightstand. I love it. He was a brilliant young man. I am very curious about the way of thinking of such geniuses of that time. I would like to learn more about their values and what makes them relevant today. Lermontov was a genius. I am really enjoying his works.

**Pavel Zarubin:** Mr Peskov.

**Dmitry Peskov:** We have gone over four hours. Mr President, shall we finalise it by taking journalists’ questions?

**Vladimir Putin:** Sure. Buryatia. Buryats do not back down, I remember.

**Yekaterina Yelistratova:** Yes, Buryats do not flee, as you said.

**Vladimir Putin:** I did not say that.

**Yekaterina Yelistratova:** No. Our hero did.

Hello, Mr President.

My name is Yekaterina Yelistratova. I am from Ulan-Ude, Buryatia. Tivikom television company.

As you know, there is a unique oriental medicine centre in Buryatia. It is the only centre in Russia that uses traditional and even some non-conventional diagnostic and treatment methods based on oriental practices. The centre currently produces medication and provides enormous support to special military operation veterans in their rehabilitation. We really wish the centre could expand its capacities because the demand is high and we want more military personnel to receive proper treatment, more fighters to undergo rehabilitation. There have been cases of extraordinary recovery. We would like to ask you to support construction of a new building for this oriental medicine centre and grant the centre the status of a research institute. We need your support.

**Vladimir Putin:** I need more specifics: what centre is it and where is it located?

**Yekaterina Yelistratova:** The Oriental Medicine Centre. There is only one in Buryatia.

**Vladimir Putin:** Alright, I took a note. Ok, ok.

**Dmitry Peskov:** We will get all the details.

**Vladimir Putin:** We will try. Please get the details. It's a deal.

Yugra.

**Lolita Kurbanova:** Hello, Mr President.

Following the August meeting with members of the Government, you issued an instruction to consider building a railway connecting Yugra with Siberia, Yakutia, and China. How realistic do you think this project is and when can Yugra residents expect it to be completed?

**Vladimir Putin:** This project is in demand. The Government and Russian Railways are considering possible options. This has to be coordinated with RZD's investment programme. Of course, its current priority is the development of the Eastern Operating Domain, and they have to focus their efforts on this project, but again, it is related, in one way or another, to our trunk line plans. I do not want to get it wrong, so I will just ask Oleg Belozеров and Andrei Belousov, who is in charge of all these projects at the Government. Let us get back to that and look at it again, okay?

Next, Siberia.

**Yelena Belyayeva:** Good afternoon.

Yelena Belyayeva, GTRK Irtysh, Vesti Omsk.

Today we have talked about the pivot to the east. Naturally, we have a certain economic interest there, as the Omsk Region is located at the intersection of major transportation lines. As you know, we have the Trans-Siberian Railway, the navigable Irtysh River, the federal motorway that connects eastern and western Russia, so most of the cargo traffic from Europe to Kazakhstan and Central Asia goes through the Omsk Region.

But there is a problem. A rather long section of the busiest Tyumen-Novosibirsk highway – for us, towards Novosibirsk – it is a two-lane road. It is mostly worn out and unsafe; I also use it and see trucks in roadside ditches. So are there any plans to expand this motorway? This is my first question.

And the second question. To attain the logistics objectives that the country has set for us as efficiently as possible, for the benefit of the country, we need a large, up-to-date and world-class airport. Can we count on federal support?

**Vladimir Putin:** Look, at the beginning of our conversation, we talked about the road to Kazan, and then also the ones to Tyumen and Novosibirsk. We want to build a ring road there. We have the funds for this; they have been allocated, and we will implement these plans. These projects are already underway. But we will need to look at this particular area.

I will definitely speak with Mr Khusnullin about this. But this requires a lot of investment, so we need to see. We need to implement our current plans, the ones the builders are already focusing on – the routes have already been approved, and so on. All right, I will tell the Ministry of Transport and the Deputy Prime Minister in charge. We will think about it.

**Dmitry Peskov:** Friends, one final question, because we have already exceeded four hours.

Please, Andrei Kolesnikov, you will conclude this part of the news conference.

**Andrei Kolesnikov:** Good afternoon.

Kommersant newspaper.

Mr President, you said that the world will never be the same again. What would you say to Vladimir Putin from 2000 if you had the chance? What advice would you give? What would you warn him against? Do you have any regrets?

**Vladimir Putin:** What would I say? I would say: you are on the right track, comrades.

What would I warn him against? Against naivety and excessive trust in our so-called partners.

As for tips and advice, I would say this: We must have faith in the great Russian people and nation. This faith provides a pathway to reviving, shaping and developing Russia.

Thank you.

Please do not get angry with me if I haven't answered all of your questions. Indeed, one needs to know where to stop.

Thank you, and all the best!

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