

What Putin Said



A multi-party system does not imply the existence of thousands of parties incapable of organising the political process, whose activities, actions and ambitions have the effect of demolishing the State.

Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin interviewed,

by Marie Jégo, Rémy Ourdan and Piotr Smolar

This is your first visit to France as Prime Minister of Russia. Your private dinner with Nicolas Sarkozy reveals an ambiguity: who is in charge of foreign policy, you or Dmitri Medvedev?

There is no ambiguity. I met Mr Sarkozy when I was still President. Ties of friendship were formed. When the question of my future came up, he asked me what I was going to do. I told him that I had not yet decided. He said, "Whatever your new role, promise me that your first foreign visit will be to Paris." Here I am. The President talked to me about questions concerning defence and foreign policy. As the humble servant that I am, I focus on economic and social questions. As a member of the Russian Security Council, I am also concerned with the questions discussed with the French President. Insofar as the way in which

political roles are apportioned in Russia, it is beyond doubt that the President has the last word. And today Mr Medvedev is the President.

“All The Multinationals Are Involved, Notably French Companies Like Gaz De France And Total, Who Are Involved In Developing Substantial Oil And Gas Deposits.”

You met with Jacques Chirac on Friday morning. What was the purpose of your meeting?

There was no specific purpose. We worked together for many years. He has a very warm relationship with Russia. He has a deep knowledge of the country. I share his views: relations between Russia and Europe, Russia and France have to have an influence on the international scene. Jacques is also a very pleasant man, a brilliant speaker, with an encyclopaedic knowledge of things, and that's no exaggeration. When we were working together within the framework of the G8, I already noticed that he was a magnet for attention. He always has a well marshalled point of view about questions of civilisation and a wide range of topical subjects.

Because he has done a great deal for relations between our two countries, President Medvedev has decided to award him the Russian State Prize. We hope that he will honour us with a visit to the Kremlin during the Russian National Holiday on June 12 and that the President will be able to give him his award then.

Currently, there seem to be two men at the top of the Russian political hierarchy. Is this a transitory solution or do you want the Prime Minister to become the equivalent of the German Chancellor?

Russia is a presidential republic. We will not modify the key role of the head of state in the country's political system. The fact that I am the leader of the government is a curiosity in our political history. But that is not the essential thing: at the same time I am the head of a party which plays a leading role in the political life of the country and which has a stable majority in the Duma. It is a clear sign that, in Russia, we are attached to a multi-party system and regard the role of parliament as central. That is the real political message.

In Russia, people say that Mr Medvedev and you have been in power for twenty years. In what circumstances could you leave office?

[Thursday evening], Nicolas [Sarkozy] talked to me about his plans to modernise France. He is very passionate and sincere, he wants to change things in the

country, for the good of French people. Obviously, there will be no positive changes in the short-term, but certain decisions will bear fruit in a few years time. All of that gives rise to debate within the country. Russia has to modernise in a number of fields. Firstly, in terms of the economy, where we have to place an emphasis on innovation. We discuss it actively. Indeed, the initial results are positive. We also have to change salary scales in the public sector, modernise our pensions system to guarantee our citizens a decent old age with a decent income. Pensions should correspond more closely to earnings throughout one's working life. And then there is agriculture. Russia is facing a number of challenges. We have decided to be entirely honest with our people and to eschew political claptrap. If we succeed, the organisation of power at the highest level will not be that important. The essential thing is to have shared objectives. The team we currently have in place is highly competent, very professional, made up of experts and elected parliamentarians who support us. We are going to try to keep this team together for as long as possible. The way in which roles and ambitions are allotted is of secondary importance.

In terms of the success of the Russian economy over the course of the last few years, what is the respective importance of the price of oil and your own contribution?

I don't want to express a judgment on my past work. Even if I consider that I have worked conscientiously and honestly, and that I have achieved a substantial amount. Starting with the re-establishment of the territorial integrity and constitutional legality of the country and continuing with guaranteeing high growth and a reduction in poverty levels. Of course, prices and the state of the world economy have had a visible and important impact. But did you know that during the Soviet period there were times when oil prices were high? But all that was dealt with and had no effect on economic development. More recently, in 2004, the price of oil began to go up. But in 2000, we achieved a record economic growth rate of 10%, which had nothing to do with oil. Over the last few years, in terms of taxation and governance, we have decided to focus on developing our manufacturing industry and encouraging innovation. That is our principal mission. We are now beginning to benefit from that policy. How? Manufacturing has contributed more than raw materials to the rise in GDP. But, in my view, it's still too little.

