

President Vladimir Putin on Crisis in Ukraine

Full Transcript of Press Conference

By [Global Research News](#)

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The President of Russia met with media representatives to answer a number of their questions, in particular with regard to the situation in Ukraine.

PRESIDENT OF RUSSIA VLADIMIR PUTIN: Good afternoon, colleagues,

How shall we do this?

This is what I'd like to suggest: let's have a conversation, rather than an interview. Therefore, I would ask you to begin by stating all your questions, I will jot them down and try to answer them, and then we will have a more detailed discussion of the specifics that interest you most.

Let's begin.

QUESTION: Mr President, I would like to ask (you took a lengthy pause, so we have quite a few questions by now) how you assess the events in Kiev? Do you think that the Government and the Acting President, who are currently in power in Kiev, are legitimate? Are you ready to communicate with them, and on what terms? Do you yourself think it possible now to return to the agreements of February 21, which we all talk about so often?

QUESTION: Mr President, Russia has promised financial aid to Crimea and instructions were issued to the Finance Ministry yesterday. Is there a clear understanding of how much we are giving, where the money is coming from, on what terms and when? The situation there is very difficult.

QUESTION: When, on what terms and in what scope can military force be used in Ukraine? To what extent does this comply with Russia's international agreements? Did the military exercises that have just finished have anything to do with the possible use of force?

QUESTION: We would like to know more about Crimea. Do you think that the provocations are over or that there remains a threat to the Russian citizens who are now in Crimea and to the Russian-speaking population? What are the general dynamics there – is the situation changing for the better or for the worse? We are hearing different reports from there.

QUESTION: If you do decide to use force, have you thought through all the possible risks for yourself, for the country and for the world: economic sanctions, weakened global security, a possible visa ban or greater isolation for Russia, as western politicians are demanding?

QUESTION: Yesterday the Russian stock market fell sharply in response to the Federation Council's vote, and the ruble exchange rates hit record lows. Did you expect such a

reaction? What do you think are the possible consequences for the economy? Is there a need for any special measures now, and of what kind? For instance, do you think the Central Bank's decision to shift to a floating ruble exchange rate may have been premature? Do you think it should be revoked?

VLADIMIR PUTIN: Fine, let us stop here for now. I will begin, and then we will continue. Don't worry; I will try to answer as many questions as possible.

First of all, my assessment of what happened in Kiev and in Ukraine in general. There can only be one assessment: this was an anti-constitutional takeover, an armed seizure of power. Does anyone question this? Nobody does. There is a question here that neither I, nor my colleagues, with whom I have been discussing the situation in Ukraine a great deal over these past days, as you know – none of us can answer. The question is why was this done?

I would like to draw your attention to the fact that President Yanukovych, through the mediation of the Foreign Ministers of three European countries – Poland, Germany and France – and in the presence of my representative (this was the Russian Human Rights Commissioner Vladimir Lukin) signed an agreement with the opposition on February 21. I would like to stress that under that agreement (I am not saying this was good or bad, just stating the fact) Mr Yanukovych actually handed over power. He agreed to all the opposition's demands: he agreed to early parliamentary elections, to early presidential elections, and to return to the 2004 Constitution, as demanded by the opposition. He gave a positive response to our request, the request of western countries and, first of all, of the opposition not to use force. He did not issue a single illegal order to shoot at the poor demonstrators. Moreover, he issued orders to withdraw all police forces from the capital, and they complied. He went to Kharkov to attend an event, and as soon as he left, instead of releasing the occupied administrative buildings, they immediately occupied the President's residence and the Government building – all that instead of acting on the agreement.

I ask myself, what was the purpose of all this? I want to understand why this was done. He had in fact given up his power already, and as I believe, as I told him, he had no chance of being re-elected. Everybody agrees on this, everyone I have been speaking to on the telephone these past few days. What was the purpose of all those illegal, unconstitutional actions, why did they have to create this chaos in the country? Armed and masked militants are still roaming the streets of Kiev. This is a question to which there is no answer. Did they wish to humiliate someone and show their power? I think these actions are absolutely foolish. The result is the absolute opposite of what they expected, because their actions have significantly destabilised the east and southeast of Ukraine.

Now over to how this situation came about.

In my opinion, this revolutionary situation has been brewing for a long time, since the first days of Ukraine's independence. The ordinary Ukrainian citizen, the ordinary guy suffered during the rule of Nicholas II, during the reign of Kuchma, and Yushchenko, and Yanukovych. Nothing or almost nothing has changed for the better. Corruption has reached dimensions that are unheard of here in Russia. Accumulation of wealth and social stratification – problems that are also acute in this country – are much worse in Ukraine, radically worse. Out there, they are beyond anything we can imagine. Generally, people wanted change, but one should not support illegal change.

