Address by the President of the Russian Federation

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President of Russia Vladimir Putin: Citizens of Russia, friends,

My address concerns the events in Ukraine and why this is so important for us, for Russia. Of course, my message is also addressed to our compatriots in Ukraine.

The matter is very serious and needs to be discussed in depth.

The situation in Donbass has reached a critical, acute stage. I am speaking to you directly today not only to explain what is happening but also to inform you of the decisions being made as well as potential further steps.

I would like to emphasise again that Ukraine is not just a neighbouring country for us. It is an inalienable part of our own history, culture and spiritual space. These are our comrades, those dearest to us – not only colleagues, friends and people who once served together, but also relatives, people bound by blood, by family ties.

Since time immemorial, the people living in the south-west of what has historically been Russian land have called themselves Russians and Orthodox Christians. This was the case before the 17th century, when a portion of this territory rejoined the Russian state, and after.

It seems to us that, generally speaking, we all know these facts, that this is common knowledge. Still, it is necessary to say at least a few words about the history of this issue in order to understand what is happening today, to explain the motives behind Russia's actions and what we aim to achieve.

So, I will start with the fact that modern Ukraine was entirely created by Russia or, to be more precise, by Bolshevik, Communist Russia. This process started practically right after the 1917 revolution, and Lenin and his associates did it in a way that was extremely harsh on Russia – by separating, severing what is historically Russian land. Nobody asked the millions of people living there what they thought.

Then, both before and after the Great Patriotic War, Stalin incorporated in the USSR and transferred to Ukraine some lands that previously belonged to Poland, Romania and Hungary. In the process, he gave Poland part of what was traditionally German land as compensation, and in 1954, Khrushchev took Crimea away from Russia for some reason and also gave it to Ukraine. In effect, this is how the territory of modern Ukraine was formed.

But now I would like to focus attention on the initial period of the USSR's formation. I believe this is extremely important for us. I will have to approach it from a distance, so to speak.

I will remind you that after the 1917 October Revolution and the subsequent Civil War, the Bolsheviks set about creating a new statehood. They had rather serious disagreements among themselves on this point. In 1922, Stalin occupied the positions of both the General Secretary of the Russian Communist Party (Bolsheviks) and the People's Commissar for Ethnic Affairs. He suggested building the country on the principles of autonomisation that is, giving the republics – the future administrative and territorial entities – broad powers upon joining a unified state.

Lenin criticised this plan and suggested making concessions to the nationalists, whom he called "independents" at that time. Lenin's ideas of what amounted in essence to a confederative state arrangement and a slogan about the right of nations to self-determination, up to secession, were laid in the foundation of Soviet statehood. Initially they were confirmed in the Declaration on the Formation of the USSR in 1922, and later on, after Lenin's death, were enshrined in the 1924 Soviet Constitution.

This immediately raises many questions. The first is really the main one: why was it necessary to appease the nationalists, to satisfy the ceaselessly growing nationalist ambitions on the outskirts of the former empire? What was the point of transferring

to the newly, often arbitrarily formed administrative units – the union republics – vast territories that had nothing to do with them? Let me repeat that these territories were transferred along with the population of what was historically Russia.

Moreover, these administrative units were de facto given the status and form of national state entities. That raises another question: why was it necessary to make such generous gifts, beyond the wildest dreams of the most zealous nationalists and, on top of all that, give the republics the right to secede from the unified state without any conditions?

At first glance, this looks absolutely incomprehensible, even crazy. But only at first glance. There is an explanation. After the revolution, the Bolsheviks' main goal was to stay in power at all costs, absolutely at all costs. They did everything for this purpose: accepted the humiliating Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, although the military and economic situation in Kaiser Germany and its allies was dramatic and the outcome of the First World War was a foregone conclusion, and satisfied any demands and wishes of the nationalists within the country.

When it comes to the historical destiny of Russia and its peoples, Lenin's principles of state development were not just a mistake; they were worse than a mistake, as the saying goes. This became patently clear after the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991.

Of course, we cannot change past events, but we must at least admit them openly and honestly, without any reservations or politicking. Personally, I can add that no political factors, however impressive or profitable they may seem at any given moment, can or may be used as the fundamental principles of statehood.

