

Vladimir Putin: The Deterioration of EU-Russia Relations, Causes and Consequences, Interview

Interview to the Italian newspaper «Il Corriere della Sera»

By [Pres. Vladimir Putin](#)

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It's almost two o'clock in the morning when we get to the end of the interview. Vladimir Putin responded to our questions for just shy of two hours. "Mr. President—asks the editor of Corriere della Sera, Luciano Fontana—is there one thing that you regret more than anything in your life, which you consider an error that you would never again want to repeat?" The Russian president adjusts himself in his chair, and his eyes suddenly seem to sparkle. He remains silent for a few seconds, and then in his thin voice he says softly: "I will be quite frank with you. I cannot recollect anything of the kind. By the grace of God, I have nothing to regret in my life."

After more than fifteen years leading Russia as President or Prime Minister, after 5,538 days in power, Vladimir Putin does not regret anything. Two girls on the presidential staff welcomed us at the entrance of the Spasskaya Tower, in front of St. Basil's Cathedral, escorting us inside the walls of the Kremlin to the Palace of the Senate, where Putin's office is located. The location prepared for the interview was the Predstavitel'skij Zal, the same boardroom where Putin received Matteo Renzi in March. It is an oval-shaped space, the walls a pale green, the ceiling domed, the decorations in white stucco and gold. Niches at the corners, the bronze statues of four Russian emperors dominate the scene: Peter the Great, Catherine the Great, Alexander II and Nicholas I. Initially scheduled for 7:00 PM, the beginning of the interview has slipped by hours. Finally, at 11:30 PM, spokesman Dmitry Peshkov arrived. He apologized for the delay, which he attributed to government commitments and told us that the President was ready. Vladimir Putin entered the door in the back. Blue suit, blue shirt, blue tie with printed patterns, cool despite the hour, his face perhaps a bit too polished. He greeted us kindly. Then he invited us to sit.

This is the full transcript of Corriere della Sera's interview with Vladimir Putin

Luciano Fontana: I would like to start with a question concerning Russian-Italian relations. This relationship has always been close and privileged, both in the economic and political spheres. However, it has been somewhat marred by the crisis in Ukraine and the sanctions. Could the recent visit by Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi to Russia and your upcoming visit to Milan somehow change this trend, and if so, what is needed for that?

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.

But the relationship between Russia and Italy has, indeed, always been privileged, both in politics and the economy. For instance, in recent years, that is, in the last couple of years, trade between our countries increased eleven fold, from what I believe was \$4.2 billion – we make calculations in US dollars – to over \$48 billion, nearly \$49 billion.

There are 400 Italian companies operating in Russia. We are cooperating actively in the energy sector, in an array of fields. Italy is the third largest consumer of our energy resources. We also have many joint high technology projects: in the space and aircraft industries, and in many other sectors. Russian regions are working very closely with Italy. Last year, almost a million Russian tourists, about 900,000, visited Italy. And while there, they spent over a billion euro.

We have always enjoyed trust-based relations in the political sphere as well. The establishment of the Russia-NATO Council was Italy's initiative – Silvio Berlusconi was Prime Minister at the time. This advisory working body no doubt became an important factor of security in Europe. In this regard, Italy has always contributed greatly to the development of the dialogue between Russia and Europe, and NATO as a whole. Not to mention our special cultural and humanitarian cooperation.

All this, of course, lays the foundation for a special relationship between our countries. And the incumbent Prime Minister's visit to Russia sent a very important message showing that Italy is willing to develop these relations. It is only natural that this does not go unnoticed either by the Government of the Russian Federation or by the public.

We are, of course, ready to reciprocate and go further in expanding our cooperation as long as our Italian partners are willing to do the same. I hope that my upcoming visit to Milan will help in this respect.

Luciano Fontana: You have known several chairmen of the Italian Council of Ministers – Romano Prodi, Silvio Berlusconi, Massimo D'Alema, Giuliano Amato, Enrico Letta and now Matteo Renzi. With whom did you find that you understood each other best? And how much, in your opinion, does the existence of a personal relationship – like the one you had with Silvio Berlusconi – contribute to good relations between countries?