Only constitutional means should be used on the post-Soviet space, where political structures are still very fragile, and economies are still weak. Going beyond the constitutional field would always be a cardinal mistake in such a situation. Incidentally, I understand those people on Maidan, though I do not support this kind of turnover. I understand the people on Maidan who are calling for radical change rather than some cosmetic remodelling of power. Why are they demanding this? Because they have grown used to seeing one set of thieves being replaced by another. Moreover, the people in the regions do not even participate in forming their own regional governments. There was a period in this country when the President appointed regional leaders, but then the local legislative authorities had to approve them, while in Ukraine they are appointed directly. We have now moved on to elections, while they are nowhere near this. And they began appointing all sorts of oligarchs and billionaires to govern the eastern regions of the country. No wonder the people do not accept this, no wonder they think that as a result of dishonest privatisation (just as many people think here as well) people have become rich and now they also have been brought to power.

For example, Mr Kolomoisky was appointed Governor of Dnepropetrovsk. This is a unique crook. He even managed to cheat our oligarch Roman Abramovich two or three years ago. Scammed him, as our intellectuals like to say. They signed some deal, Abramovich transferred several billion dollars, while this guy never delivered and pocketed the money. When I asked him [Abramovich]: "Why did you do it?" he said: "I never thought this was possible." I do not know, by the way, if he ever got his money back and if the deal was closed. But this really did happen a couple of years ago. And now this crook is appointed Governor of Dnepropetrovsk. No wonder the people are dissatisfied. They were dissatisfied and will remain so if those who refer to themselves as the legitimate authorities continue in the same fashion.

Most importantly, people should have the right to determine their own future, that of their families and of their region, and to have equal participation in it. I would like to stress this: wherever a person lives, whatever part of the country, he or she should have the right to equal participation in determining the future of the country.

Are the current authorities legitimate? The Parliament is partially, but all the others are not. The current Acting President is definitely not legitimate. There is only one legitimate President, from a legal standpoint. Clearly, he has no power. However, as I have already said, and will repeat: Yanukovych is the only undoubtedly legitimate President.

There are three ways of removing a President under Ukrainian law: one is his death, the other is when he personally steps down, and the third is impeachment. The latter is a well-deliberated constitutional norm. It has to involve the Constitutional Court, the Supreme Court and the Rada. This is a complicated and lengthy procedure. It was not carried out. Therefore, from a legal perspective this is an undisputed fact.

Moreover, I think this may be why they disbanded the Constitutional Court, which runs counter to all legal norms of both Ukraine and Europe. They not only disbanded the Constitutional Court in an illegitimate fashion, but they also – just think about it – instructed the Prosecutor General's Office to launch criminal proceedings against members of the Constitutional Court. What is that all about? Is this what they call free justice? How can you instruct anyone to start criminal proceedings? If a crime, a criminal offence, has been committed, the law enforcement agencies see this and react. But instructing them to file criminal charges is nonsense, it's monkey business.

Now about financial aid to Crimea. As you may know, we have decided to organise work in the Russian regions to aid Crimea, which has turned to us for humanitarian support. We will provide it, of course. I cannot say how much, when or how – the Government is working on this, by bringing together the regions bordering on Crimea, by providing additional support to our regions so they could help the people in Crimea. We will do it, of course.

Regarding the deployment of troops, the use of armed forces. So far, there is no need for it, but the possibility remains. I would like to say here that the military exercises we recently held had nothing to do with the events in Ukraine. This was pre-planned, but we did not disclose these plans, naturally, because this was a snap inspection of the forces' combat readiness. We planned this a long time ago, the Defence Minister reported to me and I had the order ready to begin the exercise. As you may know, the exercises are over; I gave the order for the troops to return to their regular dislocations yesterday.

What can serve as a reason to use the Armed Forces? Such a measure would certainly be the very last resort.

First, the issue of legitimacy. As you may know, we have a direct appeal from the incumbent and, as I said, legitimate President of Ukraine, Mr Yanukovich, asking us to use the Armed Forces to protect the lives, freedom and health of the citizens of Ukraine.

What is our biggest concern? We see the rampage of reactionary forces, nationalist and anti-Semitic forces going on in certain parts of Ukraine, including Kiev. I am sure you, members of the media, saw how one of the governors was chained and handcuffed to something and they poured water over him, in the cold of winter. After that, by the way, he was locked up in a cellar and tortured. What is all this about? Is this democracy? Is this some manifestation of democracy? He was actually only recently appointed to this position, in December, I believe. Even if we accept that they are all corrupt there, he had barely had time to steal anything.

And do you know what happened when they seized the Party of Regions building? There were no party members there at all at the time. Some two-three employees came out, one was an engineer, and he said to the attackers: "Could you let us go, and let the women out, please. I'm an engineer, I have nothing to do with politics." He was shot right there in front of the crowd. Another employee was led to a cellar and then they threw Molotov cocktails at him and burned him alive. Is this also a manifestation of democracy?

When we see this we understand what worries the citizens of Ukraine, both Russian and Ukrainian, and the Russian-speaking population in the eastern and southern regions of Ukraine. It is this uncontrolled crime that worries them. Therefore, if we see such uncontrolled crime spreading to the eastern regions of the country, and if the people ask us for help, while we already have the official request from the legitimate President, we retain the right to use all available means to protect those people. We believe this would be absolutely legitimate. This is our last resort.