I am not trying to put the blame on anyone. The situation in the country at that time, both before and after the Civil War, was extremely complicated; it was critical. The only thing I would like to say today is that this is exactly how it was. It is a historical fact. Actually, as I have already said, Soviet Ukraine is the result of the Bolsheviks' policy and can be rightfully called "Vladimir Lenin's Ukraine." He was its creator and architect. This is fully and comprehensively corroborated by archival documents, including Lenin's harsh instructions regarding Donbass, which was actually shoved into Ukraine. And today

the “grateful progeny” has overturned monuments to Lenin in Ukraine. They call it decommunization.

You want decommunization? Very well, this suits us just fine. But why stop halfway? We are ready to show what real decommunizations would mean for Ukraine.

Going back to history, I would like to repeat that the Soviet Union was established in the place of the former Russian Empire in 1922. But practice showed immediately that it was impossible to preserve or govern such a vast and complex territory on the amorphous principles that amounted to confederation. They were far removed from reality and the historical tradition.

It is logical that the Red Terror and a rapid slide into Stalin’s dictatorship, the domination of the communist ideology and the Communist Party’s monopoly on power, nationalisation and the planned economy – all this transformed the formally declared but ineffective principles of government into a mere declaration. In reality, the union republics did not have any sovereign rights, none at all. The practical result was the creation of a tightly centralised and absolutely unitary state.

In fact, what Stalin fully implemented was not Lenin’s but his own principles of government. But he did not make the relevant amendments to the cornerstone documents, to the Constitution, and he did not formally revise Lenin’s principles underlying the Soviet Union. From the look of it, there seemed to be no need for that, because everything seemed to be working well in conditions of the totalitarian regime, and outwardly it looked wonderful, attractive and even super-democratic.

And yet, it is a great pity that the fundamental and formally legal foundations of our state were not promptly cleansed of the odious and utopian fantasies inspired by the revolution, which are absolutely destructive for any normal state. As it often happened in our country before, nobody gave any thought to the future.

It seems that the Communist Party leaders were convinced that they had created a solid system of government and that their policies had settled the ethnic issue for good. But falsification, misconception, and tampering with public opinion have a high cost. The virus of nationalist ambitions is still with us, and the mine laid at the initial stage to destroy

state immunity to the disease of nationalism was ticking. As I have already said, the mine was the right of secession from the Soviet Union.

In the mid-1980s, the increasing socioeconomic problems and the apparent crisis of the planned economy aggravated the ethnic issue, which essentially was not based on any expectations or unfulfilled dreams of the Soviet peoples but primarily the growing appetites of the local elites.

However, instead of analysing the situation, taking appropriate measures, first of all in the economy, and gradually transforming the political system and government in a well-considered and balanced manner, the Communist Party leadership only engaged in open doubletalk about the revival of the Leninist principle of national self-determination.

Moreover, in the course of power struggle within the Communist Party itself, each of the opposing sides, in a bid to expand its support base, started to thoughtlessly incite and encourage nationalist sentiments, manipulating them and promising their potential supporters whatever they wished. Against the backdrop of the superficial and populist rhetoric about democracy and a bright future based either on a market or a planned economy, but amid a true impoverishment of people and widespread shortages, no one among the powers that be was thinking about the inevitable tragic consequences for the country.

Next, they entirely embarked on the track beaten at the inception of the USSR and pandering to the ambitions of the nationalist elites nurtured within their own party ranks. But in so doing, they forgot that the CPSU no longer had – thank God – the tools for retaining power and the country itself, tools such as state terror and a Stalinist-type dictatorship, and that the notorious guiding role of the party was disappearing without a trace, like a morning mist, right before their eyes.

And then, the September 1989 plenary session of the CPSU Central Committee approved a truly fatal document, the so-called ethnic policy of the party in modern conditions, the CPSU platform. It included the following provisions, I quote: “The republics of the USSR shall possess all the rights appropriate to their status as sovereign socialist states.”

The next point: “The supreme representative bodies of power of the USSR republics can challenge and suspend the operation of the USSR Government’s resolutions and directives in their territory.”

And finally: “Each republic of the USSR shall have citizenship of its own, which shall apply to all of its residents.”

Wasn’t it clear what these formulas and decisions would lead to?

Now is not the time or place to go into matters pertaining to state or constitutional law, or define the concept of citizenship. But one may wonder: why was it necessary to rock the country even more in that already complicated situation? The facts remain.

Even two years before the collapse of the USSR, its fate was actually predetermined. It is now that radicals and nationalists, including and primarily those in Ukraine, are taking credit for having gained independence. As we can see, this is absolutely wrong. The disintegration of our united country was brought about by the historic, strategic mistakes on the part of the Bolshevik leaders and the CPSU leadership, mistakes committed at different times in state-building and in economic and ethnic policies. The collapse of the historical Russia known as the USSR is on their conscience.

