

Interview to the Italian newspaper *Il Corriere della Sera*

Ahead of his visit to Italy, Vladimir Putin gave an interview to the newspaper *Il Corriere della Sera*. June 6, 2015

Vladimir Putin: First, I firmly believe that Russia was not responsible for the deterioration in relations between our country and the EU states. This was not our choice; it was dictated to us by our partners. It was not we who introduced restrictions on trade and economic activities. Rather, we were the target and we had to respond with retaliatory, protective measures.

Mr President, you are coming to Milan for the celebration of the Russia Day at the Universal Exhibition EXPO 2015.

The core theme of this year's exhibition is

"Feeding the Planet, Energy for Life."

What is Russia's contribution to this cause?

What does this effort mean for relations between states?

Vladimir Putin:

This is one of the major challenges that humanity is facing today. So I can and must acknowledge that the Italian organisers chose one of the key themes for the exhibition.

The world's population is growing. According to experts, it will reach 9 billion people by 2050. But even today, according to the same sources, to the UN, 850 million people all over the planet are under-nourished or starving, and 100 million of them are children. So, there is no doubt that this is one of the key issues of our time. Many other issues, seemingly unrelated, will depend on how we deal with it. I am talking about instability among other things that is political instability of entire regions, terrorism, and so on. All these problems are interrelated. The surge of illegal migration that has hit Italy and Europe today is among these resulting problems.

I would like to repeat that, in my view, the organisers did the right thing pointing out the need to address this issue.

As for Russia's contribution, we channel over \$200 million into this through UN programmes. Many countries around the world receive necessary support and assistance under these programmes using Russian resources.

- We pay significant attention to the development of agriculture in our country.
- Notwithstanding all the difficulties that the development of Russian economy faces today, our agricultural sector, the sector of agricultural production, has been growing steadily – last year the growth was around 3.4-3.5 percent. In the first quarter of the current year, the growth stayed at the same level, exceeding 3 percent, at 3.4 percent.
- **Russia is now the third largest grain exporter in the world.**
- Last year, we had a record harvest of grain crops, one of the largest in recent years – 105.3 million tonnes.
- **Finally, Russia has an enormous potential in this sphere. I think that we have the largest area of arable land in the world and the biggest fresh water reserves, since Russia is the biggest country in the world in terms of territory.**

We have always proposed a serious relationship. **But now I have the impression that Europe has actually been trying to establish material-based relations with us, and solely for its own gain.** There is the notorious Third Energy Package and the denial of access for our nuclear energy products to the European market despite all the existing agreements. There is reluctance to acknowledge the legitimacy of our actions and reluctance to cooperate with integration associations in the territory of the former Soviet Union. I am referring to the Customs Union, which we created and which has now grown into the Eurasian Economic Union. Because it is all right when integration takes place in Europe, but if we do the same in the territory of the former Soviet Union, they try to explain it by Russia's desire to restore an empire. I don't understand the reasons for such an approach. You see, all of us, including me, have been talking for a long time about the need to establish a common economic space stretching from Lisbon to Vladivostok. In fact, French President Charles de Gaulle said something similar a lot earlier than I did. Today nobody objects to it, everybody says: yes, we should aspire to this.

But what is happening in practice? For example, the Baltic States have joined the European Union. Good, no problem. But today we are being told that these countries, which are part of the energy system of the former Soviet Union and Russia, they must join the European Union's energy system. We ask: Are there any problems with energy supply or with something else? Why is it necessary? – No, there are no problems, but we have decided that it will be better this way.

What does this mean for us in practical terms? It means that we will be forced to build additional generating capacities in some western regions in Russia. Since electricity-transmission-lines went through the Baltic States to some Russian regions and vice versa, all of them will now be switched over to Europe, and we will have to build new transmission lines in our country to ensure electricity supply. This will cost us about 2-2.5 billion euro.