Moreover, here is what I would like to say: we have always considered Ukraine not only a neighbour, but also a brotherly neighbouring republic, and will continue to do so. Our Armed Forces are comrades in arms, friends, many of whom know each other personally. I am certain, and I stress, I am certain that the Ukrainian military and the Russian military will not be facing each other, they will be on the same side in a fight.

Incidentally, the things I am talking about – this unity – is what is happening in Crimea. You should note that, thank God, not a single gunshot has been fired there; there are no casualties, except for that crush on the square about a week ago. What was going on there? People came, surrounded units of the armed forces and talked to them, convincing them to follow the demands and the will of the people living in that area. There was not a single armed conflict, not a single gunshot.

Thus the tension in Crimea that was linked to the possibility of using our Armed Forces simply died down and there was no need to use them. The only thing we had to do, and we did it, was to enhance the defence of our military facilities because they were constantly receiving threats and we were aware of the armed nationalists moving in. We did this, it was the right thing to do and very timely. Therefore, I proceed from the idea that we will not have to do anything of the kind in eastern Ukraine.

There is something I would like to stress, however. Obviously, what I am going to say now is not within my authority and we do not intend to interfere. However, we firmly believe that all citizens of Ukraine, I repeat, wherever they live, should be given the same equal right to participate in the life of their country and in determining its future.

If I were in the shoes of those who consider themselves the legitimate authorities, I would not waste time and go through all the necessary procedures, because they do not have a national mandate to conduct the domestic, foreign and economic policy of Ukraine, and especially to determine its future.

Now, the stock market. As you may know, the stock market was jumpy even before the situation in Ukraine deteriorated. This is primarily linked to the policy of the US Federal Reserve, whose recent decisions enhanced the attractiveness of investing in the US economy and investors began moving their funds from the developing markets to the American market. This is a general trend and it has nothing to do with Ukraine. I believe it was India that suffered most, as well as the other [BRICS](#) states. Russia was hit as well, not as hard as India, but it was. This is the fundamental reason.

As for the events in Ukraine, politics always influence the stock market in one way or another. Money likes quiet, stability and calm. However, I think this is a tactical, temporary development and a temporary influence.

Your questions, please.

QUESTION: Mr President, can you tell us if you expected such a harsh reaction to Russia's actions from your western partners? Could you give us any details of your conversations with your western partners? All we've heard was a report from the press service. And what do you think about the G8 summit in Sochi – will it take place?

VLADIMIR PUTIN: Regarding the expected reaction, whether the G8 will meet and about the conversations. Our conversations are confidential, some are even held over secure lines. Therefore, I am not authorised to disclose what I discussed with my partners. I will, however, refer to some public statements made by my colleagues from the west; without giving any names, I will comment on them in a general sense.

What do we pay attention to? We are often told our actions are illegitimate, but when I ask, "Do you think everything you do is legitimate?" they say "yes". Then, I have to recall the

actions of the United States in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya, where they either acted without any UN sanctions or completely distorted the content of such resolutions, as was the case with Libya. There, as you may know, the resolution only spoke of closing the airspace for government aircraft, while it all ended with bomb attacks and special forces land operations.

Our partners, especially in the United States, always clearly formulate their own geopolitical and state interests and follow them with persistence. Then, using the principle “You’re either with us or against us” they draw the whole world in. And those who do not join in get ‘beaten’ until they do.

Our approach is different. We proceed from the conviction that we always act legitimately. I have personally always been an advocate of acting in compliance with international law. I would like to stress yet again that if we do make the decision, if I do decide to use the Armed Forces, this will be a legitimate decision in full compliance with both general norms of international law, since we have the appeal of the legitimate President, and with our commitments, which in this case coincide with our interests to protect the people with whom we have close historical, cultural and economic ties. Protecting these people is in our national interests. This is a humanitarian mission. We do not intend to subjugate anyone or to dictate to anyone. However, we cannot remain indifferent if we see that they are being persecuted, destroyed and humiliated. However, I sincerely hope it never gets to that.

QUESTION: How do you assess the reaction of the west to the events in Ukraine and their threats regarding Russia: are we facing the possibility of sanctions or withdrawal from the G8?

VLADIMIR PUTIN: Regarding sanctions. It is primarily those who intend to apply them that need to consider their consequences. I believe that in the modern world, where everything is interconnected and interdependent, it is possible to cause damage to another country, but this will be mutual damage and one should bear this in mind. This is one thing.

The second and the most important thing. I have already told you what motivates us. And what motivates our partners? They supported an unconstitutional armed take-over, declared these people legitimate and are trying to support them. By the way, despite all of this we have been patient and even ready to cooperate; we do not want to disrupt our cooperation. As you may know, a few days ago I instructed the Government to consider how we can maintain contacts even with those powers in Kiev that we do not consider legitimate in order to retain our ties in the economy and industry. We think our actions have been absolutely reasonable, while any threat against Russia is counterproductive and harmful.

As for the G8, I do not know. We will be ready to host the summit with our colleagues. If they do not want to come – so be it.

QUESTION: Can I add about contacts? The way I see it, you consider the Prime Minister of Crimea Mr Aksyonov to be a legitimate representative of government authorities. Are you ready to have any contacts with those who consider themselves the legitimate authorities in Kiev?