Despite all these injustices, lies and outright pillage of Russia, it was our people who accepted the new geopolitical reality that took shape after the dissolution of the USSR, and recognised the new independent states. Not only did Russia recognise these countries, but helped its CIS partners, even though it faced a very dire situation itself. This included our Ukrainian colleagues, who turned to us for financial support many times from the very moment they declared independence. Our country provided this assistance while respecting Ukraine’s dignity and sovereignty.

According to expert assessments, confirmed by a simple calculation of our energy prices, the subsidised loans Russia provided to Ukraine along with economic and trade preferences, the overall benefit for the Ukrainian budget in the period from 1991 to 2013 amounted to $250 billion.

However, there was more to it than that. By the end of 1991, the USSR owed some $100 billion to other countries and international funds. Initially, there was this idea that all former Soviet republics will pay back these loans together, in the spirit of solidarity and proportionally to their economic potential. However, Russia undertook to pay back all Soviet debts and delivered on this promise by completing this process in 2017.

In exchange for that, the newly independent states had to hand over to Russia part of the Soviet foreign assets. An agreement to this effect was reached with Ukraine in December 1994. However, Kiev failed to ratify these agreements and later simply refused to honour them by making demands for a share of the Diamond Treasury, gold reserves, as well as former USSR property and other assets abroad.

Nevertheless, despite all these challenges, Russia always worked with Ukraine in an open and honest manner and, as I have already said, with respect for its interests. We developed our ties in multiple fields. Thus, in 2011, bilateral trade exceeded $50 billion. Let me note that in 2019, that is before the pandemic, Ukraine's trade with all EU countries combined was below this indicator.

At the same time, it was striking how the Ukrainian authorities always preferred dealing with Russia in a way that ensured that they enjoy all the rights and privileges while remaining free from any obligations.

The officials in Kiev replaced partnership with a parasitic attitude acting at times in an extremely brash manner. Suffice it to recall the continuous blackmail on energy transits and the fact that they literally stole gas.

I can add that Kiev tried to use dialogue with Russia as a bargaining chip in its relations with the West, using the threat of closer ties with Russia for blackmailing the West to secure preferences by claiming that otherwise Russia would have a bigger influence in Ukraine.

At the same time, the Ukrainian authorities – I would like to emphasise this – began by building their statehood on the negation of everything that united us, trying to distort the mentality and historical memory of millions of people, of entire generations living in Ukraine. It is not surprising that Ukrainian society was faced with the rise of far-right

nationalism, which rapidly developed into aggressive Russophobia and neo-Nazism. This resulted in the participation of Ukrainian nationalists and neo-Nazis in the terrorist groups in the North Caucasus and the increasingly loud territorial claims to Russia.

A role in this was played by external forces, which used a ramified network of NGOs and special services to nurture their clients in Ukraine and to bring their representatives to the seats of authority.

It should be noted that Ukraine actually never had stable traditions of real statehood. And, therefore, in 1991 it opted for mindlessly emulating foreign models, which have no relation to history or Ukrainian realities. Political government institutions were readjusted many times to the rapidly growing clans and their self-serving interests, which had nothing to do with the interests of the Ukrainian people.

Essentially, the so-called pro-Western civilisational choice made by the oligarchic Ukrainian authorities was not and is not aimed at creating better conditions in the interests of people's well-being but at keeping the billions of dollars that the oligarchs have stolen from the Ukrainians and are holding in their accounts in Western banks, while reverently accommodating the geopolitical rivals of Russia.

Some industrial and financial groups and the parties and politicians on their payroll relied on the nationalists and radicals from the very beginning. Others claimed to be in favour of good relations with Russia and cultural and language diversity, coming to power with the help of their citizens who sincerely supported their declared aspirations, including the millions of people in the south-eastern regions. But after getting the positions they coveted, these people immediately betrayed their voters, going back on their election promises and instead steering a policy prompted by the radicals and sometimes even persecuting their former allies – the public organisations that supported bilingualism and cooperation with Russia. These people took advantage of the fact that their voters were mostly law-abiding citizens with moderate views who trusted the authorities, and that, unlike the radicals, they would not act aggressively or make use of illegal instruments.