Now let's look at the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement. It does not require that Ukraine becomes part of the European energy system, but it is considered possible. If this happens, we will have to spend not 2-2.5 billion but, probably, about 8-10 billion euro for the same purpose. The question is: why is this necessary if we believe in building a common economic space from Lisbon to Vladivostok? What is the objective of the European Union's Eastern Partnership? Is it to integrate the whole former Soviet Union into a single space with Europe, I repeat for the third time, from Lisbon to Vladivostok, **or to cut something off and establish a new border between modern Russia and the western territories** including, say, Ukraine and Moldova? Let me tell you something else now, and you can decide for yourselves what to publish and what to leave out. What are the roots of the Ukrainian crisis? Its cause seems to be completely disproportionate to what has become an utter tragedy today claiming many lives in southeast Ukraine. What sparked the crisis? Former President Viktor Yanukovich said that he needed to think about signing Ukraine's Association Agreement with the EU, possibly make some changes and hold consultations with Russia, its major trade and economic partner. In this connection or under this pretext riots broke out in Kiev. They were actively supported both by our European and American partners. Then a coup d'état followed – a totally anti-constitutional act. The new authorities announced that they were going to sign the Association Agreement but would delay its implementation until January 1, 2016. The question is: what was the coup d'état for? Why did they need to escalate the situation to a civil war? The result is exactly the same. What is more, at the end of 2013 we were ready to give Ukraine \$15 billion as a state loan supported by a further \$5 billion via commercial banks; plus we already gave it \$3 billion during the year and promised to cut gas prices by half if they paid regularly. We were not at all against Ukraine signing an Association Agreement with the European Union. But, of course, we wanted to participate in the final decisions, meaning that Ukraine was then **and is still now, today, a member of the CIS free trade area, and we have mutual obligations as its members.** How is it possible to completely ignore this, to treat it with utter disrespect? I simply cannot understand that. The result that we have – a coup d'état, a civil war, hundreds of lives lost, devastated economy and social sphere, a four-year \$17.5 billion loan promised to Ukraine by the IMF and complete disintegration of economic ties with Russia. **But Russian and Ukrainian economies are very deeply interconnected.**

The European Union unilaterally removed its customs duties for Ukraine. However, the volume of Ukraine's sales to the European market did not grow. Why not? Because there is nothing to sell. There is no demand in the European market for Ukrainian products, either in terms of quality or price, in addition to the products that were already sold before. We have a market for Ukraine, but many ties have been severed unilaterally by the Ukrainian side. For example, all engines for our combat helicopters came from Ukraine. Now deliveries have stopped. We have already built one plant in St Petersburg and another plant will be completed this year, but the production of these engines in Ukraine will be shut down because Italy, France or Germany don't need and will never need such engines. It is impossible for Ukraine to divert its production in any way; it will need billions in investment to do this. I don't understand why this was done. I have asked many of my colleagues, including in Europe and America, about it. In conclusion – forgive me for this protracted monologue – I would like to say that it is not that we feel deceived or treated unfairly. This is not the point. The point is that relationships should be built on a long-term basis not in the atmosphere of confrontation, but in the spirit of cooperation.

Speaking of peace, the countries that used to be parties to the Warsaw Treaty and today are NATO countries, such as the Baltic states and Poland, feel threatened by Russia. NATO has decided to create special forces to address these concerns. My question is whether the West is right in its determination to restrain "the Russian bear", and why does Russia continue to speak in such a contentious tone?

Vladimir Putin: Russia does not speak with anyone in a contentious (streitsüchtig) tone, and in such matters, to quote a political figure from the past, Otto von Bismarck, it is not discussions but the potential that counts. What does the actual potential show? US military spending is higher than that of all countries in the world taken together. The aggregate military spending of NATO countries is 10 times, note – 10 times higher than that of the Russian Federation. Russia has virtually no bases abroad. We have the remnants of our armed forces (since Soviet times) in Tajikistan, on the border with Afghanistan, which is an area where the terrorist threat is particularly high. The same role is played by our airbase in Kyrgyzstan; it is also aimed at addressing the terrorist threat and was set up at the request of the Kyrgyz authorities after a terrorist attack perpetrated by terrorists from Afghanistan on Kyrgyzstan. We have kept since Soviet times a military unit at a base in Armenia. It plays a certain stabilising role in the region, but it is not targeted against anyone. We have dismantled our bases in various regions of the world, including Cuba, Vietnam, and so on. This means that our