Vladimir Putin: No matter what posts we occupy or what our jobs are, we are still human, and personal trust is certainly a very important factor in our work, in building relations on the interstate level. One of the people you have just mentioned once told me, "You must be the only person (meaning I was the only person) – who has a friendly relationship with both Berlusconi and Prodi." I can tell you that it was not difficult for me, I still don't find it difficult, and I can tell you why. My Italian partners have always put the interests of Italy, of the Italian people, first and believed that in order to serve the interests of their country, including economic and political interests, they must maintain friendly relations with Russia. We have always understood and felt that.

This has been the key element underlying our good relations. I have always sensed a truly sincere interest in building interstate relations irrespective of the domestic political situation. I would like to say in this regard that the attitude people in Russia have developed towards Italy does not depend on which political party is in power.

Paolo Valentino: 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 undernourished 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.

Paolo Valentino: Mr. President, when we were talking about the shadow cast on our relations, you said that it was not your choice, and there is an opinion that Russia feels betrayed, abandoned by Europe, like a lover abandoned by his mistress. What are the problems in these relations today? Do you think that Europe has been too dependent on the United States in the Ukrainian crisis? What do you expect from Europe in relation to the sanctions? I may have asked too many questions at once.

Vladimir Putin: You have certainly asked a lot of questions, with an Italian flair. (Laughs)

First, about the mistress. In this kind of a relationship with a woman, that is, if you assume no obligations, you have no right to claim any obligations from your partner.

We have never viewed Europe as a mistress. I am quite serious now. 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 me. 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.

Paolo Valentino: And what do they answer?

Vladimir Putin: The situation got out of control.

You know, I would like to tell you and your readers one thing. Last year, on February 21, President Yanukovich and the Ukrainian opposition signed an agreement on how to proceed, how to organise political life in the country, and on the need to hold early elections. They should have worked to implement this agreement, especially since three European foreign ministers signed this agreement as guarantors of its implementation.

If those colleagues were used for the sake of appearances and they were not in control of the situation on the ground, which was in fact in the hands of the US ambassador or a CIA resident, they should have said: "You know, we did not agree to a coups d'état, so we will not support you; you should go and hold elections instead."

The same could be said about our American partners. Let's assume that they also lost control of the situation. But if America and Europe had said to those who had taken these unconstitutional actions: "If you come to power in such a way, we will not support you under any circumstances; you must hold elections and win them" – (by the way, they had a 100 percent chance of a victory, everybody knows that), the situation would have developed in a completely different way.

So, I believe that this crisis was created deliberately and it is the result of our partner's unprofessional actions. And the coverage of this process has been absolutely unacceptable. I would like to emphasise once more: this was not our choice, we did not seek it, we are simply forced to respond to what is happening.

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.

Paolo Valentino: You say the situation got out of control. But is it not the right moment for Russia to seize the initiative, to find a way to engage its American and European partners in the search of solution to the situation, to show that it is ready to address this problem?

Vladimir Putin: That is exactly what we are doing. I think that today the document we agreed upon in Minsk, called Minsk II, is the best agreement and perhaps the only unequivocal solution to this problem. We would never have agreed upon it if we had not considered it to be right, just and feasible.

On our part, we take every effort, and will continue to do so, in order to influence the authorities of the unrecognised self-proclaimed Donetsk and Lugansk republics. But not everything depends on us. Our European and US partners should exert influence on the current Kiev administration. We do not have the power, as Europe and the United States do, to convince Kiev to carry out everything that was agreed on in Minsk.

I can tell you what needs to be done; maybe I will anticipate your next question. The key aspect of the political settlement was to create conditions for this joint work, but it was essential to stop the hostilities, to pull back heavy weaponry. On the whole, this has been done. Unfortunately, there is still shooting occasionally and there are casualties, but there are no large scale hostilities, the sides have been separated. It is time to begin implementing the Minsk Agreements.