Meanwhile, the radicals became increasingly brazen in their actions and made more demands every year. They found it easy to force their will on the weak authorities, which

were infected with the virus of nationalism and corruption as well and which artfully replaced the real cultural, economic and social interests of the people and Ukraine's true sovereignty with various ethnic speculations and formal ethnic attributes.

A stable statehood has never developed in Ukraine; its electoral and other political procedures just serve as a cover, a screen for the redistribution of power and property between various oligarchic clans.

Corruption, which is certainly a challenge and a problem for many countries, including Russia, has gone beyond the usual scope in Ukraine. It has literally permeated and corroded Ukrainian statehood, the entire system, and all branches of power.

Radical nationalists took advantage of the justified public discontent and saddled the Maidan protest, escalating it to a coup d'état in 2014. They also had direct assistance from foreign states. According to reports, the US Embassy provided $1 million a day to support the so-called protest camp on Independence Square in Kiev. In addition, large amounts were impudently transferred directly to the opposition leaders' bank accounts, tens of millions of dollars. But the people who actually suffered, the families of those who died in the clashes provoked in the streets and squares of Kiev and other cities, how much did they get in the end? Better not ask.

The nationalists who have seized power have unleashed a persecution, a real terror campaign against those who opposed their anti-constitutional actions. Politicians, journalists, and public activists were harassed and publicly humiliated. A wave of violence swept Ukrainian cities, including a series of high-profile and unpunished murders. One shudders at the memories of the terrible tragedy in Odessa, where peaceful protesters were brutally murdered, burned alive in the House of Trade Unions. The criminals who committed that atrocity have never been punished, and no one is even looking for them. But we know their names and we will do everything to punish them, find them and bring them to justice.

Maidan did not bring Ukraine any closer to democracy and progress. Having accomplished a coup d'état, the nationalists and those political forces that supported them eventually led Ukraine into an impasse, pushed the country into the abyss of civil war. Eight years later, the country is split. Ukraine is struggling with an acute socioeconomic crisis.

According to international organisations, in 2019, almost 6 million Ukrainians – I emphasise – about 15 percent, not of the wokrforce, but of the entire population of that country, had to go abroad to find work. Most of them do odd jobs. The following fact is also revealing: since 2020, over 60,000 doctors and other health workers have left the country amid the pandemic.

Since 2014, water bills increased by almost a third, and energy bills grew several times, while the price of gas for households surged several dozen times. Many people simply do not have the money to pay for utilities. They literally struggle to survive.

What happened? Why is this all happening? The answer is obvious. They spent and embezzled the legacy inherited not only from the Soviet era, but also from the Russian Empire. They lost tens, hundreds of thousands of jobs which enabled people to earn a reliable income and generate tax revenue, among other things thanks to close cooperation with Russia. Sectors including machine building, instrument engineering, electronics, ship and aircraft building have been undermined or destroyed altogether. There was a time, however, when not only Ukraine, but the entire Soviet Union took pride in these companies.

In 2021, the Black Sea Shipyard in Nikolayev went out of business. Its first docks date back to Catherine the Great. Antonov, the famous manufacturer, has not made a single commercial aircraft since 2016, while Yuzhmash, a factory specialising in missile and space equipment, is nearly bankrupt. The Kremenchug Steel Plant is in a similar situation. This sad list goes on and on.

As for the gas transportation system, it was built in its entirety by the Soviet Union, and it has now deteriorated to an extent that using it creates major risks and comes at a high cost for the environment.

This situation begs the question: poverty, lack of opportunity, and lost industrial and technological potential – is this the pro-Western civilisational choice they have been using for many years to fool millions of people with promises of heavenly pastures?

It all came down to a Ukrainian economy in tatters and an outright pillage of the country's citizens, while Ukraine itself was placed under external control, directed not only from

the Western capitals, but also on the ground, as the saying goes, through an entire network of foreign advisors, NGOs and other institutions present in Ukraine. They have a direct bearing on all the key appointments and dismissals and on all branches of power at all levels, from the central government down to municipalities, as well as on state-owned companies and corporations, including Naftogaz, Ukrenergo, Ukrainian Railways, Ukroboronprom, Ukrposhta, and the Ukrainian Sea Ports Authority.

There is no independent judiciary in Ukraine. The Kiev authorities, at the West's demand, delegated the priority right to select members of the supreme judicial bodies, the Council of Justice and the High Qualifications Commission of Judges, to international organisations.