“Over The Last Few Years, In Terms Of Taxation And Governance, We

Have Decided To Focus On Developing Our Manufacturing Industry And Encouraging Innovation.”

In the last few years, the Russian government has taken back control of a number of strategic sectors of the economy, notably the oil industry. Does the influence of the government represent an obstacle to initiative and productivity?

Not at all. Your view is erroneous. It's true that oil production did not go up last year, or not by much, but that's not because the government took control. I would like to draw your attention to a number of facts. Firstly, Russia is not a member of OPEC. Secondly, in most oil-producing countries, the government has a monopoly in the oil industry. In Russia, the private sector is present in the hydrocarbons sector. All the multinationals are involved, notably French companies like Gaz de France and Total, who are involved in developing substantial oil and gas deposits. Of course, we have made sure to support State companies like Gazprom and Rosneft. The others, around a dozen big companies, are private, with foreign capital: British, American, Indian, Chinese, French, German. Our energy sector is a lot more liberalised than in most other countries, including European ones. We are currently finalising an important reform of the electric energy sector. On July 1, our biggest company, RAO UES, will cease to exist. It will be broken up into several units, while the production sector, small power stations and large units will be offered for sale to private investors. Important European actors from Italy and Germany have come in with investments of 6, 8, 10, 12 billion dollars or euros. Very few European countries are so liberal. At the same time, we - Russian investors - are prevented from gaining access to similar projects. It is entirely false to say that our markets are protected.

What problems is the oil sector experiencing? As soon as the major oil and gas companies became more than profitable, the government decided to transfer those profits to the budget of the Russian Federation by, for example, introducing a tax on the extraction of raw materials and a series of export taxes. We later discovered that this system was excessive, that the oil companies could no longer afford to prospect new resources and develop their current activities. We are therefore going to lower the tax on the extraction of raw materials. We are hoping for positive effects in the years to come. We have also granted preferential status to new oil fields, notably in the North Sea and in Eastern Siberia, where there is no infrastructure.

Could inflation be a destabilising factor on Russian society?

We are not worried about that. Inflation hasn't come from our domestic market; it's been exported to Russia from the developed economies, notably from Europe. It's linked to the rapid and unnecessary rise in the price of primary products. Experts are aware that the phenomenon is linked to consumption in China and India, to the emergence of biofuels made from wheat and corn. It's also linked to high level of investments in the Russian economy. A few years ago, 20-25 billion dollars went out of the country every year. Last year, the level of foreign direct investment reached 81 billion dollars. These petrodollar investments are added to the petrodollars of our own companies. The Central Bank takes them and then has to issue roubles to re-inject into the economy.

There are other factors that we are aware of and that we can deal with in order to diffuse these threats. We will have to develop our agro-food industry and, by means of customs regulations and imports, guarantee that we have the quantity of wheat indispensable to our needs. We are going to fight against inflation as governments do everywhere else. The Central Bank recently raised interest rates to 10.5% to limit the influx of money into the economy. As far as social issues are concerned, the increase in the price of primary products most affects lower income groups, those who spend the highest percentage of their budget on food. They are the people who suffer most. But thanks to the increase in salaries, pensions and allocations, we are confident that we will be able to minimise the negative consequences of inflation.

What would your answer to Dmitri Medvedev be if he asked you for advice about reducing the sentence of Mikhail Khodorovsky, former head of Yukos, or improving the conditions in which he is currently held?

I would say that he must take that decision entirely independently. Like me before him, he must base his decisions on the appropriate legislation. He and I went through the same university programme at the Faculty of Law in St Petersburg. We had very good professors who administered a vaccine to us: respect for the law. I have known Mr Medvedev for a long time. He will respect the law. He has said so publicly many times. If our laws allow it, there will be no obstacle (...). The law makes it possible to improve conditions of detention. Of course. But in order for that to happen, people being held must satisfy the obligations outlined by the law.

“We Saw Their Reaction To Attempts To Introduce Non-Traditional Forms

Of Islam Into The Collective Consciousness. Wahabism Is, In And Of Itself, A Current Of Islam Which Has Nothing Dangerous About It.”

How can Russia claim to share European values when economic and political competition is not permitted?