VLADIMIR PUTIN: I have just spoken about it. You must have missed it.

QUESTION: I mean, at the top level for a political solution.

VLADIMIR PUTIN: I do not have a partner at the top level there. There is no president there, and there cannot be one until the general elections.

As for Crimea, the Parliament there was formed in 2010, in December 2010 if I remember correctly. There are 100 MPs representing six political parties. After the previous Prime Minister resigned, the Crimean Parliament, in compliance with the existing legislation and procedures elected a new Prime Minister at a session of the Crimean Supreme Council. He is definitely legitimate. They have complied with all the procedures envisaged by the law; there is not a single violation. However, when a few days ago a group of armed men tried to occupy the building of the Crimean Supreme Soviet, this caused the concern of the local residents. It seemed as though someone wanted to apply the Kiev scenario in Crimea and to launch a series of terrorist attacks and cause chaos. Naturally, this causes grave concern among the local residents. That is why they set up self-defence committees and took control over all the armed forces.

Incidentally, I was studying the brief yesterday to see what they took over – it is like a fortified zone. There are several dozen C-300 units, several dozen air-defence missile systems, 22,000 service members and a lot more. However, as I said, this is all in the hands of the people of Crimea and without a single gunshot.

QUESTION: Mr President, a clarification if I may. The people who were blocking the Ukrainian Army units in Crimea were wearing uniforms that strongly resembled the Russian Army uniform. Were those Russian soldiers, Russian military?

VLADIMIR PUTIN: Why don't you take a look at the post-Soviet states. There are many uniforms there that are similar. You can go to a store and buy any kind of uniform.

QUESTION: But were they Russian soldiers or not?

VLADIMIR PUTIN: Those were local self-defence units.

QUESTION: How well trained are they? If we compare them to the self-defence units in Kiev...

VLADIMIR PUTIN: My dear colleague, look how well trained the people who operated in Kiev were. As we all know they were trained at special bases in neighbouring states: in Lithuania, Poland and in Ukraine itself too. They were trained by instructors for extended periods. They were divided into dozens and hundreds, their actions were coordinated, they had good communication systems. It was all like clockwork. Did you see them in action? They looked very professional, like special forces. Why do you think those in Crimea should be any worse?

QUESTION: In that case, can I specify: did we take part in training Crimean self-defence forces?

VLADIMIR PUTIN: No, we did not.

QUESTION: How do you see the future of Crimea? Do you consider the possibility of it joining Russia?

VLADIMIR PUTIN: No, we do not. Generally, I believe that only residents of a given country who have the freedom of will and are in complete safety can and should determine their

future. If this right was granted to the Albanians in Kosovo, if this was made possible in many different parts of the world, then nobody has ruled out the right of nations to self-determination, which, as far as I know, is fixed by several UN documents. However, we will in no way provoke any such decision and will not breed such sentiments.

I would like to stress that I believe only the people living in a given territory have the right to determine their own future.

QUESTION: Two questions. You said that sending troops into Ukraine is an extreme measure, but you are nevertheless not ruling it out. Still, if Russian troops enter Ukraine, it could start a war. Doesn't that bother you?

And a second question. You say that Yanukovych did not give the order to shoot people. But somebody shot at the protestors. And clearly, these were snipers, trained snipers.

VLADIMIR PUTIN: You know, some people, including those who were recently among the protestors, have expressed the opinion that these were provocateurs from one of the opposition parties. Have you heard this?

REPLY: No, I have not heard this.

VLADIMIR PUTIN: Look at these materials – they are freely available. That is why it is very difficult to get to the bottom of the situation. But you and I saw for ourselves when the Berkut fighters stood there with their shields and were shot at – and those were not air weapons that were used against them but assault weapons that pierced their shields. That is something we saw for certain. As for who gave the orders – that I do not know. I only know what Mr Yanukovych told me. And he told me that he did not give any orders, and moreover, he gave instructions – after signing a corresponding agreement – to even withdraw all militia units from the capital.

If you want, I can tell you even more. He called me on the phone and I told him not to do it. I said, "You will have anarchy, you will have chaos in the capital. Think about the people." But he did it anyway. And as soon as he did it, his office was seized, and that of the government, and the chaos I had warned him about and which continues to this day, erupted.

QUESTION: What about the first question? Are you concerned that a war could break out?

VLADIMIR PUTIN: I am not concerned, because we do not plan and we will not fight with the Ukrainian people.

QUESTION: But there are Ukrainian troops, there is the Ukrainian army.

VLADIMIR PUTIN: Listen carefully. I want you to understand me clearly: if we make that decision, it will only be to protect Ukrainian citizens. And let's see those troops try to shoot their own people, with us behind them – not in the front, but behind. Let them just try to shoot at women and children! I would like to see those who would give that order in Ukraine.