In addition, the United States directly controls the National Agency on Corruption Prevention, the National Anti-Corruption Bureau, the Specialised Anti-Corruption Prosecutor's Office and the High Anti-Corruption Court. All this is done under the noble pretext of invigorating efforts against corruption. All right, but where are the results? Corruption is flourishing like never before.

Are the Ukrainian people aware that this is how their country is managed? Do they realise that their country has turned not even into a political or economic protectorate but has been reduced to a colony with a puppet regime? The state was privatised. As a result, the government, which designates itself as the "power of patriots" no longer acts in a national capacity and consistently pushes Ukraine towards losing its sovereignty.

The policy to root out the Russian language and culture and promote assimilation carries on. The Verkhovna Rada has generated a steady flow of discriminatory bills, and the law on the so-called indigenous people has already come into force. People who identify as Russians and want to preserve their identity, language and culture are getting the signal that they are not wanted in Ukraine.

Under the laws on education and the Ukrainian language as a state language, the Russian language has no place in schools or public spaces, even in ordinary shops. The law on the so-called vetting of officials and purging their ranks created a pathway for dealing with unwanted civil servants.

There are more and more acts enabling the Ukrainian military and law enforcement agencies to crack down on the freedom of speech, dissent, and going after the opposition. The world knows the deplorable practice of imposing unilateral illegitimate sanctions against other countries, foreign individuals and legal entities. Ukraine has outperformed its Western masters by inventing sanctions against its own citizens, companies, television channels, other media outlets and even members of parliament.

Kiev continues to prepare the destruction of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate. This is not an emotional judgement; proof of this can be found in concrete decisions and documents. The Ukrainian authorities have cynically turned the tragedy of the schism into an instrument of state policy. The current authorities do not react to the Ukrainian people's appeals to abolish the laws that are infringing on believers' rights. Moreover, new draft laws directed against the clergy and millions of parishioners of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate have been registered in the Verkhovna Rada.

A few words about Crimea. The people of the peninsula freely made their choice to be with Russia. The Kiev authorities cannot challenge the clearly stated choice of the people, which is why they have opted for aggressive action, for activating extremist cells, including radical Islamist organisations, for sending subversives to stage terrorist attacks at critical infrastructure facilities, and for kidnapping Russian citizens. We have factual proof that such aggressive actions are being taken with support from Western security services.

In March 2021, a new Military Strategy was adopted in Ukraine. This document is almost entirely dedicated to confrontation with Russia and sets the goal of involving foreign states in a conflict with our country. The strategy stipulates the organisation of what can be described as a terrorist underground movement in Russia's Crimea and in Donbass. It also sets out the contours of a potential war, which should end, according to the Kiev strategists, "with the assistance of the international community on favourable terms for Ukraine," as well as – listen carefully, please – "with foreign military support in the geopolitical confrontation with the Russian Federation." In fact, this is nothing other than preparation for hostilities against our country, Russia.

As we know, it has already been stated today that Ukraine intends to create its own nuclear weapons, and this is not just bragging. Ukraine has the nuclear technologies

created back in the Soviet times and delivery vehicles for such weapons, including aircraft, as well as the Soviet-designed Tochka-U precision tactical missiles with a range of over 100 kilometres. But they can do more; it is only a matter of time. They have had the groundwork for this since the Soviet era.

In other words, acquiring tactical nuclear weapons will be much easier for Ukraine than for some other states I am not going to mention here, which are conducting such research, especially if Kiev receives foreign technological support. We cannot rule this out either.

If Ukraine acquires weapons of mass destruction, the situation in the world and in Europe will drastically change, especially for us, for Russia. We cannot but react to this real danger, all the more so since, let me repeat, Ukraine's Western patrons may help it acquire these weapons to create yet another threat to our country. We are seeing how persistently the Kiev regime is being pumped with arms. Since 2014, the United States alone has spent billions of dollars for this purpose, including supplies of arms and equipment and training of specialists. In the last few months, there has been a constant flow of Western weapons to Ukraine, ostentatiously, with the entire world watching. Foreign advisors supervise the activities of Ukraine's armed forces and special services and we are well aware of this.

Over the past few years, military contingents of NATO countries have been almost constantly present on Ukrainian territory under the pretext of exercises. The Ukrainian troop control system has already been integrated into NATO. This means that NATO headquarters can issue direct commands to the Ukrainian armed forces, even to their separate units and squads.

The United States and NATO have started an impudent development of Ukrainian territory as a theatre of potential military operations. Their regular joint exercises are obviously anti-Russian. Last year alone, over 23,000 troops and more than a thousand units of hardware were involved.