I don't see any contradiction. Competition is struggle. If one of the parties acquires an advantage and then wins, that means that there is competition. In all countries, economic actors try to get close to the centre of political power in order to obtain advantages. We have just talked about one of the “captains” of the Russian oil industry. There was a time when these people were refused entry visas to the United States. It was thought that they had links with the mafia. Wouldn't making his life in prison easier be an example of double standards? The struggle for privileges has always existed and will always exist. Russia is not a unique case. We have tried to keep the representatives of the business world at an equal distance, and I think we have succeeded.

Perhaps the problem was that Khodorkovsky visited the United States too often, that he had a visa ...

He finally got his visa, while other entrepreneurs, like Mr Deripaska, didn't. I asked my American colleagues why this was. If you have reasons for not providing a visa, if you have documents on illegal activities, give them to us, we'll use them. But they gave us nothing, explained nothing, and didn't allow him to enter the country. [Oleg Deripaska] is neither a friend nor a relative of mine. He is involved in businesses in various countries around the world, businesses worth several billion dollars. Why stop him travelling? What has he done? If you have nothing, let him in. Concerning Khodorkovsky, the problem isn't his trips abroad, but the fact that the law was broken, in the most serious fashion, and on several different occasions. It has been established in law that the group he belonged to committed crimes against individuals, and not only economic crimes. They've killed more than one man. Competitive struggle of that kind is intolerable and we will, of course, use all means available to put an end to it.

But there is also the case of the British citizen, William Browder, from the investment fund, Hermitage, which is present in Russia. Browder has not been allowed into the country since 2005 without knowing why ...

I haven't heard the name before. If someone thinks that his rights have been infringed, he should take his case to court. Our legal system works, thank God. Recently, a journalist was accused of crossing the border with too much cash on her person. A case against her was opened. I think that she's in France. All she

has to do is to come back to Russia, appear in court, and defend her rights. But she was afraid. In fact, the Constitutional Court recently judged that she had indeed broken the law, but that no further action would be taken. These kind of cases are dealt with by the administrative courts.

How should the Russian political system be defined? Is it a dictatorship, an authoritarian regime, or a democracy?

We are developing our country according to principles which have proved their worth in the civilised world and which correspond to our political culture and traditions. A multi-party system does not imply the existence of thousands of parties incapable of organising the political process, whose activities, actions and ambitions have the effect of demolishing the State. I think that it would be fair to say that a multi-party system is one in which the major parties represent the interests of different segments of the population, function efficiently, and, within the framework of civilised dialogue, elaborate decisions that are in tune with the interests of the majority of the population. We have done a great deal to strengthen the roles of Parliament and the multi-party approach. We have made real progress, in terms of legislation, in transferring federal powers to the regions and the municipalities. In fact, we have invested financially in decentralising power. There is no democratic, normal and civilised society without a municipal element.

There is a tradition. Look at Lebanon. Various groups have to be represented at the highest political level. This is also true of Dagestan, in the Caucasus. There are several recognised nationalities there. If the representative of one of these nationalities is the head of the Republic, the representative of another becomes the President of the Parliament, and a third, the head of government. And God forbid if you undermine that hierarchy! The collective consciousness wouldn't put up with it. You can pretend and say that it isn't good, that it isn't democratic, and that you absolutely have to have direct presidential elections with a secret vote. But that would destroy the Republic, and I can't allow that. I'm obliged to take into account the opinions of people who have been living in that territory for 1,000 years. I will respect their choice, their conception of life.

You are eloquent about the quality of the Russian legal system ...

What I'm saying is that, in spite of all the problems, the legal system is developing and demonstrating its vitality.

Mr Medvedev spoke of it more negatively, evoking "juridical nihilism."

Where is the truth located?

The truth is that you misunderstood what he said. He was talking about political nihilism, not in the courts, but in the collective consciousness. Perhaps it exists. But the collective consciousness is not guilty. In the security and public administration sector, notably justice, the interests of the population were inadequately defended. It is, therefore, natural that the citizens neither respect nor trust that system. In that regard, he is perfectly correct. (...)

“Democracy Is The Power Of The People. In Ukraine, Almost 80% Of People Do Not Want To Join NATO. But Our Partners Say That The Country Will Join.”

While the situation seems to be normalised in Chechnya, it has deteriorated in Ingushetia and Dagestan. What, in your opinion, is the key problem?