QUESTION: Can I ask a question, Mr President? Our colleagues, my colleagues, who are currently working in Ukraine, are saying practically every day that the situation for the Berkut fighters is only getting worse (perhaps with the exception of Crimea). In particular, in Kiev, there are injured Berkut officers who are in hospitals now, where nobody is treating them and they are not even getting fed. And their families, including elderly family

members, they simply cannot leave the house, because they are not being allowed; there are barricades all around, they are being humiliated. Can you comment on this? And can Russia help these families and colleagues?

VLADIMIR PUTIN: Yes, this issue is of great concern to us. After all, these are not Russia's Interior Ministry officers, and we were not managing the situation there. But out of humanitarian considerations, it would be good if our human rights organisations got involved in this as well; we might ask Vladimir Lukin, either alone or together with his colleagues, representatives from France, Germany and Poland, with whom he participated in developing the well-known document of February 21, 2014, to go on location and see what is happening there with these Berkut officers, who have not broken any laws and acted in accordance with their orders. They are military service members, they stood there facing bullets, they were doused with fire and had Molotov cocktails thrown at them. They have been wounded and injured and are now in a hospital. It is even hard to imagine – even prisoners of war are being fed and treated. But they not only stopped treating them, they even stopped feeding them. And they have surrounded the building where these fighters' families live and are bullying them. I think that human rights organisations must pay attention to this. And we, for our part, are ready to provide them with medical care here in Russia.

QUESTION: Mr President, getting back to the West's reaction. Following the US Secretary of State's harsh statement, the Federation Council suggested that we recall our ambassador to the United States. Do you support this idea?

VLADIMIR PUTIN: The US Secretary of State is certainly an important person, but he is not the ultimate authority that determines the United States' foreign policy. We hear statements from various politicians and representatives of various political forces. This would be an extreme measure. If necessary, it will be used. But I really don't want to use it, because I think Russia is not the only one interested in cooperation with its partners on an international level and in such areas as economy, politics and foreign security; our partners are just as interested in this cooperation. It is very easy to destroy these instruments of cooperation and it would be very difficult to rebuild them.

QUESTION: Russia got involved in Yanukovych's fate. How do you see his future role and his future destiny?

VLADIMIR PUTIN: You know, it is very hard for me to say; I have not analysed it carefully. I think he has no political future, and I have told him so. As for "getting involved in his fate" – we did this on purely humanitarian grounds. Death is the easiest way for getting rid of a legitimate president, and I think that is what would have happened. I think they would have simply killed him. Incidentally, the question arises: what for?

After all, look at how it all began, what triggered these events. The formal reason was that he did not sign the European Union Association Agreement. Today, this seems like nonsense; it is ridiculous to even talk about. But I want to point out that he did not refuse to sign the association agreement. He said: "We have carefully analysed it, and its content does not correspond with our national interests. We cannot sharply increase energy prices for our people, because our people are already in a rather difficult position. We cannot do this, and that, and that. We cannot immediately break our economic ties with Russia, because our cooperation is very extensive."

I have already presented these figures: out of approximately 14 billion [dollars] in export, approximately 5 billion represents second and third technological processing level products exported to Russia. In other words, just about all engineering products are exported to Russia; the West is not buying any Ukrainian products. And to take all this and break it apart, to introduce European technical standards in the Ukrainian economy, which, thankfully or unfortunately, we are not using at the moment. We will adopt those standards at some point, but currently, we do not have those standards in Russia. This means the next day, our relations and cooperation ties will be broken, enterprises will come to a standstill and unemployment will increase. And what did Yanukovych say? He said, "I cannot do this so suddenly, let's discuss this further." He did not refuse to sign it, he asked for a chance to discuss this document some more, and then all this craziness began.

And why? Did he do something outside the scope of his authority? He acted absolutely within the scope of his authority; he did not infringe on anything. It was simply an excuse to support the forces opposing him in a fight for power. Overall, this is nothing special. But did it really need to be taken to this level of anarchy, to an unconstitutional overthrow and armed seizure of power, subsequently plunging the nation into the chaos where it finds itself today? I think this is unacceptable. And it is not the first time our Western partners are doing this in Ukraine. I sometimes get the feeling that somewhere across that huge puddle, in America, people sit in a lab and conduct experiments, as if with rats, without actually understanding the consequences of what they are doing. Why did they need to do this? Who can explain this? There is no explanation at all for it.

The same thing happened during the first Maidan uprising, when Yanukovych was blocked from power. Why did we need that third round of elections? In other words, it was turned into a farce – Ukraine's political life was turned into a farce. There was no compliance with the Constitution at all. You see, we are now teaching people that if one person can violate any law, anyone else can do the same, and that's what causes chaos. That is the danger. Instead, we need to teach our society to follow other traditions: traditions of respecting the main law of the nation, the Constitution, and all other laws. Of course, we will not always succeed, but I think acting like this – like a bull in a china shop is counterproductive and very dangerous.

Please.

QUESTION: Mr President, Turchynov is illegitimate, from your point of view.

VLADIMIR PUTIN: As President, yes.

QUESTION: But the Rada is partially legitimate.

VLADIMIR PUTIN: Yes.