A law has already been adopted that allows foreign troops to come to Ukraine in 2022 to take part in multinational drills. Understandably, these are primarily NATO troops. This year, at least ten of these joint drills are planned.

Obviously, such undertakings are designed to be a cover-up for a rapid buildup of the NATO military group on Ukrainian territory. This is all the more so since the network of airfields upgraded with US help in Borispol, Ivano-Frankovsk, Chuguyev and Odessa, to name a few, is capable of transferring army units in a very short time. Ukraine's airspace is open to flights by US strategic and reconnaissance aircraft and drones that conduct surveillance over Russian territory.

I will add that the US-built Maritime Operations Centre in Ochakov makes it possible to support activity by NATO warships, including the use of precision weapons, against the Russian Black Sea Fleet and our infrastructure on the entire Black Sea Coast.

At one time, the United States intended to build similar facilities in Crimea as well but the Crimeans and residents of Sevastopol wrecked these plans. We will always remember this.

I would like to repeat that today such a centre has already been deployed in Ochakov. In the 18th century, soldiers of Alexander Suvorov fought for this city. Owing to their courage, it became part of Russia. Also in the 18th century, the lands of the Black Sea littoral, incorporated in Russia as a result of wars with the Ottoman Empire, were given the name of Novorossiya (New Russia). Now attempts are being made to condemn these landmarks of history to oblivion, along with the names of state and military figures of the Russian Empire without whose efforts modern Ukraine would not have many big cities or even access to the Black Sea.

A monument to Alexander Suvorov was recently demolished in Poltava. What is there to say? Are you renouncing your own past? The so-called colonial heritage of the Russian Empire? Well, in this case, be consistent.

Next, notably, Article 17 of the Constitution of Ukraine stipulates that deploying foreign military bases on its territory is illegal. However, as it turns out, this is just a conventionality that can be easily circumvented.

Ukraine is home to NATO training missions which are, in fact, foreign military bases. They just called a base a mission and were done with it.

Kiev has long proclaimed a strategic course on joining NATO. Indeed, each country is entitled to pick its own security system and enter into military alliances. There would be no problem with that, if it were not for one “but.” International documents expressly stipulate the principle of equal and indivisible security, which includes obligations not to strengthen one's own security at the expense of the security of other states. This is stated in the 1999 OSCE Charter for European Security adopted in Istanbul and the 2010 OSCE Astana Declaration.

In other words, the choice of pathways towards ensuring security should not pose a threat to other states, whereas Ukraine joining NATO is a direct threat to Russia's security.

Let me remind you that at the Bucharest NATO summit held in April 2008, the United States pushed through a decision to the effect that Ukraine and, by the way, Georgia would become NATO members. Many European allies of the United States were well aware of the risks associated with this prospect already then, but were forced to put up with the will of their senior partner. The Americans simply used them to carry out a clearly anti-Russian policy.

A number of NATO member states are still very sceptical about Ukraine joining NATO. We are getting signals from some European capitals telling us not to worry since it will not happen literally overnight. In fact, our US partners are saying the same thing as well. “All right, then” we respond, “if it does not happen tomorrow, then it will happen the day after tomorrow. What does it change from the historical perspective? Nothing at all.”

Furthermore, we are aware of the US leadership’s position and words that active hostilities in eastern Ukraine do not rule out the possibility of that country joining NATO if it meets NATO criteria and overcomes corruption.

All the while, they are trying to convince us over and over again that NATO is a peace-loving and purely defensive alliance that poses no threat to Russia. Again, they want us to take their word for it. But we are well aware of the real value of these words. In 1990, when German unification was discussed, the United States promised the Soviet leadership that NATO jurisdiction or military presence will not expand one inch to the east and that the unification of Germany will not lead to the spread of NATO's military organisation to the east. This is a quote.

They issued lots of verbal assurances, all of which turned out to be empty phrases. Later, they began to assure us that the accession to NATO by Central and Eastern European countries would only improve relations with Moscow, relieve these countries of the fears steeped in their bitter historical legacy, and even create a belt of countries that are friendly towards Russia.

However, the exact opposite happened. The governments of certain Eastern European countries, speculating on Russophobia, brought their complexes and stereotypes about the Russian threat to the Alliance and insisted on building up the collective defence potentials and deploying them primarily against Russia. Worse still, that happened in the 1990s and the early 2000s when, thanks to our openness and goodwill, relations between Russia and the West had reached a high level.