The situation in Chechnya has really improved. The Chechen people have chosen to develop their republic within the framework of the Federation. We saw their reaction to attempts to introduce non-traditional forms of Islam into the collective consciousness. Wahabism is, in and of itself, a current of Islam which has nothing dangerous about it. But there are extremist movements within the framework of Wahabism that have tried to impose their views on the Chechen population. People quickly realised that they were not acting in their interests but instrumentalising them in an attempt to destabilise the Russian Federation. The stabilisation process began with this realisation. When we understood this change in people's attitudes, we transferred most powers in the fields of security and the economy to the Chechens themselves. (...) It is thanks to that that we have been able to rebuild Grozny and restore the economy. Insofar as Dagestan and Ingushetia are concerned, we are well aware of what is going on there: economic interests, not political ones, are at play. Perhaps the problems there are expressed in terms of oppositions between political factions, but they are not linked to separatist movements. (...)

The war in Chechnya and the hostage crises at Beslan and Nordost are the black pages of your presidency. Would it have been possible to act differently?

No. I'm sure that if we had tried to act differently, it would all still be going on today. We have to act against attempts to destabilise Russia. All countries that make concessions to terrorists end up taking greater losses than those involved in

special operations. In the final analysis, that kind of approach ends up destroying the State and increasing the number of victims.

Beyond the fight against terrorism, human rights activists have campaigned against crimes perpetrated on Chechen civilians. Will light be shed on these crimes?

In the Chechen Republic, the courts and the public prosecutor's department are actively involved in this issue. Cases have been opened against the authors of such crimes, independently of their functions. That is also valid for those involved in the fighting [on the Chechen side] and for Russian soldiers (...) Several officers belonging to army security units have already been tried and found guilty. It wasn't easy for our courts. In spite of the evidence of their crimes, popular juries exonerated them on several occasions. That tells you a lot about the frame of mind of Russian society, especially after the savage acts perpetrated by the terrorists on our civilian population. If we want to re-establish civil peace, no one must cross the red line of the law.

What do you expect from the French presidency of the European Union?

France is a traditional and reliable partner. We have always talked in terms of a strategic partnership. I like that expression. France has always had an independent foreign policy and I hope that that will continue. It's in France's blood. It is hard to impose anything on the French from abroad. All French leaders must take that into account. We appreciate that spirit of independence and that's why we expect a lot from the French presidency. We are hoping for a constructive dialogue to establish a legal basis for our partnership with the EU. The founding document underpinning our relations recently expired. There isn't a legal void, because the existing procedure means that we can extend the arrangement on a yearly basis. But the document itself has to be renewed. We want to sign a new treaty, we have said so several times, just like our European partners. The French presidency should bring a fresh impetus.

Do you think that Iran is trying to acquire a nuclear bomb?

I don't think so. Nothing suggests that that's the case. The Iranians are a proud and independent people. They want to enjoy their independence and use their legitimate right to civil nuclear energy. I'm clear about this: legally speaking, Iran has not broken any laws. It even has the right to enrich [uranium]. The documents say so. Iran has been criticised for not showing all its programmes to the International Atomic Energy Agency. That's an issue that has to be resolved.

Overall, Iran has, or so it seems, been transparent about its nuclear programmes (...). I've always said openly to our Iranian partners that their country is not located in an aseptic zone, but in a complicated environment, in one of the world's explosive regions. We ask them to take that into account, not to irritate their neighbours or the international community, to demonstrate that the Iranian government has no hidden agenda. We have worked in close collaboration with the Iranians and with our partners in the "Group of 6", and will continue to do so (...).

"We, The Western Countries, Have To Choose Our Allies In Function Of Shared Values."

If you were to learn that Iran is really making a nuclear bomb, would that represent a problem for Russia?

There can be no subjunctive tense in politics. If we ever come into possession of such information, we will think about the appropriate approach.

In terms of principles, can Iran, as a major power, lay claim to the right to have nuclear weapons?

We are against that. That's our moral position (...). That would be an extremely dangerous road to go down. It's wouldn't be good for Iran or for the region. Using a nuclear weapon in a region as small as the Middle East would be suicidal. Whose interests would it serve? Palestine's? The Palestinians would cease to exist. We know all about the Chernobyl tragedy (...). It would be counter-productive. We have always held to that position, and I hope that President Medvedev will continue to do so.