QUESTION: Are Yatsenyuk and the Cabinet legitimate? And if Russia is concerned about the growing strength of radical elements, they grow stronger every time they find themselves facing a hypothetical enemy, which in their view, they currently consider Russia and Russia's position of being ready to send in troops. Question: does it make sense and is it possible to hold talks with moderate forces in the Ukrainian government, with Yatsenyuk, and is he legitimate?

VLADIMIR PUTIN: Listen, it seems like you didn't hear what I have said. I already said that

three days ago, I gave instructions to the Government to renew contacts at the government level with their colleagues in the corresponding ministries and departments in Ukraine, in order not to disrupt economic ties, to support them in their attempts to reconstruct the economy. Those were my direct instructions to the Russian Government. Moreover, Mr Medvedev is in contact with [Arseniy] Yatsenyuk. And I know that Sergei Naryshkin, as speaker of the Russian parliament, is in contact with [Oleksandr] Turchynov. But, I repeat, all our trade and economic and other ties, our humanitarian ties, can be developed in full only after the situation is normalised and presidential elections are held.

QUESTION: Gazprom has already said that it is reverting to its old gas prices beginning in April.

VLADIMIR PUTIN: Gazprom could not have said that; you were not listening carefully or it did not express itself clearly. Gazprom is not reverting to the old prices. It simply does not want to extend the current discounts, which it had agreed to apply or not apply on a quarterly basis. Even before all these events, even before they hit the crisis point. I know about the negotiations between Gazprom and its partners. Gazprom and the Government of the Russian Federation agreed that Gazprom would introduce a discount by reducing gas prices to \$268.50 per 1,000 cubic metres. The Government of Russia provides the first tranche of the loan, which is formally not a loan but a bond purchase – a quasi-loan, \$3 billion dollars in the first stage. And the Ukrainian side undertakes to fully repay its debt that arose in the second half of last year and to make regular payments for what they are consuming – for the gas. The debt has not been repaid, regular payments are not being made in full.

Moreover, if the Ukrainian partners fail to make the February payment, the debt will grow even bigger. Today it is around \$1.5-1.6 billion. And if they do not fully pay for February, it will be nearly \$2 billion. Naturally, in these circumstances, Gazprom says, “Listen guys, since you don’t pay us anyway, and we are only seeing an increase in your debt, let’s lock into the regular price, which is still reduced.” This is a purely commercial component of Gazprom’s activities, which plans for revenues and expenditures in its investment plans like any other major company. If they do not receive the money from their Ukrainian partners on time, then they are undercutting their own investment programmes; this is a real problem for them. And incidentally, this does not have to do with the events in Ukraine or any politics. There was an agreement: “We give you money and reduced gas rates, and you give us regular payments.” They gave them money and reduced gas rates, but the payments are not being made. So naturally, Gazprom says, “Guys, that won’t work.”

QUESTION: Mr President, [German Federal Chancellor] Merkel’s Press Service said after your telephone conversation that you had agreed to send an international fact-finding mission to Ukraine and set up a contact group.

VLADIMIR PUTIN: I said that we have people who have the training and skills needed to be able to examine this issue and discuss it with our German colleagues. This is all possible. I gave the instruction accordingly to our Foreign Minister, who was to or will meet with the German Foreign Minister, Mr Steinmeier, yesterday or today to discuss this matter.

QUESTION: All eyes are on Crimea at the moment of course, but we see what is happening in other parts of Ukraine too, in the east and south. We see what is happening in Kharkov, Donetsk, Lugansk and Odessa. People are raising the Russian flag over government buildings and appealing to Russia for aid and support. Will Russia respond to these events?

VLADIMIR PUTIN: Do you think we have not made any response? I think we've just spent the last hour discussing this response. In some cases though, the developments taking place are unexpected in my view. I will not go into the specific details of what I am referring to here, but the reaction that we are seeing from people is understandable, in principle. Did our partners in the West and those who call themselves the government in Kiev now not foresee that events would take this turn? I said to them over and over: Why are you whipping the country into a frenzy like this? What are you doing? But they keep on pushing forward. Of course people in the eastern part of the country realise that they have been left out of the decision-making process.

Essentially, what is needed now is to adopt a new constitution and put it to a referendum so that all of Ukraine's citizens can take part in the process and influence the choice of basic principles that will form the foundations of their country's government. But this is not our affair of course. This is something for the Ukrainian people and the Ukrainian authorities to decide one way or another. I think that once a legitimate government is in place and a new president and parliament are elected, which is what is planned, this will probably go ahead. If I were them, I would return to the matter of adopting a constitution and, as I said, putting it to a referendum so that everyone can have their say on it, cast their vote, and then everyone will have to respect it. If people feel they are left out of this process, they will never agree with it and will keep on fighting it. Who needs this kind of thing? But as I said, this is all not our affair.

QUESTION: Will Russia recognise the planned presidential election that will take place in Ukraine?

VLADIMIR PUTIN: Let's see how it goes. If it is accompanied by the same kind of terror that we are seeing now in Kiev, we will not recognise it.

QUESTION: I want to come back to the West's reaction. As all this tough talk continues, we have the Paralympics opening in a few days' time in Sochi. Are these Games at risk of ending up on the brink of disruption, at least as far as international media coverage goes?