Russia has fulfilled all of its obligations, including the pullout from Germany, from Central and Eastern Europe, making an immense contribution to overcoming the legacy of the Cold War. We have consistently proposed various cooperation options, including in the NATO-Russia Council and the OSCE formats.

Moreover, I will say something I have never said publicly, I will say it now for the first time. When then outgoing US President Bill Clinton visited Moscow in 2000, I asked him how America would feel about admitting Russia to NATO.

I will not reveal all the details of that conversation, but the reaction to my question was, let us say, quite restrained, and the Americans' true attitude to that possibility can actually be seen from their subsequent steps with regard to our country. I am referring to the overt support for terrorists in the North Caucasus, the disregard for our security demands and concerns, NATO's continued expansion, withdrawal from the ABM Treaty, and so on. It raises the question: why? What is all this about, what is the purpose? All right, you do not want to see us as friends or allies, but why make us an enemy?

There can be only one answer – this is not about our political regime or anything like that. They just do not need a big and independent country like Russia around. This is the answer to all questions. This is the source of America's traditional policy towards Russia. Hence the attitude to all our security proposals

Today, one glance at the map is enough to see to what extent Western countries have kept their promise to refrain from NATO's eastward expansion. They just cheated. We have seen five waves of NATO expansion, one after another – Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary were admitted in 1999; Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia in 2004; Albania and Croatia in 2009; Montenegro in 2017; and North Macedonia in 2020.

As a result, the Alliance, its military infrastructure has reached Russia's borders. This is one of the key causes of the European security crisis; it has had the most negative impact on the entire system of international relations and led to the loss of mutual trust.

The situation continues to deteriorate, including in the strategic area. Thus, positioning areas for interceptor missiles are being established in Romania and Poland as part of the US project to create a global missile defence system. It is common knowledge that the launchers deployed there can be used for Tomahawk cruise missiles – offensive strike systems.

In addition, the United States is developing its all-purpose Standard Missile-6, which can provide air and missile defence, as well as strike ground and surface targets. In other words, the allegedly defensive US missile defence system is developing and expanding its new offensive capabilities.

The information we have gives us good reason to believe that Ukraine's accession to NATO and the subsequent deployment of NATO facilities has already been decided and is only a matter of time. We clearly understand that given this scenario, the level of military threats to Russia will increase dramatically, several times over. And I would like to emphasise at this point that the risk of a sudden strike at our country will multiply.

I will explain that American strategic planning documents confirm the possibility of a so-called preemptive strike at enemy missile systems. We also know the main adversary of the United States and NATO. It is Russia. NATO documents officially declare our country to be the main threat to Euro-Atlantic security. Ukraine will serve as an advanced bridgehead for such a strike. If our ancestors heard about this, they would probably simply not believe this. We do not want to believe this today either, but it is what it is. I would like people in Russia and Ukraine to understand this.

Many Ukrainian airfields are located not far from our borders. NATO's tactical aviation deployed there, including precision weapon carriers, will be capable of striking at our territory to the depth of the Volgograd-Kazan-Samara-Astrakhan line. The deployment of reconnaissance radars on Ukrainian territory will allow NATO to tightly control Russia's airspace up to the Urals.

Finally, after the US destroyed the INF Treaty, the Pentagon has been openly developing many land-based attack weapons, including ballistic missiles that are capable of hitting targets at a distance of up to 5,500 km. If deployed in Ukraine, such systems will be able to hit targets in Russia's entire European part. The flying time of Tomahawk cruise missiles to Moscow will be less than 35 minutes; ballistic missiles from Kharkov will take seven to eight minutes; and hypersonic assault weapons, four to five minutes. It is like a knife to the throat. I have no doubt that they hope to carry out these plans, as they did many times in the past, expanding NATO eastward, moving their military infrastructure to Russian borders and fully ignoring our concerns, protests and warnings. Excuse me, but they simply did not care at all about such things and did whatever they deemed necessary.

Of course, they are going to behave in the same way in the future, following a well-known proverb: "The dogs bark but the caravan goes on." Let me say right away – we do not accept this behaviour and will never accept it. That said, Russia has always advocated the resolution of the most complicated problems by political and diplomatic means, at the negotiating table.

We are well aware of our enormous responsibility when it comes to regional and global stability. Back in 2008, Russia put forth an initiative to conclude a European Security Treaty under which not a single Euro-Atlantic state or international organisation could strengthen their security at the expense of the security of others. However, our proposal was rejected right off the bat on the pretext that Russia should not be allowed to put limits on NATO activities.