We will use all means at our disposal to prevent the proliferation of nuclear arms. That is why we have proposed an international programme for the enrichment of uranium; Iran is just one factor in the problem. A lot of emerging countries are faced with the choice of whether to use nuclear energy for civil purposes. They are going to need enriched uranium and therefore they will have to create their own closed circuit. There will always be doubts concerning the use of enriched uranium for military ends. It's very difficult to control. That is why we are suggesting that enriched uranium should be produced in countries that are above suspicion, countries that already have nuclear weapons. In order to start this process, participants must be sure that they will receive the necessary quantities and that we will take back and dispose of waste materials. We can create such a system. It will be sufficiently safe and reliable.

Why would it be a threat to Russia if Ukraine and Georgia joined NATO?

We are opposed to the enlargement of NATO in general. NATO was created in 1949 by the 5th article of the treaty on collective security signed in Washington. Its objective was defence and confrontation with the Soviet Union with a view to preventing the kind of acts of aggression that were feared at the time. The USSR could repeat time out of mind that it had no intention of attacking anyone, but that's not what the West thought. The Soviet Union no longer exists, neither does the threat, but the organisation is still there. Hence the question: Who are you acting against? And to what end?

Proliferation, terrorism, epidemics, international criminality, drug trafficking. Do you think that we can solve these problems by means of a closed military-political bloc ? No (...). They have to be solved on the basis of far reaching cooperation underpinned by a global approach, not by an approach based on blocs (...) Enlarging NATO is tantamount to creating new borders within Europe, new Berlin Walls, invisible ones this time, but no less dangerous for that. It would limit the possibilities of fighting efficiently, and together, against new threats. Mutual distrust is developing; it's nefarious. And we know how decisions are taken in NATO. Military-political blocs introduce limits on the sovereignty of all member countries by imposing a form of internal discipline, the kind of discipline you see in a barracks.

We know very well where the decisions are taken: in one of the bloc's leading countries. Those decisions are then legitimised and given a patina of pluralism and good intentions. That's what happened with the anti-missile shield. First, they took the decision, then, due to the pressure we exerted, they had a debate about it in Brussels. We are worried that if these countries join NATO, missile systems which threaten us will be installed on their soil. No one will ask them what they think (...) We're always talking about limiting arms in Europe. But we've already done it! The result is that two military bases have emerged under our nose. Soon, there will be bases in Poland and in the Czech Republic. As Bismarck said, the only thing that counts is potential, not declarations and intentions. We can see that military bases are getting closer to our borders. But why? No one's threatening anyone.

And I'll say another thing. We mentioned the question of democracy. We must always have it in mind. But shouldn't politicians in power apply its principles in the field of international relations? Can you be a democratic country with good intentions, but at the same time a frightening one? Democracy is the power of the people. In Ukraine, almost 80% of people do not want to join NATO. But our

partners say that the country will join. So everything is decided in advance, and not by Ukraine.

Isn't anyone interested in what the people think anymore? Is that what democracy is?

In France, the death penalty was abolished in 1981 at a time when the majority of the population was probably against such a reform. Sometimes, leaders have to make difficult decisions ...

Some political decisions can be taken calmly by means of a referendum. You just have to ask people what they think. A humanitarian question like the death penalty does not fit into that framework. You often hear the following about the partnership with Russia: "We, the Western countries, have to choose our allies in function of shared values." We talked earlier about the painful events that occurred in the Caucasus a few years ago. Thanks be to God, it's over. But even in a quasi-civil war situation, we in fact abolished the death penalty. It was a difficult decision, but a responsible one. Isn't that an example of shared values? In some G8 countries, certain of which are NATO members, the death penalty exists and condemned men and women are executed. So why are people so partisan when it comes to Russia? What is due to Caesar isn't due to others? That kind of dialogue would be productive. We should put our cards on the table, show each other respect. That way, we would be able to make progress.

"I Have My Opinion. I Think That The President Of The United States Has Enormous Responsibility Because The Country Has A Major Influence On International Affairs And On The World Economy."

You took a contrary position to Washington on a number of issues: Kosovo, Iraq, the anti-missile shield, nuclear energy and Iran. How do you judge George W. Bush's foreign policy record?

I won't express a judgment because I don't feel that I have a right to do so. It's up to the American people to decide. I have my opinion. I think that the President of the United States has enormous responsibility because the country has a major influence on international affairs and on the world economy. It's always easy to criticise from the outside. We have always had our own position on a number of issues, and there have therefore been differences in terms of how problems should be resolved. And we weren't alone. France agreed with us about Iraq. In fact, Germany and France took their position on Iraq before we did, not the other

way round. People said that our point of view was not correct. But events have shown that nothing can be resolved by force. It's impossible. There can be no monopoly in international affairs, nor can there be any empire or sole master. Questions of that nature can only be resolved multilaterally, based on international law. The law of the strongest leads nowhere. If we keep on going down that road, conflicts will arise that no State will be able to put a stop to.