VLADIMIR PUTIN: I don't know, I think it would be the height of cynicism to put the Paralympics at risk. We all know that this is an international sports event at which people with disabilities can show their capabilities, prove to themselves and the entire world that they are not people with limitations, but on the contrary, people with unlimited possibilities, and demonstrate their achievements in sport. If there are people ready to try to disrupt this event, it would show that these are people for whom there really is nothing sacred.

QUESTION: I want to ask about the hypothetical possibility of using the military. People in the West have said that if Russia makes such a decision, it would violate the Budapest Memorandum, under which the United States and some NATO partners consecrated territorial integrity of Ukraine in exchange for its promise to give up nuclear weapons. If developments take this turn, could global players intervene in this local conflict and turn it into a global conflict? Have you taken these risks into account?

VLADIMIR PUTIN: Before making public statements, and all the more so before taking practical steps, we give issues due thought and attention and try to foresee the consequences and reactions that the various potential players could have.

As for the Memorandum that you mentioned, you said you are from Reuters, is that right?

RESPONSE: Yes.

VLADIMIR PUTIN: How do the public and political circles in your country view these events that have taken place? It is clear after all that this was an armed seizure of power. That is a clear and evident fact. And it is clear too that this goes against the Constitution. That is also a clear fact, is it not?

RESPONSE: I live in Russia.

VLADIMIR PUTIN: Good on you! You should join the diplomatic service; you'd make a good diplomat. Diplomats' tongues, as we know, are there to hide their thoughts. So, we say that what we are seeing is an anti-constitutional coup, and we get told, no, it isn't. You have probably heard plenty of times now that this was not an anti-constitutional coup and not an armed seizure of power, but a revolution. Have you heard this?

RESPONSE: Yes.

VLADIMIR PUTIN: Yes, but if this is revolution, what does this mean? In such a case it is hard not to agree with some of our experts who say that a new state is now emerging in this territory. This is just like what happened when the Russian Empire collapsed after the 1917 revolution and a new state emerged. And this would be a new state with which we have signed no binding agreements.

QUESTION: I want to clarify a point. You said that if the USA imposes sanctions, this would deal a blow to both economies. Does this imply that Russia might impose counter-sanctions of its own, and if so, would they be a symmetrical response?

You spoke about gas discounts too. But there was also the agreement to buy \$15 billion worth of Ukrainian bonds. Ukraine received the first tranche at the end of last year. Has payment of the remaining money been suspended? If Russia provides aid, on what specific economic and political terms will this be done? And what political and economic risks are you taking into consideration in this case?

VLADIMIR PUTIN: To answer your question, we are in principle ready to look at taking the steps needed to make the other tranches available with regard to the purchase of bonds. But our Western partners have asked us not to do this. They have asked us to work together through the IMF to encourage the Ukrainian authorities to carry out the reforms needed to bring about recovery in the Ukrainian economy. We will continue working in this direction. But given that Naftogaz of Ukraine is not paying Gazprom now, the Government is considering various options.

QUESTION: Mr President, is the dynamic of events in Ukraine changing for the better or for the worse?

VLADIMIR PUTIN: Overall, I think it is gradually starting to level out. We absolutely must send the signal to people in Ukraine's southeast that they can feel safe, and know that they will be able to take part in the general political process of stabilising the country.

QUESTION: You have made several mentions now of future legitimate elections in Ukraine. Who do you see as compromise candidate? Of course you will say that this for the Ukrainian people to decide, but I ask you all the same.

VLADIMIR PUTIN: To be honest, I really don't know.

RESPONSE: It seems that the people also don't know, because no matter who you talk to, everyone seems to be at a loss.

VLADIMIR PUTIN: I really can't say. You know, it's hard to make predictions after events of this kind. I have already said that I do not agree with this method of taking power and removing the incumbent authorities and president, and I strongly oppose this kind of method in Ukraine and in the post-Soviet area in general. I oppose this because this kind of method does not inculcate legal culture, respect for the law. If one person can get away with doing this, it means that everyone is allowed to try, and this only means chaos. You have to understand that this kind of chaos is the worst possible thing for countries with a shaky economy and unstable political system. In this kind of situation you never know what kind of people events will bring to the fore. Just recall, for example, the role that [Ernst] Roehm's storm troopers played during Hitler's rise to power. Later, these storm troopers were liquidated, but they played their part in bringing Hitler to power. Events can take all kinds of unexpected turns.

Let me say again that in situations when people call for fundamental political reform and new faces at the top, and with full justification too – and in this I agree with the Maidan – there is a risk too that you'll suddenly get some upstart nationalist or semi-fascist lot sprout up, like the genie suddenly let out of the bottle – and we see them today, people wearing armbands with something resembling swastikas, still roaming around Kiev at this moment – or some anti-Semite or other. This danger is there too.

QUESTION: Just today, incidentally, the Ukrainian envoy to the UN said that the crimes committed by Bandera's followers were falsified by the Soviet Union. With May 9 coming closer, we can see now who is in power there today. Should we even have any contacts with them at all?