Specifically, there needs to be a constitutional reform to ensure the autonomous rights of the unrecognised republics. The Kiev authorities do not want to call it autonomy, they prefer different terms, such as decentralisation. Our European partners, those very partners who wrote the corresponding clause in the Minsk Agreements, explained what should be understood as decentralisation. It gives them the right to speak their language, to have their own cultural identity and engage in cross border trade – nothing special, nothing beyond the civilised understanding of ethnic minorities' rights in any European country.

A law should be adopted on municipal elections in these territories and a law on amnesty. All this should be done, as the Minsk Agreements read, in coordination with Donetsk People's Republic and Lugansk People's Republic, with these territories.

The problem is that the current Kiev authorities don't even want to sit down to talks with them. And there is nothing we can do about it. Only our European and American partners can influence this situation. There is no need to threaten us with sanctions. We have nothing to do with this, this is not our position. We seek to ensure the implementation of the Minsk Agreements.

It is essential to launch economic and social rehabilitation of these territories. What has

happened there, exactly? The current Kiev authorities have simply cut them off from the rest of the country. They discontinued all social payments – pensions, benefits; they cut off the banking system, made regular energy supply impossible, and so on. So you see, there is a humanitarian disaster in those regions. And everybody is pretending that nothing is wrong.

Our European colleagues have taken on certain obligations, in particular they promised to help restore the banking system in these territories. Finally, since we are talking about what can or must be done, and by whom, I believe that the European Union could surely provide greater financial assistance to Ukraine. These are the main points.

I would like to stress that Russia is interested in and will strive to ensure the full and unconditional implementation of the Minsk Agreements, and I don't believe there is any other way to settle this conflict today.

Incidentally, the leaders of the self-proclaimed republics have publicly stated that under certain conditions – meaning the implementation of the Minsk Agreements – they are ready to consider themselves part of the Ukrainian state. This is a fundamental issue. I think this position should be viewed as a sound precondition for the start of substantial negotiations.

All our actions, including those with the use of force, were aimed not at tearing away this territory from Ukraine but at giving the people living there an opportunity to express their opinion on how they want to live their lives.

I would like to stress this once again, as I have said many times before: if Kosovo Albanians were allowed this, why is it prohibited to Russians, Ukrainians and Crimean Tatars living in Crimea? And by the way, the decision on Kosovo's independence was made exclusively by the Kosovo Parliament, whereas Crimea held a region-wide referendum. I think that a conscientious observer could not but see that people voted almost unanimously for reunification with Russia.

I would like to ask those who do not want to recognise it: if our opponents call themselves democrats, I would like to ask what exactly democracy means. As far as I know, democracy is the rule of the people, or the rule based on the will of the people. So, the solution of the Crimean issue is based on the will of the people of the Crimea.

In Donetsk and Lugansk people voted for independence, and the situation there is different. But the main thing, something we must always bear in mind, is that we should always respect the feelings and the choice of the people. And if somebody wants these territories to remain part of Ukraine, they should prove to those people that their lives would be better, more comfortable and safer within a unified state; that they would be able to provide for themselves and ensure their children's future within this state. But it is impossible to convince these people by means of weapons. These issues, issues of this kind can only be resolved by peaceful means.

Paolo Valentino: 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 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 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.

Paolo Valentino: But you cooperate with the United States on Iran and other dossiers, and John Kerry's visit to Sochi sent yet another message in this regard. Or am I wrong?

Vladimir Putin: You are right – it did. We are cooperating not only on the Iranian nuclear programme, but on other serious issues as well. Despite America's withdrawal from the ABM Treaty, our arms control dialogue continues.

We are not just partners; I would say we are allies in addressing the issues related to non proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. We are undoubtedly allies in the fight against terrorism. There are some other areas of collaboration as well. The central theme of Expo Milano, which you mentioned earlier, is yet another example of our joint work. Indeed, there are plenty of issues that we continue to tackle jointly.

Paolo Valentino: Mr Putin, on May 9, Russia marked the 70th anniversary of the Great Victory, which liberated both your country and the entire Europe from Nazism. No other country paid as bloody a price for this victory as Russia. However, there were no Western leaders standing next to you on Red Square. *Il Corriere della Sera* published Silvio Berlusconi's letter criticising those leaders for their absence. I have two related questions.