There are more positive aspects than there are differences in our relations with the United States. For example, trade between our two countries is growing year-on-year. We share a lot of interests on major international issues, particularly concerning nuclear proliferation. In that area, we are in complete agreement. The fight against terrorism often has a confidential aspect, but it is becoming increasingly effective. I recently met with George W. Bush at Sochi. I had the opportunity to thank him for American collaboration in the fight against terrorism. The differences between us on the Iranian nuclear question are not huge.

Russia is a member of the Security Council and of the "Group of 6", we act in accord with the Council and unanimously vote for its resolutions. That said, as Article 41 of Chapter 7 of the United Nations Charter stipulates, nothing that we have undertaken presupposes the use of force. Different points of view are expressed in Washington. Thank God, no military action has been decided on. We hope that that will not happen. We understand that we have to solve this problem together. So, yes, we have differences, but the atmosphere of cooperation and trust is such that we are hopeful about the future. In fact, that's what enabled us to sign a declaration in Sochi about long-term collaboration between our two countries.

Instead of recognising the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, Russia has reinforced its control in the two separatist regions. Are you satisfied with the status quo?

Separatist, you say? Why don't you use that word when you talk about Kosovo? You won't answer? That's because you don't have an answer.

Ethnic cleansing in Abkhazia has led to 300,000 Georgians leaving the region. In Kosovo, it's the other way round; it was the Albanians who suffered that fate.

No, it's not at all the other way round. Thousands, hundreds of thousands of Serbs can't go back to Kosovo. It's the same thing. When did you see refugees returning to Kosovo? The last Serbs are being chased out of the region. Don't make things

up, I know what's really happening. You are unable to guarantee security and decent living conditions to the refugees. So, it's exactly the same thing. Concerning the departure of the Georgian population, yes, it's sure. But 55,000 Georgians have already returned to the Gali district of Abkhazia. We could have continued the process but for military pressure from Tbilisi. You know, in the so-called Socialist revolution of 1919, Georgia declared itself an independent state. Ossetia declared that it did not want to be part of Georgia, that it wanted to stay within the Russian Federation. The Georgian government sent in its army on punitive expeditions considered as massacres, and examples of ethnic cleansing by the Ossetians to this day. These conflicts have an ancient, profound character. In order to resolve them, you have to arm yourself with patience and respect for the peoples of the Caucasus rather than resorting to force.

People are saying that several Georgian drones were recently shot down over Abkhazia by Russian defence systems. But why don't people mention the fact that it is illegal to overfly these conflict zones? Using these machines is espionage. Why indulge in espionage? To prepare military operations. So, one of the parties is preparing to shed blood, is that what we want? Nobody wants that. To ensure that the peoples of the Caucasus want to live within a unified state, we have to dialogue with them. We never stop repeating that to our Georgian partners.

The Georgian President, Mikhail Saakashvili, has proposed a peace plan for Abkhazia involving a high degree of autonomy, with the position of Vice President being guaranteed to an Abkhazian. Would you be willing to accept that?

It has to be acceptable to the Abkhazians. How did the ethnic conflict start? After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Tbilisi put an end to the autonomy of these republics. What made them do that? That's how the ethnic conflict and the war started. Now they [the Georgians] say that they are ready to backtrack. "We will grant you the autonomy that we took away from you a few years ago." But, clearly, the Abkhazians don't trust them too much. They think that in a few years they will take something else away from them (...). We encouraged the return of 55,000 Georgians to the Gali district in Abkhazia. We really did that. We convinced the Abkhazians to let them in and provide them with normal living conditions. It's Russia that asked the Abkhazian leaders to do that. I will tell you frankly, I was personally involved. I asked the Abkhazian leaders to do it and they did it. We elaborated a joint plan covering energy development, cross-border cooperation, construction, and infrastructure. We even took the decision to

rebuild the railway. After the latest displays of force, everything ground to a halt. The elections [in Georgia] were approaching, they had to demonstrate that they could resolve all the problems. This kind of situation, which has been going on for centuries, cannot be made to fit into the calendar of domestic politics. Nothing good can come out of that. I hope that Mikhail Saakashvili's plan will gradually be implemented because, overall, it is a good one. But the other party has to agree. Dialogue is necessary.