VLADIMIR PUTIN: We need to have contact with everyone except for obvious criminals, but as I said, in this kind of situation, there is always the risk that events of this kind will bring people with extreme views to the fore, and this of course has serious consequences for the country.

QUESTION: You said that we should make contact with everyone. Yulia Tymoshenko was planning it seems, to come to Moscow.

VLADIMIR PUTIN: As you know, we always worked quite productively with all of the different Ukrainian governments, no matter what their political colour. We worked with Leonid Kuchma, and with [Viktor] Yushchenko. When I was Prime Minister, I worked with Tymoshenko. I visited her in Ukraine and she came here to Russia. We had to deal with all kinds of different situations in our work to manage our countries' economies. We had our differences, but we also reached agreements. Overall it was constructive work. If she wants to come to Russia, let her come. It's another matter that she is no longer prime minister now. In what capacity will she come? But I personally have no intention of stopping her from coming to Russia.

QUESTION: Just a brief question: who do you think is behind this coup, as you called it, in Ukraine?

VLADIMIR PUTIN: As I said before, I think this was a well-prepared action. Of course there were combat detachments. They are still there, and we all saw how efficiently they worked. Their Western instructors tried hard of course. But this is not the real problem. If the Ukrainian government had been strong, confident, and had built a stable system, no nationalists would have been able to carry out those programs and achieve the results that we see now.

The real problem is that none of the previous Ukrainian governments gave proper attention to people's needs. Here in Russia we have many problems, and many of them are similar to those in Ukraine, but they are not as serious as in Ukraine. Average per capita [monthly] income in Russia, for example, is 29,700 rubles, but in Ukraine, if we convert it into rubles, it is 11,900 rubles, I think – almost three times lower than in Russia. The average pension in Russia is 10,700 rubles, but in Ukraine it is 5,500 rubles – twice lower than in Russia. Great Patriotic War veterans in Russia receive almost as much as the average worker each month. In other words, there is a substantial difference in living standards. This was what the various governments should have been focusing on right from the start. Of course they needed to fight crime, nepotism, clans and so on, especially in the economy. People see what is going on, and this creates lack of confidence in the authorities.

This has continued as several generations of modern Ukrainian politicians have come and gone, and the ultimate result is that people are disappointed and want to see a new system and new people in power. This was the main source of fuel for the events that took place. But let me say again: a change of power, judging by the whole situation, was probably necessary in Ukraine, but it should have taken place only through legitimate means, in respect for and not in violation of the current Constitution.

QUESTION: Mr President, if Crimea holds a referendum and the people there vote to secede from Ukraine, that is, if the majority of the region's residents vote for secession, would you support it?

VLADIMIR PUTIN: You can never use the conditional mood in politics. I will stick to that rule.

QUESTION: Is Yanukovych even still alive? There have been rumours that he died.

VLADIMIR PUTIN: I have seen him once since he arrived in Russia. That was just two days ago. He was alive and well and wishes you the same. He'll still have a chance of catching a cold at the funeral of those who are spreading these rumours of his demise.

QUESTION: Mr President, what mistakes do you think Yanukovych made over these last months as the situation intensified in Ukraine?

VLADIMIR PUTIN: I would rather not answer this question, not because I do not have an opinion to express, but because I do not think it would be proper on my part. You have to understand, after all...

QUESTION: Do you sympathise with him?

VLADIMIR PUTIN: No, I have completely different feelings. Anyone in this office bears an enormous responsibility on their shoulders as head of state, and they have rights and also obligations. But the biggest obligation of all is to carry out the will of the people who have entrusted you with the country, acting within the law. And so we need to analyse, did he do everything that the law and the voters' mandate empowered him to do? You can analyse

this yourselves and draw your own conclusions.

QUESTION: But what feelings do you have for him? You said “not sympathy, but other feelings”. What feelings exactly?

VLADIMIR PUTIN: Let’s talk later.

QUESTION: You said just two questions back that we must above all send a clear signal to people in the south and southeast of Ukraine. The southeast, that’s understandable, but...

VLADIMIR PUTIN: We need to make our position clear to everyone, really.

We need to be heard by all of Ukraine’s people. We have no enemies in Ukraine. Let me say again that Ukraine is a friendly country. Do you know how many people came from Ukraine to Russia last year? 3.3 million came, and of that number almost 3 million people came to Russia for work. These people are working here – around 3 million people. Do you know how much money they send back home to Ukraine to support their families? Count up the average wage of 3 million people. This comes to billions of dollars and makes a big contribution to Ukraine’s GDP. This is no joking matter. We welcome all of them, and among the people coming here to work are also many from western Ukraine. They are all equal in our eyes, all brothers to us.

QUESTION: This is just what I wanted to ask about. We are hearing above all about the southeast of Ukraine at the moment, which is understandable, but there are ethnic Russians and Russian-speaking people living in western Ukraine too, and their situation is probably even worse. They probably cannot raise their heads at all and are a downtrodden minority there. What can Russia do to help them?

VLADIMIR PUTIN: Our position is that if the people who call themselves the government now hope to be considered a civilised government, they must ensure the safety of all of their citizens, no matter in which part of the country, and we of course will follow this situation closely.

Thank you.

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