Do you think that by their absence they showed disrespect for the Russian people? What does the memory of the Great Patriotic War mean to the Russian identity today?

Vladimir Putin: It is not a matter of identity. Identity is built on culture, language and history. This war is a tragic page in our history. When we mark such days, festive but also sad given the number of lives lost in that war, we think about the generation that made our freedom and independence possible, about those who triumphed over Nazism. We also think about the fact that no one has the right to forget this tragedy, first of all, because we must think about how to avoid the repetition of anything like that in the future. These are not just words; it is not an unfounded fear.

Today, we hear some people say that there was no such thing as the holocaust, for instance. We are witnessing attempts to glorify the Nazis and their collaborators. This is part of our life today. Today's terrorism in all its various manifestations is very much like Nazism; in fact, there is hardly any difference between the two.

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.

They made their choice, but this day is, first and foremost, our holiday. You see, there were veterans from quite a number of countries in Moscow: from the United States, Great Britain, Poland and other European countries. In fact, it is these people who are the true heroes of this day, and this was very important to us. During those celebrations, we did not honour only those who fought Nazism in the Soviet Union; we also remembered the Resistance fighters in Germany itself, in France and in Italy. We remember all of them and pay tribute to all the people who did not spare themselves in the fight against Nazism.

Certainly, we understand only too well that it was the Soviet Union that made the decisive contribution into the Victory and suffered the most severe losses in the fight against Nazism. It is more than just a military victory to us, it is a moral victory. You see, virtually every family lost someone in the war. How can we forget this? It is impossible.

Luciano Fontana: You are a very popular leader in Russia, but in other countries and even in your own country you are often called authoritarian. Why is it so difficult to be part of the opposition in Russia?

Vladimir Putin: What is so difficult about it? If the opposition proves that it can tackle the challenges faced by a district, a region or the whole country, then, I think, people will always notice it.

The number of parties in our country has multiplied, in recent years we liberalised the process of establishing a political party and taking it to a regional and national level. It is all about their competence and ability to work with the electorate, to work with people.

Paolo Valentino: Then why are members of the opposition so rarely interviewed by the main Russian TV channels?

Vladimir Putin: I think if they have something interesting to say, they will be interviewed more often.

As for political competition, we know that various means are used against political rivals. Just take a look at the most recent history of Italy.

Paolo Valentino: Mr President, Greece is facing huge difficulties in its relations with Europe. If Greece leaves the eurozone, will Russia be ready to offer it political and economical assistance?

Vladimir Putin: We are building our relations with Greece irrespective of whether it is an EU, eurozone or NATO member. We have very close historical and good partnership relations with Greece, which is why it is up to the Greek people to make a sovereign decision as to which union and zone to be part of. But we don't know what will happen in the future, so it

would be wrong or even harmful for both Greek and European economies if we, as the saying goes, try to read the tea leaves.

For an economy like Greece there are certain difficulties brought about by the common European rules. They cannot devalue the drachma because they don't have it, they are strictly pegged to the euro currency. Their boundaries are fully open for European goods, which gives a distinct advantage to the export-oriented economies. Common decisions are made concerning such sectors as agriculture and fishery, where Greece could have certain competitive advantages but there are limits as well.

Another sector where it has an advantage is tourism, of course, but it applies to the Schengen area and there are also some limits. We have a visa-free arrangement with Turkey and 5 million Russian tourists visited this country last year, while less than one million tourists visited Greece, around 300,000, as far as I know. However, Greece receives concessional loans, financial support from the European treasury, and it has access to the European labour market. There are also other benefits of being part of the European family.

It is not up to us here in Russia to decide what is more beneficial and preferable for Greece. Once again, it is up to the Greek people to make a sovereign decision in dialogue with their main European partners.

Paolo Valentino: We can see the statues of 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 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.

Luciano Fontana: One last question. What is your biggest regret in life? What do you consider a mistake that you would never want to make again?

Vladimir Putin: I will be quite frank with you. I cannot recollect anything of the kind. By the grace of God, I have nothing to regret in my life.

(Translation by Julia Gabrielle Barnes)

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