Furthermore, it was made explicitly clear to us that only NATO members can have legally binding security guarantees.

Last December, we handed over to our Western partners a draft treaty between the Russian Federation and the United States of America on security guarantees, as well

as a draft agreement on measures to ensure the security of the Russian Federation and NATO member states.

The United States and NATO responded with general statements. There were kernels of rationality in them as well, but they concerned matters of secondary importance and it all looked like an attempt to drag the issue out and to lead the discussion astray.

We responded to this accordingly and pointed out that we were ready to follow the path of negotiations, provided, however, that all issues are considered as a package that includes Russia's core proposals which contain three key points. First, to prevent further NATO expansion. Second, to have the Alliance refrain from deploying assault weapon systems on Russian borders. And finally, rolling back the bloc's military capability and infrastructure in Europe to where they were in 1997, when the NATO-Russia Founding Act was signed.

These principled proposals of ours have been ignored. To reiterate, our Western partners have once again vocalised the all-too-familiar formulas that each state is entitled to freely choose ways to ensure its security or to join any military union or alliance. That is, nothing has changed in their stance, and we keep hearing the same old references to NATO's notorious "open door" policy. Moreover, they are again trying to blackmail us and are threatening us with sanctions, which, by the way, they will introduce no matter what as Russia continues to strengthen its sovereignty and its Armed Forces. To be sure, they will never think twice before coming up with or just fabricating a pretext for yet another sanction attack regardless of the developments in Ukraine. Their one and only goal is to hold back the development of Russia. And they will keep doing so, just as they did before, even without any formal pretext just because we exist and will never compromise our sovereignty, national interests or values.

I would like to be clear and straightforward: in the current circumstances, when our proposals for an equal dialogue on fundamental issues have actually remained unanswered by the United States and NATO, when the level of threats to our country has increased significantly, Russia has every right to respond in order to ensure its security. That is exactly what we will do.

With regard to the state of affairs in Donbass, we see that the ruling Kiev elites never stop publicly making clear their unwillingness to comply with the Minsk Package of Measures to settle the conflict and are not interested in a peaceful settlement. On the contrary, they are trying to orchestrate a blitzkrieg in Donbass as was the case in 2014 and 2015. We all know how these reckless schemes ended.

Not a single day goes by without Donbass communities coming under shelling attacks. The recently formed large military force makes use of attack drones, heavy equipment, missiles, artillery and multiple rocket launchers. The killing of civilians, the blockade, the abuse of people, including children, women and the elderly, continues unabated. As we say, there is no end in sight to this.

Meanwhile, the so-called civilised world, which our Western colleagues proclaimed themselves the only representatives of, prefers not to see this, as if this horror and genocide, which almost 4 million people are facing, do not exist. But they do exist and only because these people did not agree with the West-supported coup in Ukraine in 2014 and opposed the transition towards the Neanderthal and aggressive nationalism and neo-Nazism which have been elevated in Ukraine to the rank of national policy. They are fighting for their elementary right to live on their own land, to speak their own language, and to preserve their culture and traditions.

How long can this tragedy continue? How much longer can one put up with this? Russia has done everything to preserve Ukraine’s territorial integrity. All these years, it has persistently and patiently pushed for the implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 2202 of February 17, 2015, which consolidated the Minsk Package of Measures of February 12, 2015, to settle the situation in Donbass.

Everything was in vain. Presidents and Rada deputies come and go, but deep down the aggressive and nationalistic regime that seized power in Kiev remains unchanged. It is entirely a product of the 2014 coup, and those who then embarked on the path of violence, bloodshed and lawlessness did not recognise then and do not recognise now any solution to the Donbass issue other than a military one.

In this regard, I consider it necessary to take a long overdue decision and to immediately recognise the independence and sovereignty of the Donetsk People's Republic

and the Lugansk People's Republic.

I would like to ask the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation to support this decision and then ratify the Treaty of Friendship and Mutual Assistance with both republics. These two documents will be prepared and signed shortly.

We want those who seized and continue to hold power in Kiev to immediately stop hostilities. Otherwise, the responsibility for the possible continuation of the bloodshed will lie entirely on the conscience of Ukraine’s ruling regime.

As I announce the decisions taken today, I remain confident in the support of Russia’s citizens and the country’s patriotic forces.

Thank you.

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