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Unofficial translation from Russian

Transcript of Remarks and Replies to Media Questions by Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Lavrov Following Talks with Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Slovak Republic Eduard Kukan, Bratislava, April 5, 2006

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Foreign Minister Lavrov (speaks after Kukan): Esteemed friends,

Yesterday's ceremonies commemorating the 61st anniversary of the liberation of Bratislava have once again confirmed that our relations are rooted in the sincere, friendly feelings that have long since tied our peoples, that are alive and, I am certain, will live on. We are grateful to the leadership of the Slovak Republic, to local authorities, citizens, non-governmental organizations and veterans for the understanding with which they address the adequate maintenance of the burials of Soviet soldiers on the territory of Slovakia.

We examined the state of our bilateral relations today, and the course of the implementation of the agreements that were reached during the visit to Slovakia of President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin a year ago. We believe that by joint efforts we have been able to build truly partner-like relations which enable realizing in full measure the potential for cooperation in all areas, acting in the spirit of pragmatism, good-neighborliness and consideration of the interests of each other. We express satisfaction with the growth of mutual trade. It went up by one-third last year, to near the 4 billion dollars mark. We also consider it necessary to upgrade the structure of our economic ties, primarily by the development of partnerships, and investment and innovation cooperation, and generally via increasing in the trade turnover the share of goods with a high degree of processing. This is what the decisions of our bilateral Intergovernmental Commission, which has resumed its work, are aimed at. In February it held its meeting in Bratislava, paying special attention precisely to developing such concrete mutually advantageous projects in these fields. We are satisfied with the way ties are being expanded between regions. We will be actively encouraging this - just as we are ready to encourage the activity of Slovak business within Russia.

Energy features prominently in our ties. Gas and oil are being supplied from Russia to Slovakia. Your country is one of the central transit countries. We have agreed that negotiations will be launched to prepare a new gas agreement: the present one expires in 2008. It is necessary to prepare the new accords in advance. Fears that have sometimes been voiced about the reliability of energy supplies from Russia to Europe, as the Russian leadership has declared on more than one occasion, have no foundation beneath them.

Attempts by certain representatives in Europe to exploit this issue and artificially whip up those fears are attempts with unsuitable means. We have repeatedly explained that diversifying the energy supply routes from Russia is designed not to replace those already available, but only supplement them and thus enhance the stability of energy supplies for Europe and strengthen its energy security. It is in this vein that these matters will be examined at the G8 summit in St. Petersburg in July this year.

We are satisfied with the development of humanitarian and cultural cooperation. Events are due to be held here as part of a Russian Cultural Season. So that our bilateral ties are evolving beautifully. We discussed our cooperation in international affairs. Slovakia is currently a nonpermanent member of the United Nations Security Council, where we are actively cooperating with our Slovak partners. We also examined the prospects for developing the partnership between Russia and the European Union and for intensifying further the work within the Russia-NATO Council. We discussed a number of concrete international situations. Eduard Kukan mentioned them.

We know of the EU's position regarding the recent elections in Belarus and Ukraine, and the situation around Transnistria. We proceed from the necessity to apply uniform standards in all cases. It is not always that the EU succeeds in this regard. I today showed with examples in the course of our talks how we assess this situation. We are convinced that if the EU or NATO has some questions about the actions of the government of this or that country, then these questions have to be settled through dialogue, through involving and not through attempts to isolate this or that country in European affairs.

Of course, we discussed Kosovo. Here our positions coincide. We are for negotiated solutions, against an imposed solution and that as a result of the future status agreements the main focus be given not to the political ambitions of this or that party, but to solving the real problems of the minorities, which so far are in Kosovo in a rightless position. The return of refugees to Kosovo is the principal task. But they can only return there when conditions have been created there for their secure, free and equal residence.

Question: Slovakia has clearly announced its wish to buy a stake in Transpetrol. Do you consider this an acceptable and advantageous step?

Foreign Minister Lavrov (speaks after Kukan): I have nothing to add. This matter is going to be solved via contacts between the appropriate companies. Of course, we expect that the government of the Slovak Republic will determine its position on that point in contacts with the Russian side.

Question: Mikhail Khodorkovsky has filed a petition with the European Court of Human Rights. How can you comment on this? How do matters stand in Russia with human rights?

Foreign Minister Lavrov: With regard to the activities of the European Court of Human Rights, we do not interfere in its work. As to standards of human rights compliance in Russia, those who wish to acquaint themselves with this situation in detail can do so. Information is accessible. We have the legislation that in full measure ensures European and world standards in the area of human rights. This legislation is being periodically improved, primarily with consideration for the practice existing in other countries and the recommendations that are adopted in the Council of Europe.

If you have some concrete remark on a specific case, then please voice it and I will comment on it. To general questions I gave general answers.

Question: How do you assess the situation in Iraq and the prospects for the formation of a new government there?

Foreign Minister Lavrov: Overall, the situation in Iraq is degrading, of course. There's nothing to conceal here. All the facts are well known. This evokes our great concern, since Iraq is a country friendly to us and sufficiently near our borders, a country that must find a way out of the present crisis. The entire Middle East region is interested in this. Its stability depends on Iraqi settlement prospects. Undoubtedly, the key to solving the problem is searching for ways towards national reconciliation and consensus. From the very beginning of settlement, after conclusion of the active phase of combat operations was announced in May 2003, when the coalition's request was addressed to the UN to help organize a political process, we stood firmly for the need as a first step to bring all major Iraqi political, ethnic and religious groups together so that the Iraqis themselves could agree on stages and concrete forms of the political process.

Unfortunately, this did not take place. The coalition chose a different method of restoring the peaceful life of Iraq. At all the stages of settlement there was felt the shortage precisely of efforts towards national consensus and reconciliation. Only now that hundreds and thousands of coalition servicemen and Iraqi citizens have lost their lives is an understanding of the need to start after all the process of national consensus beginning to come.

Undoubtedly, the efforts which were undertaken in the framework of settlement have a great significance. I mean the recent parliamentary elections. Unfortunately, the process of formation of a government is being dragged out. We are convinced that in order to reach a sustainable result which will help stabilize society it is the Iraqis themselves who must decide on who will be included in the government - without attempts at outside interference. Russia will be ready to assist all the initiatives that different countries, primarily the LAS, are now putting forward and which are directed at achieving a national consensus and developing an inter-Iraqi dialogue. This comes in the mainstream of our proposals to convene an international conference on Iraq with the participation of all Arab forces, all of Iraq's neighbors and the permanent members of the UN Security Council.