policy in this respect is not global, offensive or aggressive. I invite you to publish the world map in your newspaper and to mark all the US military bases on it. You will see the difference. Sometimes I am asked about our airplanes flying somewhere far, over the Atlantic Ocean. Patrolling by strategic airplanes in remote regions was carried out only by the Soviet Union and the United States during the Cold War. In the early 1990s, we, the new, modern Russia, stopped these flights, but our American friends continued to fly along our borders. Why? Some years ago, we resumed these flights. And you want to say that we have been aggressive? American submarines are on permanent alert off the Norwegian coast; they are equipped with missiles that can reach Moscow in 17 minutes. But we dismantled all of our bases in Cuba a long time ago, even the non-strategic ones. And you would call us aggressive? You yourself have mentioned NATO's expansion to the east. As for us, we are not expanding anywhere; it is NATO infrastructure, including military infrastructure, that is moving towards our borders. Is this a manifestation of our aggression? Finally, the United States unilaterally withdrew from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, which was to a large extent the cornerstone of the entire international security system. Anti-missile systems, bases and radars are located in the European territory or in the sea, e.g. in the Mediterranean Sea, and in Alaska. We have said many times that this undermines international security. Do you think this is a display of our aggression as well? Everything we do is just a response to the threats emerging against us. Besides, what we do is limited in scope and scale, which are, however, sufficient to ensure Russia's security. Or did someone expect Russia to disarm unilaterally? I have proposed to our American partners not to withdraw from the treaty unilaterally, but to create an Anti-Ballistic Missile ABM system together, the three of us: Russia, the United States and Europe. But this proposal was declined. We said at the time: "Well, this is an expensive system, its efficiency is not proven, but to ensure the strategic balance we will develop our strategic offensive potential, we will develop systems of overpowering anti-ballistic defence. And I have to say that we have made significant strides in this area. As for some countries' concerns about Russia's possible aggressive actions, I think that only an insane person and only in a dream can imagine that Russia would suddenly attack NATO. I think some countries are simply taking advantage of people's fears with regard to Russia. They just want to play the role of front-line countries that should receive some supplementary military, economic, financial or some other aid. Therefore, it is pointless to support this idea; it is absolutely groundless. But some may be interested in fostering such fears. I can only make a conjecture. For example, the Americans do not want Russia's rapprochement with Europe. I am not asserting this, it is just a hypothesis. Let's suppose that the United States would like to maintain its leadership in the Atlantic community. It needs an external threat, an external enemy to ensure this leadership. Iran is clearly not enough – this threat is not very scary or big enough. Who can

be frightening? And then suddenly this crisis unfolds in Ukraine. Russia is forced to respond. Perhaps, it was engineered on purpose, I don't know. But it was not our doing.

Let me tell you something – there is no need to fear Russia. The world has changed so drastically that people with some common sense cannot even imagine such a large-scale military conflict today. We have other things to think about, I assure you.

As for the colleagues you have mentioned, it is their personal choice, of course, whether to come to Moscow to join in the celebrations or not. I think that they failed to see past the current complexity in international relations to something far more important that is linked not only to the past, but also to the need to fight for our common future.

We can see four Russian emperors here, in this room. Which historical figure inspires you the most?

Vladimir Putin: You know, people ask me this question a lot. I prefer to dodge it since the answer can give rise to various interpretations.
(Laughs)

So I will put it like this: I try not to idolise anybody. I try, or rather, I am guided by the interests of the Russian people in my work, taking into account everything that has been previously accumulated and the conditions we are living in today, and I try to get a glimpse (erblicken) of the way we should build our life, economy and policy – first and foremost, our domestic policy – as well as our foreign policy in the medium and long-term strategic perspective.

There are many good examples in both Russian and European history, as well as in world history. But all those people lived and worked in certain conditions. The most important thing is to be honest with yourself and with the people who have entrusted you with this work.